

THE  TIMES

weekendreview

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Saturday January 22, 2005 ■ "I told Inland Revenue that I didn't owe them a penny because I lived near the seaside" Ken Dodd (b. 1927)

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THE DODD OF SMALL THINGS

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► EMPIRE BUILDING

America and its war with the invisible kingdom of Satan

The US wants world domination, but its people are heedless pleasure seekers. What's needed is a morality tale to scare them in the shopping malls. 9/11 came just in time, says Norman Mailer

Good novelists and good journalists are engaged in a parallel search. We are always trying to find a better approach to the established truth. For that truth is usually skewed by the needs of powerful interests.

Journalists engage in this worthy if tricky venture by digging into the hard earth for those slimy creatures we call facts, facts that are rarely clear enough to ring false or true.

Novelists work in a different manner. We begin with fictions. That is to say, we make suppositions about the nature of reality. Put another way, we live with hypotheses which, when well chosen, can enrich our minds and — it is always a hope — some readers' minds as well. Hypotheses are, after all, one of the incisive ways by which we try to estimate what a reality might be. Each new bit of evidence we acquire serves to weaken the hypothesis, or to strengthen it. With a good premise, we may even get closer to reality. A poor one, sooner or later, has to be discarded.

Take the unhappy but super-excited state that a man or woman can find themselves in when full of jealousy. Their minds are quickened, their senses become more alert. If a wife believes her husband is having an affair, then every time he comes home she is more aware of

his presence than she has been in previous weeks, months, or years. Is he guilty? Is the way in which he folds his napkin a sign of some unease? Is he being too accommodating? Her senses quicken at the possibility that another woman — let us call her Victoria — is the object of his attention. Soon, the wife is all but convinced that he is having an affair with Victoria. Definitely. No question. But, then, on a given morning, she discovers that the lady happens to be in China. Worse. Victoria has actually been teaching in Beijing for the last six months. Ergo, the hypothesis has been confuted. If the wife is still convinced that the husband is unfaithful, another woman must be substituted.

The value of an hypothesis is that it can stimulate your mind and heighten your concentration. The danger is that it can distort your brain. Good hypotheses depend on real questions, which is to say questions that do not always generate happy answers.

What intrigues me most about good hypotheses is that they bear a close relation to good fiction. The serious novel looks for situations and characters who can come alive enough to surprise the writer. If he or she starts with one supposition, the actions of the characters often lead the story some distance away from what was planned. In that sense, hypotheses are not only like fictions but can be compared to news stories — once the situation is presented, subsequent events can act like surprisingly lively characters ready to prove or disprove how one thought the original situation would develop. The value of a good hypothesis, like a good fiction, is that whether it all turns out more or less

as expected, or is altogether contrary, the mind of the reader as well as the author is nonetheless enriched.

A good novel, therefore, like a good hypothesis, becomes an attack on the nature of reality. (If attack seems too violent a notion here, think of it as intense inquiry.) But the basic assumption is that reality is ever-changing — the more intense the situation, the more unforeseeable will be the denouement. No good novel ever arrives at total certainty, not unless you are Charles Dickens and are writing *A Christmas Carol*. Just so, few hypotheses ever come to closure.

On the road to Iraq, we were offered more than a few narratives for why we were so obviously hell-bent for war.

One hypothesis which soon arose was that such a war would be evil. Shed no blood for oil. That became the cry. Others offered a much more virtuous reason than America's oil interests: conquering Iraq would democratise the Middle East. Problems between Israel and Palestine could be happily settled. In the event, this proved to be nearer to a fairytale than a logical proposition.

In its turn, the Administration presented us with weapons of mass destruction. That lived in the American mind like an intelligence thriller. Would we locate those nightmares before they blew us up? It became the largest single argument for going to war.

There were other hypotheses — would we or would we not soon find Osama bin Laden? Which became a short story like *The Lady or the Tiger?* — with no ending. On the eve of war, there was a blood-cult novel in the night. It was *Shock and Awe* — had we driven a quick stake through the heart of Saddam Hussein? Good Americans could feel they were on the hunt for Dracula.

Vivid hypotheses. None held up. We did not learn then and we still do not begin to agree why we embarked on this most miserable of wars. Occam's Razor does suggest that the simplest explanation which is ready to answer a variety of separate questions on a puzzling matter has a great likelihood of being the most correct explanation. One answer can emerge then from the good bishop's formula: it is that we marched into a full-sized war because it was the simplest solution the President and his party could find for the immediate impasse in which America found itself.

The first problem was that the nation's scientific future, and its technological skills, seemed to be in distress. American factory jobs were in danger of disappearing, outsourced to Third World countries, and our skills at technology were suffering in comparison to Europe and to Asia. Relations between American labour and the corporation threatened to go on tilt. But that was not the only storm cloud over the land.

