



Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery

Norman Mailer

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In perhaps his most important literary feat, Norman Mailer fashions an unprecedented portrait of one of the great villains—and enigmas—in United States history. Here is Lee Harvey Oswald—his family background, troubled marriage, controversial journey to Russia, and return to an “America [waiting] for him like an angry relative whose eyes glare in the heat.” Based on KGB and FBI transcripts, government reports, letters and diaries, and Mailer’s own international research, this is an epic account of a man whose cunning, duplicity, and self-invention were both at home in and at odds with the country he forever altered.

Praise for *Oswald's Tale*

“America’s largest mystery has found its greatest interpreter.”—***The Washington Post Book World***

“Mailer is fierce, courageous, and reckless and nearly everything he writes has sections of headlong brilliance. . . . From the American master conjurer of dark and swirling purpose, a moving reflection.”—**Robert Stone, *The New York Review of Books***

“A narrative of tremendous energy and panache; the author at the top of his form.”—**Christopher Hitchens, *Financial Times***

“The performance of an author relishing the force and reach of his own acuity.”—**Martin Amis, *The Sunday Times (London)***

Praise for Norman Mailer

“[Norman Mailer] loomed over American letters longer and larger than any other writer of his generation.”—***The New York Times***

“A writer of the greatest and most reckless talent.”—***The New Yorker***

“Mailer is indispensable, an American treasure.”—***The Washington Post***

“A devastatingly alive and original creative mind.”—***Life***

“Mailer is fierce, courageous, and reckless and nearly everything he writes has sections of headlong brilliance.”—***The New York Review of Books***

“The largest mind and imagination [in modern] American literature . . . Unlike just about every American writer since Henry James, Mailer has managed to grow and become richer in wisdom with each new book.”—***Chicago Tribune***

“Mailer is a master of his craft. His language carries you through the story like a leaf on a stream.”—***The Cincinnati Post***

Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery Details

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Stephan says

Mailer's insights and description of life in the late 50's and early 60's Soviet Union was fascinating and his following Oswald's journey there was unembellished and intriguing because of that. For a man who went to the archives of the KGB leaning toward a conspiracy of some sort and be brave enough to come to a different conclusion when the facts led him to that, was very brave indeed. And Oswald's life here leading up to the assassination was at least as compelling. It all added up to the conclusion that Oswald was a loose cannon that no one wanted to deal with, neither Cuba, the Soviet Union or the U.S. I couldn't put this book down.

Erik Graff says

The Kennedy assassination was first rumored during afternoon recess from Lincoln Junior High School. It being Park Ridge, Illinois, a number of seventh graders took it as good news. No one doubted the rumor. I was asked by another kid who'd become president now and had to think for a moment before coming up with Lyndon B. Johnson.

After recess we were taken from class to the downstairs auditorium where we were addressed, solemnly, by Clifford Sweat, our principal. The teachers all appeared serious, very serious--probably worried about our sensitivities, about how this important news ought be conveyed to a bunch of thirteen and fourteen year olds. The snide remarks of the children of conservatives ceased. We were sent home.

The next several days my family, like many others, was glued to the television, hearing rumors coalesce into "facts"; watching Johnson sworn in on Airforce One with the bloodied widow beside him; seeing the putative assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, himself assassinated by a former Chicago hood, Jack Ruby, while in Dallas police custody; witnessing the world-historical funeral procession in Washington, the burial in Arlington. The weeks that followed saw the print media cover the same material with detailed chronologies in Time, glossy color photographs in Life. The months that followed saw the hurried publication of the Warren Commission Report and the first of the books to question it, Mark Lane's *Rush to Judgment*.

It was probably a year or two later that I actually heard Lane himself interviewed on the radio and began my occasional forays into studying the assassination, studies which have included the reading of scores of books, of which Mailer's is the latest.

I do not subscribe to Mailer's conclusion that Oswald likely was the sole gunman, but then determining the facts of the assassination itself is not his primary concern. He and his colleagues appear to be intellectually honest and note many of the contradictions and loose threads which were left by the official accounts of the FBI and the Commission. They also attack, more than once, Posner's recent apologetic for the government's story. No, their concern is more for the character of Oswald and on this account they make a valuable contribution, primarily by going to the effort to interview many of his associates (and the KGB operatives who kept tabs on him) from his two-plus years in the Soviet Union, many of whom have never been interviewed before. What emerges is a believable, often sympathetic, portrait of a person both ordinary in the lower middle class trajectory of his life and extraordinary in terms of the means by which he tried,

sometimes successfully, to transcend his background and conditioning.

