

ON READING MAILER TOO YOUNG

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THERE HE IS, GET A GOOD LOOK AT HIM AND PROMISE NOT TO LAUGH—this little guy stooped there Quasimodo-style over a thick book at the lumbering, dark wood table in the cathedral library of this suburban New York junior high. Dust on his socks. A morsel of cafeteria lunch pasted on his lip. Girls in bare legs who've just learned to have breasts walk by but he won't look up because he's afraid his hormones will make him detonate and, well, it's a good book. Here it is, already 1964. He's thirteen. Kennedy's just dead, the Beatles are just arrived, the Stones are releasing their debut album, too, Clay has just become Ali and the GI's in Vietnam are still called advisors, mostly. The red carpet's getting ready to unfold. And this little guy is sitting there reading *The Naked and the Dead*.

The Holt, Rinehart, Winston edition. Black dust jacket that sports a red line drawing—all dots and jagged lines—the face of (maybe) a soldier in some tight-lipped, abstract rendering of the thousand-mile stare. This kid reads on, about Croft and Wilson and the climb up Mount Anaka. And we could say that he hits page 602, runs into the fabled white space, and then the shock of the pick-up: “A half hour later, Lieutenant Hearn was killed by a machine gun bullet which passed through his chest.” And we could go through the usual amazement, the heartbreak of losing Hearn after six hundred-odd pages and the later dismissals from Mailer himself who sort of scoffed at this device as one he pulled from E. M. Forster. We could do that but . . .

OK. But it's not Hearn and it's not Forester; in fact it's not literature that's got this little thirteen-year-old guy pouring through Mailer too young, going page-by-page through the longest book he's ever read. No, the clincher is earlier. It's page 150. It's when Mailer's recon platoon suddenly comes under

Japanese machine gun fire and we read: “BEE-YOWWWW! . . . BEE-YOOWWWW!” and on and on and on.

Those fantastic machine gun sounds. Written out, right there on the page.

It’s not literature that’s delivered him to Mailer. It’s comic books.

Now, obviously the discovery of Mailer is a eureka moment that’s built out of a truckload of mental prep. What’s got this little guy turned-on to Mailer (though it’s a few years yet before he’ll use that phrase) is that Mailer is the only great writer around, the only living major public author, who comes busting off of an operatic stage in total exuberance, to fall right into the lap of this thirteen-year-old boy and his reading pals. Because with their own struggling hands they’ve hammered together two unlikely mind-bending standards: *Mad Magazine* and the world of Batman, Superman, Capt. America and Sgt. Rock of Easy Co. (OK, also the blessed *Classics Illustrated*, too, one of the finest series of comics ever in those terrible days before *Cliff’s Notes*.) So, for the first time, our young man and his reading buddies are convinced they’re getting a load of an adult author who can live up to this incredible mind-melt of Mad, Marvel, National Periodicals . . . I’m telling you, reading this Mailer guy is like being on a rocket even if half the time, you have no idea what he’s talking about.

In the literary eye of the thirteen-year-old boy, this is the highest compliment. Forget the studied sincerity of, say, *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Down with *The Old Man And The Sea*, too, (which even at thirteen we thought was enough to put you off Hemingway before you discovered the good stuff.) This Mailer, he was Good vs. Evil, world catastrophe, official lies, violence, sex, madness, the whole crazy, lurid world was there in Mailer’s pages and even better, this was a guy who was respected and could write like a son-of-a-bitch.

And if a “real writer” could put something like “BEE-YOWWWW! . . . BEE-YOOWWWW!” in his book, if he could huddle so dangerously close to “Sgt. Rock of Easy Company” and “Spy Vs. Spy” then by God, a writer could do ANYTHING.

I mean, listen. It would be great to proclaim that we were drawn in by the sex scenes. The only thing is, until *An American Dream*, Mailer wouldn’t get a shake of the hand from the dedicated literary onanist. Maybe *The Time of Her Time*. A bit of *The Deer Park*. But, hey, we’d already read Terry Southern’s *Candy*. We’d scampered into *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and ’64 was the year of the court fight over Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*, a book that showed up,

literally in brown paper wrappers, in the school hall from time to time. We were veterans of post-war war novels. *Battle Cry* by Leon Uris with the bedroom wrestling that always ended in “. . .” and at least two of us were collectors of the fantastic and now much-mourned Monarch Books, a long gone and sadly missed paperback company that had dissected the soul of the thirteen-year-old boy. Titles like: *Bloody Beaches* (Marines die hard!), *Baby Face Nelson*, *Reptilicus*, *Tarawa*, *Marine War Heroes*, *The Indian Wars* series, *Nikki* (One night with Nikki was like a lifetime)—the company put out a forest’s worth of original paperbacks that skipped their way into the welcoming thirteen-year-old mind. And in each book, even the historical *The Apache Indian Wars* (even in the novelization of the monster movie *Reptilicus*, f’Christ’s-sake!) there was always a surprise sex scene. You’d be sitting around, reading about the Apaches or the Marines or a primordial monster and suddenly there’d be a breathless unhooking of bras, there’d be nipples, panting and moaning and then the final ellipsis or white space. You stumbled upon these surprises in your reading when you least expected it although, after some experience, you knew it would be there like a gift in a Cracker Jacks box. Apropos of nothing. Just apropos of they knew their audience. Monarch Books was young adult reading at its best. We practically supported the company with purchases from the swiveling metal rack at Virginia Variety and from an occasional secretive mail order. And the only reason to go on about all this is . . . into this reading world we invited Norman Mailer.

