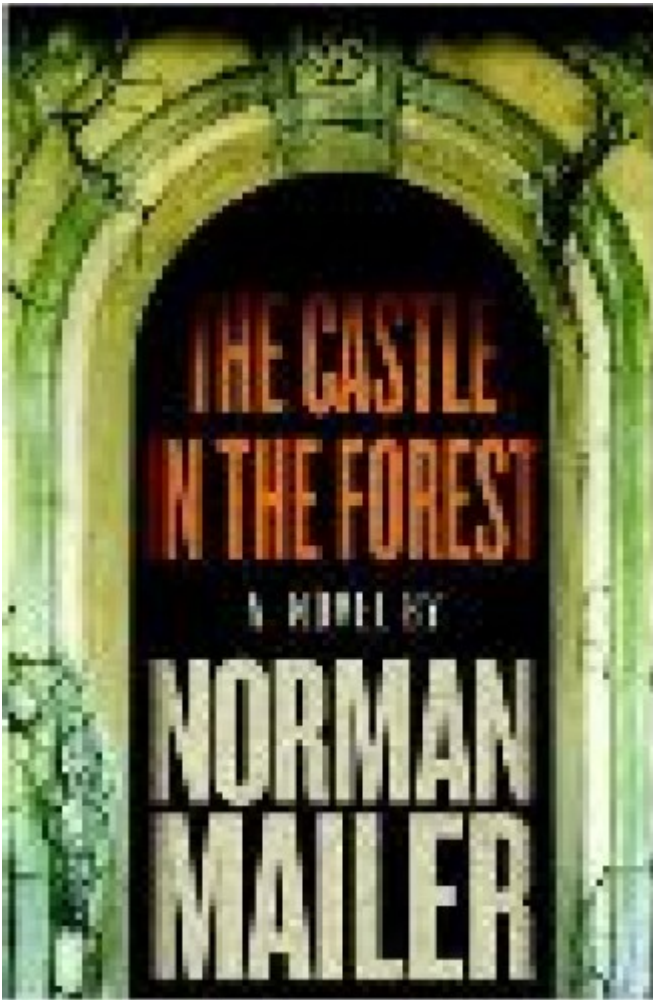


The Castle in the Forest: A Novel

reviewed by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [May 29, 2007](#) issue

In Review



The Castle in the Forest: A Novel

Norman Mailer

Random House

One of my favorite books is Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, a wild, imaginative, vicious satire about Stalinist Russia in particular and the modern world

in general. Bulgakov imagines a visit by Satan to Soviet Moscow, where all dutiful members of the intelligentsia are atheist. Having disposed of God as a possibility, they lack the intellectual resources to cope with a visit by the devil incarnate and are therefore thrown into disarray.

Something like the events in *The Master and Margarita* is going on in Norman Mailer's *The Castle in the Forest*. Mailer says that he is obsessed with Hitler, having been put on to the German leader by his uneducated but insightful mother when Mailer was a boy. *Castle in the Forest* is the first installment of a planned Mailer trilogy on Hitler's life.

To know Hitler and to explore how he produced evil on so vast a scale, Mailer turns away from psychological and historical reconstruction and toward his own imagination. It is as if Mailer has lost faith in the godless psychological and historical accounts and only supernatural fiction is capable of telling the whole truth about Hitler. Years ago, after I read Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* and *Marilyn*, he convinced me that while the facts uncovered by history are interesting truth, there is a sense in which fiction explores even higher truth.

Over the years, I too have tried to think about Hitler. (Like all good southerners I, like Mailer, am obsessed with evil.) I too have been frustrated by the results of the historiography. Even when history is done as well as Ian Kershaw's multivolume *Hitler*, one has the suspicion that there has to be something more, a lot more.

To think more than has been thought about Hitler, Mailer was forced to go to the source. We know very little from history about Hitler's early years. The führer did everything he could to hide and falsify his genealogy and the circumstances of his childhood; *Mein Kampf* gives his lying account of the way he wished he had grown up. Only the devil can tell the whole story. So *Castle in the Forest* is the devil's exposé of Hitler as a boy. Dieter, the demon-narrator, once was incarnate as a member of the SS.

Little Hitler, you will not be surprised, is a nasty piece of work. Dieter tells us that he was born into a troubled family—with an abusive, incestuous, repulsive father, Alois, and a pitiful mother who is trying to survive amid Alois's rapacious and drunken rages. Little Hitler was doomed to grow up as repellant as his older brother, Alois Jr.—only Adolf grew up even worse. He is not only cruel but disgustingly, imaginatively so—he infects his younger brother Edmund with a fatal case of

measles by slobberingly kissing him and thus gets him out of the way. Young Hitler thinks incestuous thoughts, masturbates frequently (in odd settings) and takes special delight in the suffering of animals.

Well, some children do those sorts of things. Yet none of them grow up to be the most notorious exterminator of humanity. As the novel ends in 1905, we are sure that 16-year-old Adolf is going to end up bad, very bad, but we still aren't sure why. While wandering through pages of familial perversity and grinding, low-level misery, I kept waiting for the great big cause that would finally account for Adolf. It never happens. If Mailer had focused upon Adolf's intellectual development or some of the cockeyed ideas that he got in his head, rather than upon his masturbatory activity, perhaps he could have brought us closer to the why of Hitler. In the end, Mailer seems to believe that Hitler was bad because he was born that way. Dieter says that early on the Maestro (as Dieter calls his boss, Satan) recognized that at birth little Adolf was a special case of the demonic. But the story Mailer tells about the family Hitler is boringly banal and unspectacular.

Hannah Arendt, at the end of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, writes famously of the "banality of evil." Mailer has said that he doesn't care much for her characterization of evil as banal. By making Hitler a masterpiece of satanic evil from birth, Mailer hopes, I suspect, to present Hitler's evil as supernatural, radical, something great and grand. The devil made him. Satan had to reach in and take personal, direct action at conception in order for there to be a human as inhuman as Hitler. And yet after 477 pages, Hitler comes across as not so much grand as simply disgusting. And banal.

So perhaps Mailer got it right after all, despite his intentions. Hitler's childhood is more banal than supernatural. John Milbank has warned that "talk of radical evil . . . falsely *galmourizes* . . . by rendering it outside all comprehension whatsoever, and thereby absolutizes it, granting it a demonic status equivalent to divinity. . . . This evil was really so impressive that we had better accord it a status in being equivalent to the Good." If Mailer meant to present little Hitler as something grand, a child of Satan, he failed. The devil's work is not that impressive or that triumphant, and Mailer's dabbling in the satanic and the supernatural is not as revealing or convincing as his portrayal of the repugnant and the banal. The cross has forever rendered Satan's work ugly and provisional.

For me as a preacher, Mailer's story of a noxious case of evil incarnate was somehow well worth the read during the Lenten season of ashes and the cross.