

KAUFMANN IN ORBIT

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Bramble, Infant Martian

By Donald L. Kaufmann

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*It is with great sadness that we note the passing of Professor
Donald L. Kaufmann on October 13, 2015.*

—Phillip Sipiora

THIS NOVEL IS THE STORY OF EVOLUTION (personal and collective), sex, literature, sex, movies, sex, physics, society, sex, business, sex, organized crime, sex, the end of the universe and a bunch of other themes, all jumbled together in the picaresque personal history of one Bramble, child of Pittsburgh, who works in a brewery there for a time as a young man, as he wends his improbable way, from 1944 to 1969, through a series of encounters ranging from Iowa City (read Sodom and Gomorrah), to the wilds of Alaska, moist (in more ways than one) and decadent Florida, even more decadent Las Vegas, and on to the surface of Mars, with many diversions along the way to wax poetic upon, as well as demonstrate, many of the foibles of the human condition. Oh, and did I mention sex? Penises have their own form of yoga in *Bramble*.

If the preceding paragraph seems a bit run-on and overstuffed and, frankly, more than a bit confused, I trust it gives at least a mild suggestion of this fascinating and vexing brick of a novel, written by Donald L. Kauf-

mann, Emeritus Professor of English at the University of South Florida and a living legend in Mailer Studies. Professor Kaufmann's literary criticism is broad, deep and insightful, and much of it has been collected in his scintillating and original 2014 book, *Norman Mailer: Legacy and Literary Americana*. In truth, the influences of his close and longtime friend Norman are palpable throughout the current opus (or doorstep, some might prefer), particularly the circular narrative of *Ancient Evenings*, which Kaufmann once told me was his favorite Mailer novel. Yeah, a lot of readers couldn't make heads or tails out of that one, either.

I also noted influences from such a diverse group as (including but not limited to) Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon, Antoine de Saint-Exupery, Jean Genet, William Burroughs, J.P. Donleavy and Samuel Butler, from whom Kaufmann borrows the not-unpopular idea that machines could soon replace humans in the scheme of things.

If you want to know about plot, don't ask me; I only read the thing. Yet the line-by-line writing is so inventive and vital that I found myself deeply enmeshed in each individual sequence and delighting in its attendant philosophies without much consideration of how it fit into the whole. What I was left with, then, was the story of one maddeningly wanton wastrel who serves as both everyman and commentator on modern life, or "doctor of American Culture," as he put it.

While I know I am speaking in overview here, what is fascinating in this nearly indescribable book is that each individual scene, however bizarre, is fully grounded in its own here and now. By that I mean that the reader can fully imagine each action and interaction as it is taking place, even though the whole thing adds up to a multifocal Hieronymus Bosch-like vision of civilization.

Much of the writing is just plain imaginative and therefore a delight to read. I could pick out any number of sentences that glimmer with their own inventiveness. Witness: "With Shelley at his side, Bramble stood off on a drawbridge of his own making," or "Bramble had to open his eyes or else his imagination, tied to a spirochete riding a sperm tail, might lock him into terminal blindness." The novel is full of those sentences.

And as I hung with Bramble throughout this bizarre and imaginative *bildungsroman*, I had the sensation that this material *had to come from somewhere!* Having gotten to know Don Kaufmann only in his later years, I kept thinking as I read, *Man, this guy must have had one amazing life!* Not only

that, but it is as if he has taken in the near totality of the American experience and swallowed it whole. (Swallowing is another recurrent metaphor throughout the novel.)

Few institutions are spared in this surrealist saga, and Kaufmann is not above biting the hand that has fed him all these years: the academic establishment, in the form of Skyscraper University, a chillingly accurate parody that should make any thinking person at least question the commitment of time and treasure to institutions of higher learning. Even Bramble wonders whether his academic identity is as authentic as his previous brewery identity.

Come to think of it, there are few aspects of modern society that do not make an appearance in *Bramble*. Interestingly, the novel is bookended by two of the most prominent Mailerian motifs. The first is hipsterism, as defined by his celebrated 1957 essay for *Dissent*, “The White Negro,” and represented here by such characters as Alfred Cats Dean, master of “jungle telepathy,” who knows what white folks don’t. The second is space exploration, as examined in his 1969 book, *Of A Fire on the Moon*. Like Mailer, Kaufmann suggests that the space adventure emphasized all the wrong things, such as engineering over cosmic humanism. Kaufmann remedies this with a completely otherworldly take on otherworldly travel and a character billed as “America’s foremost space poet.”

He also likes dentists, and while all the other kids are playing Doctor, Bramble plays Dentist with the little girls and makes teeth and teething an ongoing metaphor. Of course, there are a number of psychiatrists among the nearly limitless cast of characters, together with appearances by Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein and Lucky Luciano. After a while, I felt as if I was encountering the narrative equivalent of gargoyles on a high Gothic cathedral.

Along the way, Bramble encounters the rise of feminism, though that movement doesn’t seem to contribute any more to the salvation of the species than any of the story’s other isms. And as far as the sex, whatever it is that arouses or repulses you is to be found within these pages. I suppose it is meant to be a manifestation of the primal urge—the life force, as Shaw called it—the only way to preserve and sustain the endangered species of mankind. But perhaps—and I hedge just about every statement of understanding or interpretation with regard to this elusive novel—the modern age of anxiety does not allow for triumph, even of the sexual kind, no mat-

ter how hard (see, these things keep coming up!) Kaufmann's or Mailer's characters try.

And yet, if I've interpreted it correctly, the story ends on a strangely positive note; an embarkation on the next phase of existence, if you will, a la Arthur C. Clark and Stanley Kubrick's 2001: *A Space Odyssey*.

Like that masterwork, *Bramble* does not lend itself to traditional literary criticism or one-for-one interpretation, so freewheeling and over the top as it is. Though for those with a literary bent, the scholarly references and antecedents planted throughout the text provide a rich harvest. You pretty much just have to plunge in. But despite the honest confusion I have expressed over *Bramble*, despite the arcane humor, the goofiness, the layers of polymorphous perversity, this is a serious work of literature. And without much fear of contradiction—in fact, I sort of dare you to try—I will state that Don Kaufmann presents a wholly original and engaging journey of the mind and body through the trials and tribulations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that the committed reader will not soon forget.