Because, OK, *Mad* and comics and these books . . . they were all great and we knew a good piece of junk when we read it. But we were positive that there was something else out there, too, good and tasty and it wasn’t *To Kill A Mockingbird*. We’d read some John Steinbeck, Stephen Crane, Jack London. Mickey Spillane. I remember that we read Harold Robbins at one point, I think we were twelve. We’d gone through what we could find of Hammett and Chandler. Some Vonnegut. At least part of Heller’s *Catch 22*. But nobody could match Mailer for the real lowdown. Mailer was the real thing. In his exuberance alone, he was up there with the only great philosophers we ever quoted (incessantly)—Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner, of the album, *The 2,000 Year Old Man*. So, if we couldn’t be Mel Brooks when we grew up? Who did we want to be? Nah, too easy.

See, from Mailer, at thirteen, we got not only the rush of the comic book world writ grandly, we got something else that we couldn’t find so easily on

the shelves. We got an education. We learned things. Hang on, I don't mean academic things. Those ornate sentences sometimes had to be chopped through and at thirteen we didn't know that this was half the fun. No, we got real lessons from Mailer and not the self-help lessons demanded by teachers or the *New York Times* reviewers. What we learned, reading Mailer, too young, was of a more practical nature. Important things. Like how to say "go" and "wild" and "swing" and the other detailed lessons in how to be a hipster. How to walk loosely and not, as he told us, tight, from the shoulders like a white man. And we learned stuff like, to kill a Jap sentry, you should stab him down behind the collarbone, not up into the kidney. A piece of advice that could save your life. I mean, to get that kind of lesson you had to go to *Stag Magazine* and *Men's Bluebook* and half the time, no one would sell them to us.

This kind of special knowledge set off top-of-the-lungs debates over Mailer among the Junior High tuna sandwich-and-literary crowd. We broke down along two lines, both of a physical nature. The question? Who could Mailer take if it came down to a rough-and-tumble? The main contender, for some reason, seemed to be Jack London, who had mentioned some kind of Japanese death grip in his book *The Assassination Bureau Ltd.* Mailer was thought to be the victor in this contest because he knew how to stab Jap sentries and because he'd been trained in dirty fighting and hand-to-hand combat (as we'd read in *The Naked and the Dead*.) However, in the minus column, among the literary guys walking home from school or in the cafeteria, Mailer had endorsed, on the cover, a volume called *Jiu Jitsu Complete*, an early book on the Japanese combative art. This book detailed moves that we regarded as so unusable, you couldn't even get them to work on your little brother. And believe me, we tried.

Even so. We loved the guy.

He was of our father's generation (and experience) but Mailer on-the-page seemed more like some impossible, beloved older brother. He might smack us around a little but if anybody else got wise? Forget about it. He was a guy we envied but could trust to tell us the truth. He let us in on the secrets. He told us, "Don't listen to Dad, it's OK to swagger." He said, "Do like me, trust your own experience." And unlike almost any other writers we knew about, alive and hitting the typewriter keys, he got himself into trouble. Big trouble. More than us. But it went further than that. From Mailer, and probably unconsciously from our fathers, we absorbed the powerful

motor that, I'm convinced, was greatly behind the vast upheavals of the period between 1963 to 1973. This was the attitude—often unspoken—of The War's enlisted man: Don't trust them, they're lying to you, they'll get you killed, shoot first and ask questions later, everyday above ground is a good day, is this trip really necessary, everyone's scared, everyone dies, just keep moving forward and don't worry about a thing.

Study that attitude carefully, add *Mad Magazine*, Capt. American and the rest, mix it together with Mel Brooks and national travesty along with a pinch of the state of the world and I bet that you'll find a pretty direct route to long hair, fringed jackets and everything else that was counter to culture.

