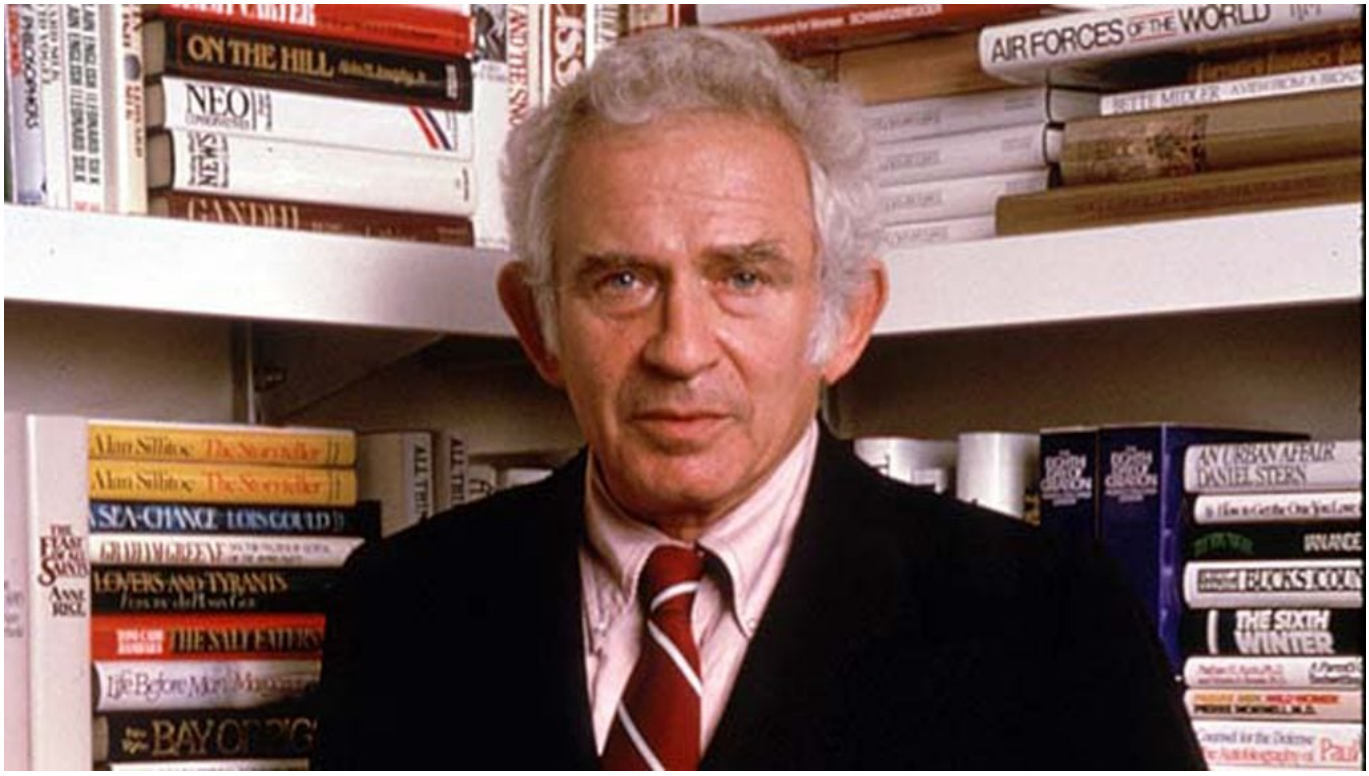
Norman Mailer Was an Out-and-Out Psychopath



by Bruce Bawer

Ten minutes after downloading Richard Bradford's *Tough Guy: The Life of Norman Mailer*, I was wondering what the hell I'd been thinking. No, that's not it. I did know what I'd been thinking: It had been a long time since I read Mailer, or read about him, let alone wrote about him, and I figured that perhaps I should take a look at this new biography – whose author, a British professor (not to be confused with the late American novelist of the same name), has previously written lives of Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin, Alan Sillitoe, George Orwell, Ernest Hemingway, and Patricia Highsmith – and use it as an opportunity to revisit Mailer's life and work and see if I had any fresh thoughts about the son of a b***h.

