PROVOCATEUR-IN-CHIEF

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Mind of an Outlaw: Selected Essays
Edited by Phillip Sipiora
Introduction by Jonathan Lethem
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MIND OF AN OUTLAW IS A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS BY NORMAN MAILER from 1948-2006, ending just before his death in the fall of 2007. The essay form gets us closest to Mailer's thought processes across six decades, closer even than his fiction or nonfiction books, his films, or his public performances. Editor Phillip Sipiora, who is also the founding editor of *The Mailer Review*, ultimately decided against a thematic or topical organization in favor of a chronological. That was an auspicious editorial decision because the book's publication date will roughly coincide with the publication of J. Michael Lennon's big, authorized biography of Mailer, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life*. Sipiora's chronological structure, clearly divided into decades, especially makes his book an illuminating companion volume to Lennon's biography. Readers of the biography now have an opportunity in *Mind of an Outlaw* to look into Mailer's mind, into his developing thought processes, even as they trace Lennon's narrative of Mailer's long, unconventional life.

In the essays collected here the subject is, of course, at times Mailer himself, but more often the true subject is Mailer's reaction to the American scene from the Cold War through the "War on Terror." And what an unusual, original reaction Mailer's so often is. Yes, he could at times be our public (or holy) fool; yes, he is eminently capable of contradicting himself over a course of months or years; and yes, as he himself admits, he has been

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wrong about one thing or another. But we see also that Mailer is often prescient; that he calls into question some of our most sacred cows, our contemporary prejudices and pieties; that he is capable of admitting his own folly; and that he probes events of political, social, economic, and popular culture with a vision unlike any other.

A year ago in the pages of this *Review,* I said something that might begin to ring true to readers of these carefully selected essays. As a self-confessed "Left-Conservative," and like left-conservatives before him (think Thoreau, Ruskin, and Orwell—and even John Adams if you go back far enough—or a contemporary like Edward Abbey or Christopher Hitchens), Mailer offers insights on topics of the moment that seem often, if oddly, both timely and timeless. That is, they carry both popular and historical interest; they have the potential to stand the test of time that other more commonly acceptable insights expressed in our mass media by commentators inhaling heavily off the zeitgeist do not.

As left-conservative Mailer suggests in "Fighting the Mind That Is Inside the Brain": "[T]his variety of conservative—decent not bigoted, open to discussion rather than given over, body and soul, to talk radio—is also aghast at the uneasy but real possibility that George W. Bush might be the worst and most unqualified president America has ever had . . . . Yes, such conservatives . . . are in the same state of inanition and ideological impotence as all those Democrats who cannot believe where the country is going. Let us as Democrats consider the possibility that such conservatives can also be part of a future in which Democrats draw their political sustenance from the best ideas of Left and Right" (p. 571).

Reading *Mind of an Outlaw*, I recalled reading aloud to my first fiction workshop at the Mailer Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, salient portions of Mailer's "By Heaven Inspired," collected here, about the 1992 Republican Convention in Houston, Texas. I introduced my reading as an amusing exercise in voice, but when I had finished the students seemed stunned. None of them had seen Mailer's essay before. It was not only the vigorous left-conservative voice that caught their attention; it was the cascade of percipient detail and surprising yet apt metaphor, the sheer, humorous energy of the piece. The astonished reaction of one bright young woman (who perhaps felt she had received little enough otherwise from the week-long workshop) was "Wow! Where did you say that was published?!" She seemed to be speaking for the group. It's a shame young people aren't exposed to

Mailer more often. *Mind of an Outlaw* has the potential to help close that yawning gap in their reading and knowledge of 20th-century American masters. It is a book that might even gather their attention enough to propel them on to Mailer's best novels and nonfiction books. After all, our literary outlaw Mailer sees the serious novel as "an attack on the nature of reality . . . . The honor and value of a serious novel rests on the assumption that the explanations our culture has given us on profound matters are not profound" (p. 587). Might not the young recover a healthy, rebellious energy in that attitude toward the inconvenient literary artifact?