Back in 2001, before 9/11, the divide between

pop culture and fundamentalism was gaping. In the view of the religious Right, America was becoming heedless, loutish, irreligious, and blatantly immoral. Half of all American marriages were ending in divorce. The Catholic Church was suffering a series of agonising scandals.

Faced with the spectre of a superpower, our own superpower, economically and spiritually out of kilter, the best solution seemed to be War. That would offer an avenue for recapturing America — not, mind you, by unifying the country, not at all. By now, that was close to impossible. Given, however, that the country was deeply divided, the need might be to separate it further in such a way that one's own half could become much more powerful. For that, Americans had to be encouraged to live with all the certainties of myth while bypassing the sharp edge of inquiry implicit in hypothesis.

The difference is crucial. An hypothesis opens the mind to thought, to comparison, to doubt, to the elusiveness of truth. Myths, on the other hand, are frozen hypotheses. Serious questions are answered by declaration and will not be reopened. The need is for a morality tale at a child's level. Good will overcome a dark enemy. For the Bush Administration, 9/11 came as a deliverance. We were encouraged to worry about the security of every shopping mall in America. The overriding myth was not merely the implacable danger of Islam, but its nearness to us. To oppose the fears we generated in ourselves, we would call on our most dynamic American myths. We must war constantly against the invisible kingdom of Satan. Stand at Armageddon and battle for the land. It was fortified by a conviction that America was exceptional, and God had a special interest in America. God wanted us to be a land superior to other nations, a realm to lift His vision into greater glory. So, the myth of the frontier, which demanded a readiness to fight without limit, became part of our exceptionalism. "Do what it takes."

For American capitalism to survive, exceptionalism rather than co-operation with other advanced nations had become the necessity. From the point of view of the nation's leaders, there had been ten lost years of initiatives, ten years in the cold, but America now had an opportunity to cash in again on the great bonanza that had fallen its way in 1991 when the Soviet Union went bankrupt in the arms race. At that point, or so believed the exceptionalists, America could and should have taken over the world and thereby safeguarded our economic future for decades at least with a century of hegemony to follow. Instead, these exceptionalists had been all but consumed with frustration over what they saw as the labile pussyfooting of the Clinton Administration. Never have liberals been detested more. But now, at last, 9/11 had provided an opportunity for America to resolve some problems. Now America could embark on the great adventure of empire.

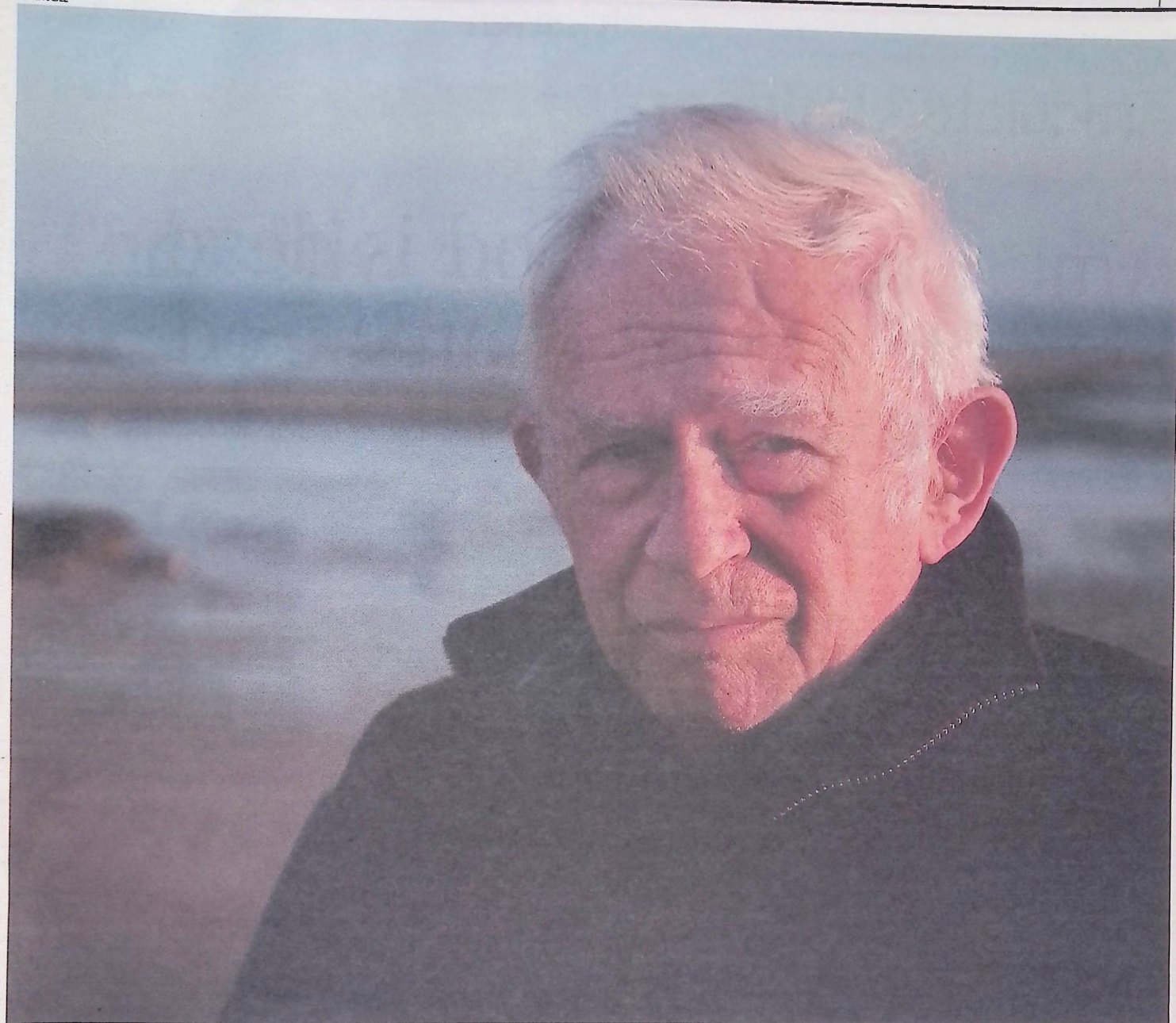
AT THAT POINT
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Victory In Baghdad: a Marine unfurls the Stars and Stripes over the face of Saddam

