

March. (So insignificant is Mr. March that one reviewer referred to the family as a “single-parent household”). Other male characters violate the conventions of polite behavior, at least by 19th-century standards: as if they were cohabiting, Bhaer enters Jo’s bedroom without knocking, kissing her familiarly on the back of her neck.

Even Laurie (peculiarly called “Teddy,” which he rarely is in the book) does not escape feminist revision. His first gaze at the girls is salacious, and he professes interest first in Meg, then in Jo, and then in Amy, without ever making the reasons for these changes in his affections clear; one expects Marmee is next in his apparent determination to wed a March girl, *any* March girl. While in Europe, Laurie is reduced to a level of degradation undreamt of by Alcott: he swills liquor from a flask and associates with women of ill repute (as the bare legs of his overdressed companion suggest).

In an act of ultimate absurdity, children’s writer Laurie Lawlor has produced a novelization of Robin Swicord’s tin-eared screenplay of Alcott’s novel. Apparently, Columbia Pictures sees nothing peculiar about novelizing a novel, nor anything wrong with revising one woman’s vision to advance another’s political agenda. Only 133 large-type pages (in contrast to the 449 small-type pages of the unabridged Signet Classic), Lawlor’s dreary little polemic lacks Alcott’s style but maintains Swicord’s shrillness. It is, if anything, a parody of Alcott. Like the pre-Bhaer Jo, Lawlor is wasting her talent by pandering to her least informed readers’ prejudices.

By reducing the roles of Alcott’s men while artificially inflating the roles of the women, both movie and novelization attempt to bring Alcott’s characters into accord with politically correct feminism. What are produced, however, are shallow caricatures rather than complex human beings, for diminishing the male characters diminishes, correspondingly, the female characters. Concerned about the unwillingness of men to attend this movie, director Gillian Armstrong mused, “We could change the title.”

Perhaps Columbia Pictures should have changed the title to something more appropriate—*Little Women*.

Laurie Morrow is a professor of English at Louisiana State University.

Mailer on Madonna

by John Lofton

Years ago, in an article he wrote for the *New Yorker* titled “My Philosophy,” in a section subheadlined “Eschatological Dialects as a Means of Coping with Singles,” Woody Allen wrote: “We can say that the universe consists of a substance, and this substance we will call ‘atoms,’ or else we will call it ‘monads.’ Democritus called it atoms, Leibniz called it monads. Fortunately, the two men never met, or there would have been a very dull argument.”

Well, Democritus has, alas, finally met Leibniz, sort of. Norman Mailer has interviewed Madonna. He talked about this talk on national TV. And it was indeed *very* dull. In fact, what H.L. Mencken once said about Thorstein Veblen can also be said about Mailer blabbing mindlessly about Madonna, the “most famous woman in the world,” if we can believe the recent television movie about her life: he does indeed have unprecedented talent for saying nothing in an august and heroic manner.

When asked on *Good Morning America* why we should find Madonna fascinating, Mailer said: “I respect her because she’s not predictable. She’s one of the few artists we’ve had in America who is not predictable.”

Get serious, please! Whatever Madonna does, she is totally predictable. And what’s totally predictable is that she will do whatever a slut does. The woman is predictably vile.

Mailer: “What she does is always interesting and very severe. She’s got severe talent.”

Always interesting? I don’t think so—unless you’re a sex pervert and a voyeur. Severe? Again, not the best word to describe this wretch, since my dictionary, the last one I trust—Noah Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language*—defines “severe” as “not . . . indulgent . . . sometimes perhaps, unreasonably strict or exact; giving no indul-

gence to faults or errors . . . sober, sedate to an extreme . . . not lax or airy . . . nice.”

Mailer: “She’s not giving it [her ‘severe talent’] to us for too little.”

True. It costs a lot of money to attend Madonna concerts. And her pornographic books are insanely expensive.

Mailer: “In other words, what she’s saying, what she’s always saying, which the others don’t do, is that life is very difficult.”

Gosh.

Mailer: “[What she’s saying is that] there are extraordinary elements, there are profound contradictions, that we don’t know our own natures and we have to search for them.”

On the contrary, what Madonna proves is that John Calvin was right when he said our human natures are totally depraved until we are born again, made good by God. Indeed, Madonna proves that, if anything, Calvin understated the depravity of human nature.

