

## ANALYSIS

*The Naked and the Dead* (1948)



Norman Mailer

(1923-2008)

“Mailer’s concern is with the individual and the way of life that formed him. He uses the shocks and tensions of wars as a corrosive agent which bites through to the hard core of truth about men. *The Naked and the Dead* is vastly more mature, intellectually, than the war novels of the twenties, with their romanticization of chronic mutiny. Artistically, it ranks comparison with the best of them.... It is a work of remarkable power, of amazing penetration, both into people and the determining forces of American life. Mailer has made his start with one of the most exciting American novels published since the end of the twenties.... *The Naked and the Dead* is not just a good book, it’s almost a great book.”

Charles J. Rolo  
*Atlantic*  
(June 1948) 114

“What he tells us is scarcely news, but it has the value of the authentic inflection, the undeniably accurate feel and shape of what happened, and not the echo of other books about other wars.... But Mailer has his own borrowings and his own conventions--Dos Passos and Farrell seem to be his chief literary influences--and by in large these stand in the way of his native ability to tell a story and depict a character. His main error was to cast his novel in the mass-novel form.... Actually...his novel deals with [a] close group of characters...and suffers from the added machinery of choruses and flashbacks.”

Raymond Rosenthal  
*Commentary*  
(July 1948) 92

“Among the war novels, Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* remains a monument to destructiveness and to man's inhumanity to men. No book with its range of characters, its emotional impact, its fierce contempt for human beings, its anarchical conception of any noble cause, its disparagement of any virtue, whether of honor, or kindness, or love, or justice, has been published for many a year. This long novel of the assault and capture of the small Pacific island of Anopopei was grimly ironical, but it had no humor; it was savage without the ameliorating touch of satire; its three hundred thousand words were so many bullets fired into the reader's mind; and yet for months it headed the best-seller lists everywhere.”

Harrison Smith  
*Saturday Review*  
(12 February 1949) 9

“Set on an island in the South Pacific, it tells the stories of the American general directing the invasion, of Lieutenant Hearn, his assistant, and of the men in the platoon Hearn takes over after a falling out with the general. Through flashbacks into the lives of the dozen or so major characters, Mailer gives a picture of the America that went into the war; through the detailed descriptions of fighting and the men under strain he examines the immediate effects of the war; and finally, in the relationship between Lieutenant Hearn and the general, he suggests the more subtle and far-reaching effects of the war on men's minds and personalities. The book is encyclopedic yet particular, both realistic and symbolic. It is generally considered one of the best novels by an American about World War II.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

“In 1948 Mailer--who was shortly to become a leading figure in Henry Wallace's campaign for the Presidency--subscribed to the notion that our postwar difficulties with Russia were the sole responsibility of American capitalism. We had gone to war against Hitler not because the American ruling class was anti-fascist, but because Hitler had shown himself unwilling to play the capitalist game according to the rules, and the next step was to dispose of Russia, the only remaining obstacle on the road to total power. World War II, then, was the first phase of a more ambitious operation, while the army had been used as a kind of laboratory of fascism, a preview of the kind of society that the American ruling class was preparing for the future.”

Norman Podhoretz (1999)

Michael Hollister (2015)