I've read a bunch of Mailer over the years, liking his non-fiction more than his fiction. The most recent books of his read have been *Ancient Evenings*, an ambitious failure, and his *The Gospel According to the Son*, another, rather poor, rather uninspired, attempt to represent the person of Jesus. This biography is worth reading both for the value of its reportage and the high quality of its prose.

Andy says

Fascinating in depth research of Oswald's life. And leaves you thinking he was unstable enough to have acted alone and secretive enough to have been an operative.

Terry Bonner says

Over the last forty years I have read far too many books on the Kennedy assassination to be considered healthy. It is quite easy to be persuaded by presentations of specious evidence and half-baked conspiracy theories. This book, albeit not one of Mailer's best efforts, was the last book I ever ever read on the subject. The portrait of Oswald which Mailer's paints in broad strokes as he embarks on his own personal pilgrimage through the files of the House Select Committee and the KGB archives is simply irrefutable. Whatever he was in fact, in spite of his uncanny and precocious associations, Lee Oswald was beyond a reasonable doubt and to a moral certainty the man who pulled the trigger which ended Camelot. And he was a sad little man, a wannabe and a naif. I shared Mailer's combination of revulsion and empathy for this truly pitiable young man who desperately wanted to matter in a world which took little notice. To be frank, the smug and lawyerly books of Gerald Posner, which thoroughly and definitely document the case against Oswald, only managed to piss me off. It took Mailer's literary sensitivity to drive the final nail in Oswald's coffin. In the end, Oswald's guilt becomes self-evident in the simple act of leaving his wedding ring lying on the dresser beside his wages on that warm November morning in Dallas forty-nine years ago. The ballistics and the eyewitnesses and the paper trail only confirm what should have been obvious from the start. Oswald was a twenty-four year old nobody who went out that day to become history. He succeeded, but we've all been paying his debts since.

Matt says

"Did Oswald do it? If one's answer is to come out of anything larger than an opinion, it is necessary to contend with questions of evidence. In that direction, however, one encounters a jungle of conflicting expert estimates as to whether Oswald could fire the shots in time, was a good enough marksman, was the only gunman in Dealey Plaza, and on one can go, trying to explore every last reach of possibility, only to encounter a disheartening truth: Evidence, by itself, will never provide the answer to a mystery. For it is in the nature of evidence to produce, sooner or later, a counterinterpretation to itself in the form of a contending expert in a court of law. It will be obvious to the reader that one does not

(and should not) respect evidence with the religious intensity that others bring to it..."

- Norman Mailer, *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*

There's an old saying: the shortest distance between two points is a line; the longest distance between two points is Norman Mailer.

Okay, I made that saying up. But I stand by the truth. Norman Mailer does not do things the easy way. He does them the Norman Mailer way.

Case in point, when you open up the cover to *Oswald's Tale*, Mailer's nearly 800-page deep-dive into the tangled lives of Lee Harvey Oswald, you are greeted by these lines: "When Valya was three years old, she fell on a hot stove and burned her face..."

Who is Valya? Well, eventually, after about seventeen pages – spent learning about her upbringing, her loves, her life – we discover that she is the aunt of Marina Nikolayevna Prusakova, the woman we now recognize as Marina Oswald. It is pretty extensive background for a minor character in the casting call of Oswald's life. Not long afterwards, Valya pretty much disappears from the story, and is seldom heard from again.

That is *Oswald's Tale* in a nutshell.

It is not a book that takes a lot of diversions and digressions; rather, the meandering diversions and digressions are central to the book's structure. It is actually how *Oswald's Tale* is constructed.