But 10 minutes was enough to turn me off. Did I really want to renew my acquaintance with this privileged, pampered mama's

boy from tony Long Branch, New Jersey, who, even as a kid – and, later, as an undergraduate at Harvard – posed as a tough-talking, deprived proletarian goon from the most uncivilized part of Brooklyn? Then again, as I read Bradford's book, I realized there was a lot I'd forgotten that was worth being reminded of. Starting early on, for example, I'd forgotten that after the 1942 Cocoanut Grove fire in Boston in which 492 people perished, Mailer, then 19, spent "several hours" examining the burned corpses that had been laid out so that they could be identified by their loved ones. Good God, what to make of that?

Two years later, after marrying his first wife, Bea – a pianist, communist, and nymphomaniac – Mailer went off to serve as a GI in the Pacific theater, which he looked forward to not because he was particularly interested in fighting for his country but mainly because wanted to make his name by writing the great American war novel. Indeed, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) did make him famous – even though, for this reader, the words never rose off the page – and enabled him to assume a position, which he'd retain for the rest of his life, at the very heart of the New York literary world. Mailer – who at the time was a fan of Stalin and of Henry Wallace's Progressive Party (a Kremlin front) and unwilling to listen to any sense on the subject of communism – soon replaced Bea with a new spouse, Adele, who resembled her predecessor in at least one respect: In Mailer's journals, notes Bradford, she comes off by turns as a "sex maniac, decadent aficionado of pure filth and a woman who seems to take pleasure in being raped." Despite being a mama's boy, then, he was never interested in wedding a girl just like the girl who married dear old dad.

Raked over the coals for his short, surprisingly unimpressive second and third novels, *Barbary Shore* (1951) and *The Deer Park* (1955), Mailer, eager to establish himself as a beatnik hero, helped found – and became a regular contributor of slapdash, infantile columns to – the new weekly *Village Voice*.

No longer big on communism, he was now busy formulating his own philosophy, which idolized meaningless displays of brutal force. In one column, he distinguished "squares" (bad) from "hipsters" (good): "To a Square, a rapist is a rapist…. But a hipster knows that the act of rape is a part of life too, and that even in the most brutal and unforgivable rape, there is artistry or the lack of it." "The Hip and the Square" was one of many writings, in a variety of genres, that made up Mailer's 1959 grab-bag *Advertisements for Myself*, a book that helped shift his image from that of a no-longer-promising serious novelist to that of an iconoclastic social and cultural commentator. Another highlight of *Advertisements* was the essay "The White Negro," which, as Bradford puts it, treated "the African-American male as an animalistic sub-species of humanity"; in one notorious passage, he imagined two black teens murdering a shopkeeper and asserted that such a crime would qualify them as rookie "hipsters." Even Beat writer Jack Kerouac, himself no intellectual heavyweight, thought that Mailer's views on being "hip" were idiotic. Many members of the Gotham literati agreed, but they still loved attending Mailer's parties and inviting him to theirs. Yes, he had an unpleasant tendency to start fistfights, but his buffoonery kept him in the headlines and made Manhattan's more staid authors feel, by sheer virtue of contact with him, hip.

Then, at one of those very parties, as if to act out his theories about hipsterdom, Mailer stabbed his wife. Twice. She almost died. It happened during the first of his two ridiculous runs for mayor of New York. He showed no guilt, got off almost scot-free, and actually thought he could continue with his mayoral campaign as if nothing had happened. Soon he was on to wife number three, Jeanne, who was also notable for her "debauchery" (Bradford's words). His fourth, Beverly, came along shortly after, as did his terrible little fourth novel, *An American Dream* (1965), whose protagonist doesn't just stab his wife but kills her. The plot's similarity to Mailer's own recent act of near uxoricide helped sales. But it

was garbage, as was his slight fifth novel, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967). By contrast, *The Armies of the Night* (1968), his account of an antiwar protest in which he took part, was a straightforward, well-observed narrative that received glowing reviews, won the Pulitzer and National Book Award, and is now considered a blue-chip example of the then-new New Journalism, which, unlike traditional journalism, eschewed objectivity. Yes, it was, and still is, an immensely absorbing read – but how much of the praise had to do with its literary merit and how much with its PC politics?

