

MAILER'S LAST WORDS

JOHN BOWERS

On God: An Uncommon Conversation

By Norman Mailer with Michael Lennon

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On God: An Uncommon Conversation by Norman Mailer with Michael Lennon is a true gem. It comes out appropriately at the end of Mailer's life and reveals a lifetime's rumination over why we are here, what or who directs us, and where we may go when it's all over on earth. It is a Moby Dick-like quest for God, only mercifully shorter than of Melville's version of Ahab's looking for the whale.

The book is collaboration between Mailer and Lennon in getting at Mailer's beliefs. It is anything other than an interview. It is a discussion, not an interrogation. As the full title tells us, it is an uncommon conversation. Superficially, it may remind some of those late night bull sessions in the dorm when we plumbed the deep about the meaning of it all—is sex for procreation or recreation and is communism good or bad? That sort of thing. No, it is not. This is the mother of all bull sessions.

On the one hand, there is Mount Rushmore himself, the great novelist, who once was bar mitzvahed, and on the other there is the ex-altar boy, a Doctor of Literature, a regular guy who has been around and seems to have read everything. And, lest we forget, in service Mailer was an enlisted man and Lennon an officer. It is fitting that Lennon should pose questions and lead the discussion.

They tackle the biggest of subjects, those that have baffled and engaged the finest minds and deepest thinkers of the ages and have yet to come up with definitive answers. If there is a God who is He (or She?) How does He

operate? Mailer believes that God is an Artist who, to paraphrase Mailer, may make things up as He goes along. Sometimes He is right, sometimes He is wrong. He made a mistake when he created the dinosaur, but He learned from it. He is always in conflict with the Devil, who works to subvert Him or create something on his own, as in the case of technology. In all of us, Mailer thinks, there is God and there is the Devil. As the Creator, God operates much like a novelist, a role Mailer can well identify with. We can now expect to hear the yelp, there goes his ego again! He thinks he's God! Mailer lived with this charge through life. He can live with it through death.

Through the quest for God, a trainload of subjects filters in. The Gnostics come in as does existentialism. St. Thomas is there as well as Adolf Hitler. The Soul is dealt with as well as the incursion of soulless technology into our lives. You can expect many original thoughts to crop up. After all, this is Mailer. Mailer thinks that the high crime of the Holocaust is that it cheated the victims of their deaths. They thought they were going for a shower and then the gas hissed. A multitude of Souls were left abruptly for God to find a place for because Mailer believes in Reincarnation. He thought that Gary Gilmore of *The Executioner's Song* wanted death by firing squad so that his Soul wouldn't be deadened by a life in prison. If Mailer could choose whom he would come back as, he says, in a fantasy, that he would like to be a black athlete. The Monitoring Angel in this fantasy says everyone wants to be a black athlete these days and Mailer has been put down as a cockroach—but the good news is that he'll be the fastest cockroach on the block!

Mailer, as he confesses, has no ties to organized religion. He is as far from an observant Jew as one could get. As the discussion evolves with Lennon, they both find that he may have more affinity with Catholicism than any other religion, but even there he is not comfortable. Iron-clad rules are not to his liking. The Ten Commandments give him trouble, and he chooses, perhaps appropriately, the seventh (Thou shall not commit adultery), to dissect and find fault with. Mailer, in all his works and particularly in this book, displays his intellectual worth. His fiction often disguises his personal life. He is not a memoirist. But here, in his last book, come some touching memories that are devoid of any theology or any bombast. He talks about his mother and remembers the tears in her eyes when she lit the Friday night Shabbat candles. His maternal grandfather was a rabbi and Mailer, it must be said, has a knack for drawing devoted followers around him and

handing out Biblical-like judgments. (Think of his judgments of fellow novelists in *Advertisements for Myself*.) Mailer could pass as a secular rabbi.

Among his personal memories comes a most revealing one. In a straightforward way he tells about walking off aimlessly in Brooklyn when Lady Jeanne Campbell calls it quits to his third marriage when Mailer thought he had found happiness at last. He goes from bar to bar, looking for a woman and finding none, and ends up in a diner and orders coffee and a donut. Then God tells him to leave without paying. At least in this conversation with Lennon he puts it that the voice of God spoke to him and said, "Leave without paying."

He believes that his senses told him it was a divine voice, not a diabolical one. "It seemed to me that I was so locked into petty injunctions on how to behave, that on the one hand I wanted to be a wild man, yet I couldn't even steal a cup of coffee. To this day, I think it was God's amusement to say, 'You little prig. Just walk out of there. Don't pay for the coffee. They'll survive, and this'll be good for you.'"

Further into the personal trials he put himself through, he tells of an imperative prompt from his soul to walk parapets in San Francisco, which had sheer drops to the street below. "I used to be full of dread every morning because I knew that before the day was done, I'd be walking a parapet."

Many unexpected moments crop up through the conversation with Lennon. We learn that Mailer spent one whole summer studying classical Hebrew. We learn that for a long while in early life he couldn't go to bed with a woman without being drunk. We learn that when he's feeling weak he's also very nice (unlike his often truculent public persona) and is sympathetic to weakness in others. "Whereas when I'm feeling strong and also feel compassion or charity—on those rare occasions—there's real goodness present. It's of real use to the other person."

Much of his behavior is explained through these pithy anecdotes and razor-sharp insights. They probably would not arise if Lennon had been intrusive or not his equal in many ways. Lennon is no Tim Russert, trying to pin someone down. He is much better informed than Charley Rose and knows the paths to take to get Mailer to open up. For all the casualness of the talk—you can picture a tumbler of Irish in both their hands—some esoteric topics come forth. Words like "Gnosticism," "Manichean," and "Hagiography," are not in everyone's repertoire, used every day. In fact, you could go years without thinking about them and have to go to Webster's

when you do. And I know few people who carry Milton on the tips of their tongue. As Dr. Johnson said, “No one ever wished for *Paradise Lost* to be longer.”

This book is about Mailer’s search for the meaning of Good and Evil and speculation about God and the Devil and the battle between them. There is hardly any hypothesis that Mailer and Lennon do not make interesting and food for thought in that regard. You may think that some of it is whacky, but stop and think about what has evolved in the world’s religions today. The body of Christ in wafer? Prayer by forehead to the ground and buttocks raised?

And how do any of us conjure up God, or whatever it is, that allows us to have this pinprick of time on a miniscule planet in a limitless galaxy? Mailer had the pleasure to get his final thoughts down on it before he left. If he had believed in Heaven we might now imagine him looking down on us with his distinguishing smile.