



The Naked and the Dead

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Written in gritty, journalistic detail, the story follows an army platoon of foot soldiers who are fighting for the possession of the Japanese-held island of Anopopei. Composed in 1948, The Naked and the Dead is representative of the best in twentieth-century American writing.

The Naked and the Dead Details

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Author : Norman Mailer

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From Reader Review The Naked and the Dead for online ebook

Josh Moyes says

This is the shittiest book I have ever read.

H. P. Lovecraft, the horror writer from the earlier decades of the 20th century, wrote very little dialogue in his stories because he was aware that he wrote bad dialogue. Stilted, pedantic garbage. He knew that his forte was the description and action of his stories and so for the most part he stuck to that and wrote some very satisfying creepy stories.

By contrast, Norman Mailer wrote a great deal of dialogue in the "Naked and the Dead". He didn't write it because it was his strong suit. He wrote it because apparently he had no one close to him who was kind enough to say, "Norm, this is garbage. You need to rewrite this." He really could have used a friend like this. He really could have used a friend who told him, "Really, man, this whole book is a steaming pile of poop. Burn it. When the stench is gone you'll feel much cleaner."

I have read a lot in the course of my life. Admittedly, not all of it has been great (see: Stephen King's "Desperation"). And some of it has been amazing. Some of it brought tears to my eyes and other stuff made me so angry I wanted to run over a convent of nuns. And in all this reading, of so many different types of fiction, I have never, and I say this with no equivocation or uncertainty, read anything as shitty as "The Naked and the Dead". I gave it one star because I couldn't figure out a way to give it a negative number of stars.

The characterization was...just bad. As I alluded, the dialogue was horrible. Yes, stilted. Yes, pedantic. But also incredibly condescending. Most characters in the book were written in overwrought colloquialism that made them all seem retarded. None of the characters in the story had a) any redeeming qualities, or, b) anything that made them interesting. Every emotion in the book was set in as clumsy a manner as I've ever read. I've seen better from high school sophomores. Everything the characters said, and every thought they had (Mailer made sure to share everything everybody thought for the duration of the book) was an incessant bitch-fest: how bad they had it, how much the army was "fucking" them, how they were certain their wives back home were nailing anything with the ability to maintain an erection. Combine all this with the fact that nobody, nobody at all, succeeded in doing a single thing they set out to do over the course of 721 pages. Whether it was leading a platoon on patrol, standing up to the crazy sergeant, or carrying a body back to camp, or any of the score of other things characters in the book "tried" to do, everybody failed and the entire point of everything they attempted was to give the reader the opportunity to listen to their fucking whining about it.

Nothing happens in the first 400 (400!) pages of the novel. Well, okay, there was some bitching. And this perverse tension as the latently homosexual general plays dominance games with his lieutenant aid. And one character's clap won't go away. But aside from that, there is a 400 page lull at the beginning that brings into question my own sanity for finishing (commitment, baby, commitment). So after a "dry beginning" that is longer than most novels, the platoon goes on its big mission. But first: let's look at the pretty sunset. So they look at the sunset and they go on their mission and not a great deal happens there either and then the book is over.

The San Francisco Chronicle calls "The Naked and the Dead" "...perhaps the best book to come out of any war." The San Francisco Chronicle is full of shit.

I read this book because Norman Mailer is one of the most acclaimed authors in the American canon. I wanted to see what sort of achievement his breakthrough novel (at the tender age of 24) might be. I expected "Saving Private Ryan". What I got was an insufferably boring novel. I might burn it. I sure wish Norman Mailer had.

Your time would be better spent reading Archie comic books.

Sarah says

DNF at 49%, 353 pages. I'm bored and this is slow going so I'm giving up in total frustration. It's not a bad book but it would take me way longer to finish than I can possibly bear.

Jessica says

Executioner's Song was one of the best books I've read in the past year -- so good I haven't felt up to reviewing it -- so I had high expectations for *The Naked and the Dead*. The front-cover blurb from the *SF Chronicle* speculates that this novel is "perhaps the best book to come out of any war," which really jacked up the ante and got me intrigued.

