

S U P E R M A N R E D U X

P H I L L I P S I P I O R A

Norman Mailer. JFK. Superman Comes to the Supermarket

Text by Norman Mailer

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Introduction by J. Michael Lennon

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IN THE FALL OF 1960, RIGHT BEFORE THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, Norman parachuted into the world of political journalism with his mesmerizing, detailed exploration of JFK (14,000 words) in the November issue of *Esquire*. Political journalism would not be the same and neither would Norman Mailer, who was thirty-three years old and leading a charge.

The Taschen rebirth of Mailer's stunning political journalism includes more than three hundred stunning photographs contextualizing the 1960 campaign in conjunction with Mailer's well-known essay, "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," published in *Esquire* directly on the eve of the election. Adding to the rich texture of the volume is a probing Introduction by Mailer's authorized biographer, J. Michael Lennon. The collection also includes details of the macro context of Kennedy's personal life, including his political career and the complex vagaries of the controversial presidential election. Weighing in at nine plus pounds, this book is pure heft on the scale of political commentary.

Mailer assigns a redoubtable task to himself: the demystification of the Democratic convention that took place a few months earlier: "Mysteries are irritated by facts, and the 1960 Democratic Convention began as one mystery and ended as another." Mailer proceeds to bring forth the procedural protocols of the summer convocation, dressing up his analysis with a "ribbon or two of metaphor." Indeed, Mailer flourishes as he unleashes his army of

well-trained tropes in attempting to capture, through resonance and resemblance, the surreal summer atmosphere of 1960: “Delegates are not the noblest sons and daughters of the Republic; a man of taste, arrived from Mars, would take one look at a convention floor and leave forever, convinced he had seen one of the drearier squats of Hell.” The subject of Mailer’s analysis requires uncommon diction as he struggles to make sense of the chaotic magic of the moment. Not many other writers would tie together depression, panic, and exhaustion in capturing the intensity of the event—yet these concepts are hardly adequate to provide the precision that Mailer (always) pursues.

Mailer finds the atmosphere to be distinctively (and exhaustively) carnivalesque: “If one still smells the faint living echo of carnival wine, the pepper of a bullfight, the rag, drag, and panoply of a jousting tourney, it is all swallowed and regurgitated by the senses into the fouler cud of a death gas one must rid oneself . . . a cigar-smoking, stale-aired, slack-jawed, butt-littered, foul, bleak, hard-working, bureaucratic death gas of language and faces.” The tenor and tone of the delegate gathering, according to Mailer, leads to an overriding sense of panic among the participants.

Mailer shrewdly calculates the tactical, mundane nature of a political convention and recognizes the cosmic banality and absurdity of the process:

A legitimate panic for a delegate. America is a nation of experts without roots; we are always creating tacticians who are blind to strategy and strategists who cannot take a step, and when the culture has finished its work the institutions handcuff the infirmity. A delegate is a man who picks a candidate for the largest office in the land, a President who must live with problems whose borders are in ethics, metaphysics, and now ontology; the delegate is prepared for this office of selection by emptying wastebaskets, toting garbage, and saying yes at the right time for twenty years in the small political machine of some small or large town; his reward, one of them anyway, is that he arrives at an invitation to the convention.

The presumptive heir to a convention crowning is, mysteriously, an enigma: “[T]he emotional fact is that Kennedy is not in focus, not in the old political focus, he is not comfortable.” Yet Kennedy is mysterious not because of the political process, but to those who control some—but not all—

levers of power: “[I]t is a mystery to the boss how Kennedy got to where he is, not a mystery in its structures; Kennedy is rolling in money, Kennedy got the votes in primaries, and, most of all, Kennedy has a jewel of a political machine.” The presumptive nominee is fresh-faced and not part of the warp and woof of an institutionalized mindset, characterized by Mailer as “the boss.”

The invisible boss is clearly in distress as he observes a coronation that he neither grasps nor is truly part of: “So the boss is depressed, profoundly depressed. He comes to this convention resigned to nominating a man he does not understand, or let us say that, so far as he understands the candidate who is to be nominated, he is not happy about the secrets of his appeal, not so far as he divines these secrets; they seem to have too little to do with politics and all too much to do with the private madnnesses of the nation.” Mailer’s use of “madness” as a descriptive tool brings to mind Plato’s notions of healthy, insightful madness in addition to one of “sickness.”

