

MR. MAILER TELLS A TALE OF LOVE, ART, CORRUPTION

REVIEWED BY
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THE DEER PARK
By Norman Mailer, 375 pp. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, \$4

A FAMOUS DIRECTOR, CHARLES FRANCIS EITEL (pronounced eye-TELL), finds himself blacklisted in Hollywood and retires to Desert d'Or, a resort town in the latitude of Palm Springs. His marriages have been a series of disasters, his latest pictures have been slickly false, and now he hopes to redeem himself in his own eyes by writing an honest script that will have to be produced in Europe. For the first time he meets a woman able to forget himself in love.

A handsome flyer named Sergius O'Shaughnessy comes back from Korea with a medical discharge and \$14,000 that he won in a poker game. He thinks seriously of writing novels, but meanwhile he rents a house in Desert d'Or and finds himself in bed with the most glamorous young actress in the movie colony. He also meets Charley Eitel and, being an orphan, comes to regard him as a spiritual father.

Two curves have intersected. Loving power more than integrity, Eitel follows a descending curve as an artist. He gives his script a false ending in order to have it accepted by his friend, the producer Collie Minshin; he gets off the blacklist by giving a long list of names—including those of innocent persons—to the Committee on Un-American Activities; and he leaves the woman who loves him when he resumes his now meaningless career in Hol-

lywood. Sergius is exposed to the same sort of temptations but resists them—incidentally, with the aid of Eitel. We are left with the feeling that he will write his novels and that, whatever their faults, they will be completely honest.

That is the fable or simple heart of *The Deer Park*, although it isn't the same as the plot, which is much more elaborate. The plot involves a number of curious but persuasive characters; Sergius, who speaks for the author, is the only one whose reality we are tempted to question. It involves political intrigues over the loyalty program, struggles for power in the studios, gambling, prostitution and a diversified series of sexual episodes that are the duller portions of a generally absorbing narrative; sometimes Mailer writes about them as if he were describing the mating habits of the Japanese beetle. The plot also includes melodrama, poetry and two of the funniest scenes in recent fiction. But essentially *The Deer Park* is a serious and recklessly honest novel about art—art in itself and in its relations with love, integrity, corruption and the business of making movies.

In this book Mailer has made a real advance over *The Naked and the Dead*, which must have been a comparatively simple novel to write. Given its grandly simple theme—the war in miniature, or the conquest of a single island—and given the decision to include every element in the picture, from the commanding general down to the privates in a rifle squad, the rest depended chiefly on patience and understanding. In *The Deer Park* the characters are treated more in depth, the structure of the novel is more complicated, and the author had to make up his own rules as he went along. He has taken risks and made mistakes, but not cheap or shameful ones, and he has avoided artistic temptations, as Sergius O'Shaughnessy tried to do. The book leaves us with that feeling that Norman Mailer, though not a finished novelist, is one of the two or three most talented writers of his generation.

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