

THE LOSER'S LOSER

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Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery by Norman Mailer

LEE HARVEY OSWALD WANTED HIS NAME TO GO DOWN IN HISTORY and he got his wish. Sometimes it seems that before all America knew those five nerdish syllables nothing could go wrong for us, while in the years since Thanksgiving time, 1963, nothing has gone quite right. This may be illusion conditioned by age, but surely there is something to it. Looking back, we seemed then to stand at noon. After the fall of John Kennedy in Dealey Plaza the shadows kept lengthening.

The man who killed Kennedy, apparently alone and unassisted by any conspiracy outside his own mad schemes, was an American type, already somewhat familiar by the early Sixties. In fact he was the mid-century extension of a certain specifically American condition.

It would not be true to say that there is a little Lee Harvey Oswald in all of us.

Americans have nothing in common with such a person. John and Jacqueline Kennedy might have come from a different planet than Oswald. But there is a little Lee Harvey Oswald in many of us.



Norman Mailer;
drawing by David Levine

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In German, there exists a set phrase for the United States: *das Land der unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten*; it was bandied about by German generals during the Second World War when the first overconfident, undertrained American troops arrived in North Africa. Translated it means “the land of endless possibility.” On a level beyond irony it is a very apt phrase for a certain aspect of American life. Possibility, if you like, is the subject of Edward Hopper’s paintings. It scents the wind that stirs the curtains in that city flat, lurks in the night outside the diner, is drawn in the drag on the cigarette smoked by the thin nude woman beside the window. Intoxicating, tantalizing, always potentially violent, this ineffable quality helps define us.

There are many rootless, open-ended lives in America and many children raised under the shelterless sky of possibility. Lee Harvey Oswald, the principal subject of Norman Mailer’s *Oswald’s Tale*, was one. Gary Gilmore, Jack Abbott, and Jack Kerouac’s old friend Neal Cassady were others. They are not all outlaws but there is an outlaw breed, consisting quite often of extremely intelligent and sensitive individuals. Everyone knows a few examples.

They used to abound in the military, to which many turned for order and three squares a day. Autodidacts, Nazis or fascists or Communists-manqués, wiseguys, they lived to shock everyone aboard ship or in barracks with their records of the Red Army chorus and German marches and their copies of *The Communist Manifesto* or *Mein Kampf*. They affected a cool fanaticism and a cosmopolitan sophistication, acquired at the town library and the corner Bijou. They tried to use words they’d only seen in print. When they got out they would start satanic motorcycle gangs or go to Paris to paint or become gigolos.

Or they might be revolutionaries who, upon separation, would be straight off to Russia for instructions. They were often men of indeterminate class or ethnicity. Often they seemed not truly of their native place or region. Hillbillies raised by barmaids in Staten Island. New York boys stranded in the Arizona desert or some level of Florida hell. Booming postwar Texas produced many. They were always angry. Think of the child, Lee Oswald, mocked in a New York public school for his outlandish accent, playing hooky at the Bronx Zoo, dodging the dutiful truant officers of those lost days, already a fantasizing loner.

It seems inevitable that Norman Mailer would do a book about Oswald and the Kennedy assassination. The combination of a violent soul lost in

the void of possibility and the assassination with its vast lore of conspiracy in a promiscuous mélange of high and low places is a natural subject for him. He has written and speculated on them before. And as Kerouac was drawn to the basically benign Neal Cassady, so has Mailer been drawn to other, darker, figures of a similar sort, like Gilmore, Abbott, and Oswald. *The Executioner's Song*, his 1979 book about Gilmore, the Utah multiple murderer, is an American classic. It is a book so beautiful and wise that its light somehow illuminates the rest of his work and legitimates his vision.

