

A FAVOR FOR THE AGES

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THE HEROES OF MY YOUTH DIED IN THE 1960s: my father and President John F. Kennedy in 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Sen. Robert F. Kennedy in 1968. Assassins took them all: cancer the first, bullets the rest. Losses of that magnitude, at least for a time, stripped life of its joy, reduced living to a mere alternative. It wasn't just me. The loss of my father was only a private preview of the pain, confusion and anger that was to scar and undermine my generation. Lee Harvey Oswald, James Earl Ray and Sirhan B. Sirhan, by themselves or in concert with powers unknown, helped to twist and turn us unproductively inward while in the background arose a damnable Asian war that left us mocking the principles, self-reliance and patriotism of our parents and their parents, and their parents before them.

We have been a naïve, narcissistic and arrogant generation, the Baby Boomers, quick to blame and slow to take responsibility. Despite ourselves, we managed to achieve some good along the way, but in a country turned upside down in the 1960s, spun inside out in the 1970s, and set before a fun-house mirror in the 1980s, we remained consumed by the mysteries of the self. Our unswerving indulgence and self-absorption right through the turn of the century has finally brought us, as we flirt with the end of the new millennium's first decade, to the brink of ruin.

Perhaps this is a glib and unfair judgment, the too-fast stroke of a broad and darkening brush. I do believe that more hope abides from coast to coast in the year 2009 than during any year in recent memory. And if we look back over all of the years and even quickly consider the day-to-day of it all, where life was lived, only rarely did tomorrow seem unremittingly bleak. There have been moments of great joy, righteous, tide-turning anger, clarity of purpose and, most importantly, understanding.

We owe much of that—although we always have been loathe to admit it and certainly do not do so now—to the best of American journalism, and in

particular to those who have been the boldest, brightest, most tenacious and passionate of its practitioners. They push, prod and knead the prosaic forms of their craft until what might otherwise be homely articles instead become illuminating stories that strain and tilt inexorably toward something more. Invariably, the goal is a keener, clearer, more circumspect knowledge: truth, in other words, with a capital letter T, or as close to it as anyone can possibly come.

Their work on this last literary frontier has gone by various names, some invented by the journalists themselves, others by critics and academics who, for the sake of predictability or perhaps merely for wont of neatness, always feel compelled to categorize—fly-on-the-wall reporting, window-pane reporting, drop-out journalism, submersion journalism, immersion journalism, nonfiction fiction, fictional nonfiction, reporting from the worm’s-eye view, new journalism, gonzo journalism, creative nonfiction, narrative journalism. Well into the exercise, with labels flying everywhere, some pedant is likely to sniff, “Literary journalism? Isn’t that an oxymoron?” Eventually the effort mires in priggish declarations of what is literary and what is not. It is at roughly this juncture that someone is most apt to reel out Ezra Pound’s dictum that “Literature is news that stays news” (29). Curses are shouted, oaths taken, punches thrown. The police are called. ’Twas ever thus.

Reporters who dare also to write often become the makers of so many glimmering brass rings, the bearers of higher, different, more challenging standards. When one considers the fundamental importance of good journalism to a democratic society, their work can rightly be called heroic. They become models for others who would seek the truth and tell it with a style and grace of their own. This has been so in virtually every age, but in mine, these men and women have stood in for my slain heroes.

There have been so many truly fine writing reporters that no single list could accurately be called complete. Here are but a handful from the twentieth century: Jimmy Breslin, Martha Gellhorn, Ernie Pyle, Richard Harding Davis, Ernest Hemingway, Truman Capote, John Hersey, Gay Talese, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, Pete Hamill, Lillian Ross, Rachel Carson, Jessica Mitford, Seymour Hersh, Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, Tom Wolfe, Mary Heaton Vorse, Joan Didion, Rick Bragg, Michael Herr, Hunter S. Thompson, and, of course, scrapping, jabbing, self-promoting but, best of all, brilliantly writing his way to the top, Norman Mailer.

