

A STONE FOR NORMAN MAILER

By Michael Ventura

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Has Norman Mailer published a book or sculpted a tombstone? *The Time of Our Time* is a massive slab of a volume, thick as a grave marker. The collection, chosen by Mailer himself, purports to cover his life's work; it can't help but smack of the posthumous. It's as though Mailer, like Huck Finn, is trying to attend (and control) his own funeral. So let's take the liberty Mailer implies, and speak of him as though he has died. Once upon a time there was a writer named Norman, born in Brooklyn, educated at Harvard, a combat veteran of the Second World War. He hit fame in his 20s with his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), a war tale that also accurately predicted the coming corporate dominance of America (something that would not become clear to most observers until 30 years later). Little is known of Norman's youth. He never wrote of it. (One wonders what he was trying to hide.) Though married several times and the father of several children, he wrote virtually nothing about family. (One wonders again.) He opined incessantly about the meaning of America, yet his experience of this country was limited; he lived most of his life within a few miles of his birthplace. Prolific and contentious, he tackled many subjects, but he was most identified with one: himself. Like all writers, he had pretensions, but objectivity was not among them. He never concealed that on his pages we were seeing *his* world through his intense blue eyes. His detractors called that egoism; his supporters called it honesty. It was both.

Unlike most Jewish writers of his era, Mailer never wrote of the American Jewish experience. (One wonders yet again.) His fictional protagonists tended to be Irish Catholics and WASP patricians. (Ethnic envy?) He wrote of boxers (fancied himself a talented amateur); film stars (he directed and starred in several independent features); serial killers and assassins (he was arrested once for stabbing his wife with a penknife, and had killed in combat); CIA operatives (he had no known connection to the CIA); presidents (he ran for mayor of New York). He wrote a novella of Marilyn Monroe and a novel about Jesus, both in the first person. His Monroe was convincing (a surprise to everyone), his Jesus not very (a surprise to no one). During the 1960s and early Seventies, no national event seemed complete until recorded in his essays - protest marches, political conventions, moon walks, championship fights. Toward the end of his life it's unlikely that there was a literate American who hadn't read a line of Mailer's, yet his rep became less certain with time. Was he great or merely loud? A visionary or a gadfly? A misogynist, or a man who respected feminism enough to argue with it wholeheartedly? A rebel or an apologist for power? Quotes from his work could support all those opinions. He seemed to enjoy that.

Late in life, Mailer published a 1,300-page collection, *The Time of Our Time*, a book as misleading as it is long. His most influential years were between 1948 and 1970, yet only 33 of this collection's 73 pieces date from that era. More than half (37) were written circa 1982-98. The collection's most featured work by far (13 selections!) is from 1991 *Harlot's Ghost*, an immense, intricate CIA novel. Thus half a century's work is represented mostly by its last 16 years, years during which many wrote Mailer off as a serious literary force. It's as if, in *The Time of Our Time*, Mailer was answering his critics, trying to prove them wrong, trying to demonstrate that he hadn't dimmed. So his

finest and most heartfelt novel (*The Deer Park*, 1955) was slighted by only one selection, while he included pieces like a 1994 *Esquire* interview with Madonna, in which he called her "a great artist." Even his kindest critics had to acknowledge that Mailer rarely knew the difference between having something to express and something to prove.

As he once wrote of Mary McCarthy, "Is this true guilt, or innocence in disarray?"

No serious writer of prose can slight Mailer's mastery of language, no matter what is felt about his opinions, and even in the top-heavy *The Time of Our Time* he cannot be underestimated. On every page there are sentences to ignite your mind - and sentences to scoff at, dismiss, curse. You don't read Mailer, you wrestle him. He demands that, and he gets his way. On every page he makes you choose: Go with him one more sentence or slam the book shut. Then open it just a crack - because he just might say something in the next sentence that shakes you. If he didn't know he was doing this, he'd be a fool; he knows, and that makes him brave. How many other writers risk their dignity so recklessly in order to tell their truth?

