HOUSTON CHRONICLE
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Meddling nerveis and undercurrents

Mailer tracks the real Oswald

In Russian files and memories, writer unearths complex figure

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By FRITZ LANHAM
Houston Chronicle Book Editor

NORMAN Mailer has never lacked for opinions, and one of his opinions is this: Obsessions aren't good for the national character.

Of our national obsessions, among the most tenacious is the question of who killed John F. Kennedy. Did Lee Harvey Oswald do it? If yes,

■ **Why did Oswald choose Kennedy? An excerpt from Norman Mailer's *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* appears in today's Parade magazine.**

did he do it alone or as part of some conspiracy? If the latter, who was pulling the puppet's strings? The CIA? The Mafia? Fidel Castro? Anti-Castro Cubans?

For 30 years Mailer has been fascinated by Oswald and the Kennedy assassination. In 1991, curiosity intersected with opportunity when he and a colleague gained access to Soviet KGB files covering the 2½ years Oswald lived in the Soviet Union. Could this be the key to unlock the mystery?

Off to Minsk went Mailer, and the result is his 26th book, *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* (Random House, $30). The book doesn't answer the question of who killed JFK. For the record, Mailer is now about 75 percent convinced that Oswald did it and about 60 percent convinced he did it alone.

Rather, this book is based on the assumption that we can better understand the deed if first we understand the doer. To that end Mailer set out to plumb Oswald's character, to re-create his life before, during and after the sojourn in Russia and thereby transform a cipher into a comprehensible human being.

The Oswald who emerges is both intelligent enough and bitter enough to have carried a rifle up to the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas, taken aim at the back of the president's head and pulled the trigger.

Mailer made a rare Houston appearance recently to promote *Oswald's Tale* and to speak at a luncheon benefiting Chinquapin School, a private school in Highlands that offers college-preparatory education to low-income youth.

(A member of Chinquapin's board of directors is a friend of Harry Evans, the head of Random House, who put the arm on his star author. *That's* how you get Norman Mailer to speak at your luncheon.)

In his talk and in an interview afterward at his Westin Oaks hotel room, Mailer combined personal graciousness with his trademark intellectual pugnacity. At the luncheon, he talked about how he came to write the book. He answered questions and gave a very funny reading of a domestic spat between Oswald

See MAILER on Page 26.



Buster Dean / Chronicle

Norman Mailer used a colleague's contacts with Russian KGB officers to get a look at their files on Lee Harvey Oswald.

Mailer

Continued from Page 22.

and his wife that the KGB surreptitiously taped. He took a swipe at American religious fundamentalists. Afterward he patiently signed books for all who stood in line.

Mailer is 72, and the shock of white hair is thin on top. His compact build is going slack around the middle, and his hearing isn't great. But the two-time Pulitzer Prize winner (for *Armies of the Night* in 1968 and *The Executioner's Song* in 1980) is as lively and provocative as ever.

Early reviews of *Oswald's Tale* are mixed, but then his books always get mixed reviews, Mailer said. He noted that even the favorable reviews don't want to agree that Oswald was more interesting or complex than we have thought.

"I think there are a couple of elements in it – why certain people hate the idea of Oswald having any dimension," he said. "One is that he was profoundly anti-patriotic. He really hated America, and that bothers a lot of people."

The other element has to do with our own potential for violence. "We all have a murder and a suicide in us," Mailer said.

"In most people it's just a little bit, but they don't want that little bit awakened. One of the ways they keep it from being awakened is that they sit very hard on any impulse to feel any sympathy for a murderer."

Actually, *Oswald's Tale* isn't likely to inspire much sympathy for Lee Harvey Oswald. The Oswald of this 791-page book is a dislikable young man, manipulative, self-centered, alternately audacious and insecure, embittered that the world doesn't share his opinion of his worth.

The book is curiously constructed. It's made up of two parts. The first deals with Oswald's life in the Soviet Union, including his marriage to the Russian Marina Prusakova. The second traces Oswald's early life, his service in the Marines, and his life in New Orleans and Dallas after his return from Russia.

For the first, Mailer and his associate, Lawrence Schiller, interviewed Russians who had known Lee and Marina Oswald socially and at work. They also interviewed KGB officers who had kept Oswald under surveillance and examined the files the secret police kept on the young American defector.

For the second part of the book, Mailer combed through the Warren Commission hearings and other previously published books about Oswald and Marina but did no new interviews.

Oswald's Tale has a cut-and-paste quality to it. You have pages of interviews with this Russian or that, followed by KGB transcripts. Lengthy passages are quoted from the Warren Commission and from Priscilla Johnson McMillan's book *Lee and Marina* and so on. Mailer's speculation about what it all means is the glue that holds the bits of material together.

Nevertheless, the sum of the book exceeds its parts, and once you get accustomed to Mailer's method, you find yourself pulled into this exercise of piecing together small shards of a life. Moreover, you can pass over the dull pages and probably miss nothing crucial.

Mailer's involvement in this project began with a phone call from Schiller, who had helped with the interviews for *The Executioner's Song*, a widely acclaimed chronicle of the life and death of killer Gary Gilmore.

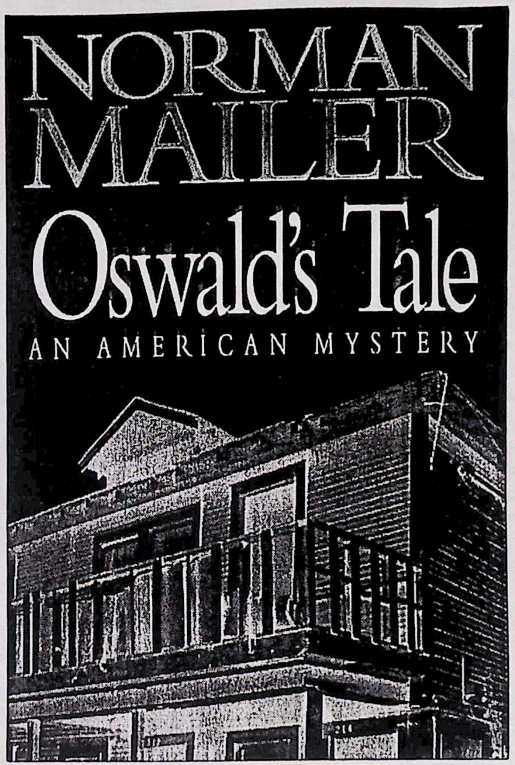
Schiller, whom Mailer admiringly describes as a "great wheeler-dealer," had been in Russia filming a movie about the life of Peter the Great. Among his many contacts were post-communist KGB officials who said, in essence, that they were good guys and had nothing to hide.

Mailer leapt at the chance to look at the KGB files, which no outsider had seen. He and Schiller spent six months in Minsk, the western city where Soviet authorities had sent Oswald to live.

After the Kennedy assassination, the Soviet government told those who had known Oswald in Minsk to keep their mouths shut, and they did. Mailer and Schiller tracked them down, and they agreed to talk. The fact that Schiller described his colleague as "the American Tolstoy" helped – Russians have great respect for important authors.

"I've never gotten reviews like Larry gave me," Mailer said, laughing.

Mailer and Schiller interviewed 17 KGB officers, five in depth, and this material is among the most interesting in the book. Basically, the KGB didn't trust Oswald and didn't know what to do with him. When the



19-year-old ex-Marine showed up in Moscow in October 1959 and announced that he wished to defect, the Soviets were first inclined to send him back. But after he made a halfhearted suicide attempt, they let him stay and shipped him off to Minsk, a major city in what is now Belarus.

There they kept him under surveillance – maybe he was some strange new type of CIA agent. To Mailer's surprise, the KGB apparently never debriefed Oswald, even though he'd had access to radar codes during his Marine tour in Japan. The officers told Mailer they already had good intelligence sources in Japan. And besides, if Oswald was an American agent, they didn't want to reveal their debriefing procedures.

"They were much more paranoid than assertive – the KGB," Mailer said. "I discovered they have a tradition of finesse and very careful planning, and he just disturbed them. It would be as if an acrobat with two bricks in his hand came vaulting into a computer office and started doing cartwheels down the aisle."

After Oswald married Marina, whose uncle was a lieutenant colonel in the Soviet equivalent of the FBI, the KGB became more suspicious and planted a bug in the young couple's apartment. This generated stacks of transcripts of the Oswalds' conversations, including their comically picayune quarrels about Marina's housekeeping.

Oswald grew disillusioned with the material poverty of Soviet life and resented the fact that Soviet authorities didn't treat him as an important person. He returned to the United States with Marina in 1962.

While unimpressed with Soviet-style communism, Oswald remained a committed Marxist and tried to ingratiate himself into various socialist parties in this country. He also passed out leaflets, and appeared in radio debates in support of Castro's Cuba.

Mailer details these activities and argues that they reveal more political sophistication on Oswald's part than is commonly supposed. But Mailer also believes that Oswald may have been recruited by the CIA or FBI to infiltrate radical organizations and engage in "dirty tricks."

"He would have been a wonderful working agent for (the FBI), and he would have been capable of working with an organization he detested, because he would have seen that he was using them – getting money for his trip to Cuba, learning things about his enemy.

"He was smart enough and had enough meanness. He was perfectly capable of double-dealing – he uses all the people around him in Minsk, he's double-dealing when he marries Marina, telling her uncle he's going to be there for life and already he knows he wants to go back to America.

"On top of that, (the FBI) might have put some heat on him. It might have been a forced relationship to a degree. But I'm just speculating, which is why I didn't get into more depth about it in the book."

Double-dealing and questions of identity have always fascinated Mailer. His 1991 novel *Harlot's Ghost* explored the dark world of the CIA, and he has announced that his next project is *Harlot's Ghost II*. Indeed, one of the reasons he was so eager to interview KGB operatives in Minsk was to gather material for the new novel.

"To be an agent is to call into question every aspect of identity," he said.

Oswald was certainly a sort of secret agent, Mailer writes at one point in *Oswald's Tale*:

"There is no doubt about it. The only matter unsettled is whether he was working for any service larger than the power centers in the privacy of his mind."

The Star Courier
May 11, 1995

Norman Mailer

Pulitzer winning author speaks at Chinquapin benefit luncheon



NORMAN MAILER, author of OSWALD'S TALE: An American Mystery, spoke at the Chinquapin School luncheon.

By LEWIS SPEARMAN
Star-Courier Staff

HOUSTON-- Norman Mailer, winner of the Pulizer Prize for Literature for his book *The Executioner's Song*, began his book tour for *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* on May 4 at the Westin Oaks Hotel at the Gallerina Mall in Houston at a luncheon benefit for the Chinquapin School.

This is the second "Author's Luncheon" to raise money for Chinquapin. Several years ago author ***Mollie Ivins*** also spoke at a benefit. And earlier this year, former First Lady ***Barbara Bush*** had a book signing at Brazos Bookstore in Houston, of which some of the proceeds went to the schools reading program.

Mr. Mailer was introduced by Robert H.Graham Board President of The Chinquapin School. About 400 people attended the luncheon at which Mr. Mailer spoke cordially of his research into the mind of the man accused of killing John F. Kennedy, Lee Harvey Oswald, from the perspective of inside the former Solviet Union, and that done by others into Oswald.

The focus of discussion was into the characteristics of the man that was Lee Harvey Oswald, drawn from access to K.G.B. documents done from wiretaps and from neighbors paid to spy on Lee Harvey and Marina Oswald as potential double agents for the C.I.A. It was Mr. Mailer's hope in seeking answers to the thirty two year old assasination of a beloved American president to find something other than an absurd zealot; instead he portrays the more perpetually banal evil of a guy taking his one shot at greatness by sneaking a rifle into work and calling it curtain rods...a man who bragged of his shooting ability but missed a hare only three feet away on a hunting expedition with K.G.B. agents looking on in dull surprise.

The Chinquapin School in Highlands was founded by Mr. Robert Moore head of the English Department of St. John's School in Houston weathering the desparity between the high quality of private schools and the condition of public schools in the poorer communities. It is a small school of 100 students and 10 faculty members started in 1969. From its founding as all male , it has developed into coed. The students must work for their education in the classroom and out, a minimum tuition of $30.00 is required. As you know the cost of education in a private system is hardly covered by $30.00 a month, this is called a token tuition. The students come from lower income families so they are required to recompense the school with meaningful work, rarely taking funds from their parents. The students make their own lunch-

Continued on page 2

) SEE PAGE 5 FOR CONVENIENT LOCATIONS TO PICK UP A COPY! -- O

Mailer at Chinquapin

Continued from page 1

es, and attend to their own in school maintenance needs.The school's motto is "Quid por Quo" something for something or give for the same as you get. The school was established in order for the students to return to their communities enabled from college to return something meaningful to their communities.

Most of the students are from minority backgrounds but are not allowed to sound the victim role. Bill Heinzeling stated, "The world is unfair. It doesn't do any good to sit around and cry."

As the private, non-profit, ecumenical school of this area Chinquapin is staying afloat by the tax deductable contributions of private citizens which accounts for 80% of the operational expenses.. Currently the school is embarked upon a $4.75 million dollar endowment campaign which goes to pay operating funds, that is schoiarship funds included. They are located at 2615 East Wallisville in Highlands.

Brazos Bookstore in Houston at 2421 Bissonnet 77005 has about fifty personnally signed copies of Mr. Mailer's latest book..

Houston

Mailer on Oswald: A familiar rehash

BY MICHIKO KAKUTANI
The New York Times News Service

"Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery," by Norman Mailer; 828 pages; Random House; $30.

Even though more than 2,000 books have already been written about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the prospect of reading a new one about Lee Harvey Oswald seems intriguing – if the author is Norman Mailer.

The topic, after all, looks like the perfect magnet for all the author's talents and preoccupations. What Mailer calls "the greatest mountain of mystery in the 20th century" not only offers him another opportunity to fulfill what he once called his need "to speak to one's time," but also serves as a dark mirror of the themes he has addressed throughout his 47-year-long career: the confluence of psychic and social disorder, the anarchic consequences of violence and the relationship between a self-declared outlaw and the status quo.

In the course of "Oswald's Tale," Mailer explains to the reader exactly what he hopes to do. By probing the life and character of Lee Harvey Oswald, he says, he hopes to understand him, and in doing so, "come to the end of an ongoing question: Did Oswald kill President Kennedy? And, if so, did he do it on his own or as part of a conspiracy?"

Oddly enough, there is both too little and too much of Mailer in "Oswald's Tale." Much of this cumbersome volume consists of little but excerpts from earlier books and studies, cut and pasted together into an awkward collage.

At the same time, Mailer declines to use his enormous gifts as a reporter and novelist to create an unvarnished portrait of his subject (the way he did with Gary Gilmore in his 1979 masterpiece, "The Executioner's Song"); he instead clumsily tries to force his material into an unyielding cookie-cutter shape. The result is a book that succeeds simultaneously in being boring and presumptuous, derivative and solipsistic.

It takes Mailer nearly 800 pages to complete his examination of Oswald's character, and by the end of the book, he has turned – or tried to turn – his subject into a typically Maileresque hero: a visionary (if highly deluded) malcontent whose only fealty is "to himself and to his own ideas," a man obsessed with proving his own manhood and convinced "that he has the makings of a great leader."

In short, Mailer has created a close relative of Stephen Rojack in "An American Dream" and of the hipster in "The White Negro" who knows that "if the fate of 20th-century man is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey with the rebellious imperatives of the self."



– Associated Press

Lee Harvey Oswald is killed by Jack Ruby in 1963.

Mailer also concludes "that Lee had the character to kill Kennedy and that he probably did it alone," that "it is too difficult, no matter how one searches for a viable scenario, to believe that others could have chosen him to be the rifleman in a conspiracy."

There is little effort in some passages to find and evaluate discernible facts; rather, Mailer willfully veers even further into the realm of imaginative fancy than Don DeLillo did in his powerful 1988 Oswald novel "Libra." Playing his time-honored games with labeling, Mailer still coyly insists that "Oswald's Tale" is "most certainly not fiction." The book, he argues, can be seen "as a special species of nonfiction that can be put under the rubric of mystery."

"That," he goes on, "is because all means of inquiry have to be available when one is steering one's way through a cloud – especially if there are arguments about the accuracy of the navigating instruments, which in this case are the facts."

In several chapters, Mailer observes, "there will be no more demand on the author than to serve as a literary usher who is there to guide each transcript to its proper placement on the page." But the book has also been heavily embroidered with Mailer's own speculation about Oswald – speculation that grows increasingly elaborate as the book plods wearily toward its end. ■

BEST SELLERS

NATIONAL

(Source: Publisher's Weekly)

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	
		FICTION — HARDBACK
1	(1)	Rainmaker. John Grisham
2	(2)	Celestine Prophecy James Redfield
3	(4)	Ladder of Years. Anne Tyler.
4	(3)	Moo. Jane Smiley
5	(7)	A Dog's Life. Peter Mayle
6	(6)	Politically Correct Bedtime Stories. James Finn Garner
7	(5)	Our Game. John le Carre.
8	(8)	Border Music. Robert James Waller
9	(12)	The Fourth Procedure. Stanley Pottinger.
10	(9)	The Glass Lake. Maeve Binchy
		NON-FICTION — HARDBACK
1	(2)	In Retrospect. Robert McNamara
2	(1)	Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus. John Gray
3	(5)	Mars And Venus In The Bedroom. John Gray
4	(3)	The Hot Zone. Richard Preston
5	(9)	The Seven Spiritual Laws Of Success. Deepak Chopra.
6	(6)	First Things First. Stephen Covey
7	(4)	The Death Of Common Sense. Philip Howard
8	(8)	Breaking The Surface. Louganis; Marcus
9	(7)	Sisters. Carol Saline; Sharon Wohlmuth
10	(13)	Beardstown Ladies' Commonsense Investment Guide. Leslie Whitaker

LOCAL

(Source: The Thunderbird Bookshop, The Barnyard)

FICTION — HARDBACK

1 Rainmaker. Grisham
2 Samurais Garden. Tsukiyama
3 Celestine Prophecy. Redfield
4 Mutant Message Down Under. Morgan
5 Dogs Life. Mayle

FICTION — PAPERBACK

1 Chamber. Grisham
2 Shipping News. Proulx
3 K Is For Killer. Grafton
4 Angel. Bradford
5 Cry To Heaven. Rice

NON-FICTION — HARDBACK

1 Seven Spiritual Laws Of Success. Chopra
2 Men Are From Mars Women Are From Venus. Gray
3 In Retrospect McNamara
4 My Lucky Stars. Maclaine
5 John Steinbeck A Biography. Parini

NON-FICTION — PAPERBACK

1 Chicken Soup For The Soul. Canfield
2 Fitness Lite. Burleigh
3 Secrets Of Fat Free Baking. Woodruff
4 Above Carmel Monterey And Big Sur Gilliam
5 Second Helping Of Chicken Soup For The Soul. Canfield

Local poetry winners

"Nightwalk Dreams Sleep" by Lynne Chester of Pebble Beach, won first prize in the annual Dreaming Art Poetry Contest at the Carl Cherry Center for the Arts. "Scrambled Eggs" by P. H. Deese of Pacific Grove placed second and the third place winner was "Radiant Prescience" by Kyia McCollam of Carmel.