This is an absolute marvel. I mean that. *Oswald's Tale* is a frustrating, exasperating, compelling, mesmerizing reading experience. It defies easy description. So, what kind of book is it? It's hard to explain, so I'll let Mailer explain it himself, even though Capote already beat him to this particular punch:

Let me propose, then, that a mystery of the immense dimensions of Oswald's case will, in the writing, create a form of its own somewhere between fiction and non-fiction. Technically, this book fits into the latter category – it is most certainly not fiction. The author did his best to make up no dialogue himself and attribute no private motives to his real characters unless he was careful to label all such as speculation. Still, it is a peculiar form of non-fiction, since not only interviews, documents, newspaper accounts, intelligence files, recorded dialogues, and letters are employed, but speculations as well. The author's musings become some of the operative instruments...The result can be seen, therefore, as a special species of non-fiction that can be put under the rubric of *mystery*. That is because all means of inquiry have to be available when one is steering one's way through a cloud...

There is a lot of unpack in that description, a lot of pomposity to wade through. The most interesting thing about that passage, though, is that Mailer delivers it roughly 350 pages into his narrative. That's what I mean about structure. It's as though Mailer wrote his entire book and then threw it in the air, allowing the currents of the wind to do his editing.

Mailer starts in Russia, with his long introduction to Valya, finally pivoting to the arrival of the young American Lee Harvey Oswald, a former Marine intent on giving up his American citizenship. The research

here is enormous. Mailer and his investigators appear to have talked to everyone who ever came across Oswald's path. Instead of simply relating what they had to say – which is what a normal author would do in a normal book – Mailer provides thumbnail sketches of each one of these participants. They all get the Valya treatment, so that long before you know the simplest thing about Oswald – such as his date of birth – you have learned about dozens of Soviets.

The portrait of Oswald that emerges from this technique is vague and pointillist. Indeed, it stresses one's patience, and the only thing that kept me going was the fascinating picture of Soviet life that it formed.

In due course, Mailer starts to tighten his narrative grip. He hones in on Marina and Lee's troubled marriage, making extensive use of Soviet wiretaps to give us a long glimpse at the sheer domestic drudgery of their marital existence. If nothing else, Mailer proves, without having to underline the point, that Oswald did not work for Soviet intelligence (because they had enough intelligence to steer clear of the man, whose only real ability was his absolute inability to understand his limitations).

At the midpoint, Mailer does his transition thing (partly excerpted above) where he talks about how his creation is *sui generis* and meditates upon the search for truth. (As an aside: this quest for verity includes Mailer quoting from his CIA novel *Harlot's Ghost*. I have nothing but respect for an author with the temerity to quote from his own awful fiction in a book purporting to define reality). It is only after this point that we circle back entirely to learn about Lee Oswald's early life.

It is in these pages that we meet Oswald's mother, Marguerite, an incredible character who manages to stand out, even in a crowded field of colorful, egotistical, slightly-off-balance self-myth-makers. She is a good example of one of the major strengths of *Oswald's Tale*: Mailer's fine eye for people. He has a real sensitivity for the complexities of humanity (which he took too far in glorifying the two-bit killer Gary Gilmore in *The Executioner's Song*), and he clearly enjoys this haughty, conceited woman who went to her grave fiercely believing that the world owed her much more than she ever received.

As he warned, Mailer uses a great deal of speculation, though he does a good job of making you aware of that. This is especially true during Oswald's Marine Corps time, when he continually accuses Oswald of being a spy, while following every accusation with an admission that there is no evidence. Along with guesswork, Mailer utilizes wiretap transcriptions, book excerpts (especially Priscilla MacMillan's *Marina and Lee*), and testimony from the Warren Commission (which he criticizes constantly while quoting from liberally).

This is not a book directed at conspiracy buffs. Mailer does not run down every single theory. Indeed, I don't even recall him mentioning the grassy knoll. He follows Oswald, after all, and Oswald was in the Texas School Book Depository (what he was doing there is an ongoing debate). Discussions about possible conspiracies involving others are beyond the ken of *Oswald's Tale*. The only time Mailer gets into the weeds of doubt, to hint that it took more than Oswald to kill John Kennedy, is during the chapter on Jack Ruby. Unfortunately, any attempts to link Ruby to Oswald, and Oswald to a broader conspiracy, fail at the same stress point: What conspiracy would use a bum such as Oswald as an assassin, and then use a bigger bum like Ruby to tie off loose ends? (This is a rhetorical question. I don't actually want to debate this on the internet).

Ultimately, though, Mailer grudgingly accepts a couple things. First, that Oswald was the killer. Second, that he killed alone. He has to come to this conclusion. After all, at the end of all his interviews, his digging, all his sniffing the ground like a bloodhound, that's where the evidence – even if Mailer does not necessarily trust evidence – leads.

