YOU ARE TOO HEALTHY FOR THE WORLD

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On God: An Uncommon Conversation
By Norman Mailer with Michael Lennon
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WATCHING THE DOCTORS AND NURSES shuttling in and out of his wife's hospital room, a restless G. K. Chesterton summed up the love and wonder rising inside him by saddling his imagination to charge through the closed door and place his hastily scribbled words on her breast: "The hair on your unconquered head shall freshen wanderers like a field / The very healers 'round your bed will touch your garments to be healed … You will burn up the world at last / You are too healthy for the world…." Similar feelings were shared by many of those who loved Norman Mailer as in spirit they waited by his hospital door last November, drawn less by the gathering darkness than by the remarkable light that still shone so brightly from within.

The Mailer we always knew smiles as he catches sight of us and gestures us inside, have a seat, I'm talking with Mike Lennon about God. When, the careful reader asks, was Norman not talking about God who is a Presence if not a character in so much of his sixty years of writing?

That question also occurs to Michael Lennon, Mailer's longtime friend and authorized biographer who led the conversations that constitute this absorbing book. In the preface Lennon observes that "Although his novels and narrative nonfiction back to the 1950s are shot through with his ideas of God and the Devil … this material was there largely as a backdrop, a sort of cosmic context for the journeys and struggles of his characters … the direct

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interventions of angels and demons were surmises." That all changed In Mailer's last novel, *The Castle in the Forest*, in which his beliefs now ground the characters in a solar system in which power is divided among God, the Devil, and humanity.

I had listened to Mailer discuss this universe in a variety of settings over near to forty years of friendship, from The Ginger Man in Manhattan to a Chinese restaurant in Brooklyn and over meals at his home in Provincetown. He never spoke casually about his vision of the celestial clash between the embattled God and the Devil in which our behavior can shift the momentum one way or other. This long held concept is the basis for these wide-ranging conversations whose familiar themes are enlivened by the spontaneity of Mailer's reflections. Indeed, Mailer insisted that Lennon keep the theological questions to himself until they spoke to guarantee that his responses would meet the requirements of his favorite word, "improvisational."

One is tempted to modify the introductory phrase used in Franz Werfel's novel about the French peasant girl Bernadette who claimed to be visited by the Virgin at the place now called Lourdes: To those who believe in God no explanation is necessary; to those who do not, no explanation is possible. Norman would have regarded that sentiment as, at best, a small deceit and, at worst, as the cheapest and least worthy of graces, a cowardly dodge of the largest dread bearing existential question before us. Still, of these conversations, one may say that to those who know Mailer and his work, no explanation is necessary; to those who do not, no explanation is possible.

Mailer's meditations on an imperfect God's trench warfare with the Devil, advancing here and retreating there, will delight those who already understand him and will provoke those who do not. If, in *The Castle in the Forest*, Mailer takes on the first person voice of an agent of a cunning and powerful Evil One, he is present here fully as himself; that is, charmingly and simultaneously immodest and modest, taking on the themes that have been largely reserved to professional theologians and speaking, he says, as an amateur.

No reader familiar with Mailer can resist or protest, of course, when he writes that "what will be evident … is how truly untutored I am." His *bona fides* may, he observes, "be legitimate" because as a novelist "I have spent the last fifty years trying to contemplate the nature of God." Of his attempts to "advance my notions by readings in theology, I was repelled. The works were

studies, for the most part, of the unstated but dictatorial injunction to have faith. They were undernourished in their appetite for inquiry, and full of theological dicta."

If these words will not endear him to professional theologians, neither will these conversations conducted in a style very different from the language, manner, or good order of their investigations. If theologians are playing bridge cautiously in the quiet of a gentleman's club, Mailer is playing the wildest kind of Poker with all cards wild in a Las Vegas world in which he wrestles with the angel every night.

Mailer's reflections begin with and depend on his essential insight and confession: "I do believe in God as the artist, the Creator.... Whether I have a private agenda, or whether I am being an objective philosopher ...—so be it. Whether guilty or innocent, this will be the argument I advance. God is an artist. And like an artist, God has successes, God has failures." Central to all Mailer's reflections is his sense that, as an artist, God is "limited in power," that, far from the icy unimaginable perfection once unanimously posited by formal theologians, God the imperfect artist struggles every day to get it right, battling on a hundred fronts, many of which, like natural disasters and wars, we fail to see as the evidence of His majestic, terrifying engagement with the Devil who winches up power enough of his own to achieve victories here and there and to keep the contest even and the still unachieved outcome in doubt.

We are not helpless or neutral observers of this contest, Mailer says, but participants who, like troops courageous or cowardly, affect the outcome on any given day of this unending combat. Professional theologians may scoff and even devoted readers may hesitate, but the compelling force at the core of this book is Mailer's imagination, that bustling and magic bazaar where he dares us to look long and hard on the nature of existence and to name its beasts as truly as Adam once did the animals in Genesis. Make no mistake, this book cannot be read casually.

The reader must yield to Mailer's imagination in which he comes upon the dull beast of conventional religious thinking as D.J. does the bear coming at him "on the heuuuuuu of the cry, two red coal little eyes of fire, wall of fur coming fast as a locomotive" (*Why Are We in Vietnam?*). This is no time or place to back away or ask for polite introductions or to make small talk. Mailer pushes aside the traditional categories of theology to examine the vast broken reality of human experience at no small price to himself or

to the readers who must get their bets down if they are to accompany him on this bold journey.

Yet Mailer knows the one true thing that only the great religious geniuses of history understand. Faith is not designed to appeal to the intellect or to the will but to the imagination and its language is metaphor. That, for example, is what Pope John XXIII understood when he convened Vatican Council II and freed long suppressed energies to excite the world's imagination about belief again. That pope's readiness to embrace rather than fear the world so disturbed some of his successors that they initiated a massive effort to mute the creative imagination and to stress again the conforming will in religious matters. One should not, therefore, underestimate the power of Mailer's imagination to rattle the locks on all the cages in which the superorthodox are once more attempting to confine the spirit.

It was my good fortune to be in on the exchanges between Lennon and Mailer in that last full season of the author's life, reading the chapters as they were written, answering questions about certain points of Catholic theology and feeling the spray of the champagne uncorked in the World Series winner's mood of this last great conversation. Enter this portal into Norman's imagination, knowing that he had first intended to call this book "Into the Mystery." That is exactly where he takes you.