Honorable mention awards went to poems by Raymond H. Cyr, Seaside; Renee McClue, Carmel Valley; and Shirley Tofte, Monterey. ■

Thunderbird Bookshop Cafe
EVENTS
Sun. • May 7 • 6:30pm • Free
Singles Night
For those 55 and over; meet new friends, kindred spirits
Mon. • May 8 • 7pm • $5
Rev. Enid Miller
Lecture
The Art of Inner Listening
Tues. • May 9 • 7pm • $5
Elisa Lodge
presents
"Wild Woman's Soul Song"
Fri. • May 12 • 7:30pm • $5
National Writer's Union
Prose & Poetry with
Bill Minor & Raylyn Moore
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THE BARNYARD, CARMEL

1/2

FROM MINSK WITH LOVE

by Nicholas A. Basbanes

In the 47 years that he has been a powerful presence in the world of American letters, Norman Mailer has written 28 books, two of which, *The Armies of the Night* and and *The Executioner's Song*, have won the Pulitzer Prize.

While each of those honors came for what were largely ambitious exercises in nonfiction, *The Executioner's Song* was a hybrid of two artistic forms. It is the novel which Mailer believes is the highest calling of his profession, and by far the most demanding.

Indeed, work on his latest book *Oswald's Tale* (Random House, 791 pages, $30), began four years ago as something of a respite between *Harlot's Ghost* and that ambitious novel's intended sequel. The 1,309-page Cold War epic about spies and counterspies concluded with three teasing words: "TO BE CONTINUED."

Since *Harlot's Ghost* was narrated by Harry Hubbard, a career CIA man, the next logical step for Mailer was to make some sense of the American intelligence agency's arch-rival, the KGB, an organization the 72-year-old Brooklyn Heights, N.Y., author admits he knew next to nothing about. "I could have faked the KGB, I could have faked the whole thing," Mailer said last week during a Boston interview, but that course of action would have been a betrayal to all the work that had gone before.

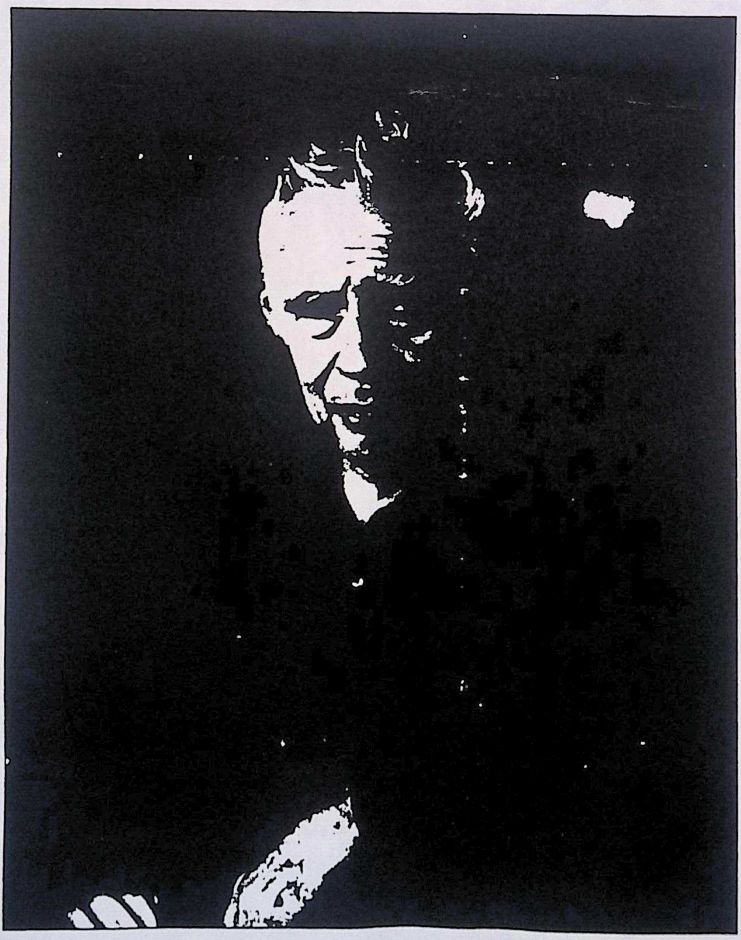


Photo: Christopher Bierlin

About that time, an invitation from investigative reporter Lawrence Schiller came along that promised Mailer a chance to examine Lee Harvey Oswald's mysterious years of exile in the Soviet Union from 1959 to 1962, and to see first-hand some previously secret KGB material. Just as tempting was the opportunity Mailer suddenly had to write about the John F. Kennedy assassination, a subject he said has obsessed him for more than 30 years.

Mailer and Schiller had worked together in the 1970s on Marilyn, a speculative biography of Marilyn Monroe, and *The Executioner's Song*, the celebrated account of Gary Gilmore, the convicted Utah murderer who faced a firing squad in 1977. "Larry is brilliant with the detail work," Mailer said. "He arranged all the interviews, set up the schedule for each day, got us a translator." All together, they spent six months in 1992 in Minsk, the capital of the now independent republic of Belarus.

Divided into two large sections, Oswald's Tale is not an attempt to add yet another candidate to an already vast list of conspiracy theories, but to make some sense of the mysterious man who, Mailer finally concedes, probably acted alone in assassinating President Kennedy.

Despite some striking parallels between this book and the one about Gary Gilmore, Mailer said the two are decidedly different. With Gary Gilmore, Mailer said he was interested more in creating a work of art — one he described at the time as a "nonfiction novel" — than he was in providing factual information.

"I wanted to portray Gilmore as a

character in a novel rather than having long essays about the nature of a psychopath." Mailer defines a "character" as "someone you can grasp as a whole," which is an impossibility with Lee Harvey Oswald. He prefers to identify the alleged assassin as a "being," someone "whose nature keeps shifting."

"I didn't feel any attempt to argue that *Oswald's Tale* is a novel," he explained. "I thought I really was on the cusp with *Executioner's Song*, and it was interesting to me to claim that it was a novel, because I felt that there is a lot of misunderstanding about what a novel is. A novel, finally, is a way of attacking reality."

By contrast, the kind of nonfiction he has written in Oswald's Tale digests much more information and "feeds it back to the reader," he said. "In fiction, you try to create a presence, you try to create the life that's there, without judging it, and let the reader judge it instead. This is a sizable difference."

Oswald's Tale is not an attempt to add yet another candidate to an already vast list of conspiracy theories.

He also emphasized that the decision to undertake a work of fiction or nonfiction is not entirely a choice of his making. "Writing a novel is a grace. It's like falling in love; you just get it. You can't say, 'I'm going to fall in love next year.' But you can say, 'I'm going to write a book of nonfiction next year.' I can choose a nonfiction book and decide I want to do it, and the odds are very much in my favor that I'll finish the book."

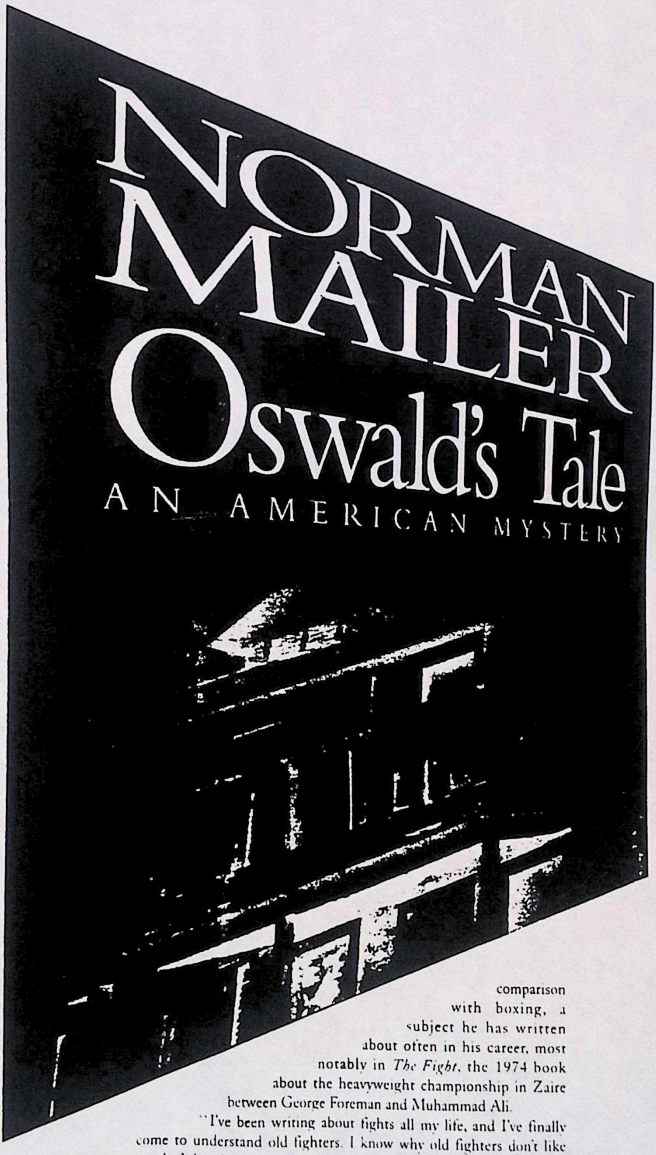
With fiction, on the other hand, "you can start with a marvelous idea and it can depart from you. Your characters can disappoint you, they can disappear on you. Or you can discover, as you get into the book, that you're heading toward an unknown continent, and you don't know enough about it, which is what happened to me at the end of *Harlot's Ghost*."

Having spent six dreary months in Minsk, Mailer said he no longer finds himself obsessed with the Kennedy assassination. "I hate obsessions," he said. "Nothing's more wasteful. It just consists of putting more and more energy into the same questions and never getting an answer. When I was younger, I used to have a question, 'Am I a good man?' That's a terrible obsession to have. It just keeps you circling around your navel all the time."

To illustrate just how difficult it is to write a novel, Mailer made a comparison with boxing, a subject he has written about often in his career, most notably in *The Fight*, the 1974 book about the heavyweight championship in Zaire between George Foreman and Muhammad Ali.

"I've been writing about fights all my life, and I've finally come to understand old fighters. I know why old fighters don't like tough fights, because they kill you, they really age you. Their bodies take a beating from which they won't recover completely, and writing fiction is like that. Too much anxiety. It just eats up your guts."

Still, with Oswald's Tale now done, Mailer said that he will turn his attention nonetheless to the sequel he boldly asserted four years ago was forthcoming. "I made the promise," he said. "Let's see if I keep it."



The Sunday Oregonian

BOOKS

Reviews ◆ Recommendations ◆ Literary calendar ◆ Paperbacks

The man who made the world weep

Using new evidence, Norman Mailer takes a crack at the lingering enigma of Lee Harvey Oswald

By SCOTT ELLSWORTH

We are haunted by the death of John F. Kennedy.

It's not just the images, though they are unforgettable: The presidential motorcade wheeling into the sunlight of Dealey Plaza. The anguished face of Lee Harvey Oswald as Jack Ruby pulls the trigger. John-John's salute to his father's casket.

Nor is it simply that we lost a president that day, or even a way of living. Ask people over 40 where they were when they heard the news from Dallas. They'll know.

Rather, we are haunted by the fact that, 31 years later, we still do not know who is responsible. The American crime of the century remains unsolved.

It has not been for lack of effort. Added to the thousands of pages of Warren Commission testimony, and the latter-day hearings of the House Select Committee on Investigations, scores and scores of books have been written about what did or did not happen on Nov. 22, 1963.

Now, it is Norman Mailer's turn.

At the heart of "Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery" lies a simple question: Did Lee Harvey Oswald have the character to assassinate JFK? To answer it, Mailer has assembled the largest batch of new evidence in nearly two decades.

When Oswald "defected" to the Soviet Union in the fall of 1959, his Soviet handlers were extremely wary. Was he sincere, they wondered, or was this ex-Marine some new type of U.S. spy? Not surprisingly, the KGB kept close tabs on Oswald.

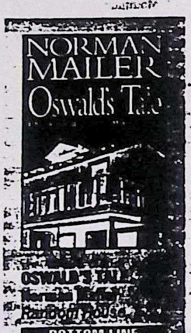
With the subsequent breakup of the Soviet Union, Mailer was able to gain access to these materials.

They form a remarkable window. Shadowed by KGB agents for months on end, we follow Oswald in his day-to-day activities. Through a peephole in the apartment next door, we endure his petty arguments with Marina Prusakova, his Russian bride. We read his mail, go with him to dinner parties and even know when he doesn't pay his fare on a city tram.

Combining this rich trove of information with dozens of interviews with Oswald's former associates in Moscow and Minsk, Mailer brings us an Oswald of genuine, if often distasteful, human dimensions.

It is an empowering perspective. By the time Oswald returns to the United States, in June 1962, we feel as if we

Please turn to OSWALD, Page 7





BOB JACKSON/Associated Press

After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, his accused slayer, Lee Harvey Oswald, is shot to death by Jack Ruby in a Dallas police station.

In the cross hairs of history



MAILER

Oswald's life was absurd, not tragic

5-21-95

Greensboro NC
News and Record

OSWALD'S TALE
An American Mystery
By Norman Mailer
Random House. 828 pages. $30.

BY ANDREW O'ROURKE

HISTORY REVIEW

On the second most infamous Sunday morning in American history, Nov. 24, 1963, nightclub owner and small-time hoodlum Jack Ruby elbowed his way through a crowd of policemen and reporters in the basement of the Dallas City Jail, pulled a revolver from his jacket, and shot accused presidential assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, in what remains today the most astonishing event ever broadcast on live television.

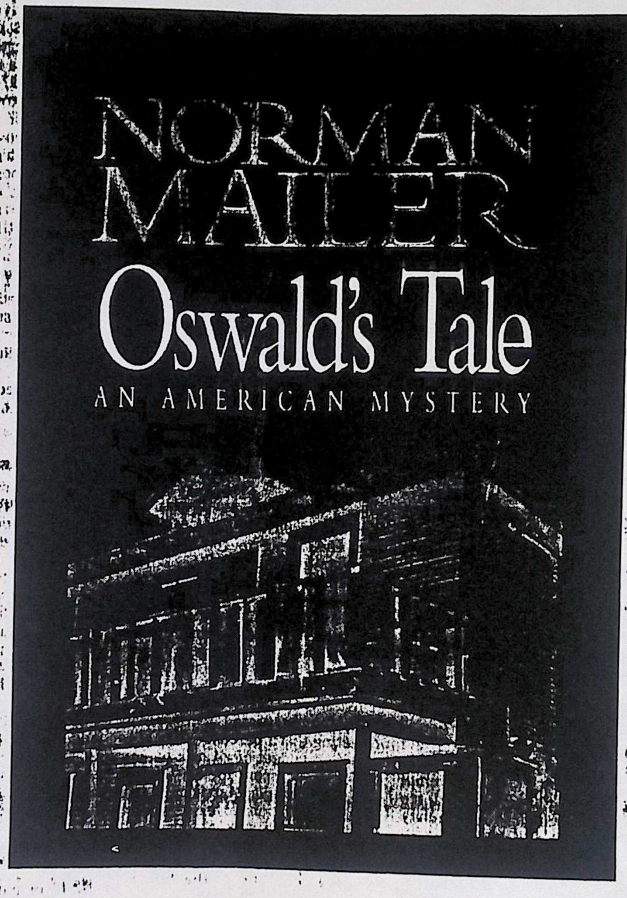
No one who was alive then will ever forget the image: Oswald twisted in pain, face contorted, eyes squeezed shut, handcuffed arms raised futilely as Ruby's bullets tore into his body, while a Stetson-hatted sheriff's deputy looked on incredulously. When he crumpled to his death, Lee Harvey Oswald took with him knowledge that we have been trying to resurrect ever since. Dead nearly a third of a century, he lives on in the dark recesses of America's collective consciousness.

Now comes Norman Mailer, no stranger to those shadowy recesses, with *Oswald's Tale*, a massive but unsatisfying examination of the final years of the assassin's sad and twisted life.

Oswald's Tale is really two books in one, and they are decidedly different in both nature and quality. The first part of the book (Volume One, as Mailer very aptly calls it) is "Oswald in Minsk and Marina," and covers the period from his peculiar "defection" to the Soviet Union in 1959 until his return to the United States with his Russian wife in 1962.

Oswald's admiration for the Soviet Union was considerable, but was scarcely reciprocated. Traveling to Russia in 1959, his repeated entreaties and attempts to become a citizen of the workers' paradise were rebuffed by Soviet authorities, who knew a crackpot when they saw one. They relented only when Oswald, faced with repatriation to the U.S., made a pathetically half-hearted suicide attempt.

He ended up working in a radio factory in the leaden grey city of Minsk, now the capital of Belarus, where he learned to speak some Russian, saw his wife Marina give birth to their child, and was assiduously shadowed (and his apartment bugged) by the KGB, who were never entirely sure that this seeming dim bulb was not an agent of the CIA.



To gather material for this part of *Oswald's Tale*, Mailer spent six months in [illegible] Soviet Union, along with his collaborator, Lawrence Schiller (of recent prominence for his execrable joint venture with O.J. Simpson, *I Want to Tell You.*) They conducted scores of interviews and were given access to formerly secret official files.

From these, Mailer has produced a book that sheds little new light on Oswald the assassin but which deftly captures the domestic hell that was the marriage of Oswald and Marina Prusakova, as well as the quotidian grimness of life in the Soviet Union at the apex of the Cold War.

How unfortunate that Mailer didn't quit at the end of this first part of *Oswald's Tale*. But instead he went on to "Volume Two: Oswald in America." It is, not to put too fine a point on it, tiresome and pointless, an unoriginal rehash of earlier examinations of Oswald's life in Dallas in the months preceding the assassination. There is absolutely nothing new here, save for some wild speculations on the author's part, for which he offers no evidence whatever.

So we are left to wonder why, 32 years after John Kennedy's murder, an author of Norman Mailer's stature saw fit to write *Oswald's Tale*. It may be useful to recall that prior to Kennedy's death, the notion of a presidential assassination evoked nothing more than thoughts of Abraham Lincoln and, for those acquainted with the dustier bins of U.S. history, James Garfield and William McKinley — all from the distant and irrelevant past.

Then came Nov. 22, 1963 — such a cataclysmic jolt to the American psyche that we found it almost unbearable to accept that it might have been nothing more than a lucky shot by a single, deranged loser. We needed desperately to invest the president's death with something of greater substance than that. Hence the tenacity with which so many clung — and some still cling — to the belief that Kennedy's murder was the end product of a vast conspiracy.

Even when the conspiracy theories finally come to seem untenable — and Mailer reluctantly acknowledges that they do, we could more easily bear the reality of Oswald being the lone assassin if we might somehow view his life as, in the author's words, "tragic rather than absurd."

If finding that core of tragedy was the point of *Oswald's Tale*, the book has failed utterly. Lee Harvey Oswald's short life *was* absurd, and it was also empty and wretched and pointless, and nothing Norman Mailer can do will change that.