With him there belongs *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*: a minority view perhaps, but one that is eminently defensible. Stylistically, the book is something of a Norman Mailer sampler. Some passages soar, some trudge. In very many, the author is invisible; in others he is omnipresent, but necessarily so. The book's unevenness gives it an engaging, if unwoven, vitality; it is easily among the most conscientiousness, candid and compassionate of Mailer's reportage.

Consider his summary estimation of Marina Prusakova Oswald, Lee Harvey Oswald's often- and easily-vilified widow:

She sits in a chair, a tiny woman in her early fifties, her thin shoulders hunched forward in such pain of spirit under such a mass of guilt that one would comfort her as one would hug a child. What is left of what was once her beauty are her extraordinary eyes, blue as diamonds, and they blaze with light as if, in divine compensation for the dead weight of all that will not cease to haunt her, she has been granted a spark from the hour of an apocalypse others have not seen. Perhaps it is the light offered to victims who have suffered like the gods. (788)

Who but a fellow traveler could write that last line? Only a novelist in reporter's clothing.

I knew nothing of Mailer until the late 1960s, when, as an undergraduate English major at the University of New Hampshire, I took a preponderance of courses in journalism. Our professor, the late Donald M. Murray, told us that we could never hope to be good if we did not first know what good really was, and so he insisted that as we learned to report, write and edit, we frequent the library's periodicals room, as well as newsstands and magazine racks in order to stay abreast of what our infinite betters were doing.

One day in March of 1968, Murray walked into class with the latest copy of *Harper's Magazine*, showed us the cover story, "The Steps of the Pentagon," and talked about its author, Mailer. Murray was, like the author, an Army combat veteran of World War II, and he said Mailer's first critically acclaimed work, *The Naked and the Dead*, was one of the finest novels—if not *the* finest—he had ever read, and that while war was its ostensible backdrop, the work was about so much more. And here, suddenly it seemed, in one of the oldest, most highly regarded general circulation magazines in the

country, Mailer the allegorist, the moralist, the fine novelist, was reporting on the 1967 Vietnam protest march in Washington, D.C.

And then Murray read long passages from the story. The piece was mesmerizing, a gift, the kind of work that made sense of chaos, that explained a historic moment with brilliant, gritty, nearly luminous clarity. The story roared for more than 90,000 words, the longest single piece ever published by an American magazine (Hillstrom 22). It chewed up the entire issue, a fact which helped to consign Willie Morris' editorship of *Harper's* to an early and untimely grave (Jones 64). The story became part of *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, The Novel as History*, which in 1969 won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction and a National Book Award in Arts and Letters, too. Eleven years later, in 1980, Mailer would win the Pulitzer again, this time for fiction, with *The Executioner's Song*.

Remarkable. At one turn, Mailer could be the once-and-future journalist, erudite, hard-working to a fault, dazzling with invention, but restrained by the metes and bounds of reality. The next, he could be the celebrated novelist, startlingly fresh, daring and powerful. He could reach for truth with either hand. Genre mattered little; convention not at all. His bravado and originality made his work magnetic and, inevitably, controversial.

Little wonder that over the course of his long career he left his admirers awe-stricken and his detractors unhinged. No sooner had the latter defined him, properly pinned safely under glass as though he were some exotic, light-bearing creature with gossamer wings and razor-sharp fangs, than he would punch the pane into shards and fly off again to the edge of the cold dark unknown, next to be heard asking his eternal question, "Why?" of war mongers, of ancient pharaohs, of modern kings, of killers and cunning misfits, of social outcasts, even of Adolf Hitler. Should anyone have been surprised that as he neared the end of his odyssey, he also chose to confront the mightiest deity in Western civilization?

In some ways, it was more surprising that in 1995, with publication of *Oswald's Tale*, he would try to reconstruct Lee Harvey Oswald and dare to tug at the Gordian knot of conspiracies that twine around him. Even now the skinny ex-Marine with the smirk on his lips stands at the center of the Baby Boomers' whirlwind, Mannlicher-Carcano 6.5 mm carbine in hand.