The did-he or didn't-he debate, however, is not really the point of *Oswald's Tale*. This may be a mystery, but solving the mystery does not rate high on Mailer's list of priorities. Or maybe I'm focusing on the wrong mystery. Because the thing that interests Mailer, that animates him on this epic sleuthing expedition, is to understand this man, this Oswald, with his scrawny body and smug face, his modest abilities but enormous ambitions, his confused political philosophy and inscrutable aims.

The match between author and subject, between Mailer and Oswald, is uncannily perfect. Both have towering senses of self worth, both aimed extremely high, both – unfortunately, in the case of Oswald – hit their mark.

Oswald's Tale is a remarkable work, a demi-classic where Mailer's artistic achievement nearly attains the same height as his literary ego.

Mike says

First a bit of on-the-ground reporting from someone who has admittedly never touched a loaded firearm. There I was in August 2016, on a warm, clear day that would later turn to Biblical rain- as tends to happen in the south in summer. From the spot where Zapruder had stood, I watched a guy wait for the light to turn, then jog out to one of the Xs so his friend could take a picture; cars were already turning left from N Houston, and slowed down as the tourist sprinted back to the sidewalk. "You're gonna be the second person who died here", his friend called.

Someone has written, on the fence above the grassy knoll, "Bill Hicks was right about everything." On the sixth floor of the former book depository, now museum, the glassed-in window is still as Hicks described. "They have it set up to look exactly like it did on that day; and it's really *accurate*, you know, because...*Oswald's not in it*. I'm talking *painstaking* detail..."

It's true that you can't get to the window, but you can look out the adjacent one and try to gauge the distance for yourself (for whatever that's worth). As I did, I remembered a detail that had impressed me in Oliver Stone's *JFK*; that if Oswald had been the shooter, it would have made a lot more sense for him to shoot Kennedy when the motorcade was on N Houston, a straight shot.

The idea impressed me just a little less while standing at the window, only because I was able to see that the distance the motorcade would have traveled on N Houston is extremely short. As I watched the street, there couldn't have been more than five seconds between the time any slow-moving car turned right on N Houston from Main Street and then left on Elm. It's hard to imagine that even someone ready and waiting would have had time to take aim and fire. Also, as Mailer writes,

It is a direct head-on shot with the target growing steadily in size...on the other hand, trained professionals are staring at the Book Depository windows from the lead car in the motorcade, and police on motorcycles are scouring the building with their eyes. A sniper's instinct would probably pull him back into relative darkness...

But Mailer begins about four years earlier, with Oswald's arrival in the USSR in October 1959 which has the effect of encouraging readers to temporarily forget what we know, or think we know, about Oswald, and to see him as the Soviets must have: inexplicable. And then we remember that he *is* inexplicable, that the ambiguities of his life have never really been resolved. In the early 90s, after the end of the Soviet Union,

Mailer traveled to both Moscow and Minsk to read declassified KGB documents and to interview people who had known Oswald, 30 years earlier. There are some interesting anecdotes here; a former co-worker of Oswald's, for example, remembers that they'd once gone rabbit hunting together; when a rabbit jumped out unexpectedly from a bush, Oswald became startled and shot into the air, missing the rabbit by a wide margin. Bill Hicks might have found that interesting. But then again, as Mailer puts it later, "Why should we ascribe any more consistency to a man with a gun...than we would expect from a professional basketball player whose accuracy often varies dramatically from night to night?"

When Oswald arrived in the USSR, the KGB of course immediately suspected that he was an American agent. Just imagine- here was a former Marine radar operator who claimed to be a Marxist, although he demonstrated "only a superficial knowledge of Marxist-Leninist Theory." Upon being told that he would have to go back to the US, Oswald slashed one of his wrists in a suicide attempt that the doctors who treated him later expressed skepticism about (he only slashed one wrist, and the wound wasn't deep enough to be fatal); but his subsequent hospitalization, coupled with the possibility that he was genuine, led to his being allowed to stay...under heavy surveillance, naturally. KGB agents were pretty bewildered, however; what kind of CIA man *was* this, after all? Did the Americans deliberately send over someone neurotic and unstable, to see how we would react?

