

1959: ONE OF MAILER'S YEARS

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1959: The Year that Changed Everything

By Fred Kaplan

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Fred Kaplan's social history of the end of the nineteen fifties is far more interesting than his somewhat hyperbolic subtitle and thesis that 1959 was the "year that everything changed." But publishers—or their publicity departments—demand gimmicks and what's a writer to do? He begins the book with a "Timeline," that is, a list of important events of the year and gives the whole game away. One only has to look at the two or three examples he gives for the most burning social issue of the time—racial integration—to see how weak his thesis can be. The Timeline's entry for January 9, 1959, reads, "Federal judge orders Atlanta to integrate its buses and trolleys." And on January 19, "Federal Judge orders Virginia to desegregate its schools." Neither of these decisions was unexpected or destined to be memorable. Both were predictable and both—notice that neither came from the Supreme Court—were capable of being litigated for several more years, if the losing side so chose. Between *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the 1964 Civil Rights Act, these decisions are at best important footnotes. Kaplan does not argue otherwise in his text—clearly he had trouble making the year produce significant civil rights "dates" for his timeline.

But, of course, all was not quiet on the racial front, so Kaplan has no problem producing an interesting chapter on racial unrest and agitation in the late fifties and early sixties, with a cast of characters including George Wallace, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and the Black college students participating in the first sit-ins, who, ungraciously, waited until the first months of 1960 to begin their attempt to change everything.

So the truth is that 1959 was a year pretty much like all others, encompassing events that mostly had their origins in previous years and consequences that spilled into future years. And Kaplan is very impressive at exploring this wider dimension. Occasionally, he strikes out, however. In the arts, for example, he can deal with the revolutions in Jazz that Ornette Coleman was bringing in, and in the visual arts he can deal with the emergence of pop art. But in literature, he is reduced (in his "Timeline") to noting the "return" of Allen Ginsburg to Columbia University, his alma mater, for a reading, suggesting he somehow had received approval from the academy. But the chapter on Ginsburg tells another story. It was the students who invited him and the students whose "packed" attendance indicated their approval. Faculty stayed away and for the most part did not warm to the Ginsburg or any other member of the Beat generation. Kaplan takes the disjunction to be indicative of a "generation split" which will appear in the next decade. But it didn't take an appearance at Columbia University to foresee that. Only in recent times have we forgotten that universities are supposed to be conservators of traditional values, not proponents of the avant-garde. And, in any case, the larger public had already spoken by 1959. By then the Beats were all over the Sunday tabloids, and any self-respecting city was hurrying to open a "coffee house" where Beat-inspired poetry could be read. Too much approval from the "Establishment" as it was soon to be called would have been an embarrassment.

Two other literary happenings of note were the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* case which gave Grove Press the right to publish an unexpurgated version of Lawrence's novel for the first time in America and the publication date of Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus*. The Lady Chatterley case is undoubtedly important, but that it was decided in a Federal district court and the government decided not to appeal tells you that by 1959 it was a decision whose time had come. As for the publication of *Goodbye, Columbus*, what it meant to most people was that the already recognized and sizeable cadre of Jewish American writers had a new member—one with a style almost as sweet as F. Scott Fitzgerald's. Kaplan's justification for the novella's inclusion on his list is based on the objection of certain self-conscious Jewish groups that Roth's satiric portrayal of prosperous middle-class Jews was in fact anti-Semitic. But since those objecting were hardly tastemakers and Roth got to defend himself (and obtain additional attention to his talents) in Jewish publications that were tastemakers, such as *Commentary*, this hardly seems like a publication event that "changed everything."

And then there is the publication of Norman Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself*. Of all the literary events, the publication of this seemingly somewhat bizarre anthology was probably the most "era-changing" event of the year. (Kaplan's chapter is called "The Philosopher of Hip.") The Beats would go on being "beat;" Philip Roth would go on to write other satires of Jewish life; and the emancipation of literature from the clutches of the bluenose censors would continue, but Mailer would take himself and in reality the whole conception of the literary work and the literary life in a new direction.