Andrew O'Rourke is a free lance writer living in Greensboro.

NEW & RECOMMENDED

"Rule of the Bone" by Russell Banks (HarperCollins, $22). A dark adventure that follows a 14-year-old boy with a mohawk from rural, white, New York provincialism to black, postcolonial Jamaica.

"The Love Letter" by Cathleen Schine (Houghton Mifflin, $18.95). A droll, comic novel about pleasure-seeking and pleasure-finding love and all its bountiful, generous, funny and world-altering glory.

"Oswald's Tale" by Norman Mailer (Random House, $30). A 791-page attempt to make a nobody into someone equal to the crime he committed.

"Taking Apart the Poco Poco" by Richard Francis (Simon & Schuster, $21.) A splendidly comic novel about the day in the life of one family that illuminates the dense, lonely core of each member and their interdependent relations.

"The Promise of Rest" by Reynolds Price (Scribner, $24). The author completes his trilogy of the Mayfield family with a generation beset by a plague in this spiritually uplifting novel.

"Safe in America" by Marcie Hershman (HaperCollins, $24). A chronicle of a single family's mundane existence in Cleveland set against the disintegrating world of WWII.

"Poison" by Kathryn Harrison (Random House, $23). A richly evocative tale of a French-born queen and a silk merchant's daughter during the Spanish Inquisition.

"Ladder of Years" by Anne Tyler (Knopf, $24). The protagonist walks away from motherhood and marriage to start a new life, and hardly anyone notices.

"In Retrospect" by Robert S. McNamara (Times Books/Random House, $27.50). The former secretary of defense says we were terribly wrong to continue the war in Vietnam.

"The Information" by Martin Amis (Crown, $24). A frighteningly funny, erudite and mostly compelling novel about literary envy.

"H" by Elizabeth Shepard (Viking, $17.95) A short, poignant and enthralling debut novel about a 12-year-old, mentally ill boy.

"Always, Rachel: The Letters of Rachel Carson and Dorothy Freeman, 1953-64" edited by Martha Freeman (Beacon, $35). The passionate record of a friendship founded in two women's shared love of nature.

"Hilda and Pearl" by Alice Mattison (Morrow, $22). A subtle novel of a family and the ties that divide it.

"Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years, 1865-1871" by Joseph Frank (Princeton, $35). The great creative period of the Russian literary genius.

"Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s" by Ann Douglas (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $25). After "The Feminization of American Culture," its growth into the fertile hybrid we know today.

Selected from books recently reviewed in the Globe.

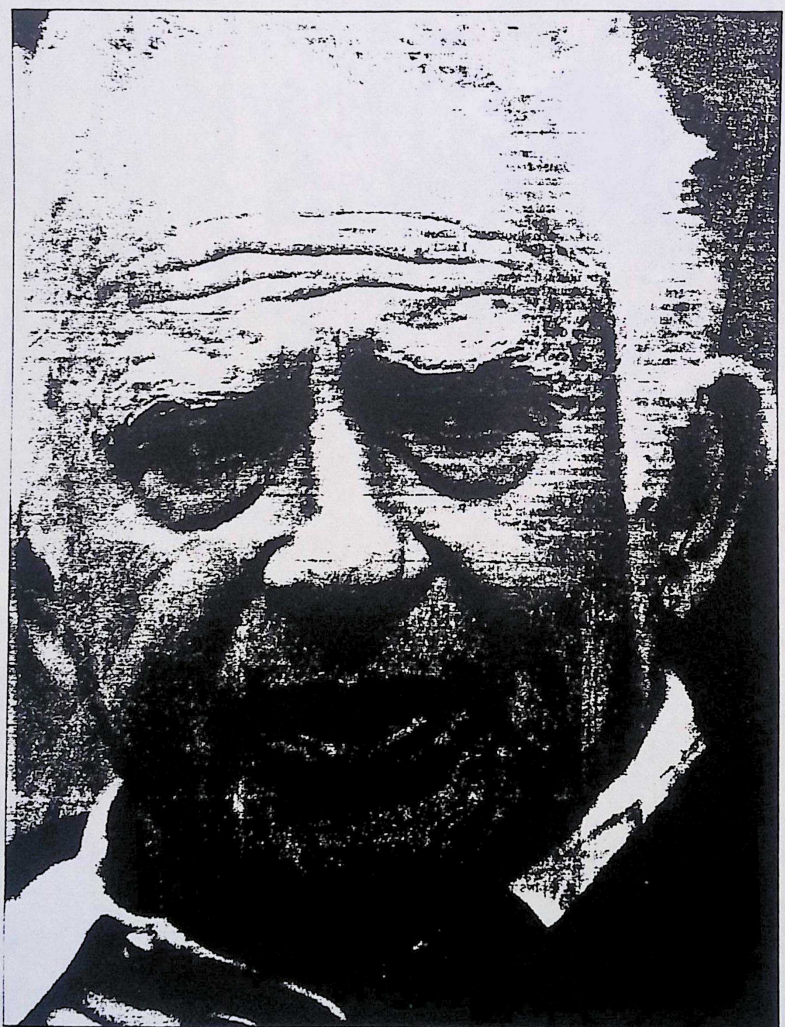
Boston Globe 6/4/95

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THE TORONTO STAR

ENTERTAINMENT

Sunday, May 7, 1995 Section B



RICHARD LAUTENS / TORONTO STAR

MAILER: As Oswald, a "very bad version of myself . . . I could commit an assassination. All by myself."

Mailer cracks mystery

In his new book, Oswald's Tale, Norman Mailer says he's finally solved the puzzle of the Kennedy assassination

BY PHILIP MARCHAND
BOOK CRITIC

NEW YORK — The old boxer still enters a room leading with his shoulders, but now he walks stiffly, as if his back hurts. He is also, on this morning, recovering from an appearance on *Good Morning America* promoting his latest "non-fiction novel," *Oswald's Tale*, about John F. Kennedy's assassin.

"It's the toughest television gig there is," the 72-year-old Mailer complains. "You've got six or seven minutes and you feel like a fool because you're flogging your own book and you're trying to look for some way to be clever and make some dent in that morning stupor that you have, and that you're sharing with 50 million Americans who are watching your show."

Morning stupor disappears, however, when Mailer starts talking. A mention of Marshall McLuhan prompts an enthusiastic recollection of a CBC-TV debate back in the '60s, moderated by Robert Fulford, featuring Mailer, McLuhan and Malcolm Muggeridge.

It was a great and bizarre moment in the annals of Canadian television. Three writers brought together who had not ing in common except a prope sity for wild ideas, a hatred dullness, and pariah status wit in the intellectual and academ establishment.

"I could never stand up McLuhan — he always had ac to my kings," Mailer remem bers. "But he was terrified Muggeridge. And I could alwa pull out a card that would trum Muggeridge.

"Muggeridge would say, 'O *Nawman*, you're a *rub*-bi.' An I'd say, 'No, I believe in vi lence. Rabbis don't believe in v olence.' Then McLuhan woul say something *fabulous*, an Muggeridge would come ou with, 'Oh, Marshall, that's suc *rub*-bish.'"

Mailer is now the only surv vor of that trio, and he shows n signs of fading away. *Oswald' Tale* is his 28th book. It was project, like Mailer's book abou convicted murderer Gary Gil more, *The Executioner's Song* that originated with Larry Schil ler, literary agent and hustle par excellence. (Schiller is re sponsible for O. J. Simpson's re cent book, *I Want To Tell You*.)

Schiller persuaded the KGE to allow him and Mailer to look at their Oswald files — Oswald, of course, temporarily defected to the Soviet Union in 1959. He also persuaded Marina Oswald, whom he had known since he covered the Kennedy assassination for the *Saturday Evening Post*, to do five days of interviews with the pair.

The Marina interviews, along with the KGB files and interviews Mailer and Schiller did together in Russia over a period

(☞ Please see KGB, B2

San Antonio Express-News
BOOK PAGE

Sunday, May 28, 1995



Judyth Rigler

Book Editor

'Party line' connects authors, journalists

Didja ever wonder why *anyone* would want to talk to TV journalist Andy Rooney? Well, so did I — but it turned out OK.

The occasion was a "national teleprint conference" put together by Planned Television Arts, a division of a New York PR firm called Rudder-Finn.

Once you dial the 800 number provided, you're identified and can log on with a question, or simply listen to an hour-long series of questions posed by others.

Not as exciting as a one-on-one interview, but it appears to be the wave of the future for authors unable or unwilling to go on lengthy book tours. Among those whose publishers have put them on the horn with journalists since the first of the year are Maya Angelou ("Phenomenal Woman"), Robert McNamara ("In Retrospect") and Norman Mailer ("Oswald's Tale").

Andrew Shane, senior publicist for PTA, told me, "It's a terrific way of reaching all of the U.S. in an hour's time — particularly for the authors, who often just don't have the time to go on tour (indeed, Rooney was working on his Sunday spot for "60 Minutes" when he took a break for the conference call). And the publishers have been very pleased as well — it's less expensive and less hassle."

These aren't small papers grateful to share an author's time; the New York Times, Chicago Tribune, and other big papers and magazines participate.

Before long, *no one* will ever leave the office.

Andy has his say

But back to Andy. No, he didn't whine or complain — but then, he was promoting his new book, "My War" (Times Books, $25).

Never one to duck controversy, Rooney questions the figures on Jews killed in concentration camps and the validity of the word "Holocaust."



ROONEY

Asked about his stance, Rooney admitted it made his publisher nervous, but "I don't use the word Holocaust. . . . because it sounds like a public relations word, and the word 'genocide' is the word we already have and is perfectly good."

Rooney writes that following the war, the figures of 2 million and 3 million exterminations were used, and he feels that one of those figures might be more accurate than the more modern 8 million estimates. He believes that we must be "meticulous" in citing figures to avoid falling prey to those who would deny entirely the wholesale slaughter of Jews.

"If it can be proved, as it might be possible to do, that it was 3 million Jews who were killed, or 4 million, it would lend credibility to the doubters. And if it was 4 million, can someone say 'only'?"

While Rooney's wartime experience as a correspondent for Stars and Stripes included the witnessing of many horrible deaths, he often goes weeks and months without thinking of the war, he said.

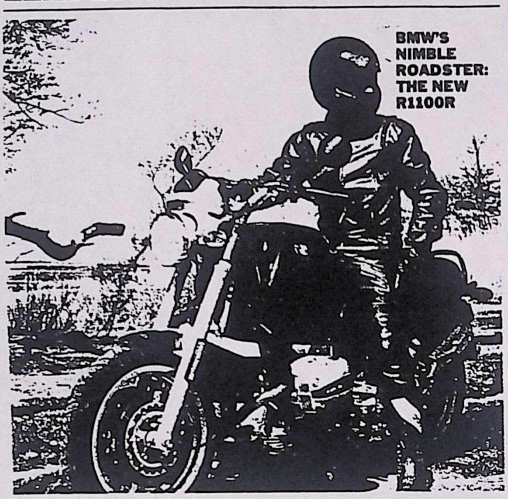
What makes the difference, I asked, between those who regard the wartime experience as the most vivid and unforgettable time of their lives and those who go on and don't think of it so much. Does it have to do with the quality of life they left behind, or the intensity of their wartime experiences?

"I think it has more to do with the kind of people they are," Rooney said. "I feel sorry for professional veterans. . . . I think we have overpaid and overtended veterans and spent too much money on them. If a man was wounded — seriously wounded — during the war, there is nothing too much that this country can do for him. If he got out of the war whole, with nothing but his experiences left, he got what was coming to him, a free country. What more could he ask for?"

When someone described the teleprint conference as a big party line, Rooney, back in TV character, deadpanned: "Some party."

To leave a message for Judyth Rigler, call ExpressLine at 554-0500 and press 4417.

THE NEW LEADERS OF THE PACK



BMW'S NIMBLE ROADSTER: THE NEW R1100R

Back in 1975, I borrowed $700 from my Dad and bought a used Kawasaki motorcycle. Like others of my generation—I was 20—I found a bike brought a sense of freedom that four wheels just couldn't deliver. But after a couple of years, I sold the machine, went to work, and forgot about the thrill of two wheels, horsepower, and an open road.

This spring, the old itch came back. Motorcycling is enjoying a resurgence, thanks in large part to returning riders who buy into the whole experience—bike, clothing, and accessories. In 1994, enthusiasts purchased some 300,000 new bikes, up almost 5% from 1993. And sales this year are expected to grow by at least that amount.

Things have changed since my riding days. You no longer choose a road bike just by color or engine size, as makers now offer distinct categories of specialized cycles. Sport bikes are lightning-fast, race-bred machines easily capable of triple-digit speeds. Sport-touring models feature high-tech engines and great handling but readily carry a passenger and saddlebags for comfortable, long-range travel. Standard motorcycles forgo aerodynamic bodywork and deliver all-around comfort and performance. Touring bikes are big—built for cross-country adventures. And cruisers, the largest-selling category epitomized by classic Harley-Davidsons, are constructed with wider saddles, higher handlebars, and a lower, more comfortable rider position.

LEISURE

For returning riders or newcomers alike, a safety course ought to be a top priority before making any purchase. The Motorcycle Safety Foundation (800 447-4700) offers beginner, intermediate, and advanced riding instruction around the country, with prices ranging from $50 to $200. The one- and two-day combination classroom and road courses are supported by local dealers who provide bikes and certified instructors.

Once you're ready to roll, you'll have a dizzying choice of models built in the U.S., Japan, Germany, Britain, or Italy. Japanese bikes, led by Honda, Kawasaki, Yamaha, and Suzuki, boast brilliant colors, rocket acceleration, and precise handling. The Honda VFR750F ($8,699) is a sport bike that delivers rock-solid Honda reliability and quality without rattling your molars.

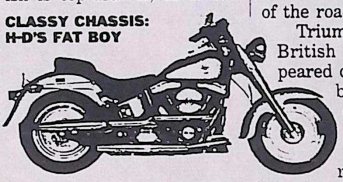
TOP-DRAWER. BMW imports a full line of bikes, and this year introduces the R1100R Roadster ($9,990). The Beemer sports a new, multivalve Boxer engine that delivers plenty of torque through a low-maintenance shaft drive. The bike handles nimbly on back roads or highways, thanks to a sophisticated chassis and suspension. Optional antilock brakes ($1,200) give the R1100R rider confidence and safety. Fit-and-finish is top-drawer, as is the complete line of BMW clothing and cycle accessories. Another plus: BMW reimburses new bike buyers for the Motorcycle Safety Foundation course.

If you've always wanted a Harley, be prepared for a waiting list for some models. Since recovering from severe financial problems in the early 1980s, the Milwaukee company has its act together and sells almost every bike it can build. Twenty H-D models are available with dozens of genuine Harley accessories to guarantee that yours can be one-of-a-kind. Most Harley shops carry more leather than Cher could wear—a genuine H-D leather jacket with insignia goes for around $450. My favorite Hog is the FLSTF Fat Boy ($13,425). It's powered by a huge, two-cylinder engine and sports disk wheels, two-tone paint, and lots of chrome. It ain't high-tech, but head out of town on a Fat Boy and you're king of the road.

SOLID QUALITY: HONDA'S VFR750F



CLASSY CHASSIS: H-D'S FAT BOY



Triumph, a venerable British bike that disappeared during the 1970s, is back, with new models suited for high-speed sport riding. And the screaming red Italian Ducati enjoys a loyal following for its mix of power and panache. Give me any of these bikes, a helmet, a leather jacket, an open road, and a full tank of gas, and in no time, I'll happily motor back to my youth. *Tom Reed*

WORTH NOTING

■ **INVESTMENT INSIGHTS.** Yet another free mutual-fund brochure, this time from Smith Barney. You can get a copy of *Finding Your Way: A Guide to Mutual Fund Investing* by calling 800 EARNS-IT, ext. 3911.

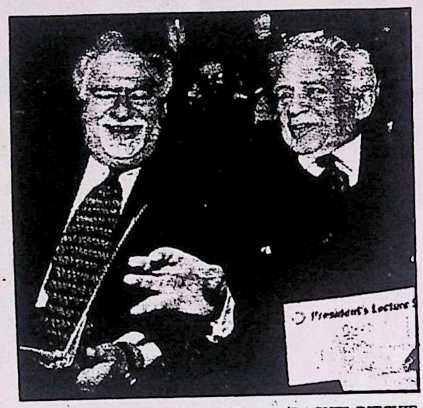
■ **WORKER WORKOUTS.** If you tend to stiffen up on airplanes or suffer aches and pains from sitting for long hours at a computer, you might take a gander at *Getting in Shape* ($15, Shelter Publications, 415 868-0220). The book provides 32 illustrated exercise routines to keep you in shape while on the road or on the job. The programs include desk stretches, hotel-room workouts, and airplane stretches.

(TOP LEFT) PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN DOWE

THE PROVIDENCE SUNDAY JOURNAL

SUNDAY Brunch

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Journal-Bulletin/RACHEL RITCHIE

AT BROWN: Mailer, right, and Brown University President Vartan Gregorian.



CAROL McCABE
Journal-Bulletin
Books Editor

Mailer back in the arena, pushing 'Oswald'

CAMBRIDGE, Mass.

"Is that Norma Mailer with an 'i' or a 'y'?" the hotel operator asked.

It could be that in 1995 Norman Mailer, author of *The Naked and the Dead* at 25, winner of two Pulitzers and the National Book Award, film-maker, onetime candidate for mayor of New York City, lacks the name recognition of a talk-show host or mini-series actress. But his mind is still what one critic called it 25 years ago: a national resource.

The rest of his 72-year-old body must be holding up pretty well, too. At an age when few major literary figures are carrying their bags from hotel to hotel and reading their work to audiences from a dozen stages, Mailer was on the road this month. He visited 12 cities on behalf of his 28th book, *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*, answering the same questions over and over like some 23-year-old promoting the latest coming-of-age novel.

By Albany, the next-to-last stop, the cities were blurring. "It's so lovely here we could be in Philadelphia," he told the man from the Times-Union. "I feel like a pro wrestler. Do I win tonight or do I take the fall?"

Enough is enough. Visiting his alma mater, Harvard, at the end of a 12-city promotion tour, he clumped three final Boston area interviews into one hour in Cambridge. And after the hotel operator found Mailer-with-an-"i", the trio of questioners [illegible]ded to his suite.

'I HAD,' Page 9

'I had been absolutely obsessed with Oswald'

Continued from the cover

Mailer opened the door. His hair is white now and flossy, his tough-guy face grooved, steel-wool chest hair springing from the neck of his alligator shirt. His grip is strong.

Mailer is a man at home in arenas — boxing arenas, bullfight arenas, political arenas. His Cambridge hotel suite, trendily furnished in "Americana" — chipboard Shaker cupboards, dried hydrangeas and fake geraniums in wicker baskets — seemed too fragile a container for him.

The literature that Mailer has produced is a different sort of Americana, a picture of a violent century, of dislocation and shifting values.

The ex-Marine, once known as a brawler, heavy drinker and drug taker, stabber of one of his six wives, sat somewhat gingerly in a pretend Shaker chair.