Some specimens:

From an essay feminists love to hate, Mailer's critique of Kate Millett's critique of D.H. Lawrence: "Sex was the presence of grace and the introduction of the stranger into oneself. That was the only medicine for the lividities of the will." (Who could argue with that, and who could say it more beautifully?) From *Ancient Evenings*: "Now I knew what she had known, and it was equal to the tender odor of this air, and whether we owed it to Amon or Osiris, I could hardly say, but I was moved to climb onto the cage of Hera-Ra, and this so pleased him that he, in turn, walked with humorous thumps of his paws into the space beneath and began to purr." (Come again? The whole novel's like that.) From the collection's introduction: "In effect, this is a book that nearly all of us have created in our minds...." (What?! *I'm* responsible for this slab?!) From *Advertisements for Myself*: "I feel that the final purpose of art is to intensify, even, if necessary, to exacerbate the moral consciousness of people." (Who has stated the artist's challenge to society with less compromise?) From *The Presidential Papers*: "To die before one's time in a gas chamber may offer the good fortune that one does not have to live beyond one's time and be kept alive by medicines that do not reach the disease but only deaden the pain. In a gas chamber one loses one's life and conceivably saves one's death." (What person of spirit wouldn't throw the book across the room?) From *The Gospel According to the Son*: "Nevertheless, the truth is more valuable even than the heavens." (Oh yes, even in a strained, forced novel, Mailer sometimes soars.) From one of the greatest essays of the century, Mailer's account of the 1960 Democratic convention: "But [the Hollywood myths] stayed alive for more than that - it was as if the message in the labyrinth of the genes would insist that violence was locked with creativity, and adventure was the secret of love." (That is the core of Mailer's aesthetic, driving many crazy and making some - me, especially - cheer.)

The most telling and to-the-point critique of Norman Mailer came not from his literary enemies, nor from famous feminists, nor from any who love to hate him. No, this critique came from, of all people, Marilyn Monroe. Mailer always wanted to meet her. When she lived in New York in the late 1950s, they had many mutual friends, some of whom tried to arrange a meeting. Monroe would have none of it. One mutual friend, the poet Norman Rosten, assured her that under the bluster Mailer had a genuine sweetness. "He just wants to smell your perfume!" "That's the trouble," Marilyn laughed, "all you writers trying to steal my perfume." They never met.

But a young British journalist named W.J. Weatherby, whom Monroe befriended, gave her a copy of *The Deer Park*, a novel about a subject on which Marilyn Monroe was the reigning expert: Hollywood of the 1950s. I believe it's Mailer's finest, most moving fiction, but Monroe honed in on its weakness and his: "He's too impressed by power." Weatherby defended Mailer: "I thought he understood it." She said, "You can't fool me about that. I've felt that way myself - scared of being a loser." When Mailer's excesses, and his compulsive (if ambivalent) admiration of power, are seen as motivated by his fear of being a loser - he becomes not a legend or an ogre but a man, with a man's most basic insecurity. Leave it to Marilyn Monroe to spot that, and to comment without condemning.

There is a sentence in *The Deer Park* that could serve as Mailer's epitaph: "For there was that law of life, so cruel and so just, which said that either one must change, or pay more for remaining the same."

He once said these words were the truest he'd written. They are certainly among the truest I've read, by anyone, and stand as a judgment and a warning to many of us. But Mailer can't face that sentence anymore; you won't find it in *The Time of Our Time*. For those of us who've loved Mailer's prose, and have learned from both his courage and his mistakes, the absence of that sentence is a curse upon his tomb - or at least his tome.

I re-read that sentence and remember that, the few times we've met, Mailer has been generous to me, and he gave a supportive jacket-quote for my first novel - something he rarely does. So is "curse" too strong a word? Or is it the writers we owe and love the most, whom we must curse most deeply when they fail - not so much because we are angry with them, as because we fear the same failure in ourselves one day? So when we curse them we are really warning ourselves and each other? That's a Maileresque thought if there ever was one, a way of thinking I first learned from him, so let's leave it there.

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