There were reasons aplenty for Mailer to not touch him.

In addition to the twenty-six volume report of the Warren Commission, which concluded that Oswald acted alone, score upon score of books already

had been written about the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, some merely shoring up the findings of the commission, many others arguing that the assassination was the work of conspirators. My generation always has sensed that some malevolent force lurks beneath the national bed. Three assassinations in five years will do that, and when you add in the murders of Medgar Evers and Malcolm X, the number of assassinations in that span actually was five. Little wonder that decades later most Americans are still inclined to believe that Kennedy's murder involved, depending on the particular plot at hand, the Mafia, CIA, FBI, Cuba's Fidel Castro, the far right, the far left, the KGB, LBJ, or virtually any combination of the aforementioned.

As a writer, Mailer also had to be acutely aware that the best any reconstruction can hope to be is a tilted and cracked mirror of a reality that was. While a good reconstruction can be a glory, one that is questionably handled breeds distrust of the very form. It is supremely risky business to rely on the aging memories of the players, to interpret or assign motive, or treat as fact that which can no longer be verified or proved. The author always is in the position of building a tower on one potentially brittle block after another. And the passage of thirty years could very well make the extraordinarily difficult nearly impossible.

And then, in no small measure, Norman Mailer also would have to contend with the fact that he was ... well, Norman Mailer. By the early 1990s, though obviously and permanently ensconced in the pantheon of literati, his reputation was such that had he, instead, discovered the True Cross and carried it through the streets of Brooklyn, there would have been no shortage of people to decry both him and the achievement.

More likely than not, had John Hersey still been alive when *Oswald's Tale* was published, he would have been among the critics. Hersey's iconic 1946 reconstruction of the dropping of the atomic bomb in World War II, *Hiroshima*, was a milestone in modern reporting and an oft-cited influence on countless journalists for decades thereafter. The 31,000-word story was given the entire Aug. 31 issue of *The New Yorker*. No literary effort did more to awaken the world to the horrors of nuclear war.

In his well-known 1986 essay, "The Legend on the License," Hersey decried a trend in reportage that he saw as blurring the line between fiction and nonfiction. For journalism, he laid down "... one sacred rule ... The writer must not invent. The legend on the license must read: *NONE OF*

THIS WAS MADE UP” (153). Then he excoriated three of the day’s most celebrated writers—Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote and Norman Mailer.

Hersey praised Mailer’s work, *The Executioner’s Song*, as eloquent fiction, but insisted that despite Mailer’s defense of the work as “a model of complete, precise and accurate reporting,” he was not to be trusted as a journalist (qtd. in Hersey 160). Hersey’s rationale was not based solely on Mailer’s inclination to meld interpretation and judgment with verifiable fact, or even on his earlier propensity to assume a player’s role in the drama on which he was reporting.

Instead, Hersey rather inexplicably attacked Mailer for personal conduct that even Charity might have condemned as unruly. “[H]e has scattered his macho boasts and seed among a flock of wives, mistresses, and bare acquaintances; near dawn after a night of carousal and quarrels he made a pretty fair attempt on the life of one of these ladies with a cheap knife; he has romanticized marijuana ... tried to bite an earlobe off an actor” (160).

Then Hersey asked, “Can we trust a reporter with such a bizarre history of brutality, insecurity, mischief, and vogueishness ... ?” (160). And he answered: “Am I saying that we can accept what Mailer says as a novelist and cannot accept what he says as a journalist? Baffled by the impossibility of knowing when he is which, I am” (161).