There are plenty of memorable "characters" here. I particularly enjoyed reading about the circumscribed lives of the KGB agents assigned to spend their days listening to Oswald and Marina's conversations, trying to figure out if Oswald knew more about Marxism than he was letting on, or if perhaps he understood Russian better than he seemed to. Later, there are two consular officers at the Soviet embassy in Mexico City who could have starred in a Cold War sitcom. They grow 'Mexican-style moustaches' and drink in the local cantina; when Oswald shows up in distress with a loaded gun, they're forced to miss their team's championship volleyball game against the local GRU officers. But Oswald's life also, had it ended differently, could have made a good Cold War sitcom, especially when he goes back to the US and the Americans, as is only natural, suspect that he's been turned by the KGB; but why would they try to utilize such a clearly unstable person? What kind of KGB man *was* this, after all?

What kind of man was this? "Oswald owned all the properties that belong to a ghost", Mailer writes.

...ambition, deceit, a sense of mission, and the untold frustration of an abrupt death just as a long-held dream of personal prominence is about to unfold.

His mother could have driven just about anyone to murder, or at least to eastern Europe, but in many ways he's pathetic. He's a narcissist, a burden to every person and agency he comes in contact with (the officers' volleyball team even lost to the GRU), and he physically abuses his wife, Marina. His political and ideological convictions seem to change on a dime, but it's always got to be something; an absolute conviction, a crusade. As Eric Hoffer wrote of his archetypal "true believer", "he is a homeless hitchhiker on the highways of the universe, thumbing a ride on any eternal cause that drives by. He cannot be convinced, only converted." He also seems to fit FBI profiler John Douglas's "assassin personality": the misfit whose alienation precedes any ideological conviction, who assigns himself a mission out of desperation. The most sympathetic person in the book has to be Marina, who left her family, friends and country to be with him. Who could ever have imagined the infamy? "What is left of what was once her beauty", Mailer writes,

are her extraordinary eyes, blue as diamonds, and they blaze with light as if, in divine compensation for the dead weight of all that will not cease to haunt her, she has been granted a spark from the hour of an apocalypse others have not seen.

And 30 years after her husband slept through his alarm (he almost always woke up before, and turned it off

so as not to disturb her) and without telling her left his wedding ring in a cup on the dresser, she can't let it go. She wants to know Mailer's opinion. Did Lee do it?

Oswald's being an assassin personality and generally unstable is not mutually exclusive with the idea that someone, or more than one person, tried to push him in the 'right' direction. It's even possible that his erratic personality would have made him an appealing candidate. "Of all government bureaucracies", Mailer writes,

the CIA probably bears the greatest resemblance to an organism: that is, its analogical stomach, mind, lungs and limbs, while capable of communicating with each other, often need to do so no more than minimally- large parts of the CIA function almost entirely out of communication with other large parts. To assume that the CIA as a whole was interested in Oswald is to alienate oneself from understanding more likely possibilities. It is safer to assume that word-of-mouth concerning Oswald...made him a figure of interest to particular enclaves of the Agency who, by December of 1962, were no longer welcome in the Director's office.

Mailer goes on to note that the Mafia and the CIA had together made an agreement to assassinate Castro, "perhaps the most important and secret aspect" of what was called Operation Mongoose; Kennedy's decision to cut back on Mongoose, a byproduct of his agreement with Khrushchev following the Cuban Missile Crisis, "...opened a schism in the CIA. Small groups of officers, feeling betrayed by the President's new policy, began to function in concealed enclaves." Unlike the monolithic conspiracy posited by the Oliver Stone film, Mailer suggests that it could have been a conspiracy hatched by a few members of one of these enclaves, or even people who successfully convinced Oswald that he would be working in some official or semi-official capacity.

But towards the end of the book, Mailer quotes from Oswald's notes:

I wonder what would happen if someone would stand up and say he was utterly opposed not only to the governments, but to the people, to the entire land and complete foundation of his society.

"All the motivation for shooting Kennedy", Mailer writes, "is in that sentence." He said later in an interview that he thought Oswald "probably" did it (a different question from whether he did it alone). Why? "It was the logic of his life."