If the institutionalized rhythms of the convention have been destabilized, it is fitting that they take place in a cauldron of post-Truman cultural wreckage (infused with Mailerian irony):

The Biltmore is one of the ugliest hotels in the world. Patterned after the flat roofs of an Italian Renaissance palace, it is eighty-eight times as large, and one-millionth as valuable to the continuation of man, and it would be intolerable if it were not for the presence of Pershing Square, that square block of park with cactus and palm trees, the three-hundred-and-sixty-five-day-a-year convention of every junkie, pot-head, pusher, queen (but you have read that good writing already). For years Pershing Square has been one of the three or four places in America famous to homosexuals, famous not for its posh, the chic is round-heeled here, but because it is one of the avatars of good old masturbatory sex, dirty with the crusted sugars of smut, dirty rooming houses around the corner where the score is made, dirty book and photograph stores down the street, old-fashioned out-of-the-Thirties burlesque houses, cruising bars, jukeboxes, movie houses; Pershing Square is the town plaza for all those lonely, respectable, small-town homosexuals who lead a family life.

The delegates are also part and parcel of Mailer's satiric arrows: "[T]he delegates wandered and gawked and paraded and set for a spell, there in the Gallery of the Biltmore, that huge depressing alley with its inimitable hotel color, that faded depth of chiaroscuro which unhappily has no depth." Yet the dancing, analytical descriptions of the settings and the participants serve as a prelude to the entrance of the young prince, soon to be king as "he saluted Pershing Square, and Pershing Square saluted him back, the prince and the beggars of glamour staring at one another across a city street, one of those very special moments in the underground history of the world." The moment was momentous, straight out a medieval romance made modern: "[I]t was the scene where the hero, the matinee idol, the movie star comes to the palace to claim the princess, or what is the same, and more to our soil, the football hero, the campus king, arrives at the dean's home surrounded by a court of open-singing students to plead with the dean for his daughter's kiss."

The political gathering is situated within a special American sensibility—a grand metaphor for a grandiose metaphor. For Mailer, figures of speech refer to much more than historical "reality." They are always and already a nod to yet other recursive tropes, which lead to an epistemological moment for writer and reader: "Since the First World War Americans have been leading a double life, and our history has moved on two rivers, one visible, the other underground; there has been the history of politics which is concrete, factual, practical and unbelievably dull if not for the consequences of the actions of some of these men; and there is a subterranean river of untapped, ferocious, lonely and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream life of the nation." Mailer notes the (much needed) heroic potential of the convention: "Yet America was also the country in which the dynamic myth of the Renaissance—that every man was potentially extraordinary—knew its most passionate persistence." JFK was Renaissance Man, reborn once again. Perhaps Mailer's most powerful and reverberating metaphor for JFK is heroism and special (inevitable) time, all coming together in 1960. This essay is a massive tome and Mailer's prose dances as he recoronates JFK. Mailer cuts through his dense subject matter like a master surgeon, wielding far more instruments far more deftly than one usually encounters in political commentary.

What makes this volume so special are the hundreds of photographs and J. Michael Lennon's superb Introduction. Most of the photographs are black

and white and they surely capture the sense and sensibility of a remarkable American man of destiny. Distinguished photographers include Cornell Capa, Henri Dauman, Jacques Lowe, Lawrence Schiller, Paul Schutzer, Stanley Tretick, Hank Walker and Garry Winogrand. Their work is oftentimes both ceremonial and personal, and they present a visual history of a politician who always seems to be potentially prime, forebodingly cut short of his heroic character and his grand fulfillment.

J. Michael Lennon's Introduction is crisp, clear, and impressively evocative. It begins by recounting Mailer's letter to Jacqueline Kennedy, thanking her for thanking him for his *Esquire* essay, in which she remarked that she "had never dreamed that American politics could be written about that way." Lennon notes that Mailer's 1960 vote for Kennedy was the first time that he voted prior to voting for Henry Wallace in 1948. Lennon recounts how Kennedy made politics exciting again and Mailer was fascinated by the thick aura of the man. The mixture of Kennedy, Mailer, and the emergence of New Journalism were an explosive, catalytic combination for the new era. The deep and wide response to Mailer's essay motivated him to run for mayor of New York City. Lennon deftly recounts Mailer's first meeting with Kennedy at Hyannis Port and notes that this meeting was the beginning of Mailer's attraction to Kennedy—and it never really ended.

The Kennedy and Mailer legends intertwine in this Taschen production and JFK and NM continue to soar before our eyes—and, let there be no doubt, this carefully assembled volume plays a strategic role in that flight.