Advertisements for Myself started taking shape as a collection of Mailer's essays, short stories, and selections from his longer works. The publisher did not expect it to do well—it was simply expected to be the kind of mildly successful book that a best-selling novelist could get accepted on the basis of his fame and the assumed loyalty of at least a small percentage of the readers of his novels. Mailer, not surprisingly, was bored by, and dissatisfied with, the boilerplate introductions to the various pieces that he tried to write. Eventually, as Kaplan relates, he took his cue from Jack Kerouac, to whom Allan Ginsberg had introduced him: he would "write about *living* the essays, to make the book *about* the merging of his life and his art, his life *as* art."

The notion of combining the teller and the tale is not as original as Kaplan seems to think, but it was something different for the nineteen fifties where serious novelists were supposed to have a Jamesean devotion to their impersonal "craft," which in effect required a purging of the self, an Eliotic extinction of the writer's personality. Mailer's personality refused to be extinguished: he wanted to produce a book, in Kaplan's words again, in which "he would not only celebrate society's transgressors [in the fictional entries and in the reprinted 'The White Negro' and in the various treatments of 'Hip'] but also join their ranks."

It was indeed the joining of their ranks that was the major literary transgression or, rather, the major transgression against the norms of writerly behavior of the days. But it was exactly what Mailer wanted. Kaplan relates that Diana Trilling, reviewing *Advertisements* claimed Mailer was "posturing," and suggested that he "return to the realism of *The Naked and the Dead*." Mailer wrote her a letter saying in effect that the author of "The White Negro" with its premise that the holocaust and the atom bomb had unmoored every personality, forced everyone no matter how rooted previously, into an existential awareness that life could end at any minute, that there were no societal refuges anymore—such an author could not simultaneously

valorize the existential rebel, the “hip” Black jazzman and re-assume the narrative voice of a pre-apocalyptic narrator.

There were other complaints and suggestions throughout the sixties that Mailer and writers who followed him in putting their own personae forward (if only by doing journalism) were violating some sacred precept of art. Mailer ignored Trilling’s advice and all the later laments about a good novelist “wasting his time” and became a household name in the sixties, one who could write an essay on Jackie Kennedy or the space program or an anti-war protest march and have it read for the experiences of its front-and-center, combative-and-transgressive narrator/reporter as much as for its factuality.

Finally, Kaplan says that when *Advertisements for Myself* was published, Mailer sold an excerpt not to *Dissent* or *Partisan Review*, the niche journals of his intellectual clique, but to *Esquire*, a literary but thoroughly commercial magazine, available at newsstands and supermarkets.” This transaction, says Kaplan, makes the work the “first serious postmodern book” a major whack at the distinction between “high culture” and “mass culture.” Here Kaplan misses the mark just about completely. *Esquire* was not an example of mass culture nor was anything Mailer ever wrote. It actually was a strange mixture of middlebrow and highbrow, and, at least in the arts, decidedly tilted towards the latter. It had published Mailer previously and it had a burning desire to be in the forefront of any literary “revolution.” (A few years later, it would be the publication in which Mailer tried to write *An American Dream* in monthly installments.) The point is that not only was *Esquire* not for the masses, but it had a long history of publishing important writers, including Fitzgerald and Hemingway. Its interest and promotion of Mailer showed that there was a literate audience out there waiting to follow him in his transgressive mode, tucked between the slick consumer ads and the even slicker men’s fashion spreads. In effect, *Esquire* canonized Mailer, validated his attempts to become a (somewhat) hip explorer of his own being and of the larger culture, and, in a more vulgar sense, it advertised him.

But if Kaplan is wrong about *Esquire*, he is certainly right in the larger sense: *Advertisements for Myself* announced a new Norman Mailer to the world, one who would occupy the next decades as a cultural force, a powerful and distinctive presence who inevitably defamiliarized everything he encountered. Kaplan was fortunate to find such a publication event in 1959, and we are fortunate to have him remind us of it.