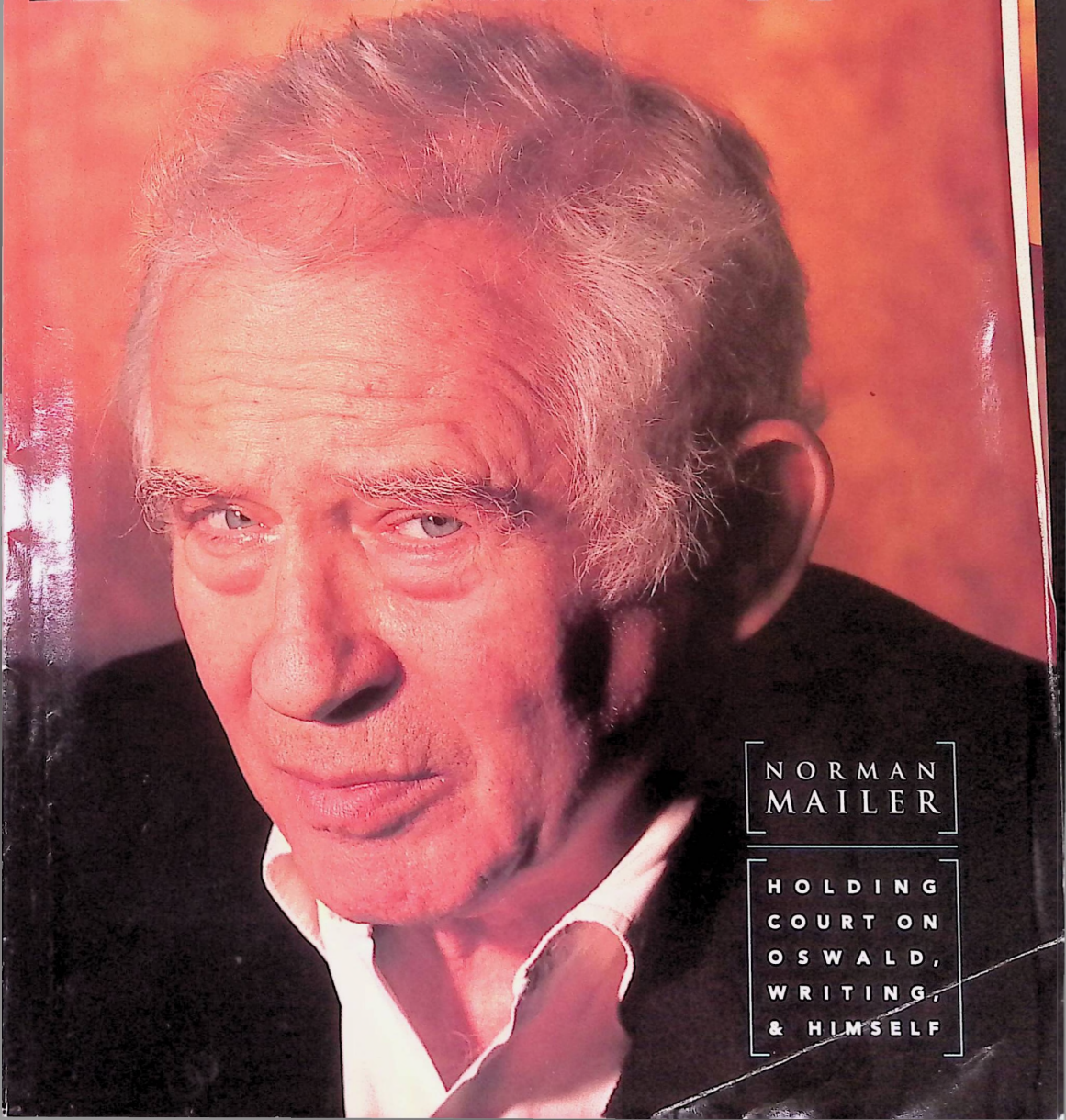


DOING BUSINESS IN BRAZIL • KAYAKING WITH THE WHALES OF BAJA • JIM SHAHIN'S GREAT ESCAPE

JUNE 15, 1999

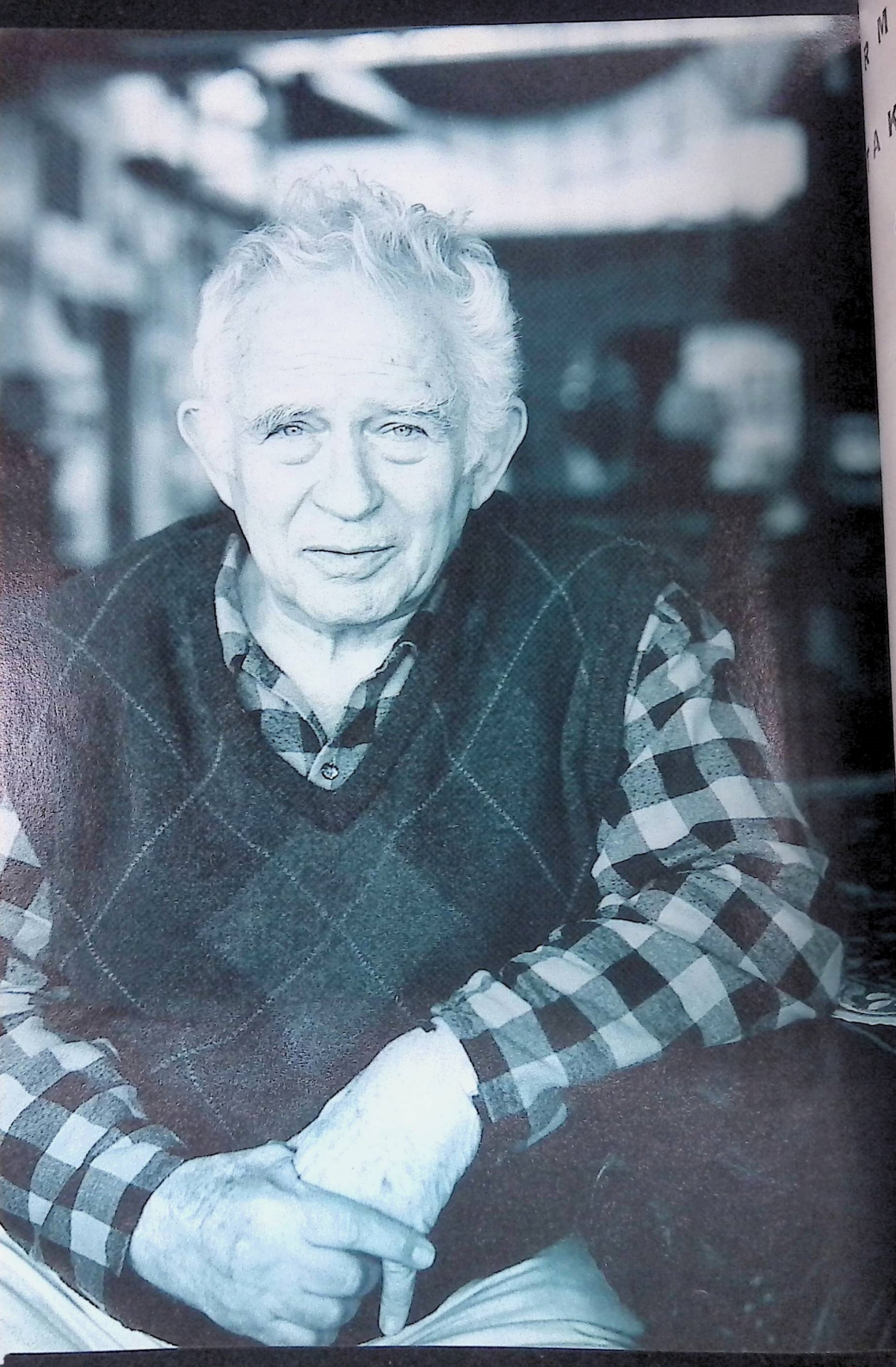
AMERICAN WAY

AMERICAN AIRLINES/AMERICAN EAGLE



NORMAN
MAILER

HOLDING
COURT ON
OSWALD,
WRITING,
& HIMSELF



N O R M A N M A I L E R :

T A K I N G S T O C K

& T A K I N G

A I M



W I T H

T H E R E C E N T

R E L E A S E O F

H I S N E W B O O K ,

O S W A L D ' S T A L E , A M E R I C A ' S

M O S T P R O V O C A T I V E W R I T E R

R E F L E C T S O N L I F E , W O R K , G O D ,

D E S T I N Y , J F K , A N D C H A N N E L - S U R F I N G .

