



er . *The Spooky Art*. Random House, 2003.

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When a writer as renowned and contentious as Norman Mailer puts out a nonfiction book on his own trade, the endeavor naturally sparks at least some interest in the author's private life. *The Spooky Art*, Mailer's recent essay collection and thirty-second book, does make some gestures toward autobiography, although it is not a confessional memoir by today's standards. The author proves to be as cautious about his past as he is about the act of writing, a job that is ultimately far less glamorous than the book's title might suggest. What the work requires are long, unceremonious hours in the chair each day, submitting oneself to many pains for the achievement of few words. And yet as tedious as that sounds, Mailer does manage to elevate the process throughout the book, providing glimpses into the exotic temperament that drives the novelist. For example, in one instance he draws a powerful comparison to priests, saying: "Part of them wants to be good to others; the other self wants ... to have some acquaintance with power. Which is often hugely at odds with the first notion. Generosity vies with acquisition; compassion is besieged with greed." According to Mailer, a writer spends much of his life trying to work through these contradictions. Inevitably, a great many writers fall prey to them. For if the novelist is fueled, as Mailer puts it, by his "fear of living with an inner void," over time it will be that same "draining of ... unrest" that risks the most damage to his work.

For young novelists seeking insights into the process, Mailer's reflections will have definite appeal. Yet one should not expect a craft book in the style of John Gardner's *On Becoming a Novelist* or a careful study like E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*. Mailer's tidbits are eclectic and lack the controlled forward movement of argument. He splices together a series of short pieces, some previously published essays and interviews, plus his thoughts on a long list of fellow writers, assessing everything from style and plot choices to occupational hazards of success and

reviews. Within short chapters reside multiple section breaks and very often a string of solitary paragraphs, as if tempting the reader to turn randomly and glean information as he chooses. Nevertheless, if the chapters can be reshuffled, the wisdom itself has an undeniable precision, born of someone who has spent many years in the field. Mailer passes seamlessly between modes of conversation and intellection, and with charming candor he mocks his "swollen self-importance" as a young writer, a person he still champions for his "vigor" and willingness to take risks. Despite the early triumph of his novel *The Naked and the Dead*, he never presents his literary success as inevitable. Casting as far back as his experiences at Harvard, Mailer comes across as someone put through the wringer in his classes, starting at square one with composition and then later with his fiction workshop, where he suffered public embarrassment at the hands of the instructor.

Interestingly, as Mailer seeks to objectify the "discipline and dull punishment" of writing, the reader cannot help but notice the author's own nature coming through. Like it or not, the author's personality is indistinguishable from the writing process. Mailer himself seems to recognize this fact. As he looks through the long lens of his life's work, he discovers a remarkable thread to his younger self. He discloses that the "most terrible themes of my own life—the nearness of violence to creation, and the whiff of murder just beyond every embrace of love—are his themes also."

At times the book reads macho, in the style of Hemingway, making numerous comparisons to prize-fighting, calling life a "gladiators' arena," and referring to the novel as a "Great Bitch" whose power one tries to get out from under. (Some readers may recall Faulkner's comment about success being like a woman, best treated with "the back of your hand.") But the hard edge to Mailer's prose bears many layers of finesse, including a richness of analogy and continual jabs at the author himself. On managing his public image, for example, he compares himself to "the fool" in the tarot deck, and elsewhere he provides an amusing anecdote of the time he plopped down next to an unfriendly reviewer at a party, purposely intimidating him for thirty minutes by pressing his body against the other man's. In these and other instances Mailer's good humor prevails, even as he makes it clear that the writer's greatest occupational hazard is "a bad mood." He affirms that the only way to tread past these and other dangers is to tread right through them. The novelist goes to work each day, plain and simple. Therein lies his best chance to reach the unconscious, so often stingy and elusive, and which is at best an "arm's length" away. Only through regular attention does the writer participate in the "spooky art," that creeping exhilaration that the process sometimes affords us, interceding among hours of doubt and against "the blank page." Prophetically, if not in dire warning, Mailer tells us that "you never know where your words are coming from, those divine words."