Well, I got only a little over a hundred pages in, and IMHO *The Naked and the Dead* isn't bad, but it is not a better book than *War and Peace* or *The Iliad*. It's not even a true classic, though it is a good read. *The Naked and the Dead* was probably a lot more essential before we had access to so many war movies; you can see all the war movie cliches already present, though there isn't a black guy (the troops aren't yet integrated, and Jews and Hispanics are the minority characters here). I have to say that I don't think this has aged all that well. You can definitely see why it was a bestseller at the time, and you can also see Mailer was in his early twenties when he wrote this, his first novel.

It's a well-told story, and interesting, but it's 700 pages long. If it were 300 pages or if I cared more or didn't have other options I'd keep going, but I need to get through my post-Proustum depression with something that really makes my toes curl, and this ain't it.

Maybe some other time? It is a fun read. One of my favorite things is how all the characters say "fug" all the time, as in "fug you, motherfugger!"

It does feel dated, which is not always a bad thing.

Rob says

This is a book about America. Its no secret that Tolstoy is Mailer's favorite author, and reading this book right after reading *War and Peace* gave me a good perspective on everything defined in this book. It captures a uniquely American milieu of characters at a time when a uniquely american sence of Identity and patriotism was being forged. It spoke of the physical and intellectual challenges of various backgrounds through about a dozen main characters with learned empathy. And in the end and throughout you get to glimpse all the indelible cruelty of reality as would be expected by for forboding title.

The book is also brashly written by a novice. Mailer himself will admit his syntax tends towards the simplistic, which lends the book a 'page-turning,' 'thriller' characteristic that actually aids the reading experience, possibly to the chagrin of the more established lit snobs. What does hurt the book is some occasionally awkward diction and character development for some of the book's figures. The Hispanic sergeant, for example, who is a capable if not confident soldier, for some reason has an inner monologue that is written in fractured and childlike stream of consciousness, as if Mailer equated difficulty speaking English as a second language with stupidity. The crudeness of the soldier's banter also can occasionally ring hollow, especially given liberal use of standard euphemisms for censored swear words.

In the end the book is of extreme high quality, readable, illuminating, passionate, and empathetic. It is well structured and mostly well written, and in a couple places extremely influential. I'm tempted to give it five stars, but in the end I think the book maybe wasn't as beautiful and influential as some of my favorite five-star reads.

Parting Shots:

Did anyone else think the writing of Japbait was somewhat oversimplistic?

Who else loved that last line of the book?

So the Lieutenant admitted he hated Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, but his conversations with the General really reminded me of Catsorp's relationship with Leo Naphta in Mann's classic.

Patrick says

This is an amazing book considering it was the author's first published novel. All the more amazing considering Mailer was something like 20 years old when he wrote it. I picked it up after reading somewhere that Mailer actually joined the military during WWII in order to gain some life experience so he could write a book. I really enjoyed Mailer's writing style. It was vivid, alive and gritty.

Mailer describes the jungle in perfect detail. You can almost feel yourself being smothered by the dense foliage and overpowering humidity. Add to this the atmosphere of fear and anxiety that Mailer so deftly creates and you've got a great war novel. Some of the flashbacks can become a little drawn out and at times it is a little hard to keep track of who's who due to the large number of characters. I love the fact that there is no hero or character who can be seen as the good guy. Mailer exposes each character's hang-ups and dysfunctions and simply shows how each functions under the stress of combat and military life in general. I can see why this book was so controversial when it came out in the 50's (cussing, graphic violence, sexuality, homo-eroticism, etc.). This must have been a wake-up call for a lot of people who were used to the sanitized John Wayne style stories of heroism and clear-cut moral divides. Good stuff.

piperitapitta says

Brothers in Arms.

Beh, è passato un bel po' di tempo da allora, da quando ho finito di leggerlo.