Walking down the hall to meet Norman Mailer in the New York office of his publisher, Random House, I recall the capsule autobiography he gave in *The Armies of the Night*, his Pulitzer Prize-winning personal account of the 1967 Vietnam protest march on

BY DIVINA INFUSINO • PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTOPHER BIERLEIN

Washington. Writing in the third person, he described himself as:

"Warrior, presumptive general, ex-political candidate, embattled aging enfant terrible of the literary world, wise father of six children, radical intellectual, existential philosopher, hard-working author, champion of obscenity, husband of four battling sweet wives, amiable bar drinker, and much exaggerated street fighter, party giver, hostess insulter ... [and] a last remaining speck of the one personality he found absolutely insupportable — the nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn."

Which Norman Mailer would surface on this pleasant spring afternoon when the seventy-two-year-old is drawn from his lair in Brooklyn Heights to talk about his twenty-eighth book, *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*? Would he be surly and argumentative, serious and cerebral? The hard-drinking author? The champion of obscenities?

When the door swings open, it comes as a bit of a jolt to encounter the part he apparently never shook for good — the nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn.

White hair sticking out in several directions, his brown corduroy jacket rumpled, his squat body now past the mere chunky stage, Mailer eagerly shakes hands, takes my coat, and offers coffee or soda, his famous blue eyes downright friendly, his gruff voice edged with warmth.

Most surprising, at least at first, is his sense of humor, especially about himself. The infamous braggadocio of his youth seems to have been replaced by considered self-appraisal, perhaps inevitable after the life he's led. Over the years, he's married six women, the last being his present wife, Norris Church, and fathered nine children. Age has mellowed him in some ways, Mailer admits. "But about work, I am more passionate than ever," he says.

Oswald's Tale is evidence of that. Published last month, the tome attempts a monumental task — painting the definitive psychological portrait of the man accused, but never completely proven guilty, of killing President John F. Kennedy. At more than 800 pages, it is based on diaries, endless interviews, and, mostly, Mailer's exclusive access to previously restricted KGB surveillance reports chronicling Oswald's self-imposed exile in the USSR between 1959 and 1961. It is an ambitious and controversial work, as one has come to expect from its author.

Brooklyn-raised and Harvard-educated, Mailer rose to overnight literary fame with 1948's *The Naked and the Dead*, a novel based on his experiences in the infantry during World War II. Comparisons to Ernest Hemingway abounded, and Mailer, at twenty-five, discovered he was to do his growing up in public.

"I encountered a problem of identity then," he says. "Who, indeed, was I, and what was I going to write about now?"

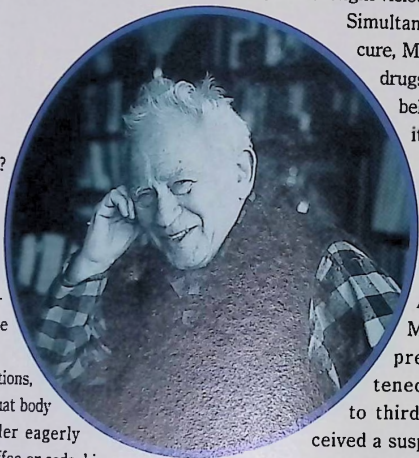
His persona of choice was the quintessential Fifties hipster. He moved to Greenwich Village, helped start *The Village Voice*, and wrote the novels *Barbary Shore* and *The Deer Park*, which garnered less-than-glowing, and sometimes outright vicious, reviews.

Simultaneously arrogant and insecure, Mailer took refuge in alcohol, drugs, sexual orgies, and abusive behavior. This period reached its nadir in 1960, when, at the end of one of his all-night parties, he stabbed his second wife, Adele Morales, in the abdomen and back with a penknife. Although seriously injured, Morales recovered and never pressed charges. A chastened Mailer pleaded guilty to third-degree assault and received a suspended sentence.

Meanwhile, his 1959 collection of essays, *Advertisements for Myself*, established his trademark non-fiction narrative style, which he honed in monthly columns for *Esquire* and in a series of books on the turbulent political events of the Sixties.