A little later, Mailer says with a straight face that Madonna has tried to “fill the void” that Andy Warhol merely catered to. He says: “She has this feeling—when I speak of the void what I mean is that everybody has—you remember when Jimmy Carter made that speech about American malaise. And we’re beginning to feel it now, that there’s something wrong that we all feel, that there’s something wrong with American life. It’s not what it used to be. There isn’t that certainty we all used to have. We used to have a feeling 30, 40, 50 years ago that this is a great country and we’re gonna do marvelous things and now that confidence is no longer there. And that’s what I call the void: this empty feeling inside that things are not right and not going well.”

Ah, yes, malaise. I know the feeling well. In fact, I felt it at the precise moment I listened to Mailer blather on about Madonna. And yes, there is something wrong with American life. Proof of this fact is that Madonna is such a celebrity in our country, which, contrasted with 30, 40, or 50 years ago, is not great. If we *were* great today, no one would have ever heard of Madonna. She would have been deported years ago.

Mailer (for this one you should be seated): “Madonna is trying to find out what the nature of truth is. That’s why I think she’s a great artist.”

Madonna searching for truth? Madonna a “great artist”? Sure, like

Nero, who said when he committed suicide: "What an artist dies in me."

When Mailer hears that some people think Madonna is profane—you know, doing what she does with the name "Madonna"—he says: "Well, what can I say? She's daring and she's Catholic herself. So, she knows the price she's paying if she's wrong. She really has a kind of spiritual courage that is not small. She knows what the stakes are. I never met a Catholic who didn't know what the stakes were."

Madonna a Catholic? Perhaps, but in the same way in which Adolf Hitler was a Catholic. It was, after all, none other than Madonna who once said that she wears a crucifix because she thinks it's "sexy" to wear "a naked man."

Mailer: "And so, in that sense, the chances she takes are not small chances. And one reason I respect her is because she's transcended her talent. Her talent is good. But she has a touch of genius in the chances she takes, the way she brings them off, which makes her talent larger."

Well, yes, Madonna has "transcended" her talent with a vengeance, as has Mailer. This is known as the "Peter Principle." Dr. Laurence J. Peter wrote about it years ago in a best-selling book of the same name: "In a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to the level of his incompetence."

It is appropriate that Norman Mailer should be ga-ga over Madonna, since Mailer's own lifestyle has been rather—how shall I put it—eccentric, as reported by Hilary Mills in her book *Mailer: A Biography*. First, there is Mailer's stabbing of his wife Adele, at a party at his apartment in November 1960, where he informally announced his candidacy for mayor of New York City. As Mills recounts, "Only a handful of people were left by 4:30 A.M. when a very drunk Mailer walked in from the street with a black eye, a torn lip, and blood all over his fancy bullfighter's shirt. Adele took one look at him and spoke sharply. The accounts of her comment vary. George Plimpton was told that she said the equivalent of 'You look like you've been rolled by a couple of sailors in the back streets.' Others remember it as 'You look like a woman with lipstick on your mouth.' Mailer then took out a two-and-a-half inch penknife and went at his wife, stabbing her in the upper abdomen and back. One wound was later described as three inches deep and

three-quarters of an inch wide, a 'thrust near the heart.'

While Adele and a Detective Burns engaged in a post-stabbing discussion, Mailer taped "a bizarre television interview with Mike Wallace in which he described the knife as an instrument of manhood." Discussing what was then known as "juvenile delinquency," Mailer rejected the idea of disarming young hoodlums: "The knife to a juvenile delinquent is very meaningful. You see, it's his sword—his manhood." A better solution, Mailer suggested, would be to hold annual gangland jousting tournaments in Central Park, "which would bring back the Middle Ages."

To keep a long story short, Mailer finally pleaded guilty to third-degree assault. Almost a year after the stabbing, he received a suspended sentence with a probation period not to exceed three years. A 1962 book by Mailer, *Deaths for the Ladies and Other Disasters*, contained this "poem":

So long
as
you
use
a knife,
there's
some
love
left.

Eighteen years after he stabbed his wife, Mailer declared: "A decade's anger made me do it. After that, I felt better." Mailer has also played what Mills calls "matrimonial musical chairs," marrying at least six women.