Increasingly in need of cash to bankroll his expensive lifestyle, support his many children, and pay alimony to an ever-burgeoning number of spouses, Mailer spent much of his middle age banging out volumes of lousy-to-middling non-fiction that were nominally about the 1968 political conventions (*Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, 1968), the Apollo 11 mission (*Of a Fire on the Moon*, 1971), feminism (*The Prisoner of Sex*, 1971), Marilyn Monroe (*Marilyn*, 1973), the glories of vandalism (*The Faith of Graffiti*, 1974), and a boxing match between Muhammed Ali and George Foreman (*The Fight*, 1975). I say "nominally" because whatever the purported subjects, the books were always, in very large part, about Mailer himself. After all these hack jobs came a curious project. Mailer's longtime rival Truman Capote had spent years researching his magnificent true-crime work, *In Cold Blood*, for which he'd received plaudits of a kind Mailer had never attained; so when a mountain of material about the murderer Gary Gilmore was dumped in Mailer's lap, he avidly, and without doing a lick of research of his own, transformed it into *The Executioner's Song* (1979), which won him a second Pulitzer, in no small part because the literary elites who cheered it shared his view of Gilmore as, in Bradford's words, an "existential anti-hero."

In 1980, Mailer divorced Beverly, underwent a two-day marriage to his fifth wife, Carol, in order to make their child

legitimate, and wed his sixth wife, Norris. A year later came a scandal to rival his stabbing of Adele. It was while working on his Gilmore book that Mailer began an intense correspondence with another convicted killer, Jack Henry Abbott. Mailer not only helped Abbott find a publisher for his memoir, *In the Belly of the Beast*, but also helped secure his release from prison, even though a prison official who knew him a lot better than did Mailer considered him a dangerous psychotic; in 1981, two weeks after *Belly* came out, Abbott killed Richard Adan, a 22-year-old waiter in an East Village restaurant, for no reason whatsoever. As in the wake of his wife-stabbing, Mailer was unrepentant, saying that he was "willing to gamble with certain elements of society to save this man's talent." As it happens, Adan, too, had been an artist – an actor, dancer, and about-to-be-produced playwright; but for Mailer, writes Bradford, Adan "was just a waiter," and therefore as worthless as the imaginary store owner in "The White Negro." I would add this: Surely part of the reason why Mailer valued Adan less than he did Abbott was that Adan appears to have been a gentle soul, unlike Abbott, who embodied precisely the kind of irrational rage that Mailer identified with real manliness, creative genius, greatness of spirit, and (of course) hipsterhood.

Mailer devoted the third act of his life largely to the production of fictions, a couple of them massive, in which he tackled subjects about which he knew next to nothing. About *Ancient Evenings* (1982), a giant doorstop set in pharaonic Egypt, Bradford comments that some parts "are almost hilariously terrible…. It is astonishing that anyone found it publishable." After the pedestrian crime novel *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1984) came the 1300-page *Harlot's Ghost* (1991), which covers the entire history of the CIA by recounting the career of a fictional spy, and Mailer alter ego, named Harry Hubbard. "Mailer," I wrote in my review for the *New Criterion*, "has never been known as an exquisite stylist; if the writing here is especially slovenly and redundant,

however, one has the impression that it is because he has been more than usually fixated on filling pages." I further described Mailer as "shoveling in research," noting that the novel even included "excerpts from 1963 *New Republic* articles about Kennedy and Castro."

I'd actually forgotten about Mailer's short *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man*, which, completed in 1992, shortly after the publication of the first volume of John Richardson's magisterial life of Picasso, was, quite sensibly, rejected by Jason Epstein, his editor at Random House, because it would look so pathetic by comparison; it wasn't brought out (by another publisher) until 1995. The same year saw the publication of *Oswald's Tale* (1995), about Lee Harvey Oswald, and two years later came *The Gospel According to the Son*, the premise of which was that Mailer was retelling the Gospels from Christ's perspective. But *Gospel* clung so closely to Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John that the exercise seemed pointless except as a way to make a quick buck off a provocative title. "Mailer's attempts to provide glimpses of the interior Jesus are feeble," I wrote in my notice for the *Hudson Review*, adding that he seemed "to have no notion at all of what it might mean to have a spiritual life." After the embarrassment of this biblical ripoff, Mailer actually dared to write a companion book in the form of a theological treatise, *On God* (2007). And as if all this incompetent overreaching weren't enough, Mailer's last novel, *The Castle in the Forest* (2007), was about the young Hitler. In all these cases — Oswald, Jesus, God, Hitler — more serious writers would have steeped themselves in scholarship before daring to set down a word. Not Mailer. Few novelists who have addressed Nazism, writes Bradford apropos of *Castle*, "can match Mailer in allowing invention and the imagination to intrude upon undisputed truths."

