A ROSY FINGERED DAWN?

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Norman Mailer: Legacy and Literary Americana
By Donald L. Kaufmann
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WITH THIS BOOK, DONALD L. KAUFMANN STEPS UP in his late eighties to become the Grand Old Gentleman of Mailer studies. Not only did he write one of the very first critical studies of Mailer, *Norman Mailer: The Countdown: The First Twenty Years* (1969), but during the last forty-five years he has continued his study of and adventures with Mailer, most of which he recounts here, in the weighty (402 pp.) and incisively written *Norman Mailer: Legacy and Literary Americana.* The book would have a longer page count, but publishing exigencies apparently caused the printing job to be assigned to someone whose last gig was in the basement of a monastery, transcribing the Bible on the head of a pin. This does not detract in any way from the worth of the work or its pleasant accessibility and impressive sophistication.

Kaufmann bites off more than the average critic could chew, but manages to masticate and digest it: the naturalistic influences on Mailer's early work, the segue into existentialism, the effect of Derridean deconstruction, "mired in convoluted jargon," on American letters, the significance of such controversial and polarizing books as *An American Dream*: all of this and much more lies between these covers. Throughout, the author evinces both deep erudition and a leavening humor. In discussing Romanticism in Keats, he writes, "Instead, say hello to Mom Nature, the secular humanist's best pal." He refers to Capote's *In Cold Blood* in terms of its "oodles of literary acclaim."

The author's quest is to explore the probability (or lack thereof) of a towering and enduring legacy for Mailer in American letters for the centuries to

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come. Thus, in "A Short Prologue," Kaufmann refers to himself as "an octogenarian primal seeker" in search of a legacy for Mailer. Early in the book, he excitingly and disarmingly recounts his adventures with Mailer in Alaska, where Kaufmann served as his host and guide in such outings as a flight over the Brooks Range, which Kaufmann correctly credits with inspiring *Why Are We in Vietnam?*

Kaufmann does not just give us a taste of the influential literary movements of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries; he immerses himself and his reader in them. When he gets to Naturalism and Frank Norris for example, he does not reference only *McTeague*. He also gives us a detailed treatment of *Vandover and the Brute*, which he correctly refers to as "America's first lycanthropy novel." Even more impressive is his coverage of Dreiser's work, from *Sister Carrie* to *An American Tragedy.*

With incisive precision and disarming wit throughout, Kaufmann compares Mailer and Hemingway in not only fiction but lifestyle and poses, concluding that "All in all, there is little chance—so sayeth posterity—that Mailer will duplicate Hemingway's feat of making a mode of heroism and his name inseparable."

In keeping with his central theme of Mailer's literary legacy, Kaufmann makes his own list–we each have one—of Mailer's ten most significant books, echoing his first book on Mailer in its countdown format. It is one with which each of us would have a bone or two to pick and a good deal to agree with:

#10 *The Naked and the Dead* (1948)
#9 *Harlot's Ghost* (1991)
#8 *The Castle in the Forest* (2007)
#7 *Advertisements for Myself* (1959)
#6 *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967)
#5 *The Executioner's Song* (1979)
#4 *The Gospel According to the Son* (1997)
#3 *An American Dream* (1965)
#2 *Ancient Evenings* (1983)
#1 *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1971)

My biggest problem with this selection is the omission of *The Armies of the Night*, not simply because it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the

National Book Award, but because it announced a new style, a new point of view, in some ways a new, more modest, Mailer. Yet Kaufmann is eloquent and persuasive in his choice of *Of a Fire on the Moon* as first in the canon:

> But why rate the Moon book #1? It was nonfiction, but *Of a Fire on the Moon* surmounted traditional creativity by linking world-historical and literary history. Imagine, a global event being communicated by a seminal literary presence—Columbus with Cervantes on board, Jamestown bringing Shakespeare on shore, the Puritans landing near Provincetown, with Milton as witness—then why not Mailer lighting a "fire" on the moon?

Mailer once said in an interview, in fact, that he felt "nominated" to write *Fire.*

Later in the book, Kaufmann makes much of the serendipity of Thomas Paine, "a showy leftist activist [migrating] to the New World exactly at the right time," and goes on to elaborate: "Paine, like Mailer, was a born careerist with 'legacy-skills,' and a media genius. . . . He was a natural literary phenomenon with impeccable timing." It may be in this singular literary analogy that the heart of Kaufmann's championing of *Fire* comes most alive; yet why not extend the parallel to *Armies* as well?

Kaufmann goes on to deal in detail with Mailer's contemporaries among American novelists. Here, in rounding up the usual suspects, he casts a wide net: not merely Roth, Bellow, Miller and Malamud, but also Oates, Mary McCarthy, Updike, Morrison, Wright, Ellison, Baldwin. This analysis is characteristic of Donald Kaufmann's close, detailed presentation of Mailer's literary forbears and his contemporaries. He is not merely meticulous in detail but panoramic in scope. Kaufmann is very well read, particularly in American literature, even by academic standards. One reads in gathering respect as he refers in detail to virtually all books by his chosen major writers, and many relatively arcane ones, like Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep* or John Horne Burns' *The Gallery.*

My second and final disagreement with Kaufmann's assessments of Mailer's competitors is this: Whether from the puckish humor characteristic of his delivery or a minor error, he refers to "Kenny" Kesey, dismissing his "essentially drug-induced one book career." Further, he writes, "Mailer's heavyweight canon is based on Existentialism: Kesey's flyweight canon is

drug-based." The one book is, of course, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest,* the favorite chosen by everyone, scholar or layperson alike. To his credit, Kaufmann does mention the "well-received" second novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion* (which some Kesey scholars regard as his heavyweight masterpiece) as well as such lesser works as *Kesey's Garage Sale* and the "so-so" *Sailor Song.* But Kaufmann maintains that "after the 'cuckoo nest' [sic], Kesey's legacy aftermath was dismal."

Kaufmann's treatment of rival literary giants among Mailer's contemporaries is exhaustive and usually fair. He deals with Joyce Carol Oates' remarkably prolific and fine output, the comparison between Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* and *The Naked and the Dead,* and Philip Roth's excellent later works (for example, *The Counterlife*) with their consequent prestigious awards, perhaps upstaging the consistently productive Updike.

Preparing us for his verdict almost a hundred pages before he delivers it, Kaufmann, in presenting the role of the Norman Mailer Society, *The Mailer Review,* and the Norman Mailer Writer's Colony, states that "There is, one may hope, the real prospect of a renewed Mailer-Homeric 'rosy dawn.'" After still more gathering of logical evidence for his argument, after narrowing his gallery of novelistic rivals for posthumous recognition to four and then one (Philip Roth), Kaufmann concludes:

> Some might say, why single out Mailer—but not Bellow, Updike, or Roth? . . . But in sheer legacy terms, I have chosen Norman Mailer. Over six decades . . . he was the consummate American writer—a writer for his age but also for the ages. In 2007, as he lay dying in a New York hospital, I believe he was already looking up at Posterity's 'rosy colored dawn.' I like to think that Homer would approve.

Given the monumental Mailer canon coupled with Kaufmann's enthusiastic and persuasive treatment of it in the context of American letters, one would be pleased to agree.