

MAILER EXPUNGED;
MAILER RESTORED

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Understanding Norman Mailer

By Maggie McKinley

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THE MOST REMARKABLE THING TO ME about Maggie McKinley's *Understanding Norman Mailer* is that in less than 120 pages of text, Professor McKinley is able to assess with real insight the sixty-year, forty-book, four-film, public intellectual career of Norman Mailer, a man of distinguished literary accomplishment and notorious reputation. I haven't been able to figure out quite how she managed to do it—there is art and mystery to it—but I admire and welcome her accomplishment.

McKinley's book (with ample notes, bibliography, and index) is part of an extensive series, "Understanding Contemporary American Literature," founded by Matthew Bruccoli and now edited by Linda Wagner-Martin, from the University of South Carolina Press. Bruccoli envisioned the series as "guides or companions for students as well as good nonacademic readers;" the criticism and analysis of the series is intended "to provide instruction in how to read certain contemporary writers . . . to facilitate a more profitable experience of the works under discussion."

Given the purpose of the book, I began to imagine those readers who might benefit from this volume. Certainly students working on a paper about Mailer, or graduate students embarking on a thesis and needing a good introduction to the oeuvre. But also instructors who are thinking about

including Mailer in a course, and though they may have some familiarity with Mailer are not yet conversant with the larger body of work. Also common readers who for any reason have decided to begin their approach to Mailer. But I would also add readers, and particularly academics, who have not read Mailer's books but who have been assured by others (including those who have read little or nothing of Mailer either) that he may be ignored as irrelevant or incorrect—a benighted jackanapes unfit for the enlightened temperaments of right-thinking people everywhere. Mailer is, after all, the major 20th-century author commercial publishers and their academic editors (with the smug assurance of Ray Bradbury's Chief Fireman Captain Beatty) have expunged from anthologies of American literature in the educational marketplace. McKinley is not blind to Mailer's faults as he made his audacious, often experimental, journey as a writer and human being, but her slim book serves as a needed antidote to academic fashion and prejudice.

McKinley addresses such bias by opening her book with Andre Gide's remark (one of Mailer's favorites): "Do not understand me too quickly." She argues that Mailer—"one of the central literary and cultural figures of twentieth-century America," and "one of the most prolific"—also resists "any easy exegesis or conclusions." She then launches herself into a seven-chapter exegesis with concise elegance.

From the beginning McKinley covers a lot of ground efficiently. In the opening chapter we get some essential biographical information, a description of Mailer's influences and style, and a discussion of his basic themes: the problem of fascism and totalitarianism (including corporate totalitarianism), skepticism of technology, a peculiar brand of existentialism, the dualistic nature of inner and outer life, spirituality infused with Gnosticism and Judaism, and the moral center of a body of work that raises ethical questions in unorthodox ways. Reading McKinley's analysis of such themes in 2017 is an uncanny experience; Mailer's controversial ideas seem strikingly prescient. He just might be the kind of public intellectual America needs now more than ever. Just don't bet the farm on seeing one soon.

McKinley also makes clear something reviewers and critics often miss. Mailer's life and work was a vocation with a bold commitment to questioning, skepticism, and curiosity. He's a free-thinker, a sort of latter-day American Antinomian. He continually revises and reshapes his ideas, reinventing himself and his works. He is on a journey. Any work or public appearance is a stop along the way. Reviewers and critics too often seem to approach a

book as a concretized artifact, rather than part of an author's larger, evolving process. Any flaws (especially ideological) they detect condemn a particular work and author and ignore the quest, the untidy journey of a committed life. D.H. Lawrence, one of Mailer's heroes, suffered the same kind of misunderstanding of a real writer's onerous vocation. On this point of reading Mailer's books as part of a larger process, McKinley helps to reset the balance in how readers approach Mailer. To my mind that is one of the most valuable attributes of her book.

McKinley also sees that the collections of Mailer's essays and journalistic pieces in *Advertisements for Myself* and *Cannibals and Christians*, among others, are helpful to our understanding of Mailer's public persona and of his novels and such nonfiction books as *Armies of the Night*. When as a student myself I first encountered Mailer, it was the collected pieces (none more than *Cannibals*) that drew me into reading Mailer and trying to understand him. McKinley serves students and newcomers well by pointing them toward those collections.

Her fourth chapter on "War, Women, Politics, and Film" is sweeping, of course, but—dare I say it—fun. And it goes to the heart of so many matters that consumed Mailer that the chapter alone may well be worth the price of the book: Mailer's Thoreau-like night in jail protesting war, his public rants, his satirical turns (at his best and most Swiftian in *Why Are We in Vietnam?*), his commercially and critically failed films, his humor and outrageous behavior, his pungent, often hilarious, writing as he covers political conventions, and his confrontations with second-wave feminists. He is at times misguided, blustering, a public annoyance; he knew he could be his own worst enemy. But at other times he was right on the money. "Certainly any war was a bad war which required an inability to reason as the price of retaining one's patriotism; finally, any war which offered no prospect of improving itself as a war—so complex and compromised were its roots—was a bad war."

Understanding Norman Mailer is mostly and mercifully free, as it should be, of academic jargon. Still, echoes linger that made me think we academics might do well to challenge ourselves by declaring a moratorium on such words as non-normative, gendered, interrogate, heteronormative, performative, and inflected—just to put ourselves to the test as writers. I decided to expunge, Beatty-like, from my own prose for a time the word "fraught,"

a perfectly useful word that not only others but I too have been overusing and thereby enervating.

But a few slips into group-talk do not weaken the usefulness of this book. The most thorough and fruitful book discussions are of *The Naked and the Dead*, *An American Dream*, *The Executioner's Song*, *Oswald's Tale*, *Harlot's Ghost*, and *The Castle in the Forest*, but many other of Mailer's works are addressed more briefly, giving the reader a sense of synthesis and, as the book's title suggests, understanding.

One of the difficulties with understanding Norman Mailer, and a central theme of McKinley's book, is that Mailer wrote to raise questions more than to suggest or supply answers. Much of his dissent lies in the questions he raises. The kind of intelligence Mailer said democracy requires is "the readiness to look into the face of difficult questions and not search for quick answers. You can measure real intelligence by that ability to live with a difficult question." His worries that America could be approaching a fascistic condition arose out of his sense that patriotism had been so "gobbled up, sentimentalized, and abased" that by now "it proliferates stupidity." Likewise, he argued, similar forces have reduced much of contemporary American literature, killing off "the profound novel" in favor of page-turners and profitable vogue. In *The Big Empty*, Mailer put it this way: "The serious novel is antithetic to corporate capitalism. The best seller is one of the props of corporate capitalism precisely because it's an entertainment. . . . Well, every time there's a page turner to read for too little, someone's mind gets dulled." In other words, censorship by hyper-commercialism in the *literary* marketplace is still censorship. If there is to be any hope of Mailer's restoration in the *educational* marketplace, books such as Maggie McKinley's *Understanding Norman Mailer* will do much to help overcome censorship, as well, by transitory academic prejudice.