Since when did we judge a writer’s work by whether his personal behavior offends our moral sensibilities? If we held actors and actresses to such a standard, Hollywood long ago would have gone the way of the dodo. Such scrutiny, it is lamentably clear today, might even snuff out the eternal flame on JFK’s grave. More to the point, I suspect that no writer worth reading ever tried to argue that deception or obfuscation is anything less than deception or obfuscation. And that was never what Norman Mailer was about. Rather, for most of his literary life he presented himself, flaws, pugnacity, flamboyance and all, as crucible, filter and conduit, a unique and mighty churning vessel in which the facts and essences of one subject after another could be cooked, seasoned, churned, strained, and served up, to be accepted and enjoyed as a wholly new dish; call it what you will, but never intentionally a lie.

Oswald’s Tale only bears that out, and it does so with such care, conscientiousness, candor and compassion that Mailer’s effort should be applauded for those traits alone. The project was fraught with obvious and unique difficulties, some of them Herculean, owing to the extraordinary

volume of information, the varying and contradictory nature of it, and the involvement of no fewer than one hundred and seventy different characters, so many that the book justifiably includes a five-page glossary of names. From start to finish, Mailer seemed more acutely aware than ever that his workmanship had to be noticeably clean, his methods transparent and his motives for taking one tack or another unassailable, or if not unassailable, then at the very least, readily understandable.

The first half of the nearly eight-hundred-page work—"Volume One: Oswald in Minsk with Marina"—is a richly detailed if hoary landscape of the Soviet Union from 1959 to 1962, and a picture of Oswald's life within it. Mailer and Larry Schiller, his friend and colleague, spent six months in Minsk and Moscow researching, interviewing and, at the invitation of the Belarus KGB, poring over government surveillance files on Oswald. They were trying, Mailer said, to establish a base camp on "the greatest mountain of mystery in the twentieth century" (349).

The sense of place is indelible:

Max Prokhorchik's parents were buried alive in the Jewish ghetto of Minsk during World War II when Max was four, and so he was raised by an uncle who was a Russian, not a Jew, who became Max's uncle by marrying Max's mother's sister. Max himself never heard much about the ghetto in which he was born; it was not something he wanted to know; it still hurts. When his relatives tried to tell him, he would say, "I don't want to hear." Still, everybody in Minsk knew. What is left of that ghetto is one short crooked street that slopes down a hill. It still has old wooden buildings, and at the bottom is a very small park, perhaps twenty by thirty feet in area, with a sizable hollow at the center that was left when all the bodies buried in this place were removed. (83)

Moments of drama are handled deftly and without intrusion or histrionics. From Oswald's Intourist guide in Moscow, Rimma Shirakova, he learns that his petitions for Soviet citizenship have been rebuffed. He is deeply disappointed, sullen, depressed. The next afternoon, he is uncharacteristically late to meet her.

The floor lady at the elevator landing said, 'He's still in his room, because I don't have his key.'

Rimma said, 'Come with me.' They began knocking. Nobody answered. His door was locked from the inside, and so the floor lady couldn't put her extra key in. They called someone from Internal Security and a locksmith from their hotel crew joined them, but the locksmith had difficulty opening the door, and finally pushed it open with such a bang that both men fell into the living room. They saw nobody. Rimma, behind them, saw nothing. Then these two men went on to the left and into Oswald's bathroom. Rimma doesn't know where they found him, whether in the tub or on the bathroom floor; she couldn't see from where she was in the hall, and she did not want to. Then they came out and said, 'Get an ambulance.' Rimma went down to call, and soon after, a policeman told her that he had cut his wrists ... From a moral point of view, she thought it was good that she had come in time. When they brought him out on a stretcher she saw that he was dressed. His clothes were dry. He was lying unconscious on this stretcher and she sat next to him in the ambulance. Up front was a man driving, and another fellow who had helped carry his stretcher. She was alone with him in back, and he looked so weak and thin. His cheeks were hollow; his face was bluish. He looked like a person about to die. (50)

The scene is clear, effectively drawn, and within it, typically, hides a deceptive amount of reporting. "Please tell me what happened," Mailer may have said to Rimma Shirakova, "in as much detail as you can recall." Reporters have issued such instructions since time immemorial. Rarely does the response ever come in the sort of clear and well-ordered sentences that need only be taken down and then reported. More often, especially in a reconstruction, the interview subject's retelling has to be interrupted countless times or, at its close, many of the statements revisited for clarification or elaboration. Reporters cannot write or describe that which they do not understand. The process of reporting, even for this one relatively uncomplicated, tightly presented, scene, would be painstaking. For example:

"You said the floor lady couldn't get into his room?