But even better—we could double back on that attitude and throw Mailer against our fathers, knock the old man off the Oedipal perch. The War, as we called it, hung over everything back then. In the neighborhood, everybody's father had been in The War, uncles thrilled us with the bullet wounds they'd caught at Pearl Harbor, the father of the kid around the corner downed beer after beer watching *Guadalcanal Diary* on Saturday afternoon TV and slurred to us how he'd killed Japs, too, just like that, just like in the movies. The guy next door showed us a dented Nazi helmet in his basement, the blood still caked and visible inside. The War was almost a form of cosmic, religious authority. To have been in The War was to “know,” although to “know” *what* exactly nobody could quite say. It took some thought and some years in the land of the living to learn that this guy you met, say, who'd gone in on the first wave at Iwo Jima? Well, he turned out to be fat, stupid, afraid of his boss, more terrified of his wife and if you were foolish enough to ask him, he'd give you the dumbest advice possible. He knew nothing. It could happen. And to absorb that shock there was little else besides *The Naked and the Dead*. Because Mailer, by putting The War out there as a detailed, finite human action, had almost pulled The War down off its celestial perch. You couldn't imagine your father walking through The War, say, as in *Battle Cry*, but the old man's failures, foibles and shortcomings were apparent in Mailer's characters. Through our eyes, trained by comics, Mailer did just fine. We got the feeling from *The Naked and the Dead* that regular guys fought The War and came out of it regular guys, most of them deeply fugged up, but still regular. To qualify as one of Mailer's existential heroes, though, you had to do a lot more than that.

And another thing about Mailer. He was a cocky, stay-the-hell-away-from-synagogue Jew. Sure, I know all about the God business—but nobody

at our lunch table really believed that part of his outlook and I have to admit that when Mailer's "On God" came out, I still suffered a slight rumbling that he actually took this stuff seriously. To us, see, at thirteen, this was a two-fisted, blooded GI veteran Jew who wrote incredible stuff and cowboy'd around like a champ. There wasn't a one of us, not that I knew, who hadn't quit Hebrew School the New-York-minute after saying some prayers and getting some pens. I'd even go as far as to say that the Hebrew Schools of that era turned out as many non-believers (proportionally) as the World War Two infantry turned out pacifists. And Mailer fit right in there, he'd faced and overcome the murderous demand to be "nice" especially in America and especially in our neighborhood where many of the fathers were not only Depression kids and veterans of The War, but also soon to be indicted on various counts of fraud, embezzlement, money laundering, ponzi schemes, you name it. Mailer knew our hearts and he'd be there alongside us when we needed him. I mean, hey. We'd read *The Sun Also Rises*, we knew what the literary lion of masculinity thought of Robert Cohn. And here was Mailer (in *Advertisements For Myself*) writing that Hemingway had the "shrewd mind of a small-town boy" because Mailer came across to us, even as boys, as shrewd, sure, but every inch the urban Jew—exactly the guy we needed. Harvard or not, like it or not.

So that was Mailer to the thirteen-year-old mind of 1964, the year that (as Andy Warhol said in *Popism*) "everything went young" (and at thirteen we didn't have a choice.)

But there was something that we didn't get out of Mailer at that age, something that I now see as central to his writing and to his outlook—the overbearing presence of the threat of personal failure. The demand that one turn up the heat and try not to fail oneself. That seems to power the drive towards Ego and the thoughts always of "the big novel" and all those other adventures. At thirteen, the consciousness of personal failure may be intense in the adolescent hormones but the spread is pretty thin. At thirteen, a person will secretly fear and struggle with himself and pick up unconsciously on the mood of the elders of the house, failures not articulated that make their way in through the pores. Still, in the understanding, there's only the dimmest whiff of how deeply one can fail personally. And I don't think we picked up on, for example, what happened to Croft when he failed to climb Mt. Anaka and the platoon is chased downhill by bees. We didn't fathom

what Croft had failed when he looked back at the mountain as he and the others left the island.

I only met Mailer once, about fifteen years later. I was overseas, living in London at the time, working on a book and making a living working for the one commercial talk radio station in town, LBC. This was at the end of the 1970s, early 1980s, and Mailer came over to do some PR for *Ancient Evenings*. It had just been published in paperback. He was interviewed on the air, and then afterwards, as he was rushed out of the studio and escorted to the exit through the newsroom and production area, our crowd of young men timidly, cautiously gathered around him. One by one we approached him—reporters, writers, announcers, producers—and he slowed down and he began to talk. We were all in our late twenties up through about thirty-five, I think, and we started to cluster around Mailer and shyly ask him questions, ask to shake his hand, we traded nice-to-meet ya's and wound up talking to him about everything. And damned if he wasn't vastly enjoying himself. Mailer couldn't have been more generous with his time or attention. I remember thinking even when it was happening, that ol' Norman was being surrounded by "his boys" the guys who'd grown up with him in the old neighborhood, the neighborhood of his books. And when we'd finished talking about those books, we talked about London, good pubs, beer and then we ended up talking about boxing and Mailer demonstrated a couple of combinations for us, throwing a left and right hook, an uppercut, gracefully moving with the blows. I remember him as somehow both completely relaxed and intensely in-the-moment (as actors tell it) having a hell of a good time and seeming to be genuinely interested in what any of us guys had to say. He was there a long time. And he didn't leave until the PR woman came over, told him he was late, told him he had to go, and pulled him away from us.