

Forward to
Chip McGrath 1

NORMAN MAILER

J. MICHAEL LENNON

JML: Can you say something about *The Castle in the Forest* as a way of perceiving history? How is it different from other historical novels?

NM: I think the large difference is embodied in the narrator. Off hand, I can't name a serious novel where an Assistant to the Devil is the one to tell the tale, but I found the choice curiously liberating. It allowed me to enter people's minds at will, which is of course one of the strengths of 19th century fiction. You can go into any mind the author chooses to enter, and so are able to live with the characters as they appear on the surface, and also as they feel within. Of course, those novels were corseted by 19th century moral strictures. Sexual lines of inquiry were hardly pursued.

Now, I did use the third-person omniscient in *The Naked and the Dead*. I went into everyone's head without worrying about it unduly. It never occurred to me that this had become an aesthetic problem. The success of *The Naked and the Dead* obliged me, however, to become more sensitive to the improbability of casual omniscience. Obviously if I was

going to keep writing fiction I had to develop a bit. I will say that ever since, I've been preoccupied with the problem. I certainly wrestled with it in *The Deer Park*. How do you inhabit more than one person's mind? How do you avoid the manacles of the first person observer without violating something ineffable in the presentation? So I was delighted when, behold, I had this Assistant to the Devil ready to tell the tale. Because then you could certainly explore your character's minds, not the least of whom would be young Adolf Hitler.

JML: What percentage, roughly, of the figures in *The Castle in the Forest* actually lived?

NM: All of the major figures but one. I don't like to specify who it is because that can affect the reading of a book. It's as if one of the legs of someone walking by has just been shortened. Now, he's limping in some odd fashion. You don't want to do that to a reader. I should answer your question, however. I'll have to face it, after all, in future interviews. The only major character who is wholly imaginary is Der Alte, the beekeeper. Alois Hitler, Adolf's father, did keep bees in Hafeld, and so must have known a few apiarists in the area. I never came across anything in my research that suggested there was or was not such a person, but I felt his presence was necessary. I also became fascinated with the subject—

beekeeping soon took over its own portion of the book. While there are certain symbols in a novel that are explained by the author, or just about—Jake Barnes' wound in *The Sun Also Rises* or Ahab's white whale—white, for example, was declared by Melville to be on occasion an essence of evil even more intense than the absence of light. Most symbols are not so clearly delineated. The power of a symbol isn't always to be delineated by language. Sometimes, it is more evocative as an undefined presence.

JML: Is it fair to say that Hitler's father, Alois, is equal in importance to Hitler himself in your novel?

NM: Maybe more so. I'm truly fond of writing about a character when I don't dominate their development. He or she will show a few vices and virtues I wasn't quite prepared for. As my friend, Jean Malaquais once said, "The only time I know the truth is at the point of my pen." I find that one of the awards of writing. It is as if you are actually encountering reality which will then show you how to make the next move.

JML: Did you do the same kind of research for this novel as you did in the Picasso biography or on *The Gospel According to the Son*?

NM: Or for *Harlot's Ghost*...

JML: Or *Harlot's Ghost*.

NM: I always do as much research as my temperament can digest. Seven years went into *Harlot's Ghost* and eleven years on *Ancient Evenings*. For *Oswald's Tale*, I needed two full years of research. On *Castle*, I spent four years, the last two while writing it. I had already read everything I could find about Hitler's childhood, of which, incidentally, there are not too many books. Not in English at any rate. I also read every major work on his adult life that has been translated and quite a number of minor ones. The bibliography is not brief. If you are going to follow someone through their adolescence, it helps to know how they turned out later.

JML: Was any one book indispensable to your research?

NM: Three or four on his childhood were important. In the bibliography I've given an asterisk to those, and to a few works that had nothing to do with his childhood but did give me a grasp of later events.

JML: One of the strongest episodes in the novel concerns the coronation of Tsar Nicholas II of Russia in 1896. What was the reason for such an inclusion?

NM: I felt that I had to move away from the subject matter, and do it in dramatic fashion. To be fixed entirely on Adolf Hitler's childhood was going to limit the dimensions of the work. Moreover, the narrator, D.T., the Assistant to the Devil, needed his own action. As an invisible participant, he

is much more important to the outcome of the coronation of Nicholas II than he is in Hafeld or the other areas of Austria where the novel takes place. Finally, when you've been doing fiction for as long as I have, you are readier to follow your instinct. The coronation of Nicholas II may yet be seen as necessary preparation for the next novel. Now, at the age of 83, I won't make any promises, but if I can keep working for the next few years and complete the second volume, I confess that I would like to have Rasputin in it. D.T.—my Assistant to the Devil—will also work with Rasputin.

JML: The theme of incest is very strong in the novel. Did you emphasize it, or were you just following material?

NM: There is no explanation of Hitler without assuming some very large differences between him and other human beings. One of these possibilities is incestuous roots. I take that to the point of assuming that his mother was the daughter of his father. There is some likelihood of that. Moreover, the occasion on which he was conceived is treated as extraordinary. I have felt for a long time—and this is where a great many people who read our interview will part company with me altogether—but I expect that God and the Devil, or their representatives if you will, are present in any sexual intercourse that is exceptional. So, I propose that the

conception of Adolf Hitler did take place with the Devil present, even as Christians believe that Gabriel was there when Mary was impregnated. If any man has ever been a whole opposite to Christ, it was Adolf Hitler.

JML: My last question comes from Donna, my wife. She said, "Norman is Jewish and is writing about Hitler. How much does his Jewish identity have to do with his desire to write this book?"

NM: Everything. Hitler has been in my mind since I was nine years old. By 1932, my mother was already sensitive, and intensely so, to the dangers he presented. After Hitler came to power in 1933, everything that happened in Nazi Germany used to cause my mother pain. It was as if she knew in advance what was going to occur. She'd grown up with a knowledge of the anti-semitism her father had had to face in Lithuania. Then, as a child going to school in Long Branch, New Jersey, kids on the street would call her 'Christ killer'—no surprise, then, if Hitler was immensely real to her. Finally he took over a portion of my existence. Many people have little comprehension of what it means to lose half of the millions of people who dwell in your fold of humanity. The Irish have some sharp sense of that considering what they suffered in the potato famine. The Armenians have it. But generally speaking, the average Wasp or well established Catholic in America does not really understand the depth of the

effect. In the main, they do feel antipathetic by now to anti-semitism, and it is true that any prominent politician who uttered an anti-semitic remark today would probably see his political career seriously injured. Yet, this is not necessarily equal to understanding how deep a negative presence was Hitler to the Jews of my parents' generation and to mine as well. So, this is a book that I've wanted to begin for the last fifty years. I would go so far as to say I've always assumed that sooner or later I would have to write it.