Ma se ancora adesso mi ricordo di loro, se ogni tanto, quando guardo un film in cui si parla anche di guerra, di quella guerra, mi ritrovo a pensare alla storia di Hearn, di Red, di Wilson, di Roth, di Brown, di Gallagher, di Croft e di tutti gli altri; se dopo tutti questi mesi ancora ricordo i loro nomi e non riesco a togliermi dagli occhi l'immagine della montagna, dell'isola del Pacifico di Anopopei immersa nella foschia, del caldo appiccicoso, della pioggia e del fango; se sento ancora il peso della barella portata a spalla e il respiro del nemico giapponese nascosto dietro ogni curva del sentiero e della giungla; se ancora ricordo tutto questo e insieme a tutto ciò che li ha uniti dal giorno in cui la guerra ha messo insieme "il plotone", ricordo anche le loro storie, una per una, così come Mailer a solo ventiquattro anni le ha raccontate, affinché il suo romanzo non fosse solo un romanzo che raccontava di una guerra vissuta in prima persona, delle battaglie e delle conquiste, della vita al fronte e delle sconfitte, dei giochi di potere e di quelli di squadra; ma anche, attraverso *la macchina del tempo* - che si contrappone alla *diretta* della guerra, con quelli che io ho definito durante la lettura, "gli inserti di vita", con i quali, un po' alla volta ci fa conoscere, in maniera più approfondita, i singoli personaggi - il ritratto delle tante città, dei tanti Stati, dei tanti americani, tutti diversi per classe sociale, razza e colore, che a quella guerra si affacciavano colmi di speranze, delusioni, miserie, ricchezze e desideri di rivincita.

E se tutto questo è vero, e lo è, ed è ancora così vivo dopo tutto questo tempo in cui ho aspettato di scrivere un commento a «*Il Nudo e il morto*» perché volevo lasciarlo "decantare" per capire meglio cosa fosse e cosa avesse significato per me; se poi me ne sono dimenticata, e poi, alla fine, me ne sono ricordata, e dimenticata ancora, finché oggi è arrivato il giorno per scriverlo, e adesso, finalmente, posso dire che questo libro, questo romanzo, questo best-seller, è davvero un capolavoro.

E che nessuno lo definisca "un libro di guerra", perché dentro c'è molto di più: è la guerra si fa "istituzione totale", e un romanzo in cui, pur narrando di guerra e di morte, si riesce a sentire il brulicare della vita.

«Ci sono solo due elementi fondamentali. Una nazione combatte bene in rapporto al numero di uomini che ha a disposizione. E l'altro fattore dell'equazione è che il singolo soldato è un elemento migliore se ha vissuto in condizioni miserevoli prima di arruolarsi.»

«- La necessità più profonda dell'uomo è l'onnipotenza?

- Sì. Non è la religione, è evidente, non è l'amore, la spiritualità: questi sono tutti contentini, premi che ci creiamo da soli quando i limiti della nostra esistenza ci allontanano dall'altro sogno. Raggiungere Dio. Quando veniamo al mondo siamo Dio, e il confine dei nostri sensi è l'universo. E crescendo, quando scopriamo che l'universo non siamo noi, viviamo il trauma più profondo dell'esistenza.

«Croft fissava la montagna. L'inviolato elefante che dominava sulla giungla e le misere colline. Era pura e lontanissima, Nella luce del tardo pomeriggio era di velluto verde, di roccia azzurra e di terra chiara, una materia diversa da quella di cui era fatta la giungla.»

«Beh, tanto ti possono ammazzare una sola volta.»

Splendida anche l'introduzione, scritta da Norman Mailer nel maggio del 1998, a cinquant'anni dalla pubblicazione:

*«[...] E così, a me *Il nudo e il morto* piace ancora. Ha i suoi pregi e i suoi difetti, ma ha senz'altro un salubre, forse anche stimolante, tocco di compassione tolstoiana che mi permette di coltivare speranza per tutti noi le rarissime volte che mi guardo indietro e ne rileggo qualche pagina.*

Lasciatevi quindi credere che sia possibile trovarvi un bel po' di speranza qualora lo si legga per intero.

Matt says

Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* is *War and Peace* as written by Larry David. It has all the Tolstoyean hallmarks: dozens of main characters; an ever-shifting third-person point of view; and lengthy, turgid digressions on History, Philosophy, and the like.

It also has a thoroughly misanthropic point of view. This book reminded me of nothing so much as an episode of *Seinfeld* set during the Pacific War. The characters are all hateful, spiteful, little men. None of them are likable. Nothing really happens. There is no great set piece battle, which you might expect when reading a war novel (*the* war novel, according to the cover). And the ending is straight out of the *Seinfeld* finale, with the action devolving from black comedy to farce, and the hateful, spiteful, little characters left utterly unredeemed. Mailer's ultimate disgust for his creations is utterly brimming on the last few pages.

The Naked and the Dead is set in the Pacific theater during World War II. It is putatively interested in the invasion of the fictional island of Anopopei. The main characters are the men of an Intelligence and Reconnaissance (I&R) platoon: Lieutenant Hearn, Sgt. Croft, Sgt. Brown, and your typical ethnic and cultural grab bag of enlisted men: Goldstein and Roth (the Jews); Martinez (the Mexican); Wilson (the redneck).