He responded to familiar questions courteously, thoughtfully, in a resonant voice flavored with New York vowels. What follows includes responses to questions from all three interviewers.

* * *

The subject of *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*, Mailer's first book of non-fiction in 16 years, is Lee Harvey Oswald. The misfit who killed John F. Kennedy remains an enigma 31 years — and some 2,000 books — after the event by which he finally got everyone's attention.

"I had been absolutely obsessed with Oswald," Mailer said, responding to an opening question about why he wrote this book. He hoped to understand Oswald the man and perhaps to solve, if only for himself, the great American mystery of the 20th century.

The immediate impetus was unexpected access to secret KGB documents concerning the period from 1959 to 1962 when Oswald lived in Russia. He had gone there, only 20 years old, unable to speak the language and at first too timid even to leave his hotel room. He was so weak on Russian geography that when officials there sent him to Minsk, he had to ask where it was.

Mailer's book details a mean pillar-to-post childhood from which Oswald escaped by joining the Marine Corps, only to find that there, too, he was odd man out. Although seriously dyslexic, he escaped into books, read Marx, liked the ideals of Communism. And because he was unhappy living under capitalism, he seems to have believed he would be happy living under Communism.

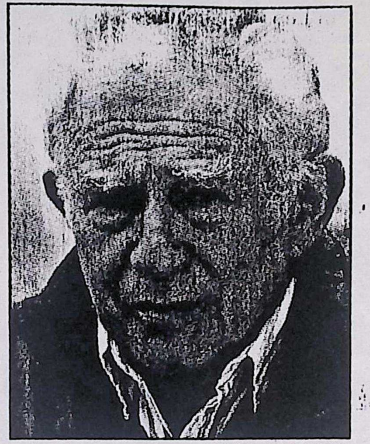
His arrival as a tourist in Moscow and his request to stay alerted Soviet authorities, who assumed he must be a U.S. spy. They maintained increasingly baffled surveillance on him throughout his time there, even tape recording his bedroom conversations with Marina, the tough Russian woman he married. Their records show no evidence that he was a U.S. plant.

Mailer and his associate, Lawrence Schiller, spent six months in the former Soviet Union following Oswald's footsteps, interviewing dozens of people who had come in contact with the future assassin. Later, Mailer went to Texas to interview Oswald's widow.

Schiller was also Mailer's collaborator on *The Executioner's Song*, the Pulitzer-winning story of killer Gary Gilmore, a figure with some resemblance to Oswald. Both were soreheads, outsiders, rebels against the status quo, hungry for control and some measure of importance, no matter how negative.

Thanks to Mailer's superb book and to Mikal Gilmore's 1994 account of his brother's life, Gary Gilmore has come alive in print.

In an interview distributed by Random House, his publisher, Mailer said, "I ended up finding [Oswald] much more interesting than I thought I would." But despite all Mailer's efforts, after 800 pages, Lee Harvey Oswald still seems not very interesting, a nonentity, a cipher and, to one reviewer, "a cockroach."



NANCY CRAMPTON

NORMAN MAILER: Followed Oswald's footsteps.

"What is this passion everyone has to make him small and meaningless, a nonentity?" Mailer asked. "When a guy has guts, I never look on him as a nonentity. . . . Some people who are desperate just slowly collapse and die young. Others who are desperate *try* things. This guy tried it."

Oswald spent his Marine Corps savings to get to Russia and ran out of money while waiting for approval to stay. "He went over there and he's a weak, pathetic figure," Mailer said. "It was like he used all his courage to get there and then it collapsed. Then slowly he [regained] his courage over a couple of years . . . slowly he gets repelled by life in the Soviet Union and decides to go back [to the U.S.]. So he takes on *both* bureaucracies. . . . Finally they decided to let him go back."

Oswald persuaded the U.S. embassy to admit his wife and their daughter along with him, Mailer said. "It took stick-to-itiveness. . . . He's got guts."

Which is not to say that Mailer found Oswald altogether admirable. "He was also the failed husband, the bad worker. . . . He's a complex figure. . . . I think he had a bad character. He was a psychopathic liar, a brute with his wife.

"I think he is a tragic *figure*, not a tragic *hero*," Mailer said in response to a different question. "He's an anti-hero if anything. What's an anti-hero? Someone who goes in for large ventures and makes a mess of them. . . . I think he wanted to be a hero and he absolutely failed at that."

Had Oswald not killed Kennedy or himself been shot dead by Jack Ruby, if he were alive today, what would he be doing? Would he be a member of a militia? Would he be on the Internet?

"He *would* be on the Internet, sending out all kinds of manifestoes. He had a political program; he was a libertarian. Both kinds of government were wrong; he wanted no government at all.

"Militia? I think he liked the idea of killing people one by one, not . . . ."

The end of Mailer's response was drowned by another interviewer's voice. Presumably he could have said, "not 167 at a time." Something like that.

Although it was about actual people and events, *The Executioner's Song* was labeled a novel, because it applied the techniques of fiction writing to non-fiction. *Oswald's Tale* is presented as non-fiction. "Most people think the line between fiction and non-fiction is a Berlin Wall," Mailer said. "I think, on the contrary, that it's a barely marked boundary. I like working back and forth on that boundary. . . . being a range rider on that line.

"The big difference between the two books: this one is a colloquy with the reader. In the second half [which deals with Oswald after his return to the U.S.], I'm talking to the reader, saying, 'Here I feel pretty sure of myself and there, I'm not sure I know what I'm talking about.'"

"Are you still obsessed with Oswald?" one of the Cambridge trio asked him. "Much less now," Mailer said.

In a favorable 1966 review of Mark Lane's book *Rush to Judgment* in The Village Voice (a paper Mailer co-founded), Mailer expressed doubt that Oswald could have acted alone. "Perhaps," he wrote, "Perhaps there is one chance in a thousand."

Now, nearly 30 years later, Mailer is of the opinion "that Lee had the character to kill Kennedy and that he probably did it alone."

Still, during this interview, he hedged. "I think there's a real chance that there were conspiracies. Although I end up guessing 3 to 1 that he did it alone, that's just a guess. He could easily . . . have been part of some small conspiracy."

* * *

"Are you still an obsessive person?"

"I try not to be. Nothing's more wasteful. I hate obsession. It just consists of putting more energy into the same question. When I was younger, I used to [ask], 'Am I a good man or not?' That's a terrible question. It's very wasteful."

He regrets other energy dissipated. During the '60s, "I was wasting a lot of time, getting into a lot of capers, into troubles of one sort and another, drinking too much and killing a lot of writing I could have done. I think that over the years I've gotten more or less in shape. Much more disciplined now."

What's next? Another CIA novel, a sequel to *Harlot's Ghost*? Mailer's answer was a quick reminder that he is no longer the kid who wrote *The Naked and the Dead*.

Writing takes a lot out of you, he said. "I've been writing about fighters all my life. And I've finally come to understand old fighters. Old fighters don't like tough fights. [Tough fights] kill you. [Old fighters'] bodies have taken a beating from which they can't recover. Writing is like that. Too much anxiety. It just eats up your guts."

Finally, he talked about the vogue for short books, the kind he seldom writes. "Everywhere I go, booksellers ask me, 'Why don't you write a short book? Short books take up less space on our shelves.' Marketing has taken over writing now. The hell with what the book *is*, can we market it?"

As for Mailer, "I was convinced at an early age by Thomas Mann that only the

BIRMINGHAM
NEWS/POST-HERALD

BIRMINGHAM, AL
SATURDAY 179,250

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BURRELLE'S

BOOK REVIEWS

Here are books I don't feel like reviewing — and why:

OSWALD'S TALE: A American Mystery. By Norman Mailer. Random House. $30.

Mailer has a multibook deal with Random House; the first was the massively overwritten novel "Harlot's Ghost," a CIA fable running to more than 1,000 pages. Hustling to meet obligations, Mailer has turned to that inexhaustible pile of myth and fact, the John Kennedy assassination, an event that has inspired more than 2,000 books.

Just leafing through this 800-pager showed me that Mailer lifted whole sections of other books and the Warren Commission transcripts. The book's first section is an account of interviews Mailer and an associate conducted in the former Soviet Union with people who knew Oswald. This part was excerpted in The New Yorker, which I read with growing disinterest, although I did learn about life in Minsk in 1959.

"Oswald's Tale" has the feel of a slapped-together bio as the writer filled in all the gaps with secondary sources.

MARS AND VENUS IN THE BEDROOM. By John Gray. HarperCollins. $22.

The Doc Jonson of the New Age, Gray's first take on the sexes, "Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus," was demeaning to women, juvenile, obvious and a best seller. His new one, a sex manual with only two diagrams, looks cadged from the pages of Ladies Home Journal.

ANAIS NIN: A Biography. By Deirdre Bair. Putnam. $35.

How hard can it be to retell the life of someone who turned out 69 volumes of her diary, be it fact or fantasy? Miss Nin was a mediocre writer, a cheap pornographer and either a sexual freak or a pathological liar. Today, it's hard to accept that she was embraced as a pioneer of feminine sexuality when her diaries were finally published in the 1960s. There have been two other bios of Miss Nin, so why another one?

MY DOG SKIP. By Willie Morris. Random House. $15.

Poor Morris. He's one of those American writers who never made it to the second act. Morris stays in print by rewriting "North Toward Home," his excellent first book. Now, it's back to childhood in Yazoo, Miss., *again*.

— Bob Hoover
Scripps Howard/
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Book notes: Actor Charlton Heston put the finishing touches on his forthcoming book during a two-day stay at the Tutwiler Hotel in Birmingham.

After arriving Sunday, Heston asked to borrow a typewriter, said hotel General Manager Mark Collins. Heston told Collins he was so close to finishing the project that he could " 'smell the barn.' "

The book, "In the Arena," is an autobiography of the actor's personal life and career. Heston, who was in town in conjunction with the MCI Charity Pro-Am golf tournament, has starred in such Hollywood epics as "The Ten Commandments" and "Ben Hur."

NEWS & RECORD

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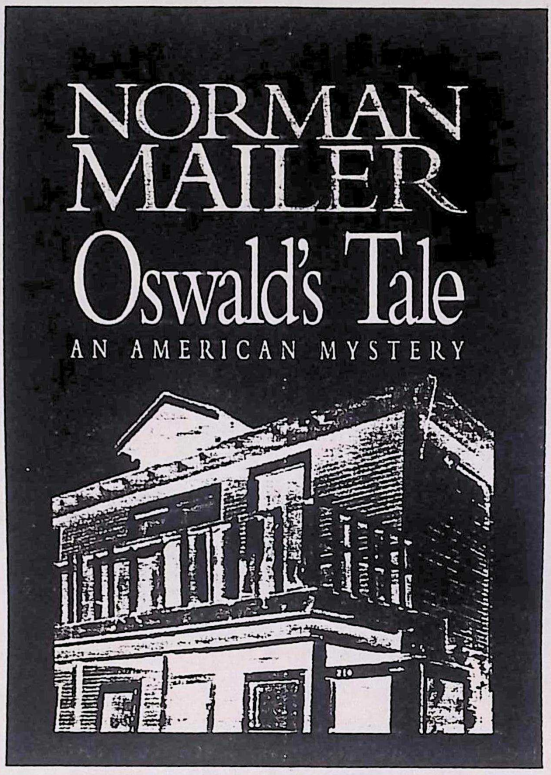
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Oswald's life was absurd, not tragic

OSWALD'S TALE
An American Mystery
By Norman Mailer
Random House, 828 pages. $30.

BY ANDREW O'ROURKE 7131

HISTORY REVIEW



On the second most infamous Sunday morning in American history, Nov. 24, 1963, nightclub owner and small-time hoodlum Jack Ruby elbowed his way through a crowd of policemen and reporters in the basement of the Dallas City Jail, pulled a revolver from his jacket, and shot accused presidential assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, in what remains today the most astonishing event ever broadcast on live television.

No one who was alive then will ever forget the image: Oswald twisted in pain, face contorted, eyes squeezed shut, handcuffed arms raised futilely as Ruby's bullets tore into his body, while a Stetson-hatted sheriff's deputy looked on incredulously. When he crumpled to his death, Lee Harvey Oswald took with him knowledge that we have been trying to resurrect ever since. Dead nearly a third of a century, he lives on in the dark recesses of America's collective consciousness.

Now comes Norman Mailer, no stranger to those shadowy recesses, with *Oswald's Tale*, a massive but unsatisfying examination of the final years of the assassin's sad and twisted life.

Oswald's Tale is really two books in one, and they are decidedly different in both nature and quality. The first part of the book (Volume One, as Mailer very aptly calls it) is "Oswald in Minsk and Marina," and covers the period from his peculiar "defection" to the Soviet Union in 1959 until his return to the United States with his Russian wife in 1962.

Oswald's admiration for the Soviet Union was considerable, but was scarcely reciprocated. Traveling to Russia in 1959, his repeated entreaties and attempts to become a citizen of the workers' paradise were rebuffed by Soviet authorities, who knew a crackpot when they saw one. They relented only when Oswald, faced with repatriation to the U.S., made a pathetically half-hearted suicide attempt.

He ended up working in a radio factory in the leaden grey city of Minsk, now the capital of Belarus, where he learned to speak some Russian, saw his wife Marina give birth to their child, and was assiduously shadowed (and his apartment bugged) by the KGB, who were never entirely sure that this seeming dim bulb was not an agent of the CIA.

To gather material for this part of *Oswald's Tale*, Mailer spent six months in Russia and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, along with his collaborator, Lawrence Schiller (of recent prominence for his execrable joint venture with O.J. Simpson, *I Want to Tell You.*) They conducted scores of interviews and were given access to formerly secret official files.

From these, Mailer has produced a novelistic work that sheds little new light on Oswald the assassin but which deftly captures the domestic hell that was the marriage of Oswald and Marina Prusakova, as well as the quotidian grimness of life in the Soviet Union at the apex of the Cold War.

How unfortunate that Mailer didn't quit at the end of this first part of *Oswald's Tale*. But instead he went on to "Volume Two: Oswald in America." It is, not to put too fine a point on it, tiresome and pointless, an unoriginal rehash of earlier examinations of Oswald's life in Dallas in the months preceding the assassination. There is absolutely nothing new here, save for some wild speculations on the author's part, for which he offers no evidence whatever.

So we are left to wonder why, 32 years after John Kennedy's murder, an author of Norman Mailer's stature saw fit to write *Oswald's Tale*. It may be useful to recall that prior to Kennedy's death, the notion of a presidential assassination evoked nothing more than thoughts of Abraham Lincoln and, for those acquainted with the dustier bins of U.S. history, James Garfield and William McKinley — all from the distant and irrelevant past.

Then came Nov. 22, 1963 — such a cataclysmic jolt to the American psyche that we found it almost unbearable to accept that it might have been nothing more than a lucky shot by a single, deranged loser. We needed desperately to invest the president's death with something of greater substance than that. Hence the tenacity with which so many clung — and some still cling — to the belief that Kennedy's murder was the end product of a vast conspiracy.

Even when the conspiracy theories finally come to seem untenable — and Mailer reluctantly acknowledges that they do, we could more easily bear the reality of Oswald being the lone assassin if we might somehow view his life as, in the author's words, "tragic rather than absurd."

If finding that core of tragedy was the point of *Oswald's Tale*, the book has failed utterly. Lee Harvey Oswald's short life *was* absurd, and it was also empty and wretched and pointless, and nothing Norman Mailer can do will change that.

Andrew O'Rourke is a free lance writer living in Greensboro.

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Mailer's art can't overcome his hot air



Norman Mailer

LEE HARVEY OSWALD: STILL A 'KNUCKLEHEAD'

■ **Oswald's Tale.** *By Norman Mailer. Random House. 791 pp. $30.*

7131

By James Hazard

Well of course Norman Mailer was going to write a book about Lee Harvey Oswald. And here it is, all 791 pages (plus appendix and notes).

Grandiose historical ambition has always drawn Mailer, particularly when it is wedded to one daring outlaw's psyche. Simultaneous destruction and creation in one extreme act have been his ticket, and so we have Mailer on Oswald.

The book begins with a prelude, setting the scene in Russia for the advent of Oswald. It has the feel of a Russian novel, Pasternak or Tolstoy, and I was struck again by what a splendid writer Mailer can be when he's storytelling, and not thinking too much.

But then the thinking starts at about page 200. The pages begin filling with excerpts from the Warren Commission and other testimony, with Mailer interpreting the texts for us. What promised to be a great nonfiction novel, the tale of Lee Harvey Oswald, becomes something infinitely less satisfying.

Mailer believes that Oswald did shoot John Kennedy. He also believes that "if a figure as large as Kennedy is cheated abruptly of his life, we feel better, inexplicably better, if his killer is not without size."

That sentence focuses a couple of objections I have to this book. First, Mailer seems hell-bent on making Oswald into more of a philosopher-criminal than he was. Second, the phrase "not without size" is an annoying example of the self-consciously prissy writing that has always cluttered Mailer's "philosophical" speculations, and finally comes to dominate the style of this book.

Mailer's idea is that if he can find some greatness in Kennedy's killer, the killer becomes a tragic figure. Oswald assumes the stature of "America's First Ghost" — using the designation of First here as it's used for "The First Family."

But as I read the evidence that Mailer provides, following Oswald's unhappy life from childhood to America to kill and be killed, I don't find myself convinced. Poor Oswald comes across to me as a miserable knucklehead who dreams he'll find his own greatness in a great political crime.

His first attempt, the assassination of General Edwin Walker, fails. His next one does not. And then he is bumped off by a strip joint operator with a name out of a detective novel.

Mailer's attempts to give this man with a gun grandeur are completely unconvincing. Any increase in Oswald's stature in these pages doesn't come from what we learn about Oswald. It comes for a lot of huffing and puffing — hot air provided by Norman Mailer.

James Hazard, a poet and free-lance writer, is an English professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.



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Books

Norman Mailer Goes to Minsk, but Fails to Solve the Mystery

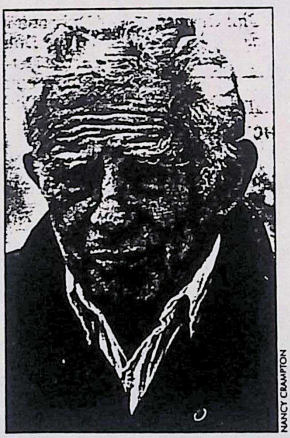
By Hugh Aynesworth

It must have been exciting for Norman Mailer when Lawrence Schiller, the man Mailer describes as his "skillful and wily colleague," suggested to him that they might be able to gain access — for a price — to the KGB's secret files on Lee Harvey Oswald during the two-and-a-half years Oswald spent in the Soviet Union from 1959 to 1962.

Schiller has always had a nose for big-bucks journalism. He wrote the enigmatic *I Want to Tell You* for a needy O.J. Simpson ($1 million-plus advance), provided the Gary Gilmore connection that helped Mailer win the Pulitzer Prize for *The Executioner's Song* and emerged with a strange interview from a tape recorder smuggled into Jack Ruby's hospital room as Ruby lay dying in late 1966. He even made the claim (much disputed) that he was the last one to interview Marguerite Oswald, Lee Harvey's mother.

