

THE DEER PARK

ROBERT LINDNER

*By Norman Mailer, Putnam, \$4.
The village VOICE, November 9, 1955*

WITH HIS NEW NOVEL, Norman Mailer has routed the Philistines. Their panic is evident from the reviews already published, reviews which betray an almost total lack of comprehension of the book and, further, the fear it has inspired among the timid of nerve. Characteristically, this fear is revealed by slips of print and errors of reportage in many of the appraisals I have seen. The number of these is too large for all of them to be attributed to accident; they must hence, have a significance beyond the slippery fingers of typesetters or the careless eyes of proofreaders.

But it is not surprising that *The Deer Park* has evoked such a response. Almost alone among recent novels, it probes the secret places of the modern soul, entering its recessed areas and exploring interior terrain ordinarily heavily guarded from public view. It takes a great deal of courage to follow the author where he so determinedly wishes to lead—more courage, I think, than most of us have.

Unconventional in design and of a unique literary architecture, *The Deer Park* is not so much a story as it is a delicate study of character and intra-human relationships projected against the stark landscape of basic instinct. With all the tender care of a master weaver, its author has fabricated a tapestry of personality wherein the texture of each human unit varies subtly—and by measured quantitative and qualitative degrees—from the others. When, at last, the final picture emerges, we find ourselves in possession of a veritable anatomy of the types Mailer has chosen to represent our mid-twentieth century society.

Like every valid work of art, *The Deer Park* can be read on more than one level. Unfortunately, many of the critics have evaluated the work on its most superficial, referring to it as a “Hollywood novel,” and placing it for comparison alongside volumes of that genre. This is a mistake that perverts the author’s intention and reduces the significance of the book; for that aspect of his book, except that it serves him as a whetstone for the sharpening of his perception, obviously interests Mailer least. For if the truth is to be told, this writer—like all good writers—is a teacher, devoted above everything to instructing his readers in the complex business of living with a heightened consciousness.

There are, of course, certain faults to be found with this novel. For example, the first-person technique creates problems Mailer has only been moderately successful in solving: Sergius, the narrator, tends to weave in and out of the action, and his outlines, consequently, become fuzzy at times. A few of the scenes, moreover, are gratuitous; passages like those dealing with the bull-fighting experiences of Sergius give the impression of being glued on to the work and have the air of after-thinking. Finally, there is a pretentiousness about much of the philosophizing Mailer permits himself from time to time. It is not, let me hasten to add, that the thoughts the author attempts to convey lack depth in these cases, but rather that they do not always warrant the dramatization of expression and the emphasis Mailer gives them. In some instances, one has to protest that while an idea may be new and startling to the writer, it is not necessarily so to his readers.

The Deer Park is certainly Norman Mailer’s best book. Assuredly, it takes a giant step forward from his previous novels. While *The Naked and the Dead* and *Barbary Shore* gave indication that the talent behind them was considerable, with *The Deer Park* what was promise approaches fulfillment. One cannot yet decide if Mailer is a “great” writer, but that is patently his destiny if he continues developing the insight and acquiring the maturity of which his latest book gives evidence.

Dr. Lindner, an eminent psychoanalyst, is the author of Rebel Without a Cause, The Fifty-Minute House, and other books.