This might not amount to much in a courtroom, but I think I know what Mailer meant. It seems to be true, on one hand, that Oswald expressed a degree of approval towards Kennedy, at times. It's also now fairly well-established that earlier in the year 1963, Oswald attempted to shoot retired General Edwin Walker- member of the John Birch Society, staunch anti-Communist, and extremely rightwing- who would seem to have been some distance away from Kennedy on the ideological spectrum. But it may not have mattered. Mailer tries to imagine Oswald's rationale:

Kennedy had the ability to give hope to the American ethos...Kennedy was not, as American Presidents went, a bad President; therefore, he was too good. The world was in crisis and the social need was to create conditions for recognizing that there had to be a new kind of society...

But even this contorted logic may have been justification for something that fell even shorter of great ideological or historical vision. "It is doubtful that Oswald wanted to debate such a question with himself", Mailer continues.

He may well have possessed an instinct that told him he had to do something enormous and do it quickly, do it for his own physical well-being. The murderer kills in order to cure himself- which is why murder is properly repudiated. It is the most selfish of acts.

Louise says

In this epic work, Norman Mailer shows the complexity that is Lee Harvey Oswald and leaves the reader to determine: Did he have the soul of a Killer?

Mailer begins with Oswald's trip to Russia and works backward through Oswald's early family life, then forward with through his return to the US with his Russian wife. I took this book on a long flight (next trip I'm digital), so If I hadn't been a captive audience, I wouldn't have finished it. The early part is almost straight reporting, covering in more detail Oswald's Russian life, previously covered in Marina and Lee. The book gets a lot better and held my attention as it progressed.

The text is comprised of excerpts from the reports of the Warren Commission and the House Select Committee on Assassination, transcripts from the FBI and Russian intelligence services (some are conversations from Oswald's bugged apartment), interviews by Mailer and Larry Schiller, the work of Priscilla McMillan, Norman Posner, and Edward Epstein and a few other sources. Each is introduced with a pithy narrative using the "royal we" that sets the stage or interprets what is to come.

While Mailer does not give an opinion on whether Oswald did the deed, he does have an opinion on its aftermath: for the intelligence establishment, a trial would be explosive since Mafia-CIA-FBI links would be revealed. Mailer notes, throughout, that while the 26 volume Warren Commission Report (which relied on FBI and CIA staff) leaves too many loose ends, it does provide a wealth of information on people and life in the US at this time. There is important but spotty documentation of dates and activities but, as Mailer notes more time was spent investigating everyone on the public bus Oswald took to Mexico than Oswald's pro and anti Castro associates in New Orleans.

There is material I had not seen elsewhere. For instance there are interviews of Oswald's acquaintances in Minsk that Mailer and his associates had in the 1990's showing how just knowing Oswald affected their lives and careers. There is insight into the dilemma Oswald's presence in Russia and his later "fame" posed for the KGB. Oswald's stint in the Marines shows possible early on intelligence involvement in Japan. While Mailer says too much is made of Oswald's dubious sexuality Mailer shows possible roots of it in the Marines.

The intent of the book is to assess the character of Oswald but you also get interpretive portraits of his mother Marguerite, his "friend" George de Mohrenschildt, Marina's uncle and aunt in Minsk, her friend Ruth Paine and of Jack Ruby. The description of talk show host William Kirk Stuckey's treatment of Oswald is one of the many short personality profiles that deliver wider perspective.

The book badly needs an index. On p. 703 Allan Dulles seems to be questioning Oswald while in custody in Dallas. I flipped back but could find no context. Maybe this was an editorial glitch and the questions were from the Warren Commission a year later. (Dulles later appears at a small dinner party given by Jackie Kennedy's mother and stepfather along with George de Mohrenschildt. What it means for a daughter when her mother invites a known friend of her daughter's husband's alleged assassin is not explored). Dulles's interest in keeping a lid on things would be apparent, particularly to anyone who read The Brothers: John

Foster Dulles, Allen Dulles & Their Secret World War.

I am not sure where this fits in the mountains of material on this topic. It hardly makes a notice in material on Mailer and his body of work. It is the Mailer voice with his Mailer take, and while 20 years old, the prose is not dated. This book unites many primary sources with insightful commentary. After the first 200 pages, it kept me occupied on a long flight.

????? says

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Katie says

After reading Stephen King's 22/11/63 I thought it was time I finally delved into the Kennedy assassination and through internet searches decided on Oswald's Tale as a good starting (and in my case ending) point. I'd read The Executioner's Song when it first came out, but hadn't read anything else by Mailer so I didn't know what to expect.

