

Harlot's Ghost

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"The most daring, ambitious and by far the best written of the several very long, daring and ambitious books Norman Mailer has so far produced....Unlike just about every American writer since Henry James, Mailer has managed to grow and become richer in wisdom with each new book....There can no longer be any doubt that he possesses the largest mind and imagination at work in American literature today."

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Narrated by Harry Hubbard, a second-generation CIA man, HARLOT'S GHOST looks into the depths of the American soul and the soul of Hugh Tremont Montague, code name Harlot, a CIA man obsessed. And Harry is about to discover how far the madness will go and what it means to the Agency and the country....

A Main Selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club

From the Trade Paperback edition.

Born in Long Branch, NJ, in 1923, and raised in Brooklyn, Norman Mailer was one of the most influential writers of the second half of the 20th century and a leading public intellectual for nearly sixty years. He is the author of more than thirty books. The Castle in the Forest, his last novel, was his eleventh New York Times bestseller. His first novel, The Naked and the Dead, has never gone out of print. His 1968 nonfiction narrative, The Armies of the Night, won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. He won a second Pulitzer for The Executioner's Song and is the only person to have won Pulitzers in both fiction and nonfiction. Five of his books were nominated for National Book Awards, and he won a lifetime achievement award from the National Book Foundation in 2005. Mr. Mailer died in 2007 in New York City.OMEGA-1

On a late-winter evening in 1983, while driving through fog along the Maine coast, recollections of old campfires began to drift into the March mist, and I thought of the Abnaki Indians of the Algonquin tribe who dwelt near Bangor a thousand years ago.

In the spring, after the planting of corn, the younger braves and squaws would leave the aged to watch over the crops and the children, and would take their birchbark canoes south for the summer. Down the Penobscot River they would travel to Blue Hill Bay on the western side of Mount Desert where my family's house, built in part by my great-great-grandfather, Doane Hadlock Hubbard, still stands. It is called the Keep, and I do not know of all else it keeps, but some Indians came ashore to build lean-tos each summer, and a few of their graves are among us, although I do not believe they came to our island to die. Lazing in the rare joys of northern warmth, they must have shucked clams on the flats at low tide and fought and fornicated among the spruce and hemlock when the water was up. What they got drunk on I do not know, unless it was the musk of each other, but many a rocky beach in the first hollow behind the shore sports mounds of ancient clamshells, ground to powder by the centuries, a beach behind the beach to speak of ancient summer frolics. The ghosts of these Indians may no longer pass through our woods, but something of their old sorrows and pleasures joins the air. Mount Desert is more luminous than the rest of Maine.

Even guidebooks for tourists seek to describe this virtue: "The island of Mount Desert, fifteen miles in diameter, rises like a fabled city from the sea. The natives call it Acadia, beautiful and awesome."

Beautiful and awesome. We have a fjord in the middle of Mount Desert, a spectacular four-mile passage by water between promontories on either side. It is the only true fjord on the Atlantic coast of North America, yet it is but a part of our rock-hewn splendor. Near the shore, peaks rise abruptly a thousand feet to afford sailing craft the illusion of great mountains, and our finest anchorage, Northeast Harbor, is in summer a dazzle of yachts.

Perhaps it is the nearness of our mountains to the sea, but silences are massive here, and summers have an allure not simple to describe. For one thing, we are not an island to attract people who follow the sun. We have almost no sand beach. The shore is pebble and clamshell strand, and twelve-foot tides inundate the rocks. Washed by incoming waves are barnacles and periwinkles, rockweed mussels, Irish moss, red seaweed, dulse. Sand dollars and whelks lie scattered in the throw of the surf. Kelp is everywhere and devil's-apron often winds around one's ankles. In the tide pools grow anemone and sponge. Starfish and sea urchins are near your toes. One walks with care over sharp stones. And the water is so cold that swimmers who did not spend childhood vacations in this icy sea can hardly bear it. I have lolled in the wild green above the reefs of the Caribbean and sailed over purple deeps in the Mediterranean, I have seen the inimitable mist of hot summer on the Chesapeake when all hues blend between the sky and the bay. I even like slate-brown rivers that rush through canyons in the West, but I love the piercing blue of Frenchman's Bay and Blue Hill Bay, and the bottomless blue of the Eastern and Western Way surrounding Mount Desert—indeed, one's affection for the island even shares the local accent. As decreed by the natives, one spells it Mount Desert, but the pronunciation is Mount Dessert. The view is as fine as sugar frosting to a New Englander's eyes.