Mailer is fierce, courageous, and reckless and nearly everything he writes has sections of headlong brilliance, although the quality of his work has been uneven. Some of it has seemed paranoid or obsessive and obscure, partaking of a logic that was always writerly but simply did not play in daylight. Often it went over the top. But after *The Executioner's Song* it became impossible to deny his stature. In this book, he made all of us, regardless of class or origin, see tragedy in the life and death of a murderous jack-Mormon thug from the gulches of the West. In Gary Gilmore, another road child, a product of brutal possibility and an utterly superfluous man, Mailer led us to recognize a son and brother.

We ought not to fault *Oswald's Tale* for not being the second coming of *The Executioner's Song*. All writers are hostage to the expectations their best work creates. This book is far less ambitious and relies in far greater measure on verbatim interviews and matters of record. It also serves a lesser subject. Gary Gilmore did seem to burn with a terrible flame. There was an intelligence and dark excellence about the man that made him even more frightening while it lifted his condition to the level of tragedy. If anyone ever represented the thing itself, unaccommodated man gone wild and turned killer, it was Gilmore, which is what attracted Mailer in the first place, and inspired him. Lee Harvey Oswald was no Gary Gilmore. He lacked the majesty and the uncompromising malice. Above all he lacked the style. This is an unfair and amoral assessment of two murderers, but it's inescapably relevant when we consider a book. Intrigues and mysteries notwithstanding, Oswald was a lesser figure in dramatic terms.

Lee Harvey Oswald, as he appears in *Oswald's Tale*, was a loser's loser whose chance of fame would always be proportional to his willingness to self-destruct. He would never prove a lover or a hero; his options were only shades of villainy, something which he naturally failed to understand. In the Marine Corps, he was just another one of those mouthy sea lawyers full of

pseudo-intellectual yammer about their far-out politics, one of the revolutionaries who would go to Russia when they got out. The difference between Oswald and the rest was that he actually went. And then, instead of skulking home when his money ran out, he insisted on staying, even to the point of making a superficial suicidal gesture when he was asked to leave. He was determined to achieve the status of “defector.” This was a man whose only gift was the wit to compound his mistakes exponentially. A man to turn a personal fuck-up into a national disaster and make his problems everybody’s.

Oswald’s Tale often shows Mailer at his best, which means that reading it has many rewards. Mailer and his associate Larry Schiller were able to obtain a large amount of KGB material, including tapes from the bugged apartment in Minsk where Oswald lived and where he began his life with Marina. This was probably facilitated by the fact that Minsk, Oswald’s Soviet residence, fell to the independent state of Belarus after the breakup of the Soviet Union and the local authorities acquired the KGB’s records. Using them and interviews he recorded with various people who knew Oswald during his period in Moscow and Minsk, Mailer provides a vivid sense of life in the former Soviet Union circa 1960. If it was not nasty, brutish, and short, it was certainly cheerless and dull.

This narrative is about as sympathetic to Oswald as anything published. Marguerite Oswald, the neurotic, narcissistic woman who raised him in her image, makes several memorable appearances. Oswald’s dyslexia is discussed, and the degree to which that disorder can trap an intelligent person in the appearance of incoherency and deeply embitter him. Mailer throughout argues convincingly for Oswald’s intelligence, in spite of the man’s subliterate journals and correspondence.

The recorded accounts, balanced by the author’s novelistic style, make it impossible not to feel sorry for this very young man—barely twenty—with his spite and naiveté and childish pride, adrift in the utterly foreign, Orwellian landscape of post-Stalinist Russia. Even an intelligent paranoid like Oswald could scarcely have imagined the degree of official scrutiny to which he was subject during this period. Suspecting a CIA plant, the KGB followed him relentlessly, analyzed tapes of his recorded conversations, received regular reports from informers among his associates, and even drilled a peephole commanding a view of his apartment from an adjoining flat to

supplement the bug already installed. Eventually this gave them insight, not to say oversight, into the honeymoon period of Oswald's marriage.