During the Seventies, critics claimed he'd lost his cultural compass and pointed to his anti-feminist harangues, which put him at odds with liberal intellectuals. But by decade's end, he won his second Pulitzer Prize for *The Executioner's Song*, the story of murder convict Gary Gilmore. In the Eighties, Mailer returned to fiction with *Ancient Evenings*, set in eleventh- and twelfth-century-BC Egypt, and the thriller *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, which became one of four movies he has directed. With 1992's *Harlot's Ghost*, a relatively sympathetic look at the CIA, and now *Oswald's Tale*, Mailer appears to be stepping into the role of journalist as elder statesman.

Wearing a smile and the physical and psychic evidence of a brave, if sometimes foolish, existence, Mailer puts in his hearing aid, pulls up a chair, and, with surprising good nature, shines the light on Lee Harvey Oswald and himself.



American Way: What do Oswald and his story tell us about today?

Norman Mailer: I don't care if it has relevance to today. Remember, you are talking to the guy who wrote a novel about ancient Egypt. [laughs]

If Oswald is relevant to today it would be that his story might finally put the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy to rest. The assassination of Kennedy is one of America's great obsessions, and I think obsession is the single most wasteful spiritual activity. Because with an obsession you keep coming back and back and back to the same question and never get an answer.

To the degree a country can deliver itself of its obsessions, it's a healthier country. It seems to me that it would be good for all of us if we could solve that case.

AW: How is your book going to quell the obsession with Kennedy's assassination?

NM: I don't know if my book is going to do it, but I think it may open the way. I think it's the first book that tries to come to grips with who Oswald was.

If you are going to solve a mystery, you've got to make sure your protagonist fits the plot you've outlined. The majority of the plots about how the assassination took place have absolutely nothing to do with Oswald. He doesn't fit them. I wanted to give us an idea of this person so that we know which plots he fits and which he doesn't.

AW: He doesn't fit Oliver Stone's movie?

NM: No. I like Oliver Stone's movie mostly because it had enormous energy and power and because it opened the case again. But the thesis I don't accept at all. I called it the worst of the great movies. It was full of bull—, but sometimes you need superior bull—to drive out old bull—.

AW: How did your thesis about Oswald change from when you started the book to when you finished?

NM: I started out thinking he was a figure in a conspiracy, and maybe even a minor figure in a conspiracy. But he was probably more important than I or most people realized. He was very bold in his own way. He saw himself as a future great man. This wasn't a case of this nerd who killed a great president. Instead what you had was a man who saw himself equal to Kennedy and who would one day surpass

him. Of course, that hovers on the edge of madness. But we have to realize that all people who become extraordinary have that kind of conviction when they are young. Oswald saw himself as someone who would be a great man and change the political thinking of the world.

AW: Did the CIA send him to the USSR? Did the KGB set him up to return to the United States?

NM: Oswald acted on his own. No intelligence agency would have picked Oswald as an agent. Especially if you know how those guys think. He wasn't much of a Marine, kind of a sad sack. They would have at least picked someone with a better crew cut.

MEANING, CELEBRITY, AND A BEAR MARKET FOR WRITERS

AW: Your book seems to present Oswald's role in the assassination of Kennedy as destiny taking its course.

NM: If it wasn't destiny it was something close to it. Kennedy had taken many chances in his life. He was extraordinarily bold, and bold men very often come to violent ends. Oswald had taken many chances in his life and gotten away with some of it and punished for others. But the meeting of the two was not trivial, which I prefer to the idea of some ridiculous little fellow, who amounts to nothing, killing Kennedy.

AW: That would be too absurd?

NM: Yes, and absurdity will poison the species before anything else does.

AW: Why?

NM: Because I think we are all healthier if we think there is some importance to what we are doing. I can only speak from personal experience, but when it seems like my life is meaningless, I feel closest to despair. I like life to have meaning. That is not to say you have to jump into meaning and find it where there is none. Or come up with answers too quickly, which is what we tend to do in North America. There's this faculty in the human mind that hates any question that takes more than ten seconds to answer.

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"I THINK WE SHRINK FROM THE IMMENSITY OF THE PURPOSE WE ARE HERE FOR."