

MM and NM

Taschen has published an expensive "art edition" re-issue the long out of print controversial Norman Mailer biography of Marylin Monroe, *Marylin*. It will, I think, make available what is one of the most underrated of Mailer's books. The book was controversial indeed when first published in 1973; charges of plagiarism and an attendant lawsuit from the authors of biographies used in his research put a pall over Mailer's interpretative accomplishment, and feminists and progressives were particularly at arms by the fact that Norman Mailer, of all people, had written anything at length about Monroe.

Mailer had, shall we say, a problematic relationship with women, personally and philosophically, during his public life and it was easy enough to accuse the late author of indulging in an kind of literary onanism, projecting his ego on the public perception of Monro, the actress and superstar, and inflicting those results on to us. I think it took courage on Mailer's part who, fully aware of his infamy regarding women's rights, birth control and his insistence on a cult of masculinity, to take on the subject of Monroe anyway (even, as Mailer has admitted, for the money) and to investigate his own conflicted perceptions of Monroe. Mailer is an arch romantic, and allows his prose to soar and swerve and swoop from great heights in an attempt to capture something about Monroe the cultural force that film criticism, fashion commentary and sociological analysis couldn't get near. This book contains Mailer's Private Marylin Monroe, and at the time it was published it was a florid, beautifully written, occasionally interpretation of the dry facts about Monroe's life and career.

Monroe is one of the central icons of 20th century American culture, no less than Elvis or JFK, and one ought not be surprised that dozens of smart writers like Mailer have taken their turns re-imagining, recasting, reinterpreting the life of historic figures. Mailer's interpretative biography, I think, is a well written, occasionally brilliant piece of speculation about the source of Monroe's persona and the effect she had on a generation of male psyches. He does the splendid trick of bold speaking of her as a sexual creature who honed her limited craft into an Art that could not be ignored, the notion that Presence itself sometimes suffices as a legitimate aesthetic gesture, and then qualifying his pronouncements that what he proposes, based on other people's facts, is his own conjecture. Monroes' career as an actress was entirely fascinating. Mailer's public musings on what she meant beyond the films she made is not less intriguing, even now.

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