At the beginning of the novel, I was actually impressed with the depth of these characters. Though some of them are archetypes of the genre, Mailer gets really deep into their psyche. You literally are privy to all their thoughts (which are often petty, self-absorbed, and relatable). Then, after awhile, I realized that all the characters were having these same thoughts. And all of them exhibited the same disgust for their fellow man, while outwardly attempting to conform to the expectations of society. Pretty soon, the characters started to meld into one, and all I knew was that they were all pretty much dicks. I had to recall the one thing that set each guy apart: Red had bad kidneys; Gallagher had the pregnant wife; Stanley was a brown-noser.

Only three men stood out: General Cummings, because he was a general; Lt. Hearn, who was Cummings' foil, and engages in a series of Important discussions with the general; and Sgt. Croft, the psychopath. Of the three, only Croft is memorable. He is as unlikable as the rest; even more so. Yet his awfulness at least elevates him to an over-the-top villain. For instance, in one unforgettable scene, Croft gives a Japanese prisoner a cigarette, then blows him away:

Croft felt his head pulsing with an intense excitement. There were tears in the prisoner's eyes again, and Croft looked at them dispassionately. He gazed once about the little draw, and watched a fly crawl over the mouth of one of the corpses. The prisoner had taken a deep puff and was leaning back now against the trunk of the tree. His eyes had closed, and for the first time there was a dreamy expression on his face. Croft felt a bitter tension work itself into his throat and leave his mouth dry and bitter and demanding. His mind had been entirely empty until now, but abruptly he brought up his rifle and pointed it at the prisoner's head...The prisoner did not have time to change his expression before the shot crashed into his skull. He slumped forward, and then rolled on his side. He was still smiling but looked silly now.

The reality of war is that it's mostly boring. You read the statistics and are shocked to learn that only 1% of soldiers actually see combat, while the rest are relegated to the numerous support positions: cooks, medical personnel, drivers, etc. That is reality. It doesn't work in a novel. Your English teacher was right: there *does* need to be some sort of conflict to propel the story. In a war novel, that generally means a battle of some sorts (I mean, a war novel without a war is like a porno consisting solely of dialogue. Right?)

For the first 400 pages or so, the book just meanders forward, with the men of I&R sitting around, grousing to each other, and generally being insufferable. There is a brief skirmish at the river, which is really sort of distracting, owing to Mailer's gross over use of onomatopoeia. For several pages, my copy of *The Naked and the Dead* looked like an old Batman cartoon. POW! BANG! ZOOP! (I just made that last one up).

Finally, the I&R platoon is given a scouting mission. They are sent around to the back of the island and told to gather intelligence on the Japanese. They run into trouble. One man is killed and another wounded. The squad splits, half the men taking the wounded man back, the other half plunging forward. Suddenly, there is conflict, there is forward progress...and then, inexplicably, the farce begins. After hundreds of pages of struggle and toil, the platoon is sent running after it stumbles into a bee hive. Perhaps if I had known from the outset that this was satire... Anyway, 700 pages in, I was less than amused. It was as though Steven Spielberg had handed over the last 15 minutes of *Saving Private Ryan* to the Coen Brothers circa-*Fargo*. I felt like Mailer was laughing on me; like he'd pulled a fast one. Ha ha, the jokes on you. The denouement is all black comedy, with the finale focusing on Major Dalleson's attempt to get a Betty Grable pinup for a map-reading course.

I'm not kidding. The ending pissed me off.

I was also annoyed with the use of "fug" for the more colorful, the more elegant "f**k". Apparently, this was self-imposed censorship, suggested by the publishers. I guess this shocks me, considering that we'd just finished incinerating 100,000 Japanese women and children in Tokyo, then topped that by shadow-blasting 100,000 more with nuclear weapons. Yet the delicate American sensitivity could not tolerate a profanity alluding to the act of lovemaking? Sheesh. Thanks for the sexual hangups, Puritans!

I was further annoyed with Mailer's literary affectations, notably "The Time Machine" and the "Chorus." The Time Machine is a flashback device. Some of them were okay, especially Croft's. Most of them, however, do little to illuminate the characters. Moreover, they are often painfully hard to read, since they are written in the idiom of the stunted character at the center of the flashback. The Chorus sections are just plain showing off. They are written like a play, dialogue only, and touch on a certain topic chosen by Mailer, such as what the soldiers are going to do when they get home.