"Larry can do things I can't do," Mailer explained on a recent talk show when asked why the Russians had turned over the secret materials to him. "You know, Russians care a great deal about literature," Mailer added moments later, explaining that at some point the Russians obviously thought "maybe a very important American writer should do this." Maybe they also liked the long green Schiller reportedly offered.

Mailer probably didn't need much prompting to get involved. He has long harbored a fascination with Oswald and the JFK assassination — an interest he has described as "an obsession." One always had the feeling that someday he would weigh in on the subject.



NANCY CRAMPTON

Mailer: *A change of heart.*

In 1992, starting with an admitted bias toward conspiracy theories in the JFK case, Mailer, Schiller and their entourage took off to examine what the KGB had to offer. In fairness, for almost three decades nobody had been able to get inside those files, and at least a half-dozen authors had concocted great tales — some almost believable — of Russian complicity with Oswald in the Kennedy assassination. But what Mailer found — or perhaps, we should say, didn't find — in those files must have stunned him.

In *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* (Random House, 791 pp), the reader is offered a plethora of surveillance reports, a stack of transcripts allegedly made by agents peeping through a small hole in Oswald's apartment, interviews with Russians who had contact with Oswald and lengthy evaluations by a few who allegedly managed the surveillance.

The reader does not really know the identity of those KGB birds. Mailer thinks more like a novelist than a reporter, thus, the two central figures are known only by pseudonyms. Another participant, who he describes as looking like former CBS chairman William Paley, is a composite of several Russians, he admits.

Other than a passing fear that they might be punished for their handling of the Oswald case after the assassination (one of them was ordered to hand-carry the case files to Moscow on Nov. 23), the two principals told Mailer they considered the Oswald assignment a basic case "because it did not involve anyone of extreme intelligence."

Watching Oswald, Mailer quotes one as saying, was "simple because it did not have variables, it did not fluctuate and finally there wasn't much that really raised a lot of new questions." That is precisely what Yuri Nosenko, a Russian defector, told U.S. intelligence agencies in 1964, but conspiracy theorists have always refused to accept that assessment, and even within the CIA two factions fought a career-on-the-line battle over Nosenko's veracity.

What of value did Mailer and his team elicit in the more than six months they spent in Minsk and other places in the former Soviet Union? The reminiscences of a couple dozen people whose paths crossed Oswald's, plus a number of excruciatingly boring surveillance summaries and transcripts. Perhaps enough for a bang-up magazine article but, realistically, not enough for a major book. The author's writing talents have, in some cases, made others' reporting more meaningful, but the big promise of this book falls flat.

With the exception of Oswald's widow, Marina — who probably despises the picture Mailer paints of her as a mean, promiscuous nag — all those Russian people saw Oswald almost as though he were a movie star. He was the only real-life American any of them had ever met. Some liked him, some pitied him, some couldn't stand him, but always they saw what they wanted to see in him, or what he allowed them to see. To think that any of them got close enough to speak authoritatively of Oswald — who lied, evaded and lived in a surreal world of illusory self-importance — is fanciful.

A book that was to have been "Oswald in Minsk" turned out to be an 800-page beast that attempts to cover the waterfront. Mailer, who for years hooted down the official Warren Commission conclusion that Oswald acted alone, once comparing it to "a dead whale decomposing on a beach," now has no qualms citing that official investigation when it helps him make a point.

He apparently had the same change of heart regarding several books he once ridiculed, including *Marina and Lee* by Priscilla Johnson McMillan and *Lee: A Portrait of Lee Harvey Oswald* by Robert Oswald. At least two-thirds of Oswald's *Tale* appears to be cribbed from such books or previous investigations (with proper credit, of course).

Mailer leans heavily to the single-assassin theory and the idea that Oswald also killed Dallas police officer

J.D. Tippit. Noting that many Americans think nightclub owner Jack Ruby was forced by the mob to silence Oswald, Mailer admits that if that is so, Ruby made up his mind only minutes before he did it. "Why," he asks, "was Ruby standing in line in Western Union waiting his turn to send $25 to a stripper while time kept floating away and Oswald might have been moved at any moment?" The author even quotes liberally from Oswald's "historic diary," thought by many conspiracy theorists over the years to have been part of a government coverup.

Perhaps Robert Oswald is the best critic of Mailer's latest effort: "I think this book tells more about Mr. Mailer than about my brother."

Hugh Aynesworth, Dallas bureau chief of the Washington Times, *has covered the JFK assassination case on and off since 1963.*

Books for Vacation Reading

This list has been selected from books reviewed since the Christmas Books issue of December 1994 and suggests only high points in the main fields of reader interest. Books are arranged alphabetically under subject headings. Biographies and memoirs of people known for their contributions in fields other than literature and history are listed in appropriate categories.

Art, Music & Popular Culture

THE ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF ISLAM, 1250-1800. By Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom. (Yale University, $65.) A bold, competent and fresh attempt to rewrite the history of later Islamic art from scratch, with plenty of splendid color illustrations and other useful graphics.

LES DEMOISELLES D'AVIGNON. By William Rubin, Hélène Secket and Judith Cousins. (Museum of Modern Art/Abrams, $40.) A jargon-free study of Picasso's masterpiece, the starting point for 20th-century art.

NEW YORK 1960: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Second World War and the Bicentennial. By Robert A. M. Stern, Thomas Mellins and David Fishman. (Monacelli/Penguin, $125.) A huge book that examines the city's development as the world capital of finance and art, and the disputes and decisions that directed it; with extensive local descriptions.

THE RANSOM OF RUSSIAN ART. By John McPhee. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $20.) The story of a Maryland economics professor who amassed the world's largest collection of artworks by nonconformist Soviet artists.

REVELATIONS: The Autobiography of Alvin Ailey. By Alvin Ailey with A. Peter Bailey. (Birch Lane/Carol, $18.95.) Completed from tapes made before the choreographer's death, this frustratingly allusive memoir suggests the sources for Ailey's dances.

THE ROMANTIC GENERATION. By Charles Rosen. (Harvard University, $39.95.) A professor and pianist offers a fond, accessible analysis of the works of Schumann, Mendelssohn, Chopin and others during the period from 1827 to 1849. Mr. Rosen furnishes musical illustrations on the accompanying compact disk.

SEEING THE UNSEEN: Dr. Harold E. Edgerton and the Wonders of Strobe Alley. Edited by Roger R. Bruce. (George Eastman House/MIT, $39.95.) Edgerton's amazing work in high-speed photography; a CD-ROM comes with it.

SHAKER BUILT: The Form and Function of Shaker Architecture. By Paul Rocheleau and June Sprigg, edited and designed by David Larkin. (David Larkin/Monacelli Press/Penguin, $50.) Sumptuous color photographs of Shaker buildings, taken with care and devotion.

WHISTLER AND MONTESQUIOU: The Butterfly and the Bat. By Edgar Munhall. (Frick Collection/Flammarion/Abbeville, $45.) A profusely illustrated biographical account of the encounter between the eccentric American painter and the foppish French nobleman that resulted in one of Whistler's masterpieces.

Biography, Autobiography & Memoir

ANAÏS NIN: A Biography. By Deirdre Bair. (Putnam, $39.95.) An engaging account that presents the diarist as even more self-absorbed than her work suggests.

ANNA AKHMATOVA: Poet and Prophet. By Roberta Reeder. (St. Martin's, $35.) An ambitious effort to synthesize the facts of the life and works of one of Russia's greatest poets.

BATTLING FOR PEACE: A Memoir. By Shimon Peres. (Random House, $25.) The Israeli politican and leader reviews his long career, which parallels the history of the nation.

BEATRIX: The Gardening Life of Beatrix Jones Farrand, 1872-1959. By Jane Brown. (Viking, $50.) A lavishly illustrated account of how a niece of Edith Wharton became a great garden designer.

CAITLIN: The Life of Caitlin Thomas. By Paul Ferris. (Pimlico/Trafalgar Square, paper, $16.95.) A biographer of Dylan Thomas now succeeds in bringing to tempestous life a portrait of the poet's wife.

CHARLOTTE BRONTË: A Passionate Life. By Lyndall Gordon. (Norton, $27.50.) An engaging biography that connects the life and fiction persuasively, in particular the relationship between Brontë and her publisher that gave rise to "Villette," her other masterpiece.

CLOSEST COMPANION: The Unknown Story of the Intimate Friendship Between Franklin Roosevelt and Margaret Suckley. Edited by Geoffrey C. Ward. (Houghton Mifflin, $24.95.) Margaret Suckley's diary shows F.D.R. finding comfort in a distant cousin who could relax, however worshipfully, in his presence.

CONFESSIONS OF A BARBARIAN: Selections From the Journals of Edward Abbey, 1951-1989. Edited by David Petersen. (Little, Brown, $24.95.) A selec-

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tion from the notebooks and journals of the novelist and naturalist shows his lifelong focus on his familiar themes: anarchy, sex, defense of the natural world and how best to die.

THE DIARY OF A YOUNG GIRL: The Definitive Edition. By Anne Frank. Edited by Otto H. Frank and Mirjam Pressler. (Doubleday, $25.) An expanded version, restoring entries from the original diary, gives more texture and nuance to this renowned personal account of the Holocaust.

DR. SEUSS & MR. GEISEL: A Biography. By Judith Morgan and Neil Morgan. (Random House, $25.) The authorized biography of the beloved children's author who gave the world the Cat in the Hat.

DOSTOEVSKY: The Miraculous Years, 1865-1871. By Joseph Frank. (Princeton University, $35.) Volume 4 of this planned five-part biography excels in providing a cultural, literary, social and biographical context for Dostoyevsky's works.

DREAMING: Hard Luck and Good Times in America. By Carolyn See. (Random House, $23.) The novelist's memoir of her family revels in a woman's point of view as it paints a portrait of drugs, drink and zany freedom in California.

EDMUND WILSON: A Biography. By Jeffrey Meyers. (Peter Davison/Houghton Mifflin, $35.) Lively, shapely and evocative, this book offers insights into Wilson's public and private lives that Wilson, despite his own autobiographical writings, lacked the introspection to achieve.

EVELYN WAUGH: A Biography. By Selina Hastings. (Houghton Mifflin, $40.) A readable one-volume life of the English satirist who was famous as a splendid stylist and a monstrous man.

FRANCO: A Biography. By Paul Preston. (Basic Books, $37.50.) A huge, all-inclusive life of the outright winner of Spain's civil war, the shrewd, lucky dictator of his country for almost 40 years.

GENIUS IN DISGUISE: Harold Ross of The New Yorker. By Thomas Kunkel. (Random House, $25.) Forty-four years after Ross's death, this first full-scale biography of the creator of The New Yorker tries to account for the formidable editorial instincts, integrity and self-knowledge that underlay his success.

GENTLEMAN SPY: The Life of Allen Dulles. By Peter Grose. (Richard Todd/Houghton Mifflin, $30.) A biography, full of new information, of the irresistibly charming (and manipulative) man who headed — and embodied — the Central Intelligence Agency from 1953 to 1961.

GIVING AWAY SIMONE: A Memoir. By Jan L. Waldron. (Times Books/Random House, $22.) An absorbing personal history of the author and her family, women who for five generations failed or declined to keep their children.

HARDY. By Martin Seymour-Smith. (St. Martin's, $35.) An enjoyably pugnacious biography of the English novelist and poet that does not suffer previous biographies gladly.

HARRY AND TEDDY: The Turbulent Relationship of Press Lord Henry R. Luce and His Favorite Reporter, Theodore H. White. By Thomas Griffith. (Random House, $24.) An affectionate but unsentimental dual biography of the founder of Time magazine and of one of its legendary correspondents, written by a former editor at Time.

IN LOVE WITH DAYLIGHT: A Memoir of Recovery. By Wilfrid Sheed. (Simon & Schuster, $23.) The writer's account of his battles with alcohol, drugs and cancer is grim, but it's told with whimsical wisdom and good-natured resolve.

JOHN STEINBECK: A Biography. By Jay Parini. (Holt, $30.) A clearly written and sympathetic biography of the author of "The Grapes of Wrath" that argues for a critical re-evaluation of Steinbeck.

THE LAST GREAT FRENCHMAN: A Life of General de Gaulle. By Charles Williams. (Wiley, $30.) The career of the much-taller-than-life soldier whose political victories were based on a loathing for politicians and a willingness to chuck his allies when he thought they were wrong.

THE LIFE OF GRAHAM GREENE. Volume 2: 1939-1955. By Norman Sherry. (Viking, $34.95.) Mr. Sherry brings to the grotesquely complicated life of Greene a relentless passion for detail, resulting in a compulsively readable account.

LONG WALK TO FREEDOM: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela. By Nelson Mandela. (Little, Brown, $24.95.) On the evidence of his own version of his amazing life, the President of South Africa is no moralist or messiah but a pragmatic politician who always chose what might work over what was ideologically agreeable.

MOZART: A Life. By Maynard Solomon. (HarperCollins, $35.) A psychologically informed and often brilliant analysis of Mozart (and his father) that complicates rather than simplifies our understanding of Mozart. As it should.

MURDERERS AND OTHER FRIENDS: Another Part of Life. By John Mortimer. (Viking, $23.95.) The creator of Horace Rumpole continues the recollections begun in "Clinging to the Wreckage" in a tone that will be familiar to viewers of "Mystery!"

NELSON: A Personal History. By Christopher Hibbert. (Addison-Wesley, $30.) A biography that visits many familiar scenes but brings clarity, reliability, convincing judgments and enthusiasm to Horatio Nelson, a unique British hero whose personal defects could never tarnish his glory.

1920 DIARY. By Isaac Babel. (Yale University, $20.) The first English translation of a journal

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kept by the great Russian short-story writer during his service as a correspondent in the campaign against the Poles.

OUT OF EGYPT: A Memoir. By André Aciman. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $20.) A splendid rendition of life over 50 years or so in the prosperous business class in Alexandria, ending with the expulsion of the author's Jewish family.

PAULA. by Isabel Allende. (HarperCollins, $24.) The Chilean novelist's account of three generations of her family's history, interwoven with an account of her daughter's yearlong coma that ended in the young woman's death.

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON: A Biography. By Frank McLynn. (Random House, $30.) A thoroughly detailed life, taking the most recent scholarship into account, of the great Scottish writer of English prose who died at 44 in 1894.

SAINT-EXUPÉRY: A Biography. By Stacy Schiff. (Knopf, $30.) A comprehensive biography of the French aviator and author of "The Little Prince."

SLY AND ABLE: A Political Biography of James F. Byrnes. By David Robertson. (Norton, $29.95.) A life of the powerful politician who at various times was a United States Senator, Supreme Court Justice and Secretary of State.

TOM PAINE: A Political Life. By John Keane. (Little, Brown, $27.95.) A good introduction to a difficult, often unlovable character, an effective propagandist of revolution (and, on the whole, liberty) in America, France and even England.

TOULOUSE-LAUTREC: A Life. By Julia Frey. (Viking, $34.95.) A valuable life of the only great painter of France's golden age who was an aristocrat, incorporating much family correspondence recently made available.

WALTER PATER: Lover of Strange Souls. By Denis Donoghue. (Knopf, $27.50.) A critical analysis of the life and work of the high priest of Victorian estheticism in which Mr. Donoghue argues that Pater is the fountainhead of modernism.

WALT WHITMAN'S AMERICA: A Cultural Biography. By David S. Reynolds. (Knopf, $35.) An intensive historical excavation, aiming to show how Whitman, an enthusiast for almost everything, transmuted into his poetry images from all aspects of American culture.

ZOLA: A Life. By Frederick Brown. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $37.50.) A comprehensive biography, making use of Zola's recently published complete correspondence, that dispels misconceptions about the writer's life and politics.

Crime

THE BOOKMAN'S WAKE. By John Dunning. (Scribner, $21.) A luxuriantly written mystery about a limited edition of "The Raven" whose owners have the disconcerting habit of winding up dead.

CRANKS AND SHADOWS. By K. C. Constantine. (Mysterious Press/Warner, $19.95.) In this 11th novel of a series, the "generally crazy" but compassionate police chief of a dying Pennsylvania steel town is told to shrink his already tiny force at the same time a paramilitary group shows up.

DEAD LAGOON. By Michael Dibdin. (Pantheon, $21.) In the fifth Aurelio Zen novel, the ministry officer returns to his native Venice to investigate the kidnapping of an American businessman and discovers a city stagnating between economic depression and incipient fascism.

THE EDGE OF THE CRAZIES. By Jamie Harrison. (Hyperion, $20.95.) The eccentric inhabitants and festering animosities of a small town in Montana result in murder in this debut novel, told in a brash, animated voice.

MURDER ON A KIBBUTZ. By Batya Gur. (HarperCollins, $20.) Inspector Michael Ohayon faces a dual mystery when he attempts to understand the arcane ways of an Israeli kibbutz in order to catch the murderer of its administrative secretary.

NO NIGHT IS TOO LONG. By Ruth Rendell writing as Barbara Vine. (Harmony, $23.) A psychological thriller in which a murderer thinks he is being pursued by the ghost of his victim.

ORIGINAL SIN. By P. D. James. (Knopf, $24.) Adam Dalgliesh investigates a case involving intrigue, malice and murder in a prestigious London publishing house.

PIGTOWN. By William J. Caunitz. (Crown, $23.) In a savvy police procedural, the investigation of the killing of a lowly foot soldier in the Brooklyn mob leads to the exposure of police corruption and the beginning of gangland war.

STILL WATERS. By Margaret Woodward. (Putnam, $22.95.) A sensationalistic story is told with a delicate style in this debut novel about the murder of a rich socialite and her daughter in Mobile, Ala.

Essays, Criticism & Letters

ANNOYING THE VICTORIANS. by James R. Kincaid. (Routledge, cloth, $49.95, paper, $15.95.) A series of essays that take a fresh and often irreverant view of Victorian literature.

BETWEEN FRIENDS: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949-1975. Edited by Carol Brightman. (Harcourt Brace, $34.95.) The 26-year correspondence of two extraordinarily bright, active, articulate women who thought a lot and gossiped no little.

THE GUTENBERG ELEGIES: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age. By Sven Birkerts. (Faber & Faber, $22.95.) A

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meditation by the literary critic on the danger of extinction for books and the bookish as the world goes CD-ROM.

JACK KEROUAC: SELECTED LETTERS, 1940-1956. Edited by Ann Charters. (Viking, $29.95.) The first of two projected volumes of the correspondence of the Beat chronicler.

MODERN JAPANESE DIARIES: The Japanese at Home and Abroad as Revealed Through Their Diaries. By Donald Keane. (Holt, $50.) A collection of essays by the great scholar of Japan that paints of picture of the country's history from the mid-19th century to the 1920's.

THE PORTABLE JACK KEROUAC. Edited by Ann Charters. (Viking, $27.95.) An anthology by a lifelong scholar of the Beats that shows the autobiographical unity of Kerouac's writings.

SIX MYTHS OF OUR TIME: Little Angels, Little Monsters, Beautiful Beasts, and More. By Marina Warner. (Vintage, paper, $10.) Humorous, urgent essays on how myth and fiction enshrine and fix categories like the moral condition of children.