I speak in hyperbole, but then who cannot on recalling such summer beauties as the astonishing color of our rocks at water's edge. They are apricot, then lavender, and pale green, yet in late afternoon they become purple over the whole, a dark royal violet is the color of the twilight shore seen from the sea. That is our island in August. Beach heather and wild rose grow near the salt marsh grass, and in our meadows white-throated sparrows spring from one decaying stump to another. The old hayfields smell of redtop and timothy, and wildflowers bloom. The northern blue violet and the starflower, the wood sorrel and the checkerberry, painted trillium and wild geranium, golden heather and Indian pipe grow in our bogs and fields and on the sunny slopes of our mountains in the seams between ledges of rock. Down by the marshes are swamp candles and jewelweed. Once, when I was a boy (for I studied the names of wildflowers then) I found the white-vein orchid in some swampy woods; it was greenish-white, and lovely, and as rare as the moon entering eclipse. For all its tourist traffic come July, Mount Desert is still possessed of a tender yet monumental silence.

If one would ask how the monumental can ever be tender, I reply that such words recall us to the beautiful and awesome. So am I tempted, when caution deserts me, to describe my wife, Kittredge. Her white skin becomes luminous in any pale meadow; it also reflects the shadows of the rock. I see Kittredge sitting in such shadows on a summer day, and her eyes have the blue of the sea.

I have also been with her when she can seem as bleak as the March storms that strike this island. Now, in March, the fields are dun, and the snow, half-gone, will be stained in the morning with the stirring of the mud. In March, the afternoons are not golden but gray, and the rocks are rarely burnished by the sun. Certain precipices become as grim as the endless meditations of granite. At winter's end, Mount Desert is like a miser's fist; the dull shell of the sky meets a leaden sea. Depression sits over the hills. When my wife is depressed, no color stirs in my own heart, and her skin is not luminous but hooded in pallor. Except for snowy days, when island lights still dance off the frozen rock like candles on a high white cake, I do not like to live in late winter on Mount Desert. The sunless sky weighs over us, and a week can go by when we do not speak. That is loneliness kin to the despair of a convivial drinker who has not poured a glass for days. It is then that ghosts begin to visit the Keep. Our fine dwelling is hospitable to ghosts.

The house sits alone on an island, not ten acres of spread, just a stone's throw-literally one long throw-off the western shore of Mount Desert. Called Doane, after my great-great-grandfather, it is subject, I suspect, to visitations. While islands, according to my wife, are supposed to be more acceptable to invisible spirits than to such peculiarly apparent manifests as ghosts, I think we break the rule.

Out on Bartlett's Island, somewhat to the north of us, is the all-but-certified ghost of Snowman Dyer, an eccentric old fisherman. He died on Bartlett's in 1870 under the roof of his spinster sister. Once, as a young man, he had bartered five lobsters for a small Greek tome that belonged to a classics scholar at Harvard. The work was the Oedipus Rex and it had an interlinear trot. The old fisherman, Snowman Dyer, was intrigued so much by Sophocles' words in literal translation that he attempted to read the original Greek. Not knowing how to pronounce the alphabet, he contrived nonetheless a sound for each character. As he grew older, he grew bolder, and used to recite aloud from this unique tongue while wandering over the rocks. They say that to spend a night in the dead sister's house will bring Snowman Dyer's version of Greek to your ear, and the sounds are no more barbaric than the claps and groans of our weather. A corporate executive from Philadelphia, Bingham Baker, and his family now inhabit the house and seem to thrive on the ghost-at least, all the Bakers look pink-cheeked in church. I do not know if they hear the moan of winter in Snowman Dyer's voice.

Old Snowman may be the ghost of Bartlett's Island, but we have another on Doane, and he is not so agreeable. A sea captain named Augustus Farr, he owned and occupied our land two and a half centuries ago. There are allusions to his habits in an old sea-diary I have found in the library at Bar Harbor, and one voyage is cited "during which Farr engaged in practice of piracy" and boarded a French frigate in the Caribbean, took its cargo of Cuban sugar, put the crew to sea in an open boat (except for those who would join him), and beheaded the commodore, who died in naked state because Farr had appropriated his uniform. Then Augustus was so bold in later years as to have himself buried on his northern island-now our island-in the Frenchman's dress apparel.

I have never seen Augustus Farr, but I may have heard his voice. One night, not long ago, when alone in the Keep, I came out of a dream to find myself conversing with the wall. "No,

leave." I said boldly. "I do not know if you can make amends. Nor do I trust you." When I recall this dream-if it was a dream-I shiver in a way I cannot repeat at other times. My flesh shifts on my back as if I am wearing a jacket of lizard skin. I hear my own voice again. I am not speaking to the plaster in front of me but to a room I feel able to see on the other side of the wall. There, I visualize a presence in a tattered uniform sitting on an oaken and much-scarred captain's chair. An odor of corruption is in my nose. Out on the mud flats, or so I hear through the window-I do not dare to look-the sea is boiling. How can waters boil when the tide is out? I am still in my dream but watch a mouse streak along the floor, and feel the ghost of Augustus Farr on the other side of the wall. The hair stiffens on the back of my head as he descends the stairs to the cellar. I hear him going down to the Vault.

Underneath the cellar, it was originally a dugout built by my father after the Second World War when he still owned the Keep. He prided himself on being the first American to take in the consequences of Hirosh...

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