There are some beautiful passages in the book, and some wonderfully memorably scenes. There are two deaths, for instance, that really stuck in my mind. Funnily, these were scenes that were underwritten when compared with the rest of the book. They were short, elegant, haunting. Mostly, though, the *The Naked and the Dead* serves to demonstrate what happens when you write a war novel about nothing.

Kip says

Less a war novel and more a rumination on class and military structure, Norman Mailer's World War II book is a hard-edged "Catch 22" that dispenses with satire and revels in cynicism. Unlike Joseph Heller's masterwork, perhaps the definitive WWII book in close contention with Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse Five,"

The Naked and the Dead contains no character we may call completely sympathetic, and is perhaps the only war novel out there that lacks a strict protagonist. The main character in The Naked and the Dead is the Army, and what it does to the psyche of the Greatest Generation.

Mailer invents the island of Anopopei to serve as a backdrop for his multi-character study. There's enough of a war plot here to keep the casual reader entertained; but it's clear from the outset this is not Mailer's purpose in writing. A sharp criticism of the military's structure, and what it does to the minds of men ensconced in mortal combat, becomes quickly apparent, and his characters are less fully realized individuals (though he'll give you a back story for each, conveniently around the time the reader begins to hate them or they are killed) than stand-ins for ideas. The hard-nosed, straight-laced General Cummings cares more for his personal standing than the men he must order into battle; his foil, Lieutenant Hearn, is a ne'er-do-well Ivy League boy whose idealism gets him thrown into danger. The men of the recon platoon harbor their own discriminations and a grating chauvinism that can make passages of the book difficult to read for modern audiences.

Still, Mailer gets his hard-headed point across in gripping fashion, making you care just enough about the cannon fodder who are just as capable of pathos as they are of committing unspeakably violent and terrible acts. Mailer also writes with the breathless, straightforward prose you would expect from a journalist yet paints a convincing picture of his characters and their surroundings. Casual readers will balk at the attention to military detail, a convention neither Heller nor Vonnegut thought necessary to make their points and one that can bloat Mailer's tale at times. Still, this work deserves to be read in that same post-military-industrial-complex vein, and is a worthwhile read for the sociologists and anthropologists out there as well.

Vit Babenco says

“The General had once said to him, ‘I like chaos, it's like the reagents foaming in the beaker before the precipitation of the crystals. It's a kind of savory to me.’”

To generals war is a theatre and a battlefield is a stage so they can admire the scenes of bloodbath from afar. *The Naked and the Dead* is **Norman Mailer**'s best novel and it is the best American book about war. *The Naked and the Dead* is a merciless and extremely graphic novel but what the hell, war knows no shame and no pity.

Now that truth in literature has been replaced with political correctness the book is rarely read.

“All the deep dark urges of man, the sacrifices on the hilltop, and the churning lusts of the night and sleep, weren't all of them contained in the shattering screaming burst of a shell, the man-made thunder and light? He did not think these things coherently, but traces of them, their emotional equivalents, pictures and sensations, moved him into a state of acute sensitivity. He felt cleaned in an acid bath, and all of him, even his fingertips, was prepared to grasp the knowledge behind all this.”

War bares all human fears and shows human beings as they are. War turns man naked then it turns man dead...

Richard says

This is one of the great war novels from World War II. Norman Mailer studied aeronautical engineering at Harvard, but he became interested in writing, having his first story published at age 18. He was drafted after he graduated from college in 1943. He served in the Pacific with the United States Army, where he obtained

the knowledge and experience to write about soldiers in combat. *The Naked and the Dead* was published when Mailer was 25. It instantly became a huge success, spending 62 weeks on the New York Times Best Seller List. Mailer's reputation as a novelist was established by this book, which would be the first of a long line of best-selling war novels from the likes of other war veterans, including James Jones, Leon Uris, Herman Wouk and others.

Mailer would go on to become a hugely famous, if combative American author. He would have more than 30 books published before his death at age 84 in 2007, including the receipt of two Pulitzer Prizes. He would run for mayor of New York City on one occasion, with the campaign slogan "No More Bull Shit."