Fiction

THE ADVENTURES OF MAQROLL: Four Novellas. By Alvaro Mutis. (HarperCollins, $24.) Brilliant stuff from a Colombian writer, the second volume of interrelated, outrageous tales from the life and times of Maqroll, a mysterious, mythic seafarer.

THE AGE OF CONSENT. By Geoffrey Wolff. (Knopf, $22.) In Mr. Wolff's sixth novel Teddy Jenks, a 13-year-old child of the children of the 1960's, is transformed by his sister's near suicide into the historian of his family's emotional life.

ALL THE DAYS AND NIGHTS: The Collected Stories of William Maxwell. (Knopf, $25.) Stories, balanced, gentle and humane, concerned above all with reconciliation, from six decades of work by a master writer and editor who is now 86.

ANGEL ANGEL. By April Stevens. (Viking, $19.95.) A strangely persuasive novel about a family petrified by a father's desertion, then restored to humanity by an ebullient young woman with enough excess mental health to go around.

ANTARCTIC NAVIGATION. By Elizabeth Arthur. (Knopf, $25.) A first-person novel, alive with feeling and animated energy, whose heroine's aim is to vindicate by imitation the vision and morals of Scott of the Antarctic.

ATHENA. By John Banville. (Knopf, $22.) In this wickedly mannerist novel, a murderer turned "art expert" runs smack into his own past when he has to catalogue a batch of stolen Old Masters.

BETRAYALS. By Charles Palliser. (Ballantine, $23.) This clever novel spins out a set of variations on the double-cross and such related themes as infidelity, treason and revenge.

THE BLUE AFTERNOON. By William Boyd. (Knopf, $23.) A story of amoral obsessive love in the Philippines at the turn of the century, told with the author's characteristic vigor and inventiveness.

COLD SNAP: Stories. By Thom Jones. (Little, Brown, $19.95.) A collection of short stories that turns a merciless, ironic gaze on the biological trap called life.

THE COLLECTED STORIES OF LOUIS AUCHINCLOSS. (Houghton Mifflin, $24.95.) Nineteen stories, the oldest from the 1940's, by a writer unfashionably and passionately concerned with the beliefs and behavior of the WASP civilization that until very recently produced America's ruling class.

THE COMMODORE. By Patrick O'Brian. (Norton, $22.50.) The 17th installment of the saga of Capt. Jack Aubrey of the British Navy and his ship's doctor, Stephen Maturin, at sea in the 19th century.

THE CUNNING MAN. By Robertson Davies. (Viking, $23.95.) The hero of this wise and entertaining novel, a chronicle of personal and social change in Toronto, is a doctor whose superb diagnostic skills rest on shamanism and Platonism as well as scientific medicine.

DEEP RIVER. By Shusaku Endo. (New Directions, $19.95.) Mr. Endo's novel follows soulless modern Japanese travelers to the Ganges, where they encounter the humanity and suffering of a few who have found faith.

THE DISTINGUISHED GUEST. By Sue Miller. (HarperCollins, $24.) The story of an ailing, famous mother who intrudes on the domesticity of her youngest son is also a subtle exploration of the conflicts of public and private selves.

A DIVING ROCK ON THE HUDSON: Volume 2 of "Mercy of a Rude Stream." By Henry Roth. (St. Martin's, $23.95.) When it rains it pours: 60 years after "Call It Sleep," Mr. Roth, back at the keyboard, plunges on with a purposely garrulous narration whose hero looks much like himself and whose life story centers on a spectacular sin.

EAST, WEST: Stories. By Salman Rushdie. (Pantheon, $21.) Nine stories by the fugitive author of "The Satanic Verses," some boisterous, some provocative, all taking some advantage of Mr. Rushdie's difficult dual heritage.

THE FEAST OF FOOLS. By John David Morley. (St. Martin's, $23.95.) This exuberant and inventive updating of the myth of Demeter and Persephone, set in Munich in 1987, is also a homage to the author's adopted city.

FELICIA'S JOURNEY. By William Trevor. (Viking, $21.95.) Mr. Trevor's latest novel concerns an unmarried, pregnant, vulnerable Irish girl, wandering England's industrial Midlands until she encounters an awe-

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somely predatory Englishman whose monstrosity is all the scarier for remaining long undefined.

FLESH AND BLOOD. By Michael Cunningham. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $22.) An enjoyably sprawling, old-fashioned novel explores the simmering tensions of a suburban family whose overbearing patriarch inspires murderous passions.

FROM TIME TO TIME. By Jack Finney. (Simon & Schuster, $23.) Simon Morley, hero of Mr. Finney's idiosyncratic novel "Time and Again," returns to scramble the pages of history by trying to prevent World War I.

H. By Elizabeth Shepard. (Viking, $17.95.) A brief, affecting first novel about a withdrawn 12-year-old boy whose only emotional connection is with a stuffed toy.

HOW LATE IT WAS, HOW LATE. By James Kelman. (Norton, $21.) A novel about a Glasgow ne'er-do-well that charms, persuades and illuminates, though it is written not only in salty talk but in the Glaswegian language.

THE INFORMATION. By Martin Amis. (Harmony, $24.) Mr. Amis's cool and brilliant novel is sustained throughout by the corroding, corrupting envy of an unsuccessful novelist for a successful novelist who is also his best friend.

KONFIDENZ. By Ariel Dorfman. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $17.) This novel in dialogue reveals only gradually that its frightening political developments are taking place in 1939, suggesting that fear is always appropriate.

LADDER OF YEARS. By Anne Tyler. (Knopf, $24.) Delia Grinstead, the heroine of Ms. Tyler's 13th novel (a fairy tale of sorts), decides at 40 that she'd rather be somebody else — so she simply walks out of her old life.

THE LOVE LETTER. By Cathleen Schine. (Houghton Mifflin, $19.95.) Helen is 42, capable and loves Edith Wharton. Johnny is 20, acne-spotted and — *like, excellent!* — a big Tom Robbins fan. In this comic novel they fall in love.

THE LOVES OF FAUSTYNA. By Nina FitzPatrick. (Penguin, paper, $9.95.) At a sign from heaven, the Polish heroine of this frolicky picaresque novel abandons her virginity; when martial law arrives in 1981, she opens serious negotiations with the powers of political darkness.

THE MAN WITHOUT QUALITIES. By Robert Musil. Translated by Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike. (Knopf, two volumes, boxed, $60.) A magnificent new version of the unfinished and unfinishable novel by an Austrian contemporary of Proust and Joyce whose acknowledged greatness has always exceeded his acknowledged readership.

MASTER OF THE DAY OF JUDGMENT. By Leo Perutz. (Arcade, $19.95.) First published in Austria in 1921, after the empire's collapse in the Great War, this elaborate joke of a novel takes the genre itself as a stage for brilliant clowning.

THE MATISSE STORIES. By A. S. Byatt. (Random House, $17.) A trio of short stories, each featuring the work of Henri Matisse and each containing sharp insights into female sensibilities.

MEMOIR FROM ANTPROOF CASE. By Mark Helprin. (Harcourt Brace, $24.) The slowly unfolding self-revelation of Oscar Progresso, the thoughtful, aged eccentric who narrates this novel while planning a fantastical crime.

MEN IN BLACK. By Scott Spencer. (Knopf, $23.) A smart, affectionate comic novel in which an honorable but unsuccessful novelist's life is overturned when his pseudonymous potboiler about extraterrestrials becomes a best seller.

MOO. By Jane Smiley. (Knopf, $24.) The novelist who is fast becoming the Balzac of the contemporary Midwest sets her newest book on the campus of a big agricultural university and puts a 700-pound pig right in the middle.

MOVING HOUSE: Stories. By Pawel Huelle. (Helen and Kurt Wolff/Harcourt Brace, $18.95.) These tales by a Polish writer, which turn on the longings and workings of memory, are rooted in the highly idiosyncratic history of Gdansk.

MY EDUCATION: A Book of Dreams. By William S. Burroughs. (Viking, $21.95.) A barely fictionalized dream journal that offers a whirlwind valedictory tour of the author's unconscious.

NOVEL WITHOUT A NAME. By Duong Thu Huong. (Morrow, $23.) Ten years in the army of North Vietnam transform the protagonist of this gritty novel as he and his nation are stripped of the ideals they have sacrificed so much for.

OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR. By Katharine Weber. (Crown, $23.) In an engaging, elegantly written first novel, the ghosts of a young woman's past inhibit her efforts to help her best friend escape from a destructive love affair.

OF LOVE AND OTHER DEMONS. By Gabriel García Márquez. (Knopf, $21.) An exorcist becomes infatuated with the possessed 12-year-old daughter of an 18th-century marquis in this magical, fatalistic novel.

THE PAPERBOY. By Pete Dexter. (Random House, $23.) An eerie and beautiful novel whose emotionally alienated title character, a reporter in quest of facts only, is outmaneuvered by violent half-wits who know what they want.

THE POINT: Stories. By Charles D'Ambrosio. (Little, Brown, $19.95.) An impressive collection, mixing the exotic and the familiar, precise as to prose, various as to tone, emotionally generous.

A PRIVATE VIEW. By Anita Brookner (Random House, $23.) The aptly named George Bland attempts to escape his placid routine with a young and surly New Age devotee.

THE PROMISE OF REST. By Reynolds Price. (Scribner, $24.) The third and presumably final chapter of the chronicle of the Mayfield-Kendal family, in which contemporary woes overtake the clan.

REDEYE: A Western. By Clyde Edgerton. (Algonquin, $17.95.) An elaborate, unbelievable plot, chock-full of believable, well-developed characters, sustains this woolly western by an admirable Southern novelist.

RIDING THE RAP. By Elmore Leonard. (Delacorte, $22.95.) A dandy re-readable thriller set in postmodern America, land of wised-up rabble and zero authenticity; its crooks intend a whole new crime, never perpetrated before.

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A RIVER TOWN. By Thomas Keneally. (Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, $24.) It's 1899 in Mr. Keneally's impassioned 21st novel, and Tim Shea, an outsider in an Australia with no insiders, inexorably digs himself into deeper and deeper trouble by always trying to do the right thing.

RULE OF THE BONE. By Russell Banks. (HarperCollins, $22.) A novel that reinvigorates the Huck Finn myth in the person of Chappie, a mall rat from upstate New York who lights out for Jamaica with a runaway farm worker.

THE TRIAL OF ELIZABETH CREE: A Novel of the Limehouse Murders. By Peter Ackroyd. (Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, $22.) A claustrophobic, agitated novel of London in 1880; everyone (including a clutch of famous contemporary reformers) is connected to everyone else.

THE TUNNEL. By William H. Gass. (Knopf, $30.) This great big novel (652 pages) by an American master is all spun out of the head of its monstrous protagonist, a language-driven professor of fascist views who is as dreadful as he is plausible.

THE UNUSUAL LIFE OF TRISTAN SMITH. By Peter Carey. (Knopf, $24.) Its tough, spare, considered language sustains this big and thoughtful novel, whose hero learns that imperialism is universal, bad for weak and strong alike.

A VOID. By Georges Perec. (Harvill/HarperCollins, $24.) The letter E never occurs in this 1969 French novel or in its translation by Gilbert Adair; what does occur is a wildly amusing feast of puzzles, mind games and rules broken just to exhibit their latent existence.

WAITING FOR THE DARK, WAITING FOR THE LIGHT. By Ivan Klima. (Grove, $21.) A fine, skeptical novel, published in Prague in 1993; its hero, a cameraman and would-be film maker, fears that the corruption of spirit induced under the old regime may be permanent.

THE WEDDING. By Dorothy West. (Doubleday, $20.) A fascinating, deceptively substantial novel by an 87-year-old survivor of the Harlem Renaissance; its main subject is the subtle assumptions of color, class, race and status in a summer colony of upper-class black families.

WONDER BOYS. By Michael Chabon. (Villard, $23.) An intelligent, lyrical book whose graceful melancholy and good humor save it from being just a novel about a novelist making a novel.

History

ADMITTING THE HOLOCAUST: Collected Essays. By Lawrence L. Langer. (Oxford University, $23.) Mr. Langer, a retired professor of English, illuminates the literature of the Holocaust — the chronicles of ghetto and camp, the fiction and poetry wrought out of the horror, the representations in film and on television.

THE AGE OF EXTREMES: A History of the World, 1914-1991. By Eric Hobsbawm. (Pantheon, $30.) The Marxist historian's account of the modern world as the battleground between socialism and capitalism.

ART FROM THE ASHES: A Holocaust Anthology. Edited by Lawrence L. Langer. (Oxford University, $30.) A remarkable collection of personal accounts, both by well-known survivors and by victims otherwise obscure, and of fiction, poetry and art related to the cataclysm.

DEATH AND DELIVERANCE: "Euthanasia" in Germany c. 1900-1945. By Michael Burleigh. (Cambridge University, cloth, $59.95; paper, $18.95.) An artful and dispassionate account of the Nazi program to kill the handicapped and mentally ill.

EXCELLENT CADAVERS: The Mafia and the Death of the First Italian Republic. By Alexander Stille. (Pantheon, $27.50.) This fascinating and horrifying examination, based on immense piles of documents, shows how in the last 25 years the Mafia has terrorized Sicilian society and perverted Italian politics.

FACING FACTS: Realism in American Thought and Culture, 1850-1920. By David E. Shi. (Oxford University, $35.) A history of the shift of the American mind from romanticism to realism from just before the Civil War to the end of World War I.

THE FALL OF THE ASANTE EMPIRE: The Hundred-Year War for Africa's Gold Coast. By Robert B. Edgerton. (Free Press, $23.) An accessible narrative of the bloody struggle that resulted in the fall of the Asante to British imperialists.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR: A Complete History. By Martin Gilbert. (Holt, $35.) Mr. Gilbert's enormous breadth of view seeks to render this dreadful conflict as soldiers lived it on many fronts, often relying on the poetry and prose of the many gifted writers who saw action.

FOR THE PRESIDENT'S EYES ONLY: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency From Washington to Bush. By Christopher Andrew. (HarperCollins, $30.) A thoughtful and judicious history of the use of espionage by Presidents, with an emphasis on the last six decades.

THE FORBIDDEN BESTSELLERS OF PRE-REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE. By Robert Darnton. (Norton, $27.50.) A graceful and informative account of the role dissident literature played in creating the fervor that resulted in the French Revolution.

THE GENERALS' WAR: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf. By Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor. (Little, Brown, $27.95.) A lucid, meticulously researched report by the chief Pentagon correspondent of The New York Times and a retired general who is director of national security programs at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

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THE HOLLOW YEARS: France in the 1930s. By Eugen Weber. (Norton, $25.) The author, a historian devoted to France, rises from immersion in the documents bearing this scintillating, entertaining account of an unworthy but fascinating period in French life.

IMPERIAL GERMANY, 1871-1914: Economy, Society, Culture and Politics. By V. R. Berghahn. (Berghahn Books, cloth, $59.95; paper, $17.95.) A comprehensive account of German society from the founding of the Kaiser's empire to its collapse in World War I.

IN RETROSPECT: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam. By Robert S. McNamara with Brian VanDeMark. (Times Books/Random House, $27.50.) The former Secretary of Defense explains, regretfully, how he and his can-do colleagues got stuck fast in the Vietnam War.

IN THE TIME OF THE AMERICANS: FDR, Truman, Eisenhower, Marshall, MacArthur — The Generation That Changed America's Role in the World. By David Fromkin. (Knopf, $30.) F.D.R. stars in a historian's incisive account of the men who made the 20th century what it is.

KILLING CUSTER: The Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Fate of the Plains Indians. By James Welch with Paul Stekler. (Norton, $25.) A meditation on the ways Custer and Sitting Bull have reverberated through historical memory, white and American Indian.

LANDSCAPE AND MEMORY. By Simon Schama. (Knopf, $40.) A learned and perceptive survey of Western attitudes toward nature in the last five centuries; Mr. Schama's starting point is the Renaissance fascination with river, forest and mountain as signs of a revered prototypal world.

LONDON: A Social History. By Roy Porter. (Harvard University, $29.95.) The development of the Great Wen over 400 years, examined as a quasi-biological explosion that everyone feared and no one could curtail.

MY FIVE CAMBRIDGE FRIENDS: Burgess, Maclean, Philby, Blunt and Cairncross by Their K.G.B. Controller. By Yuri Modin with Jean-Charles Deniau and Aguieszka Ziarek. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $23.) The inside stuff from the Russian intelligence officer who controlled the famous British moles.

OSWALD'S TALE: An American Mystery. By Norman Mailer. (Random House, $30.) Stoked by a passion to believe J.F.K.'s death was more than a meaningless absurdity, Mr. Mailer pursues and delivers the assassin's very slightly significant soul, using his own research and that of others.

THE PHILBY FILES: The Secret Life of Master Spy Kim Philby. By Genrikh Borovik. (Little, Brown, $24.95.) A Russian writer and television personality draws upon his acquaintance with the aging English double agent as well as previously unreleased K.G.B. documents to tell this century's greatest espionage story.

THE ROCKET AND THE REICH: Peenemünde and the Coming of the Ballistic Missile Era. By Michael J. Neufeld. (Free Press, $25.) A chronicle of the Nazis' brutal V-2 rocket program and the German scientists who became the American space technologists of 1945 and after.

THE SECRET WORLD OF AMERICAN COMMUNISM. Edited by Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes and Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov. (Yale University, $25.) A collection of newly released Soviet documents shows that the Communist Party in the United States received financial support from the Kremlin and that the party established an espionage apparatus.

SPEAK NOW AGAINST THE DAY: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South. By John Egerton. (Knopf, $35.) A magisterial account of the generation of Southerners, white and black, who fought segregation from 1932 to 1954.

TERRIBLE HONESTY: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s. By Ann Douglas. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $25.) The great big city in the great good time, analyzed with broad scope and minute complexity as the locus of the national psyche when Americans attacked the conditioned responses of the pre-1914 world.

TOMORROW IS ANOTHER COUNTRY: The Inside Story of South Africa's Road to Change. By Allister Sparks. (Hill & Wang, $22.) A South African journalist's fast-paced, gripping account of the long, slow and often clandestine process that led to the end of apartheid.

TREASON IN THE BLOOD: H. St. John Philby, Kim Philby, and the Spy Case of the Century. By Anthony Cave Brown. (Marc Jaffe/Houghton Mifflin, $29.95.) A dual biography arguing that Kim Philby, the notorious English double agent, inherited a propensity for duplicity from his adventuresome father.

Medicine & Psychology

AN ANTHROPOLOGIST ON MARS: Seven Paradoxical Tales. By Oliver Sacks. (Knopf, $24.) More tales of the engrossingly abnormal by a generous, humane neurologist who explores the peculiar thinking of both physician and patient.

BOREDOM: The Literary History of a State of Mind. By Patricia Meyer Spacks. (University of Chicago, $24.95.) A persuasive account of a concept invented in the 18th century; its roots include a growing concentration on "inner experience" as the locus of personal reality.

NIGHT: Night Life, Night Language, Sleep, and Dreams. By A. Alvarez. (Norton, $23.) Personal and literary explorations of the less visible (and therefore more conjectural) half of life by a gifted critic and acutely intuitive memoirist.