"Did she try her own key?

“Why didn’t it work?

“Did you call the police for help?

“Which branch or division would have responded?

“Who takes care of such things?

“It was just one person?

“It’s he and the locksmith who end up forcing the door open, separating the bolt the door jamb while they are pushing on the door and that’s why they fell into the room when the door gave?

“Both men fell into the room?

“And where were you at that moment?

“Did you follow them into the apartment?

“Where did they find Oswald?

“Was he on the floor, or in the bathtub?

“Did you go inside?

“Why not?

“Did you or the floor lady call for the ambulance?

“You used the same telephone, the one downstairs?

“Who told you that Oswald had cut his wrists?

“What did you think when you heard that?

“Was he clothed when they carried him out of the room?

“Was he conscious?

“How many people were in the ambulance?

“In back, you were alone with Oswald?

“How did he look at that point?

“What were your thoughts on the way to the hospital?”

Throughout parts of the first volume, swaths of silken exposition are interrupted by transcripts of conversations captured surreptitiously by the KGB. While their form lends the content a stamp of authenticity, the effect of the change, regardless of the author’s skill in creating segues, often is jarring. Consider this spat between Oswald and his wife, Marina.

WIFE: ... Why are you afraid of people? What scared you?

LHO: (*yells angrily*) Shut up, shut up ... You stand there and blab.

WIFE: You’re afraid of everybody!...

LHO: Shut up!

WIFE: Are you afraid that they'll steal everything from you, a pot of gold that you have? (*laughing*) At times like this you could kill me. You have to have some kind of strong will.

LHO: How about some potatoes?

WIFE: They're not ready yet, what can I do?

22:37 (*they go into the kitchen*)

22:40 (*Wife makes LHO wash his feet*)

23:00 (*it's quiet in the room; no conversation*)

It was painful for Yuri Merezhinsky to see this marriage. Alik (Oswald) had a good apartment, quite acceptable if you were a single man. No matter if Yuri's English was good or bad, he was going to tell interviewers everything in English. (228)

Much of Mailer's narrative in Volume One gently and effectively mimics a Russian command of English. The verbiage is clipped and coolly efficient. As a literary conceit, it is noticeable, but not obtrusive, and it succeeds as a subtle reminder that the reader has a window on a most singular world.

How was Alik in bed, he did not know. That could be described only by a woman. But on outside, Alik was never aggressive. Yuri would give examples. Once, in Oswald's bachelor days, somebody grabbed Alik by his shirt. There, right on the street. Yuri saved him. Alik could not defend himself. Couldn't even hit somebody. Yuri would defend him many times ... At that time, Yuri could say, he was good fighter. Russian word for wimp is *sleeznyak*, a jelly. Not true for Oswald, said Yuri. Lee was not one to round off a sharp corner, but he was not *sleeznyak*. It's just that Yuri was boss of situation such as this. (229)

Mailer candidly notes that he took “certain liberties” in presenting Oswald’s letters and writings, but he leaves no doubt as to their nature or why it was necessary to do so.

Oswald was dyslexic, and his orthography is so bad at times that the man is not revealed but concealed—in the worst of his letters he seems stupid and illiterate ... let us also recognize how prodigiously crippling is dyslexia to a man who would have a good polemical style. Indeed, it is as intimately crippling as arthritic fingers on a violinist. (197–98)

Mailer also is careful to explain why the entire first volume of the book is devoted to Oswald’s time in Russia. “We are, in effect,” he said, “studying an *object* (to use the KGB’s word for a person under scrutiny) as he tumbles through the prisms of a kaleidoscope. It is as if by such means we hope to penetrate into the psychology of Lee Harvey Oswald” (197).