Then there is Mailer's friendship with a criminal pen pal named Jack Henry Abbott, whom he helped get released from the Utah State Prison and who subsequently stabbed and killed a waiter, Richard Adan, on July 18, 1981. At a press conference, Mailer said of Abbott: "I certainly have the strongest feelings and hopes that Abbott will not get the maximum sentence. Abbott is a very complex man with great gifts. . . . It's far too easy to send him away forever." Noting that Abbott did not benefit from what he did, Mailer said: "The only people who have gotten anything from this whole mess are the ones who are calling for more law and order, and more law and order means moving this country toward a fascist state." When asked if it wasn't a gamble to let Abbott out of jail,

Mailer replied: "I'm willing to gamble with a portion of society to save this man's talent. I am saying that culture is worth a little risk. That's what I've been saying over and over for 30 years."

Mailer also helped "yippie" anarchist Abbie Hoffman by serving as the head of his defense fund when Hoffman surfaced after years as a fugitive from a cocaine charge. Not surprisingly, Hoffman, who committed suicide, says the "most influential essay" in his own wretched life was Mailer's "The White Negro," in which Mailer argues that it would take a certain amount of "courage" for "two strong 18-year-old hoodlums to beat in the brains of a candy-store keeper" because this would mean "daring the unknown." Hoffman first encountered Mailer at a lecture at Brandeis University in 1959. "Exhorting the crowd to fan out from the hallowed grounds of academy, [Mailer] predicted a New Age would be born in the gutters and back streets of America's bohemian underworld."

In Mexico, Mailer sought a "spiritual refuge" in marijuana, supposedly finding God while high. Pot, he says, "gave me a sense of something new about the time I was convinced I had seen it all." Also, while in Mexico, Mailer met an ex-prisoner who had just been in jail for killing his wife. The man who brought Mailer and this jailbird together says: "Norman became terribly fascinated with this guy and spent a good deal of the evening asking him, 'How did it feel? What was the exact reaction you had just before you pulled the trigger?'" Mailer later wrote of his time in Mexico: "I was finally open to my anger. I turned within my psyche I can almost believe, for I felt something shift to murder in me. . . . All I felt then was that I was an outlaw, a psychic outlaw, and I liked it."

Mailer says he was introduced to the concepts of "karma" and "reincarnation" in 1953 and agreed that these things "make sense." While in Zaire, Mailer began reading "Bantu Philosophy" and discovered that "the instinctive philosophy of African tribesmen happened to be closest to his own. Bantu philosophy, he soon learned, saw humans as forces, not beings. . . . a man was not only himself, but the karma of all generations past that still lived in him." When Mailer interviewed Jimmy Carter in 1976, he asked Carter "if he had any belief in reincarnation, in the reincarnation of karma as our purgatory here on

earth.” “Carter could only smile wanly.”

Once, when a Hollywood director asked Mailer to write a screenplay for Humphrey Bogart, Mailer refused. Why? “He was always turning down things,” said one of Mailer’s wives. “He always felt he would compromise himself. He was so puritanical [!] that he wouldn’t even do a radio talk show with some actress because he would have to say ‘Drink Pepsi Cola.’ His integrity was almost pathological.” After stabbing his wife, Mailer told a magistrate that it was important for him not to be sent to a mental hospital “because my work in the future will be considered that of a disordered mind. My pride is that I can explore areas of experience that other men are afraid of. I insist that I am sane.”

Mills quotes Mailer as saying: “The devil in me loves the idea of being just that much of a changeling. You can never understand a writer until you find his private little vanity and mine has always been that I will frustrate expectations. People think they’ve found a way of dismissing me, but, like the mad butler, I’ll be back serving the meal.”

And so Norman Mailer is. This “puritan,” whose “integrity” is “almost pathological,” this wife-stabber whose sanity is questionable precisely because he thinks he’s “sane,” now tries to serve us, of all people, Madonna. Oh, how right the Good Book is, specifically Proverbs 16:18: “Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”

John Lofton writes from Laurel, Maryland.