The book is amazing in its depth, detail, the research and new light thrown on Oswald, especially his time in what was then the USSR. Mailer and his colleagues extensively interviewed former KGB agents and other Russians who knew Oswald while he was living there, and with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the time gone by were much readier to talk than might have been the case earlier. This means there is a wealth of knowledge about how Oswald lived and worked there, his relationships with friends and women, whether or not he really was a Russian spy, and why he decided to return to the States (basically he just didn't like living in communist Russia, and as I lived there as a child for a short while I can completely understand why).

The book starts off with Oswald's sojourn in the USSR, which threw me a bit as I knew absolutely nothing about him and was expecting the usual biography of he was born then, there, went to school here, studied there, etc and so on. But it works, and I found myself totally engrossed in his story.

Mailer deals with all the conspiracy theories and in the end concludes that Oswald acted alone. Admittedly this is the only accredited account I've read of Oswald's life and death, but Mailer's arguments convinced me. I especially loved his reasoning that the CIA at the time was so distrustful of itself and had so many factions working independently of each other that it was quite possible one faction thought another faction played a part in Kennedy's assassination and vice versa. The same is probably true of the Mafia.

A great read.

Siv30 says

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Andrew says

The problem with reviewing a book by Norman Mailer is that it is a little like reviewing The Bible in that most people have heard about it, many people have strong opinions that they have shared and, of course, everyone has heard of the author...

But, screw it, here's my two cents worth.

Mailer has written a superb novel split into two parts; the first deals with Oswald's time in Russia and is based on notes made available by the former KGB. The second deals with the "American" Oswald, exploring his childhood, time in the military and the events leading up to the assassination.

Part of my admiration for Mailer is the effortless way in which he can adopt completely different writing styles for each of his works. In “Oswald’s Tale”, he takes it a step further by writing the first part of the book with a hint of a Russian accent – not the slaughtered tone of a James Bond Villain, mind you, just enough that the reader is constantly aware of the location. The second part is completely different in that Mailer becomes the story-teller and refers to primary sources such as the findings of the Warren Commission. While this doesn’t have the magic of the first part, it provides an almost scholarly, yet accessible, overview of Oswald.

I suppose that there are sources where more information can be found on the Kennedy Assassination, likewise there are books that have tried to “explain” Oswald. But this book seems to accept that Oswald cannot be explained with the paucity of information, so readers wanting something definitive will be disappointed.

But for me, the book was magical – a narrative magnificently written by one of the most talented writers of the 20th Century, exploring what is possibly the greatest mystery in American history.

And that combination makes “Oswald’s Tale” a must-read.

Nick Sweet says

Reading Oswald's Tale was one of those fantastic reading experiences I'll never forget. Mailer made his name initially with The Naked and the Dead, which didn't really do much for me. I thought The Deer Park was pretty mediocre and hated Barbary Shore, An American Dream, and Ancient Evenings and think Tough Guys Don't Dance is one of the worst books I've ever read from cover to cover (I only finished reading it to find out if it continued to be as bad as I thought it was going to be...), so none of the other books I'd previously read by Mailer prepared for a book that, for me, has to be one of the best reads to have hit the shelves in the past few decades.

Mailer follows Lee Harvey Oswald as he goes to live in Moscow and has love affairs...and then we find him becoming disillusioned with the Soviet experience and fleeing to America, with his wife, only to find that he is unable to fill the fridge... I still have the image of Oswald holding a teddy bear in his arms as he tells some official he means to defect... Of course the book is not really a novel, since the story is given to Mailer, in the sense that it's history...and therefore you can't really compare his achievement to Tolstoy's in War and Peace, given that Tolstoy assigned a minor role to Napoleon and other historical figures, and gave the main roles to the characters he'd invented--something which, in my opinion, is much harder to do... That said, though, Oswald's Tale is one of the most intense reading experiences I've ever had. After reading it, I got hold of the book that many consider Mailer's best--The Executioner's Song--and read it, and it is also a great book...but for me Oswald's Tale is his best. I've written this quickly and what I'm saying doesn't come close to giving the book justice. You need to read it!

Ahmed says

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20-12-2015

Ahmed says

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