Meanwhile, Oswald did his best to look at the bright side, kept up his journal, and took an assigned job at the Minsk radio factory, where his performance was lackadaisical enough to cause negative comment. A lonely, fatherless mama's boy, he searched for a nurturing woman and came up with Marina, who, according to interviews quoted by Mailer, may or may not have been a one-time Leningrad hooker but who was definitely a canny soul and tough cookie in search of security and respectability. For that, Lee was hardly her man, but her survival skills would be drawn upon severely. In being sympathetic to Lee, *Oswald's Tale* is also sympathetic to Marina and presents her side of the story. For Marina's version of events, Mailer uses interviews with Marina taped during the 1970s by Larry Schiller and also Priscilla McMillan's book *Marina and Lee*.

The ex-Soviet dimension provides almost all the new information in the book, giving us a sense of how young Oswald looked to Russians, official and unofficial. It's also the most entertaining. Mailer has found a way to make the dry bones of KGB tapes and his own interviews stand up and perform. His Englishing of the Russian originals is extremely lucid; the picture of Soviet life provided by the recorded material and his observations is particularly lively and convincing. Characters come across with extraordinary vividness and some are memorable.

The old Soviet Union was very much a land of euphemism, circumlocution, and terrified discretion, and in the wake of the assassination just about anyone who set eyes on Oswald was questioned. In the course of its own investigation, the KGB still had time to straighten out such hooliganism as incorrect reading habits on the part of Oswald's acquaintances when it came to their attention. One Golovachev, a fellow factory worker of Oswald's, apparently already in trouble over his friendly correspondence with Marina Oswald in Dallas, is discovered in passing to have read Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, then on the index of forbidden books. The KGB record of his interrogation states:

In answer to a question about how *Doctor Zhivago* had attracted his attention, GOLOVACHEV explained that he had wanted to familiarize himself with this book purely out of curiosity, in order to have some idea about that work. It was explained to

GOLOVACHEV that it was a conclusion of prominent Soviet literary critics, writers, and other persons who had familiarized themselves with Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* that it contained slanders of Soviet reality and was not of artistic value. Therefore, GOLOVACHEV's acquaintance with the book *Doctor Zhivago* would not enrich his knowledge but, to the contrary, would lead him to have false notions about particular issues.

Is there deliberate irony in such declarations? Probably not, except to the extent that all communication between the secret police and the Soviet citizenry was part of an ongoing ironic dialogue.

Fortunately, perhaps, for Golovachev, his mother was present with maternal strictures to appease "the Organs."

"MRS. GOLOVACHEV," the record goes on to state, "sharply criticized GOLOVACHEV's desire to read *Doctor Zhivago*, noting that no decent person would waste his time on such a book."

The same hapless Golovachev then has the disastrous notion of writing Marina a letter of condolence after the assassination and Oswald's own killing by Jack Ruby. His letter gets no further than the Minsk post office and it's no more Mister Nice Guy down at the KGB.

They let him sit in a chair. They were very polite; they didn't beat him. . . . He was sitting in a room with a big table, and there were a lot of officers and bodyguards around, maybe seven people.

They started by telling him: "In our country, only representatives of the people can send sympathies. You are not a representative of our people. You have no right to express sympathy. . . . If you don't want somebody to write the laws of our country on your back, if you want to see some sky again, then stop doing stupid things."

They inquire at length into Golovachev's relationship with Marina.

"Why did you write this kind of letter if you didn't sleep with her? Are you crazy?"

Has the KGB man quoted read Kafka? *The Penal Colony* perhaps, in which

malefactors have their transgressions engraved on their bodies? But Golovachev, as a character, is more Gogol than Kafka.

Describing a pseudonymous Minsk KGB official the author writes:

How Igor Ivanovich Guzman looked when young would be hard to decide in 1993, because his presence spoke of what he was now—a retired general from KGB Counterintelligence, a big man and old, with a red complexion and a large face that could have belonged to an Irish police chief in New York, impressive from his sharp nose up, with pale blue eyes ready to blaze with rectitude, but he looked corrupt from the mouth down—he kept a spare tire around his chin, a bloated police chief's neck.