Near the end of Oswald’s sojourn, the author takes stock and declares: “It is obvious that whatever we have learned about Oswald in Russia is not enough to answer our basic question” (315).

Perhaps not, but it is startling at that juncture in the book for the reader to recognize that one of the most reviled men in history has been the subject of more than three hundred pages and not once was he maltreated or viewed with anything but dispassionate curiosity. We see him as largely alone, even in his marriage. He loves and needs Marina; he is indifferent to her, sometimes despises her. She is strident with him, hypercritical. He knocks her around. He is capable of doting on his two young daughters. He is as disillusioned with Soviet communism and Cuban dictatorship as he is with American democracy. But he is buoyed by his mounting conviction that given the opportunity, even a cipher could rise to become a person of great and historic importance; in his own mind at least, he has that potential. He even prepares his own manifesto, and he becomes comfortable with the conclusion that his only real impediment to greatness is opportunity.

Oswald was a secret agent. There is no doubt about that. The only matter unsettled is whether he was working for any service larger than the power centers in the privacy of his mind. At the

least, we can be certain he was spying on the world in order to report to himself. For, by his own measure, he is one of the principalities of the universe. (352)

Volume One then, provides both subtext and context for Volume Two, “Oswald in America.” It is in Volume Two that Mailer weighs Oswald as an assassin. The author is present almost from start to finish, but there is no confusion as to his role. He assumes no persona other than that of writer. Because he must tack together parts and pieces of so many reports and investigative works, he describes his own role as “a literary usher who is there to guide each transcript to its proper placement on the page” along a dizzying trail of facts, reports, dialogues, suppositions, presumptions, inferences and theories. The author also explains clearly and at length that while the second half of the book also is nonfiction, it is a mystery and in order to solve it, speculation based on what he has learned of Oswald and what he understands about the man, may be necessary and justified (352).

The notion of speculation was, by itself, enough to send a few critics into paroxysms of condemnation, and the response might have been justified if Mailer’s speculations were presented as anything else, but that was not the case. So when the inevitable red-flag verbiage appears, telling phrases such as, “it is possible that,” or “there is a real chance that,” it is still the reader’s choice to accept or reject the scenarios they herald. That is hardly dishonest; quite the opposite. The inclusion of speculation, labeled as such, does nothing to erode the distinction between what is verifiable fact and what is not. I suspect Mailer had no real choice but to engage in speculation at some point. Without pursuing each specific conspiratorial skein at great and exhaustive length, how else could they be accounted for? The author clearly allows that there may, in fact, have been other plots afoot to kill Kennedy, plots that may even have been operative that grim day in Dallas, but given what is known of Oswald and understood for a certainty, what conclusion can be reached about his actions?

Mailer’s deductive reasoning is worthy of the immortal Sherlock Holmes. Listen closely as the detective says to his compatriot, Dr. John Watson, “How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?” (Doyle 274).

Mailer found no assassination conspiracy to be sufficiently encompassing, believable, and realistic enough to withstand long and cold scrutiny, and

so he allows the answer to gradually emerge from what is palpable, known and understood.

Oswald, without any obvious reason to do so, took steps to provide for his family should he be captured or killed, and Mailer deduced that

In the depths of Oswald's logic lies an equation: Any man who is possessed of enough political passion to reach murderous intensity in his deeds is entitled to a seat at the high table of world leaders. Such may have been Oswald's measure. The route to becoming a great political leader—given his own poor beginnings—might have to pass through acts of assassination. (505)

On April 10, 1963, most likely acting on his own, Oswald tries to kill General Edwin A. Walker, head of the ultra-right John Birch Society.