During this period, Mailer's exertions were interrupted by 9/11. That attack inspired insipid little America-hating

broadsides by two of Mailer's fellow *New York Review of Books* contributors, Gore Vidal and Joan Didion, but until reading Bradford's book, I was unaware that Mailer, too, had published his own polemical pamphlet on the topic. In interviews, he'd already praised the hijackers for toppling the "architectural monstrosity" that was the World Trade Center; his philippic, *Why Are We at War?* (2003), which I finally got 'round to the other day, reads in part like tons of other left-wing trash I remember perusing after 9/11: "Why are we so hated?" But Mailer's contribution to the debate is even uglier, less reflective, and more glib and ragtag than most. He speaks of "trying to understand terrorism" and says that there's "a tolerable level to terror." He defends Islam. He brings up Hiroshima. You don't have to have supported the long, pointless wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to be disgusted by the readiness with which Mailer jumped onto the bandwagon of intellectuals who blamed the 9/11 jihad on America.

Bradford's biography has been faulted for being too critical of Mailer both as man and as writer. I would say rather that, unlike previous biographers, he's chosen not to whitewash or to dodge certain dicey – but illuminating – actions and writings by his subject but instead to address them head-on. The plain fact is that – when you strip away the glowing reviews written by his pals for the *New York Times Book Review* and the cozy anecdotes that fill books like the 1985 oral biography *Mailer: His Life and Times*, compiled by Mailer's Provincetown housemate Peter Manso – many of the facts of Mailer's life suggest that he was, quite simply, an out-and-out psychopath. In any event, his was the weirdest of literary careers: a first book cynically calculated to be crowned as the great novel of World War II; several volumes of bombastic New Journalism designed to ensure that his name would be associated with the era's biggest headline events; and, in later years, absurdly big novels about absurdly big topics that were intended to (and did) earn him absurdly big advances – even if the books themselves were more or less

preposterous, promoted breathlessly but purchased by few, read all the way to the last page by even fewer, and forgotten by pretty much everybody in record time.

There's one book I still haven't mentioned yet. In 1998, on the occasion of Mailer's 75th birthday (he died in 2007 at age 84), Random House put out a 1,200-page anthology of his "best" writings entitled *The Time of Our Time*. My late friend Terry Teachout took the occasion to ask, in *National Review*: "Why is Norman Mailer still famous?.… I've never met anyone under the age of forty who took him seriously.… Mailer has been writing badly for so long that it is easy to forget that a great many intelligent people once took him almost as seriously as he took himself." Reviewing the book in the *Hudson*, I made the same point: "[D]o people really read him anymore? It's hard to avoid the conclusion that they don't."

What a cautionary tale the story of Norman Mailer's life is! From the beginning, he approached the business of professional writing as if it were pugilism. He wanted to be seen as the champ but wasn't willing, metaphorically speaking, to down those raw eggs, take those long early-morning runs, and punch the hell out of sides of beef in a meat freezer. You can't be a great writer if getting the fame is more important to you than doing the work. Serious writing requires self-discipline, but few Americans of his time led a more undisciplined life than he did: too many wives, too many mistresses, too many parties, too many occasions on which he picked fights with purported friends, throwing sucker punches and giving head-butts. A worthwhile novelist, moreover, needs to be a keen observer of his fellowman, standing, perhaps not always but often enough, on the outside of events and watching the human comedy proceed and, later, writing it all up in solitude and silence; one extreme example of this kind of dedication is Proust. But Mailer was the opposite, always feeling compelled to put himself at the center of the action, always wanting to get all the attention, and always being too fascinated by

himself to care very much about what made other people tick. Hence most of his protagonists are, to a great extent, versions of himself.

There's more. A great novelist needs to have a profoundly developed moral sense (although one writer's morality will not necessarily line up exactly with another's). Think of Dostoevsky. Yes, Mailer was preoccupied with good and evil. But he defined them in infantile, appalling ways. As a young man, he loved Stalin. Later he admired Castro. He saw killers as heroes. He identified manhood not with a sense of mature responsibility and self-control but with arrogant self-assertion and unnecessary acts of aggression. He unapologetically idolized madness, mayhem, and murder. While he was alive, this childishness won him attention and sold books. Now all that's left are the books, which nobody cares about.

If Bradford's biography is nonetheless a rewarding read, it's because it's the first life of Mailer that doesn't treat him like a literary master — and because, by attending to Mailer's long-term treatment as a master by the New York literary establishment, it sheds light on the deeply questionable values of America's high-culture poobahs in the decades during which Fanny Mailer's overgrown brat so improbably flourished.

First published in the American Spectator.