That description is vintage Mailer, but it's not until the book shifts its focus to the Texas killing ground that *Oswald's Tale* becomes a work peculiar to Mailer's concerns. Mailer is one of the few ideologues left in American letters. The development of his ideological system seems very roughly to have progressed from a fairly conventional Marxism in the Forties through a variety of Trotskyism and then, via Wilhelm Reich, into a system that somehow transposed sexual energy into the traditional role of the laboring masses as an engine of liberation. Sex, rather than class, is key.

Not surprisingly, then, he searches like a haruspex through various sexual clues scattered in the available material. One such, a rather haunting one, turns up back in Minsk and has to do with Lee and Marina.

Neither Igor [the KGB man described above] nor Stepan [a second agent] would admit to more than some early concern about Lee and Marina. When that romance developed quickly into marriage, it could be said, Igor admitted, that they did lose some sleep, and felt somewhat at fault that no steps had been taken to keep this courtship of Oswald and Marina Prusakova from flourishing.

When asked what such steps might have entailed, Igor's response was deliberative, even delicate. There were girls, he suggested, some of them attractive certainly, certainly, who at one stage or another could be called upon by the Organs. Perhaps one of them might have diverted Oswald. They also could have

attracted Marina perhaps to some other person, some very attractive man qualified for such activity. They didn't do that, however.

Since the KGB men are nowhere represented as telling the whole truth, this discreet evocation of "the Organs'" powers of sexual manipulation is enough to give anyone pause, the more so because Marina herself, when we take account of her Leningrad experiences and background, sounds a bit like such an attractive person. Was she put somehow in Oswald's path? But Mailer does not suggest that, nor is there any evidence for it.

Tracing Oswald's short life, the book examines the possibility of his homosexuality, a factor that might, if present, explain some of his history and connections. As a teen-ager he was a member of a unit of the Civil Air Patrol, a vaguely paramilitary scout movement whose New Orleans chapter was supervised by one David Ferrie, a known seducer of young boys later dismissed by the CAP for that reason. Ferrie had connections to various figures in New Orleans lowlife and gumshoe circles, such as the Carlos Marcello Mafia outfit and the private eye Guy Banister, who loom large in assassination conspiracy theory. However, as Mailer says, there is no evidence of any sexual relations between Oswald and Ferrie during Oswald's adolescence and no evidence that they ever met in later life. Mailer also speculates on possible homosexual experiences Oswald may have had in the Marine Corps, even to the point of imagining Oswald's shooting a fellow Marine in the act of fellatio. This scenario suggests a strong, grim scene from an unwritten Mailer novel, but it's left undeveloped as fiction and not seriously proposed as fact.

Sometimes the sexual line of inquiry is baffling and touches the occult. At one point *Oswald's Tale* describes Marina "with her deep if unfocused intuitions about magical matters" living in Dallas squalor with a small baby, having had six teeth extracted and feeling guilty about the car accident in which a local Russian acquaintance was injured. She's sleeping late mornings, earning the disapproval of the Oswald's small, generally unsympathetic circle of Russian acquaintances, and Mailer imagines his way into her condition.

There was a series of obsessions to encounter each night, including the bottomless question—"What do I do next with my existence?"

Paradoxically, her sexual life may have been stimulated. Curses that prove successful open the gates to libido. (Otherwise there would be no warlocks.)

This mystical formulation is not elaborated upon at any point, and for a moment a reader may wonder whether he's reading about Lee and Marina or Parsifal and Kundry. However, Mailer is quite scrupulous in distinguishing between the sections in which he has allowed his novelist's speculation free rein and those in which he is examining the established evidence.

This scrupulousness holds throughout, and his weighing of the facts seems to lead Mailer to the conclusion, if I read correctly, that Oswald did indeed act alone in assassinating Kennedy. He also insists that the CIA contacted Oswald upon his return from Russia and considered using him somehow. The argument offered, turning on the existence of some unlikely friendships, is strong.