Poetry

THE ANNALS OF CHILE. By Paul Muldoon. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $21.) Easier of access and more emotionally direct than his previous work, these poems are also more arcane and allusive — especially the long autobiographical sequence "Yarrow," an account of the birth of the poet's imagination.

THE COLLECTED POEMS OF LANGSTON HUGHES. Edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel. (Knopf, $30.) Except for juvenilia, all the poems, including hundreds Hughes himself did not include in collections. Altogether they remind us that he had perhaps the greatest affinity for popular speech and song of any American poet in this century.

THE INFERNO OF DANTE: A New Verse Translation. By Robert Pinsky. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $35.) A near-symphonic rendition of the tour through hell attains a truly Dantean velocity without missing a jot or a tittle.

A SCATTERING OF SALTS: Poems. By James Merrill. (Knopf, $20.) Merrill's last collection, published just weeks after his death. These poems have the unfailing style and varied brilliance one expects, but also a sense of summing up — a wealth of poetry reaching its final form.

SELECTED POEMS, 1965-1990. By Marilyn Hacker (Norton, $22.) Supple, and colloquial, formalism gives an inviting elegance to poems of often astonishing directness, heated passion and a vision of the human family that calls into question virtually all of what are called traditional values.

Politics & Current Affairs

ALLAH O AKBAR: A Journey Through Militant Islam. By Abbas. (Phaidon/Chronicle, $60.) A broad and gloomy photographic examination of 29 countries by an Iranian-born photojournalist whose subjects seem rarely to take any time out from the utmost rigors of the faith.

BROKEN COVENANT: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis Between the U.S. and Israel. By Moshe Arens. (Simon & Schuster, $25.) A senior Israeli politician indicts Bush Administration policy as meddlesome and duplicitous.

COMRADE CRIMINAL: Russia's New Mafiya. By Stephen Handelman. (Yale University, $27.50.) A reporter's account of post-cold-war Russia, now a lawless land at the mercy of organized crime.

THE DEATH OF COMMON SENSE: How Law Is Suffocating America. By Philip K. Howard. (Random House, $18.) A lawyer argues that this would be a better country if we had less law.

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DEFENDING PORNOGRAPHY: Free Speech, Sex and the Fight for Women's Rights. By Nadine Strossen. (Scribner, $22.) The president of the American Civil Liberties Union polemicizes againt the branch of the feminist movement that advocates censorship of sexually explicit materials.

DEMOCRACY ON TRIAL. By Jean Bethke Elshtain. (Basic Books, $20.) A thoughtful professor of ethics argues that the weakness of democratic institutions in America reflects the replacement of rights conceived as immunities from government interference by rights conceived as individual entitlements.

THE DE-MORALIZATION OF SOCIETY: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values. By Gertrude Himmelfarb. (Knopf, $24.). The distinguished historian argues that the West has lost its moral compass over the course of the 20th century.

THE END OF REFORM: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War. By Alan Brinkley. (Knopf, $27.50.) In the late 1930's, a distinguished historian argues, liberal interventionism lost its nerve and settled for underwriting consumer demand, with the results we now see around us.

GOOD COP, BAD COP: Detective Joe Trimboli's Heroic Pursuit of NYPD Officer Michael Dowd. By Mike McAlary. (Pocket Books, $23.) Mr. McAlary, a New York newspaper columnist who followed the case closely, reports on a police corruption investigation that appears to have been frustrated by departmental solidarity.

THE HAUNTED LAND: Facing Europe's Ghosts After Communism. By Tina Rosenberg. (Random House, $25.) A moral, political and psychological investigation, by a wise journalist, of four post-Soviet societies struggling with their conduct under the old regimes.

AN INTIMATE HISTORY OF HUMANITY. By Theodore Zeldin. (HarperCollins, $25.) Not history so much as informed rumination by an Oxford social historian who talks to many people (mostly Frenchwomen) about the fundamentals of human experience — hope, despair, love, etc. — and thinks that hope still has a chance.

KWANZAA AND ME: A Teacher's Story. By Vivian Gussin Paley. (Harvard University, $18.95.) A wise kindergarten teacher, long committed to integration, re-examines its value by paying attention to what children and parents say.

LAND OF OPPORTUNITY: One Family's Quest for the American Dream in the Age of Crack. By William M. Adler. (Atlantic Monthly, $22.) Solid reportage about how a family of poor Arkansas blacks became the kingpins of crack in Detroit.

LOSING GROUND: American Environmentalism at the Close of the 20th Century. By Mark Dowie. (MIT, $25.) A courageous critique of the environmental movement that contends its leadership has ceded the moral high ground to become just another special interest in Washington.

A NATION UNDER LAWYERS: How the Crisis in the Legal Profession Is Transforming American Society. By Mary Ann Glendon. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $24.) A Harvard law professor sees hyperactive litigators and "romantic" judges as depriving the nation of lawyers' real talents: solving problems and designing social structures.

THE NEW VICTORIANS: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order. By Rene Denfeld. (Warner, $21.95.) The author, who is 28, contends that established feminism, like its suffragist predecessor, has abandoned the quest for equal status and turned to bashing male vices.

ONE BY ONE FROM THE INSIDE OUT: Essays and Reviews on Race and Responsibility in America. By Glenn C. Loury. (Free Press, $25.) An African-American economist tackles race and poverty in a collection of biting pieces that emphasize black self-help while also calling on the Government to aid the nation's poor.

OVERCOMING LAW. By Richard A. Posner. (Harvard University, $39.95.) The author, a high Federal judge and former law professor, examines the plight of the law from a "law and economics" viewpoint, urging more respect for the empirical reality of legal issues.

PRESIDENTIAL WAR POWER. By Louis Fisher. (University Press of Kansas, cloth, $29.95; paper, $14.95.) An argument that Presidents have violated constitutional limits on war-making power ever since the Korean War.

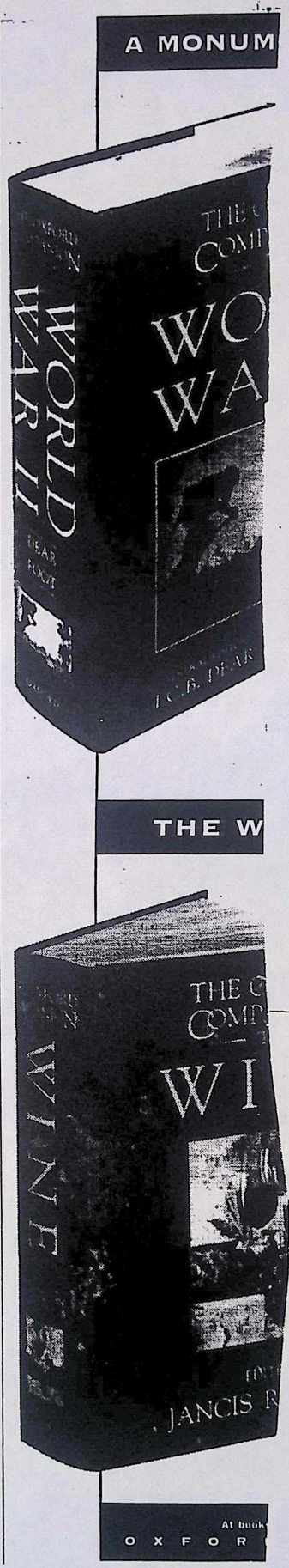
RETHINKING AMERICA. By Hedrick Smith. (Random House, $25.) An examination of and prescription for America's economy in a changed world order.

THE REVOLT OF THE ELITES AND THE BETRAYAL OF DEMOCRACY. By Christopher Lasch. (Norton, $22.) The ills of democracy, Lasch passionately contends, arise from such defaults as the abdication of responsibility for the community by economic elites and the propagation by academics of a skeptical relativism.

TEMPTATIONS OF A SUPERPOWER. By Ronald Steel. (Harvard University, $18.95.) The author, who teaches international relations at the University of Southern California, criticizes American foreign policy as muddled and wasteful and offers suggestions in keeping with contemporary conditions.

WHERE THE SUCKERS MOON: An Advertising Story. By Randall Rothenberg. (Knopf, $25.) A lively rendition, by a former advertising columnist for The Times, of real life at an agency that tried to sell cars by ridiculing ads for cars.

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Religion & Philosophy

GOD: A Biography. By Jack Miles. (Knopf, $27.50.) Not a joke but a scholarly, entertaining literary inquiry into the character called God as His multiple personalities have been rendered through the ages in the Hebrew Bible.

KILLING TIME: The Autobiography of Paul Feyerabend. By Paul Feyerabend. (University of Chicago, $22.95.) In this memoir by a philosopher who died last year, his characteristic talent for raising hackles is clearly in evidence, as well as the intellectual incisiveness that underlies his challenges to the epistemology of science.

POPE JOHN PAUL II: The Biography. By Tad Szulc. (Lisa Drew/Scribner, $27.50.) Mr. Szulc, a seasoned reporter of Polish birth, inquires into the special circumstances of Polish Catholicism and the special stresses of fascist and Communist domination that formed the present Pope.

Science

AFTER THE FACT: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist. By Clifford Geertz. (Harvard University, $22.95.) The leading anthropologist of his generation looks back on his career and finds himself with more questions than answers.

MARIE CURIE: A Life. By Susan Quinn. (Simon & Schuster, $30.) A biography of the great Polish scientist that conveys the warmth and genius of the two-time Nobel laureate.

A MOMENT ON THE EARTH: The Coming Age of Environmental Optimism. By Gregg Easterbrook. (Viking, $27.95.) Essays on the most complex of modern subjects, treating our considerable environmental accomplishments and our puzzling neglect of threats (diseases, for instance) in other people's backyards.

MONSTERS OF THE SEA. By Richard Ellis. (Knopf, $30.) A delightful and learned adventure in cryptozoology (the study of hidden life forms, including the leviathan, the sea serpent, the kraken, the blob and the globster).

NANO. The Emerging Science of Nanotechnology: Remaking the World — Molecule by Molecule. By Ed Regis. (Little, Brown, $23.95.) Crisp science journalism about a possible world of endless bounty, produced by incredibly tiny machines.

NOAH'S CHOICE: The Future of Endangered Species. By Charles C. Mann and Mark L. Plummer. (Knopf, $24.) The authors persuasively contend that humans will decide, by default or by intention, who goes extinct, and at present have not a clue how to do so wisely.

PALE BLUE DOT: A Vision of the Human Future in Space. By Carl Sagan. (Random House, $35.) A scientist predicts that when the solar system meets its end, our species will survive by colonizing other worlds.

REFLECTIONS OF EDEN: My Years With the Orangutans of Borneo. By Biruté M. F. Galdikas. (Little, Brown, $24.95.) An offbeat personal memoir that examines her own life and work, by a woman who studied the most autonomous ape.

Science Fiction

BECOMING HUMAN. By Valerie J. Freireich. (Roc, paper, $4.99.) A familiar theme — how human are the artificially cloned "toolmen" of a moralistic but class-conscious society? — is given a fresh treatment is this impressive debut novel.

THE DIAMOND AGE: Or, A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer. By Neal Stephenson. (Spectra Bantam, $22.95). The author of the manic "Snow-crash" foresees a future where the marvels of cyberspace and nanotechnology coexist with a revival of Victorian social discipline.

HUMILITY GARDEN: An Unfinished Biography. By Felicity Savage. (Roc, paper, $4.99.) Art is literally murder in this intensely imagined novel, written when the author was a 19-year-old sophomore at Columbia University.

THE KILLING STAR. By Charles Pellegrino and George Zebrowski. (Avonova/Morrow, $22.) A novel that coolly examines the advantages and disadvantages of interstellar communication and concludes that intelligent species would be wise to adopt a strategy of "shoot first, talk later."

LUNCHING WITH THE ANTICHRIST: A Family History, 1925-2015. By Michael Moorcock (Mark V. Ziesing, Box 76, Shingletown, Calif. 96088 $25.) This fine collection of stories reflects the literate and humane approach to science fiction that the author championed when he edited the British magazine New Worlds in the 1960's.

THEY FLY AT CIRON. By Samuel R. Delany (Tor/Tom Doherty, $19.95.) This biting parable about the bloody roots of civilization represents a felicitous collaboration between the mature Delany and his younger self, who wrote the first version of this tale in 1962.

Spies & Thrillers

CHINA WHITE. By Peter Maas. (Simon & Schuster, $23.) In his first thriller, the investigative reporter explores heroin trafficking with its interconnections between Chinese gangs, the mob and American intelligence agencies.

THE CODICIL. By Tom Topor. (Hyperion, $21.95.) When a wealthy industrialist leaves half his estate to the child he fathered in Vietnam, a private investigator must uncover secrets about the dead man's past in order to deliver the legacy.

A CROOKED MAN. By Christopher Lehmann-Haupt. (Simon & Schuster, $23.) An attentive thriller by a daily reviewer for The Times; it debates the decriminalization of drugs in an up-to-date Washington environment.

FREE TO TRADE. By Michael Ridpath. (HarperCollins, $23.) Murder is the starting point in this first novel about an English bond trader who stumbles across financial chicanery.

JAPANESE GAME. By Richard Hoyt. (Forge/Tom Doherty, $21.) A team of American operatives takes drastic action to alter trade relations with Japan.

KOLYMSKY HEIGHTS. By Lionel Davidson. (St. Martin's, $22.95.) An American agent braves Siberia to uncover the secret of a Soviet doomsday machine.

THE LAST HIGH GROUND. By Robin A. White. (Crown, $23.) Cultures clash but eventually collaborate as an American investigator and a Japanese accountant pursue a Japanese Mafioso who is sabotaging Boeing airplanes.

OUR GAME. By John le Carré. (Knopf, $24.) In a British adventure novel redolent of John Buchan and Eric Ambler, a retired Treasury official and secret spymaster sets off in search of a vanished friend — a onetime double agent.

PICTURES AT 11. By Norman Spinrad. (Bantam, paper, $12.95.) A group of ecoterrorists take a television station hostage but succumb to the temptations of celebrity.

Sports

BREAKING THE SURFACE. By Greg Louganis with Eric Marcus. (Random House, $23.) The Olympic swimmer's earnest memoir reveals the dark realities beneath his public facade — damaging addictions, suicide attempts, destructive love affairs and infection with H.I.V.

ONE PITCH AWAY: The Players' Stories of the 1986 League Championships and World Series. By Mike Sowell. (Macmillan, $27.95.) Recollections of the dramatic series of baseball games that decided the pennants, then the World Series, of 1986.

STRIKEOUT: A Celebration of the Art of Pitching. By William Curran. (Crown, $23.) An entertaining history of the evolution of the pitcher from lowly "server" of the ball to strikeout artist. □

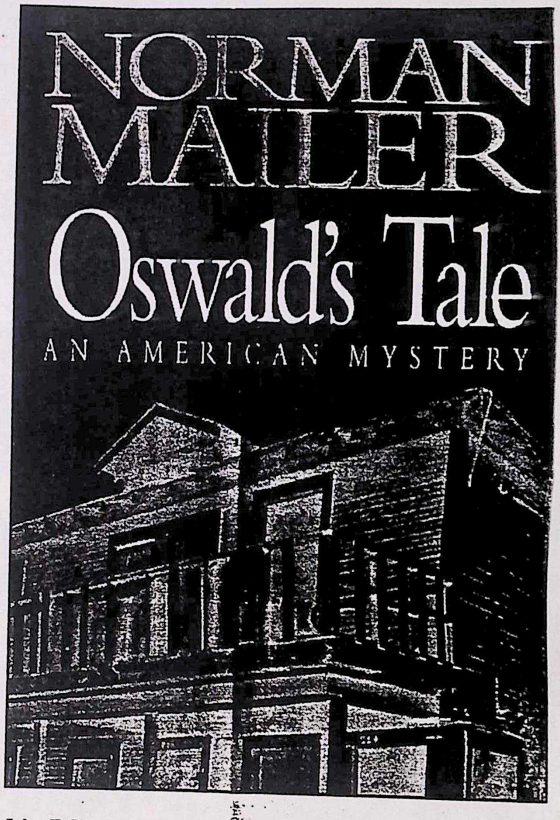
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BURRELLE'S

Whale of a 'Tale'

Echoes of Melville fill Norman Mailer's epic quest for the real Lee Harvey Oswald





Norman Mailer. Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery. Random House, $30.

By **MARY A. McCAY** *Contributing writer*

Twenty-eight books and 47 years later into his career, Norman Mailer is still writing "Moby Dick." In his first novel, "The Naked and the Dead," Mailer consciously modeled his war chronicle after Melville's haunted sea tragedy. Later, Mailer changed forms and sought to understand the core of American experience, as Melville did, through an understanding of the nature of our political demons; finally, like Melville before him, Mailer turned to society's outcasts to try to capture the paradox of our national identity. He won the Pulitzer Prize twice for his rare ability to chronicle the upheavals of our times and to pin the heart of our darkest dreams wriggling on the wall.

In "Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery," Mailer returns once again to our unhealed wounds both to understand Lee Harvey Oswald and to challenge his old mentor with yet another rewrite of his book. And Mailer is, as usual, up to the task, one of gigantic proportions. The very nature of the mystery tempts Mailer to expose and uncover, but each revelation creates another puzzle.

It is the mystery at the heart of Oswald's life that Mailer seeks to understand. Mailer needs to know whether Oswald was agent or principal; he needs to break down the wall, crash through the pasteboard mask that Oswald presents to the world, to end, once and for all, the discussion, the stories, and the controversy that has gone on since November 1963, when John F. Kennedy was assassinated and when Lee Harvey Oswald was killed.

Because of those deaths, it is impossible to assess what Kennedy's impact as president could have been, and it is impossible to determine Oswald's exact role in the tragedy. Mailer's book looks back on the events of Oswald's life because he cannot quite accept the possibility that the assassination and the national bloodletting that followed could have been precipitated by a little man who had no sense of history.

But what emerges from his investigation is something of a cosmic joke. Oswald does not become larger with Mailer's treatment; rather, Mailer becomes more obsessed with the question, "Did Oswald kill President Kennedy?"

"Oswald's Tale," as is often the case, is really Mailer's tale.

Mailer approaches that question from two points: Minsk and America. He sees Oswald's life as "the greatest mountain of mystery in the 20th century," a metaphor Mailer himself employed in "The Naked and the Dead." It is on the slopes of this mountain that Mailer "set up a base camp," that he made

See **OSWALD**, next page

Oswald

From preceding page

forays into Russia, into KGB files, and into the Warren Report so that "a future attempt by others to attain the summit," were he to fail, would be possible, "so our venture might prove of real use."

Nor is it an accident that Mailer refers to the Warren Commission's work as a "dead whale decomposing on a beach." He sees everything in terms of metaphor, and that metaphor reveals our own failure as a nation, the same failure that so tormented Melville more than 140 years ago.

"Oswald's Tale" is actually two books. Volume I is composed of first-hand accounts by people who knew Oswald during the years he was in Minsk. Mailer had access to KGB files and records many of the transcripts from the surveillance of Oswald's apartment. Ultimately, everything is pretty tawdry. Oswald's failed suicide attempt, the KGB's confusion as to Oswald's motives, the surveillance reports of Oswald's and Marina's fights, interviews with his friends and acquaintances all reveal a very diminished life.