The Naked and the Dead takes place amid the Army's invasion of a fictional Pacific Island. There is plenty of military terminology and methodology but the book is more focused on the psychological development of the main characters as they interact in the situation they are placed into. Mailer, considered to be an early proponent of narrative fiction, presents a fascinating mix of individuals who all seem to be suffering from some kind of character flaw or other. Mailer throws flashback-style personal histories of the main characters at intervals as the current story unfolds.

The one common denominator of all characters is that no one comes out of this story any better than when it began. This is in support of probably the central thesis of Mailer, that war is not just hell; it is psychosis. Some of the guys in the recon platoon include: Minetta, the malingerer, who fakes battle fatigue, only to find out that being the only sane person in a psycho ward is worse than being in combat; Red, the pre-war drifter, who finds out on the island that his health is deteriorating at an alarming rate; Wilson, the philanderer who used to laugh at getting a mild case of venereal disease and finds out before going into action that he is seriously diseased; Roth, the Jew who is not accepted as an equal by anyone on his anti-Semitic crew, who might finally find respect by sharing the platoon's trials on an arduous march, only to be killed in a fall from a cliff. The enlisted men hate their officers and the officers hate each other. Major Dalleson, the unimaginative S-3 (Operations Officer) fumbles to find a way to deal with a situation in place of the general, who is away for the day reporting to his superiors, and muddles through a solution that wins the battle against the Japanese, only to find that all recognition and credit for his actions is suppressed in the official battle history. Even the Division General, Cummings, is obsessed that enemies at Higher Headquarters will find cause to use any mistakes against him and stall his career.

Lt. Hearn is probably to be considered to be the central character in the story. He starts by working as General Cummings' aide but gets removed from that position when he makes it clear that he can no longer tolerate hearing about the General's fascist world-view. He finds himself reassigned to the recon platoon just when it is assigned to perform a mission to travel behind Japanese lines and find a way for the Army to get its stalled invasion moving again. This patrol becomes the central element of the book, when these fourteen men go on this most physically grueling and dangerous march. Hearn, and the platoon, find that they must deal with rough terrain, jungle heat, the enemy, and perhaps most fatefully, the nominal leader of the platoon, Sgt. Croft.

Croft, to me, is indispensable to the meaning and the progress of the book. His character flaw is that he is a psychopath. He is a highly motivated leader of his men and is the bravest of the group; he is the glue that holds everyone to their tasks when the going gets tough. But he is deranged. He leads his men by fear, and he enjoys killing. He becomes a seething vessel of rage when the platoon he had been leading is placed under the command of an officer (Hearn) prior to going on their flogging (Mailer's euphemism) event-filled reconnaissance, and this will not end pleasantly for Hearn or for the rest of the men.

The Picador 50th Anniversary Edition contains an Introduction from Norman Mailer. He describes the book

in the second person, as a very good effort by an amateur, albeit a passionate, hard-working amateur who had written over a quarter of a million words in college. He admits to some sloppy writing style in parts, with, to use his description, words that came too easily and the habit of all of the nouns in every sentence holding hands with the nearest adjective. I think he was a little bit self-critical but he was looking at his first big success from the perspective of fifty years of continuing writing success. He certainly was true when he said the book had immediacy, coming out when everyone was hungry for a "big war novel", and that he delivered with a good, vigorous story that got only better as it unfolded. Bravo, Norman.

Nandakishore Varma says

I read this long, long ago and none of the story or characters have stayed with me. What is left is an impression of a war so gritty and dirty that one feels disgusted (I remember one character having some sort of kidney problem, with attendant stomach-ache and blood in urine - for me, this has become the defining image of war). Also, the last sentence - "Hot dog!" - by a soldier contemplating possible furlough. I think Mailer achieved what he intended, at least with me.

miledi says

Libro eccelso. Sporco. Lascia il segno.
Norman Mailer non si è più ripetuto a questo livello.
Forse è impossibile.

Paul Bryant says

Us readers have no homes, like unnoticed birds we perch anywhere, like the most disturbed stalkers we go through anybody's underwear drawer, like vicious tax-gatherers we audit everyone, the writers especially, their creatures the characters very particularly, and hanging between all three of us, the book. It sits there in its cover. We ticket, we note, we award, with our eyes, brains and stars. We scribble in the margins to the outrage of future readers – well, I do, maybe you do not do that. (I never mind if someone has previously done that.)