Oswald's curious relationship with the veteran intriguer George De Mohrenschildt will always fascinate conspiracy buffs. Did De Mohrenschildt really go to Yale with Rudy Vallee? Apparently. Is this relevant to the Kennedy assassination? God knows, because the career of De Mohrenschildt, an oil engineer and White Russian petty nobleman who befriended the Oswalds in Dallas, is replete with odd significances that vanish furiously in all directions. As a young man he had been acquainted with Jacqueline Bouvier. He was said to have been employed by the intelligence services of five countries, all of whom suspected him of double or triple dealing.

From one point of view, it makes no sense that he would befriend impoverished and undereducated losers like the Oswalds. From another, it seems logical that as a bored Russian adventurer stranded in Godforsaken Dallas, Texas, and the self-appointed leader of the minuscule Russian community there, De Mohrenschildt might be curious about them. He almost certainly had connections with the CIA, whatever these may have been. As a secret agent, his untrustworthiness and garrulousness were world-renowned. Years later he committed suicide during a period when he was being interviewed about the assassination. Unfortunately for history he was not only an ambiguous figure but often certifiably insane. (His antic presence is one of those which will make the buffs and bet-settlers who read *Oswald's Tale* weep tears of frustration over the book's lack of index.)

Each time Mailer extends the line of conspiracy, it's within the special sphere he has reserved for novelistic imagining. Again and again he spins out conspiracy scenarios which, like a good novelist, he makes psychologically convincing but which he presents without evidence or even much conviction. Rendering the factual record, almost in contrast, he seems to abandon the exotic possibilities with regret.

Searching for purpose in the life and death of Oswald early on in the book, Mailer writes:

It is virtually not assimilable to our reason that a small lonely man felled a giant in the midst of his limousines, his legions, his throng, and his security. If such a non-entity destroyed the leader of the most powerful nation on earth, then a world of disproportion engulfs us, and we live in a universe that is absurd. So the question reduces itself to some degree: If we should decide that Oswald killed Kennedy by himself, let us at least try to comprehend whether he was an assassin with a vision or a killer without one.

Many pages later, Mailer returns to the moral intention underlying his book and the motive behind his continual sifting of unproven and unprovable theories of conspiracy: "It is possible," he writes,

that the working hypothesis has become more important to the author than trying to discover the truth. For if Oswald remains intact as an important if dark protagonist, one has served a purpose: The burden of a prodigious American obsession has been lessened, and the air cleared of an historic scourge—absurdity. So long as Oswald is a petty figure, a lone twisted pathetic killer who happened to be in a position to kill a potentially great President, then, as has been argued earlier in this work, America is cursed with an absurdity. There was no logic to the event and no sense of balance in the universe. Historical absurdity (like the war in Vietnam) breeds social disease.

"Given the yeast-like propensities of conspiracy to expand and expand as one looks to buttress each explanation, it can hardly be difficult for the

reader to understand," Mailer continues, "why it is more agreeable to keep to one's developing concept of Oswald as a protagonist, a man to whom, grudgingly, we must give a bit of stature when we take into account the modesty of his origins. That, to repeat, can provide us with a sense of the tragic rather than of the absurd. If a figure as large as Kennedy is cheated abruptly of his life, we feel better, inexplicably better, if his killer is also not without size. Then, to some degree, we can also mourn the loss of possibility in the man who did the deed. Tragedy is vastly preferable to absurdity."

From the American master conjurer of dark and swirling purpose, this is a moving reflection. It is as though Mailer, a major celebrator of the heroic mode, the heir of Hemingway in life and art who added the mystique of sexuality to the older traditions of stoicism and courage, has found the world a lesser place than he had hoped. The slain Prince, the all-powerful Mafia, the ultra-diabolical CIA, the armed fanatic, all those figures whose shadows have informed our history and his work, seem suddenly reduced from the vast form they took in the vision he now reluctantly surrenders. It is as though American possibility has somehow failed him.

The fact is that, in the land of endless possibility, absurdity and common death gape far wider beneath us than high conspiracy, tragedy, or sacrifice.