Susan Sontag

by Geoffrey Wagner

“Side by Side by Sontag” was the London *Observer*’s headline describing an evidently turbulent scene at the last Edinburgh Festival. The comedian Simon Fanshawe spotted a famous couple hobnobbing hard together—photographer Annie Leibovitz and her bosom buddy: “the great critic and writer Susan Sontag.” As the *Observer*’s “Arts Diary” put it: “Unable to contain himself, Fanshawe leapt across to pay unadulterated homage to Leibovitz. The absurd compliments gushed forth until Fanshawe finally extracted himself

with a brief nod in the aghast Sontag’s direction.” Reading this episode, a little bell tinkled in the mists of what memory my mind has left me.

Back in the early 60’s, I was living in an old stone house in Corsica: more particularly in the remote northwestern enclave of La Balange. This was, and is, a mountainous area of goat and sheep farmers whose relatives drifted over from *le continent* of a summer to spend the day sipping local D’Amiani pastis on the squares of tiny villages skewered to the nearest mountainside by 17th-century church steeples, and to play *boule* in the cool of an evening.

These hill villages, climbing up to Corsica’s glorious central massif of snow-capped mountains and dense fir forests, averaged about 300 somnolent inhabitants each. As Michelin still puts it: in winter, after the French *rentée des classes*, the population of the island is “faible.” It consists, in short, of the very young and the very old; “touching” their pensions, the latter perch in their corduroys and cummerbunds around the fountains of this or that old square. Any sudden activity beyond the shooting of wild boar or Marseilles *maquereaux* (viz. pimps) appears undignified in this clubman’s century-old preserve. The shepherds—or their sons and daughters—milk their flocks, placing their can roadside for pickup by the Roquefort van, to be aged in caves on *le continent* and sold to you and me as the celebrated cheese of that name.

Pleasant little notice is taken of the outside world, which makes the island a refreshing retreat from the likes of Madonna. Tourism is minimal in these hill villages, being confined to the beach fringes, my nearest then being Ile-Rousse. It was much nicer than St. Tropez, and probably still is. Television has come but back then there was none, nor any cinema, and no indigenous newspaper. For the latter, *Nice-Matin* sent over an island edition called *Nice-Corse-Matin*. I suspect its circulation was in the low hundreds, aimed chiefly at local politicians or (as with us) gangsters.

Hence I was startled one morning to see a Honda *vélo* furrowing up through the heathery maquis in the general direction of my house. The occupant of what had once been the saddle turned out to be José Mattei (almost everyone in Corsica is called José Mattei), stringer for said *Nice-Corse-Matin* and an old

friend; he appeared in a state of considerable, not to say unseemly, excitement.

“Susan Sontag est ici,” he gasped.

I was baffled, and not merely by his pronunciation. I had never heard of the lady, if such she were, and I fear it was a common omission at the time. José needed an interpreter since she could not speak French, or what passed for it in Corsica. So I donned my duds and climbed on the back of my own dilapidated put-put for the 30-minute plunge down to Ile-Rousse, where I was introduced to a discontented, overweight woman with spanielly dewlap cheeks, her head encumbered by what the French call curlers, *bigoudis*—hers pink. She told me in peremptory fashion to fetch her bags from the port; apparently her escort, an equally sulky young man strung with cameras like hungry tongues, could not summon the energy. Perhaps he was Corsican.

I was thus privileged to spend the morning running errands for the future recipient of the McArthur Award, plus translating from excruciating French into demotic Corse; it was only much later that I learned of her linguistic ability, when she was touting for a Nobel an obscure *mittel-European* novel she could not possibly have read, since it was couched in a ruritanian subdialect accessible only to four or five American academics; compared with it, the winner’s Icelandic poetry must have been kindergarten stuff for the explosive experts.

Sontag, it seemed, was merely passing through Napoleon’s scented island, spending the night but making sure, like him, of *getting her publicity*. And so she did, as reported in the *Nice-Corse-Matin*, whose clip of her equine features I still treasure somewhere (she had not gotten into the white forelock in those days). Meanwhile, the sheer cheek (or *toupie*) of landing on our little backwater and treating it as a staging point for personal publicity simply beat the band. The idea of deluding a respectable *caf’-conc’* barfly like José, about five-two in height and ready with his knife, into taking you as an international celebrity had me chuckling all the way back to my mountainous aristocracy of bleating sheep and grunting boar. It still does. Well done, Susan Sontag!

Geoffrey Wagner’s latest book is a novel, *A Singular Passion*. He writes from Grenada.