So I have looked out of Humbert Humbert's paedophilic eyes, I overheard the good man Jesus and the scoundrel Christ, I declined and fell with Paul Pennyfeather and I closely observed Molly Bloom in her bed for at least three hours, she didn't notice a thing. It was like I wasn't there. With Jeanette Winterson I too grew up in a crazy Christian cult, and like others before me I could not stop Merricat Blackwood from her pyromania whatever I did. Well, you could all say similar things. Our acceptance of the thousand varieties of human beingness is almost limitless. We are promiscuity itself.

The Naked and the Dead is not really about World War Two, or about war in general, it's about looking

through the eyes of men, a whole bunch of them, sleeping with them, eating with them, drinking, pissing and fighting with them. In this novel, the thing to have is a penis. The testosterone floweth through this novel as doth the Ganges through India. And... I just couldn't do it. I didn't want to go through all this painful stuff with a bunch of assorted blokes constantly eating, farting, sleeping, waking, yakking, being blown up or not, writing letters, bragging, playing poker, theorising banally about women and on. And on.

Because there are a thousand characters, Mailer provides each with a description round the time they are introduced. Such as:

He was a little over medium height, well fleshed, with a rather handsome sun-tanned face and graying hair. His expression when he smiled was very close to the ruddy, complacent and hard appearance of any number of American senators and businessmen, but the tough good-guy aura never quite remained. There was a certain vacancy in his face, like the vacancy of actors who play American congressmen.

Well, after several descriptions like this everything blurs together and you realise why *Catch-22* works so well because in that war novel everyone is a cartoon, no painful attempt at ultra-realistic detail at all, so Milo Minderbinder, Major Major, Colonel Korn and the rest remain intact in the memory years later.

But really, me trying to read *N&D* was doomed to failure. It could have been a good one, I guess, you never know until you try, heck I've liked some funny things in my time. But the signs were not good :

1) I am ferociously biased against novels written by 24 year olds and any novels written by anyone under 30. (Writing novels is like the opposite of pop music). Evelyn Waugh has squeaked by (*Decline and Fall*) and I guess you have to give Mary Shelley the nod too, then there's Dickens of course....ok, ok, MOSTLY I don't think people under 30 can write a good novel. Norman Mailer is no Mary Shelley, and he would have been the first to admit that.

2) I hate war stories – *Hamburger Hill*, *Platoon*, *From Here to Eternity*, I avoid them all. I did watch *Apocalypse Now* and *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line* and like, that's enough.

3) I thought I should read this because I was reading Norman Mailer's biography which is VERY ENTERTAINING but I just always wanted to be finding out what happened to NORMAN next not the boys in the jungles of Anopopei.

I can tell this is really a heck of an accomplishment, he commands his material fearlessly, ther's no holding back, he's a right know-it-all, and somebody needed to do a big honest novel about men in WW2 which could be set beside the big thumpers from WW1 (there won't be any great novels coming out of WW3).

So, for me this was a 2 star experience from a 4 star novel, abandoned a little shamefacedly but with relief.

Jack says

Probably the best war epic in the "from here to eternity" vein I've read. And all the more astonishing because mailer seems to have started that style - at least in America; I've not read Tolstoy. And then even more so because Mailer was only 24 when it came out. Definitely a spectacular first novel.

The problem is that it also confirmed for me that I'm just not all that into the war epic in the "from here to eternity" style. I admire Mailer's plot and character development on principle, and there are some brilliantly written passages. But the structure just doesn't click for me. I also thought the characters, while portrayed well, often fell into stereotypes.

The greatest touch getting at their humanity is how equitable is the time Mailer gives them. Deaths are not foreshadowed, nor are they parts of an arc. It's a war, and people often die without dramatic music to prepare the audience for what's coming.

Andrew Smith says

I can't recall how many years ago I tried to read this - probably 30 or more. I recall hearing that it was the best story about war ever written so, impressionable as I was at that age, I decided I'd have to read it.

My only recollection is that very early on there was a scene of such grim death and destruction that I felt physically sickened. Coward that I was (and probably still am) I gave up the attempt to work my way through this tome immediately.

I noticed an excellent review from a GR friend and it reminded me of this unfinished task (that of my failure to complete the book, not that of recording my failure to do so). So I'm now asking myself whether I'm man enough to give it another go.

I have no answer to that question at present. Maybe I will in another 30 years.