Oswald never articulated why he went to Russia; his attempts to get his American passport returned are pathetic and petulant, and his writings while on the ship with Marina and June, returning to America, show a lack of depth and political insight. He seems to have learned nothing from his experience in Russia. His determination that "he will establish a political movement of the purest principles, the highest principles," is founded on nothing more than a vague idea that neither Russia nor America were very good countries.

What is fascinating about Volume I is Mailer's ability to capture the rhythms of Russian speech and to imitate them in his style without seeming to simplify the issues or belittle the speakers. His interviews with Marina's relatives, Ilya and Valya Prusakov, reveal not just two characters whose lives were shattered by the Kennedy assassination, but illustrate the temper of the Russian soul.

Yuri Merezhinsky, 50 when he gave Mailer an interview, and ravaged by illness, dated Marina when he was a student at the Medical Institute. His interview is the most curious and disturbing because he needs so much to paint Marina as a prostitute. No other men speak of Marina with the contempt that Yuri does, so he sows seeds of doubt about her character but ravages his own in the process.

Volume II, "Oswald in America," is posited on Mailer's claim that he is exploring "a mystery, our own largest American mystery," and that is just what he does. "The author's musings become some of the operative instruments." There are speculative musings, novelistic imaginings, and, of course, the creation of a form "somewhere between fiction and non-fiction."

Yet this volume neither creates nor dispels mystery. It is enormously workmanlike, and there are times when Mailer succeeds in creating the illusion that he is just one breath away from a revelation that will change the course of history but always he comes up short because there is not enough in Oswald to sustain Mailer's need for a character who, like Ahab, cursed and defiant, can make us believe there really was some reason for Kennedy's death. Readers looking for new insights into Oswald's activities in New Orleans might be disappointed; this section of the book simply recovers all the old territory.

Oswald is finally a small man, small in stature, small in dreams, petty in his treatment of his wife, neglectful of his family and friends, lazy at work and, ultimately, simply dead. Marina told Mailer, "If we go through Lee's character, I myself would like to find out: Who is he? Was he really that mean of a person? — which I think he was — but it's a hard road for me to take because I do not want to understand him. I have to tell you in advance that, as far as Lee is concerned — I don't like him."

Many readers might finish "Oswald's Tale" feeling the same way.

Mary McCay is chairwoman of the English department at Loyola University.

THIS WEEK

- Poets Athena Kildegaard and Ralph Adamo read at 3 p.m. today at the Maple Leaf Bar.
- Berthe Amoss will sign "The Cajun Gingerbread Boy" 5-7 p.m. Wednesday at Beaucoup Books.
- There will be a reception for Barry Gifford, beginning at 6:30 p.m., and a staged reading of the play, "Mrs. Kashfi," from his new collection, "Hotel Room Trilogy," beginning at 7:30 p.m., Thursday at Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society, 632 Pirate Alley. Gifford will autograph his books and be available for questions and answers following the reading.
- Jan Jansen will present a story hour at 1 p.m. Saturday at Maple Street Chidren's Book Shop.
- Bruce Coen will present springtime stories and crafts 11 a.m.-noon Saturday at Children's Hour Book Emporium.
- Yvette McCann will autograph "Eddie Pasghetti" 2-4 p.m. Saturday at B.Dalton/Oakwood.

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Los Angeles Times

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Mailer Takes On a Nation's Paranoia

Authors: No one understands American mythology better. But in his quest to prove a JFK conspiracy, he found that all roads lead to Oswald.

By DAN COLLINS
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

NEW YORK—Norman Mailer hunches forward in the small sound booth of a call-in radio show to make a point about the Kennedy assassination.

"The key question, always: Is it conspiracy or is it accident?" he says. To illustrate, Mailer points to a technical glitch that has interrupted his conversations with callers three times.

"One of the iron rules of thumb is that three coincidences make one conspiracy. But I'm willing to believe today that it's just the telephone line."

Hmmm. The caller is not so sure. Next thing you know, somebody might be saying it was just a lone gunman who shot Kennedy.

"It seemed to happen both times at the point where you were starting to get to the meat of the matter," the caller says.

The host tries to offer assurance that they have not been jamming Norman Mailer's interview, but she is not entirely successful.

"Well, I know enough about radio electronics to know that it could have been done," the caller replies.

This is familiar landscape for Mailer. Nobody knows paranoia like the chronicler of Marilyn Monroe and Gary Gilmore, and the author of what may well become the world's longest spy novel, "Harlot's Ghost."

Now Mailer—actor, novelist, playwright, poet, screenwriter, artist, journalist, social critic, TV commentator and *ancien terrible* of the American literary scene—has dived into what he calls "the great paranoid myth of all time": the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

"Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery" (Random House) is an 828-page explora-

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ARI MINTZ / Newsday

Norman Mailer probes the John F. Kennedy assassination in his latest book.

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MAILER

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tion of the life and times of Lee Harvey Oswald. But it is also the story of Mailer's own odyssey from conspiracy theorist to doubter. After a long stay in Russia with some of the people who knew Oswald best, he now believes that Kennedy's assassin was never a KGB plant, mole, spy or even fellow traveler. He is not quite so ready to give up the idea of a connection between Oswald and the CIA but, at 72, Norman Mailer has become a reluctant convert to the single-gunman theory.

This month, out dutifully beating the publicity drums for his new book, the white-haired boxing aficionado-literary lion is not quite in fighting trim. A paunch mars the Mailer silhouette and he wears tiny hearing aids. Nevertheless, he ~~looks good in gray slacks and a~~ double-breasted blue blazer with silver buttons. A publicist ushers one journalist after another into Random House's Manhattan offices for one 30-minute interview after another, but Mailer appears indefatigable, ever willing to talk.

The decision to take two years out of his life to pursue the story of Oswald, he says, began with a phone call from an investigative reporter named Lawrence Schiller.

"I had worked with Larry on 'The Executioner's Song.' He calls me up, he says, 'What would you think about doing a book on Lee Harvey Oswald if I can get the KGB file on him?' And I said, 'I'm interested for sure.' It fit in with my selfish interests."

Those involve "Harlot's Ghost," his 1991 novel about the experiences of a middle-level CIA agent. The lengthy novel met with unenthusiastic reviews and disappointing sales, neither of which has dissuaded Mailer from going ahead with plans to write Volume Two.

"In the second half," Mailer continues expansively, "I want the KGB to figure much more prominently. 'So this was perfect."

The "perfect" arrangement involved spending six months in ~~Minsk, the dreary industrial~~ city where Oswald worked in a radio factory. To pave the way, Schiller impressed upon the KGB agents that "America's Tolstoy" was descending from the literary mountaintop to talk to them. The agency began handing over surveillance reports and other documents.

Mailer was thus given entree to the banal, tacky world of the Soviet secret police. His account of Oswald's years in Minsk depicts an expatriate American surrounded by a swarm of informers who dutifully reported his every cough and comma to the KGB.

Mailer and Schiller interviewed the agents who handled Oswald's case and many of those who knew and informed upon the ex-Marine during his years in Minsk. The two men had a long professional relationship—their work on the Gary Gilmore research produced one of Mailer's greatest critical and popular successes, "The Executioner's Song." Both out-sized characters, they have a collaborative style that sometimes resembles a barroom brawl and occasionally terrified the Russians.

The KGB's guarantee of complete cooperation turned out to be something less sweeping. Some of those who had informed on Oswald, it turned out, were not pleased to learn that their identities had been disclosed to America's Tolstoy.

"Working with the KGB was a comedy of ups and downs and ins and outs and stops and starts because the political situation kept changing," Mailer says.

The files Mailer did get to examine, however, were in their own mundane way astonishing—a crushing rejoinder to two conspiracy theories. The KGB, listening in on Oswald's life, found a man too inept and undirected to be anybody's mole. And Mailer, entering into the world of the Minsk KGB, found spies too timid and unimaginative to carry out a Cold War, at least on their own.

His conviction that Kennedy's murder was very probably the result of a conspiracy dissolved as his research proceeded.

Mailer came home in March, 1993, feeling that Oswald probably acted alone—though the author would have been more comfortable in the ranks of the conspiracy buffs.

Long obsessed with the Kennedy presidency, Mailer has often said that Americans yearn for an assassination conspiracy, to assure themselves that such catastrophes can't be the product of a single, small, insignificant individual's meaningless outburst of rancor. And anti-communism had taken on a whole new dimension. Not for the first time in his long literary career, Mailer was mad as hell.

"I came back furious at America. I mean, 'the Evil Empi This poor, moribund, Th country. Yes, it was an society, but for the avera it was no more oppres working for a corporati like being in the Army at The days of the Gulag w tially over."

It was back in the Uni that the Oswald book tool turn. Mailer took about s to write a draft of O Russia.

"I thought the second l only be 100 or 150 pages, epilogue," he explains. " came more and more int the material."

Mailer, for example, years refused to read th Commission report on th nation because it was "so

"But now I had an [Oswald]. Suddenly I w lawyer, and I'm reading ~~brief concerning my cli~~ earlier case. The stuff c for me," he says.

And so, the "epilogue" to an eye-glazing 450 p quotes extensively from ren report and other sour

Mailer's writing ca been nothing if no

Extended Page 2

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career has
ot prolific.

He has cranked out 28 books, not to mention a multitude of articles, essays, poems, screenplays, and a few ink and pencil drawings.

His craft has changed little over the years. In the age of cyberspace, Mailer still writes out everything in longhand. An assistant punches it into a word processor and then gives him printed copy for revisions.

"I'm always having fresh copy handed me each morning. It's one of the few benefits of getting older and getting closer to that great feared friend of all of us, who is named Al Z Heimer. My near memory is a burned-out zone. So I read the stuff with the attitude of 'Who is the idiot who wrote this? This is terrible!' I go through it and fix it up. I can edit over and over and over. seven, eight, 10 times if it needs it, and it usually does," he says with a smile.

Critics may have found "Oswald's Tale" too long by half, but Mailer is still thinking large indeed.

"I figure I've got 10 years and three or four big works to do," he says. "I'm going to do the second half of 'Harlot's Ghost,' and I've always wanted to do a novel about a concentration camp and my publisher wants an autobiography."

FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM

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INQUIRY



Norman Mailer

On Oswald's trail

MAILER SHOULD HAVE STAYED BACK IN THE U.S.S.R.

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Oswald's Tale:
An American Mystery
By Norman Mailer
Nonfiction
Random House: $30

By JEFF GUINN
FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM

Norman Mailer's fascination with John F. Kennedy is well-chronicled, so it figured he someday would turn attention to the former president's alleged assassin. For more than 30 years Lee Harvey Oswald has held the attention of the world in much the same manner someone just bitten would fixate on a small, insignificant-looking but still deadly poisonous snake.

The mistaken impulse of almost anyone picking up the lengthy (791 pages plus appendix), expensive (30 bucks) *Oswald's Tale* would be to assume Mailer brings to it the same half-truth, half-fictional approach he used with Gary Gilmore in *The Executioner's Song*. That massive dive into the psyche of a mass murderer won Mailer his second Pulitzer Prize, but this entirely nonfictional examination of Oswald won't bring in a third.

Oswald's Tale melds two entirely different books: one a fascinating, never-knew-that description of Oswald's life as an American expatriate in Russia and the other a warmed-over rehashing of Oswald's return to the United States and subsequent activities before his own murder at the hands of Jack Ruby.

Had Mailer stuck to Oswald in Russia, he'd hear well-deserved praise.

Mailer journeyed to Russia and lived in Minsk while on the little-documented trail of Oswald's life there. He was assisted by Larry Schiller, who with his wife did much of the interviewing of surviving Oswald acquaintances and living relatives of Marina, the young Russian woman who became one of history's more famous widows. Mailer also had access to KGB records concerning Oswald, including tapes gleaned from microphones planted in Oswald's Minsk apartment.

Mailer gives us a bleak picture. Oswald was a Marxist washout from his arrival in Russia, suspected by the KGB of being an American spy and regarded with disdain instead of the hero-worship he believed he deserved.

Oswald was desperate to find love with any Russian girl, but most of his relationships foundered after the novelty of dating an American wore off on the young ladies of Minsk.

Enter Marina — who, Mailer's researc indicates, was eager to marry after several disastrous relationships and possibly some early-life adventures in prostitution or, at least, promiscuity. Their coming together seems inevitable, as does the disharmony that soon follows.

The Oswalds' troubles commence on their wedding day; Mailer's litarary blundering begins after they arrive in America. We already know all the characters: bluff George De Mohrenschildt, appalling Marguerite Oswald, peace-loving Ruth Paine. Their lives and possible motives for doing what they did with Oswald have been examined copiously. Mailer brings nothing new to his Texas chapters and compounds this sin by quoting endlessly from other books, most notably Priscilla Johnson McMillan's *Marina and Lee*.

A few gratuitous slaps are taken at Fort Worth — Marina Oswald apparently didn' like it here — and Mailer tries hard to *understand* Lee Harvey Oswald, noting "it is possible that the working hypothesis" — Oswald's ability to kill Kennedy on his own — "has become more important to the author than trying to discover the truth."

Mailer's summing-up is equally unoriginal. Yes, he thinks Oswald did it alone. No Mafia plot here. He believes the Mafia ordered Oswald murdered by minor mobster Jack Ruby, fearing an uncle of Oswald's with tenuous mob links might cause the organization to be blamed for an assassination they applauded but did not initiate.

Wait until *Oswald's Tale* comes out in paperback, probably priced near $10. Meanwhile, get a copy of McMillan's *Marina and Lee*. Norman Mailer obviously did, and he sure liked it.

JEFF GUINN is associate books editor of the *Star-Telegram*.

Photo Illustration/Star-Telegram file

HARTFORD COURANT

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BURRELLE'S

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Mailer chips at secrets still encasing Oswald

Moral distinctions blur in portrait of murderer

Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery
By Norman Mailer, Random House, $30, 828 pp.

By OWEN McNALLY

Straining his muscular prose to the breaking point, Norman Mailer, the heavyweight champion of literary journalism, struggles mightily to elevate Lee Harvey Oswald to an exalted status as a tragic, existentialist hero or anti-hero in "Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery."

Mixing journalistic and novelistic techniques, Mailer tries to transform Oswald's image from a cipher and loser into an infinitely more complex character of depth and idealism.

His Oswald is a Nietzschean superman beyond good and evil, an American version of Raskolnikov, the young Russian idealist who, for what he believed was the higher good of mankind, axed two women to death in Dostoevski's "Crime and Punishment."

Mailer says he wrote this revisionist biography to help ease the nation's pain that such a dwarf as Oswald could have murdered such a giant as Kennedy.

"So long as Oswald is a petty figure," Mailer writes, "a lone twisted pathetic killer who happened to be in a position to kill a potentially great President, then . . . America is cursed with an absurdity."

Mailer is not out to solve the riddles of JFK's assassination. His ultimate conclusion is that he's 75 percent sure Oswald acted alone. But, he adds, there's more to be learned about what connections the CIA and FBI may have had.

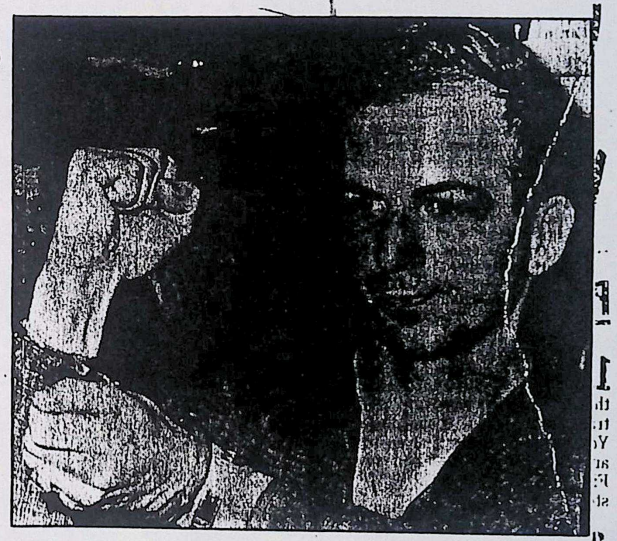
What Mailer is really after is not a smoking gun but a complete portrait of Oswald. So he plowed through the Warren Commission report and [illegible] six months of research.

There he and his aide, Larry Schiller, were granted access to once-classified KGB files, and interviewed former KGB agents and friends of Oswald and his Russian bride, Marina, who lived in Minsk from 1959-62. The KGB kept an electronic device peering into the Oswalds' Minsk apartment, "1984"-like snooping that provides Mailer with voyeuristic views of Lee and Marina's rocky marriage.

Mailer sweeps up every crumb of information about Oswald, incorporating material from earlier studies, especially Priscilla Johnson McMillan's "Marina and Lee."

At times "Oswald's Tale" is excruciatingly boring and bombastic, more a doorstopper than a heartstopper of a bio. At other times, though, it's fascinating, but it never once matches "The Executioner's Song," Mailer's masterly portrait of Gary Gilmore, a murderer executed in the 1970s by a firing squad in Utah.

As the omnipresent author, Mailer reveals his hero as, among other things, a wife beater, a psychopathic liar and a paranoid; an angry but timid boy and man; an agoraphobe; a wimp in the sack who may have been bisexual and have had extramarital affairs with men; a premature ejaculator perpetually insecure about his manhood; a dyslexic who was verbally gifted; a lazy worker who was a voracious reader; a mama's boy who slept with his domineering mom until he was 11 and was bathed by her until he was 12; a boy beaten by schoolyard bullies and mocked years later by fellow Marines; and an adult enamored of, or at least inured to, his incessant body odor that sickened Marina.



Associated Press

■ **In his new book, Norman Mailer tries to penetrate the cloud that shrouds Lee Harvey Oswald, shown here at his arrest.**

from obscurity to fame. Assassinating JFK was his destiny and would make for a far better world, he believed.

Oswald was inspired by Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf," identifying with the Führer "as a man destined for greatness against all odds."

"Hitler's success . . . probably lit a candle in the dungeon of Oswald's immense hopes for himself," Mailer writes.

Reflecting his view on the role of the hero in history, Oswald told Marina that millions of lives could have been saved if someone had assassinated Hitler.

Mailer never pauses to reflect on the enormous ethical difference between murdering an American president and assassinating a moral monster like Hitler. Here's the problem with elevating nant about a romanticized, literary portrait of Oswald as a gutsy gunman with the right stuff to pull the trigger in his rendezvous with destiny.

Mailer's high-flown rhetoric, a mix of existentialism and machismo, part Sartre, part Hemingway, blurs all moral distinctions. Yes, Hitler's killer would, indeed, be a hero. But Kennedy's murderer (or murderers) was not.

Blowing up Oswald into a king-size Nietzschean hero in Dallas does not make Kennedy's assassination any less of a tragic absurdity.

Claiming that it does is as foolish as saying the absurdity would be diminished if it could be shown JFK were shot not by Oswald's cheap, $20 mail-order rifle but by a much more sophisticated, far more expensive weapon.