It can be argued that in the course of his preparations, Oswald had scouted the house and knew Walker's habits, but that is not likely. Walker was away on his tour until Monday, April 8, two days before the attempt. The only conclusion, if Oswald managed it by himself, running entirely on his own schedule, is that he went to Walker's house on Wednesday night to shoot him, and there was the General in full collaboration ... Luck! Of course, luck may be the product of extra-sensory perception in crucial areas, and Oswald may be an unhappy example of a man with extraordinary luck. (513)

Oswald's shot misses the mark, but that only bolsters his confidence. Mailer generously quotes Patricia Johnson McMillan, author of *Lee and Marina*, on the point.

He had tried something cataclysmic—and he had not been caught. He had not even been touched.

Thus by far the greatest legacy Lee carried out of the Walker attempt was the conviction that he was invulnerable, that he stood at the center of a magic circle swathed in a cloak of immunity. It was a feeling which fitted dangerously with the feeling he

already had that he was special, that he had particular prerogatives. He and he alone was entitled to that which was forbidden to everybody else. (qtd. in Mailer 517)

Mailer sees Oswald as a stoic, a narcissist, a futurist, a seeker of utopia, and ultimately, a nihilist. It is to the author's great credit that having employed as much impartiality as he could muster in his examination, he also is able to see Oswald as a human being torn by a choice. "To which half of himself will he be faithful," Mailer asks, "his need for love, or his need for power and fame? What is never taken seriously enough in Oswald is the force of his confidence that he has the makings of a great leader" (555).

Mailer is scrupulous about letting the reader know his own leanings and prejudices, and goes so far as to note that if he embraces them too strongly and follows them too closely, they become more important than finding the truth, so he vows to be on guard against the pull of his own inclinations. In so doing, Mailer creates a journalistic work of great and compassionate charity, a metaphysical favor for the ages. The mark of his genius is to employ Oswald's grandiosity as a balm for us all:

It is virtually not assimilable to our reason that a small lonely man felled a giant in the midst of his limousines, his legions, his throng, and his security. If such a non-entity destroyed the leader of the most powerful nation on earth, then a world of disproportion engulfs us, and we live in a universe that is absurd ... the sudden death of a man as large in his possibilities as John Fitzgerald Kennedy is more tolerable if we can perceive his killer as tragic rather than absurd. (198)

Mailer confides that before he began the project, he favored conspiracy theory but was determined

to take Oswald on his own terms as long as that was possible—that is, try to comprehend his deeds as arising from nothing more than himself until such a premise lost all headway. To study his life in this manner produces a hypothesis: Oswald was a protagonist, a prime mover, a man who made things happen—in short, a figure larger than others would credit him for being. (605)

Mailer concludes not merely that Oswald had the character to kill Kennedy and to do it alone, but that the assassination probably was undertaken without any special malice. It was simply an opportunity presented to Oswald by the same Fates that months earlier had served up Gen. Walker, and that just weeks earlier had given him a job at the Texas Book Depository right on the route of Kennedy's motorcade. All that remained was for him to step up, take advantage of the moment and savor the achievement that was meant to be his alone. "For Americans, the aftershocks would not cease for the rest of the century or more. Yet he would also be punishing the Russians and the Cubans. They would suffer side effects for decades to come. But then, he was above capitalism and he was above Communism. Both!" (780).

The last part of Volume Two is titled "Oswald's Ghost," which not by accident also was the title of an "American Experience" documentary which aired on public television in 2008. In the program, Mailer said that to Oswald's way of thinking

If he was caught, well, then he was quite articulate, and he would have one of the greatest trials in America's history, if not the greatest, and he would explain all of his political ideas, and he would become world famous, and might have an immense effect upon history even if he was executed ... Oswald is a ghost who sits upon American life What is abominable and maddening about ghosts is that you never know the answer. Is it this, or is it that? You can't know because a ghost doesn't tell you. ("Oswald's" 20)

Perhaps not, but a great novelist does—and so does a great journalist.

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