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The great theme in much of Mailer's fiction and nonfiction is courage—the discovery and retention of one's courage (or the failure to do so). Reading this collection of essays one sees again that Mailer himself is a courageous writer; he says what he really thinks, he at times resorts to hyperbole, his essays are experiments in thinking-through, but he doesn't seem to give a damn what others smugly afloat on the ideological trade winds of the moment think of him. You might well disagree with him, but his challenge to you is thought provoking, certainly difficult to dismiss if you would lay claim to anything like a corresponding intellectual integrity or flexibility. I expect that one difficulty for readers will be the question of how for so long a man can love his country and yet be so critical of its shortcomings: of its failure to nurture its most fragile ideals, of the inability of its citizens to resist the blandishments of mad consumerism and fascism, of the accelerating corruptions of wealth and power, to name but a few. Editor Sipiora in his preface calls Mailer's critical, loving stance "a life of affirmative rebellion." The phrase seems just. "My hypothesis," Mailer writes in "Gaining an Empire, Losing a Democracy?", "is that President George W. Bush and many conservatives have come to the conclusion that the only way they can save America and get it off its present downslope is to become a regime with a greater military presence and drive toward empire. My fear is that Americans might lose their democracy in the process . . . . [D]emocracy, noble and delicate as it is, may give way. My long experience with human nature—I'm eighty years old now—suggests that it is possible that fascism, not democracy, is the natural state" (pp. 542–43).

In his introduction to this collection, Jonathan Lethem recognizes

Mailer's authorial courage, even if courage seemingly defeated, in Lethem's view, before it begins. No prophet in his own time, et cetera. Lethem's introduction is entertaining, clever, energetic, and often insightful, but to my mind evinces a commentator who still has before him the pleasures of learning something more about Mailer and his work. Lethem, a genre blending and bending writer worthy of his protean subject, seems to have struck the right chord, however, when he writes that Mailer "moves through American history as a kind of disastrous recording angel, a lightning rod for exemplary controversies."

Mailer also reveals himself to be an astute book reviewer in some of his review essays collected here. He might have been a formidable literary critic; he had the breadth of reading and the analytical and literary sensibility necessary to the task. And he is a hard task-master. His assessment of the pitfalls awaiting young writers is perspicacious. His readings of Mark Twain, of Hemingway and Henry Miller, of Kate Millett and D.H. Lawrence, of Bret Easton Ellis, of Jonathan Franzen, and even of his own work are among the best I've read. He realizes that his own *The Naked and the Dead* is the sum, the careful carpenter work, of all he'd learned to the age of twenty-five, but that his real life's work began thereafter.

To be sure, editor Sipiora has collected here also what Mailer readers and scholars will recognize as some old chestnuts—"The White Negro," "Quick Evaluations on the Talent in the Room," "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," "Some Children of the Goddess," among others. For readers new to (or slightly read in) Mailer, these will seem provocative or even outrageous. For those familiar with Mailer's essays, it might be the work collected at the end of the book from the 2000s that still stimulates and seems most in need of an airing for anyone (or any group—say, the Occupy Movement) who feels an urgent need to confront our fellow citizens and leaders with discomfiting questions and realities. Or at least I came to believe as I read the final section that America in the first decade of the new century had received Mailer's most trenchant examination and critique. It feels a little like the critique of a loving, exasperated father of his dysfunctional family near the end of his life. Nonetheless, in closing let us merrily savor a passage from "The Welfare of the Rich."

> Perhaps the time has come for Americans to stop worrying about the welfare of the rich. For the last two decades, the as-

> sumption has grown more powerful each year that unless the very well-to-do are encouraged to become wealthier, our economy will falter. Well, we have allowed them to get wealthier and then wealthier, and the economy is faltering. Apparently, the economic lust of the 1990s has unbalanced the springs. Might it not be unnatural, even a little peculiar, to concern ourselves so much about the needs of the rich? . . . . They know how to make money. They do not need incentives. Making money is not only their gift but their vital need. That is their vision of a spiritual reward. Not only is their measure of self attached directly to the volume of their gains, but the majority of them know how to stay rich. They are highly qualified to take care of themselves in any society, be it socialist, fascist, banana republic, or chaotic. Whether they live in a corporate economy relatively free of government or with a larger government presence, they will prosper. They can withstand an American safety net. And they may even sleep better. (pp. 556-57)

Phillip Sipiora has chosen wisely for us a gift of a book. My hope is that his—and Mailer's—readers, young and older, are ready to receive that gift and be fully engaged and goaded by it.