PETER MOULDS

ADAM NADEL



These exceptionalists also happened to be hard-headed realists. They were ready to face the fact that most Americans might not have any real desire for global domination. America was pleasure-loving, which, for exceptionalist purposes, was almost as bad as peace-loving. So, the invasion had to be presented with an edifying narrative. That meant the alleged reason for the war had to live in utter independence of the facts. The motives offered to the American public need not have any close connection to likelihoods. Fantasy would serve. As, for example, bringing democracy to the Middle East. Protecting ourselves against weapons of mass destruction. These themes had to be driven home to the public with all the paraphernalia of facts, supposed confirmative facts. For this to work, the CIA also had to be compromised. Most people in the CIA are career-motivated. Advancing one's career does not often have much to do with getting the right stuff in intelligence. Successful people in the agency, as in many another bureaucracy, get to where they are by knowing what is wanted at the top. They end up producing what they feel is needed for their country, for their own career, or just for their

next step. When such factors are at odds with each other, Intelligence pays the price. So the CIA was abominably compromised by the move to go to war with Iraq. Most analysts who had information that Iraq had very little or nothing in the way of WMD gave it up. The need at the top of the agency to satisfy the President cut them off. So we went forward in the belief that Iraq was an immediate threat, and were told that hordes of Iraqis would welcome us with flowers. Indeed, it was our duty as good Americans to bring democracy to a country long dominated by an evil man.

Democracy, however, is not an antibiotic to be injected into a polluted foreign body. It is not a magical serum. Rather, democracy is a grace. In its ideal state, it is noble. It is all but impossible to believe that men as hard-nosed, inventive, and transcendently cynical as Karl Rove or Dick Cheney — to offer the likeliest two candidates at hand — could have believed that quick democracy was going to be feasible for Iraq.

It is a crude assertion, but I expect Cheney, for one, is in Iraq for one reason: oil. Without a full wrestler's grip on control of the oil of the Middle East, America's economic problems will

continue to expand. That is why we will remain in Iraq for years to come. For nothing will be gained if we depart after the new semi-oppressive state is cobbled together. Even if we pretend it is a democracy, we will have only a nominal victory. We will have gone back to America with nothing but the problems which led us to Iraq in the first place plus the onus that a couple of hundred billion dollars were spent in the quagmire.

It seems to me that if the Democrats are going to be able to work up a new set of attitudes and values for their future candidates, it might not be a bad idea to do a little more creative thinking about the question for which they have had, up to now, naught but puny suggestions — which is how do you pick up a little of the fundamentalists' vote.

If by 2008, the Democrats hope to come near to a meaningful fraction of such voters, they will have to find candidates and field workers who can spread the word down South — that is, find the equivalent of Democratic missionaries to work on all those good people who may be in awe of Jehovah's wrath, but love Jesus, love Jesus

so much more. Worked upon with enough zeal, some of the latter might come to recognise that these much-derided liberals live much more closely than the Republicans in the real spirit of Jesus. Whether they believe every word of Scripture or not, it is still these liberals rather than the Republicans who worry about the fate of the poor, the afflicted, the needy, and the disturbed. These liberals even care about the wellbeing of criminals in our prisons. They are more ready to save the forests, refresh the air of the cities and clean up the rivers. It might be agonising for a good fundamentalist to vote for a candidate who did not read the Scriptures every day, yet some of them might yet be ready to say: I no longer know where to place my vote. I have joined the ranks of the undecided.

More power to such a man. More power to all who would be ready to live with the indecision implicit in democracy. It is democracy, after all, which first brought the power and virtue of good questions to the attention of the people rather than restricting the matter to the upper classes.

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