

RON ROSENBAUM

The Edgy Enthusiast



I hope you'll bear with me as I attempt to retrace an unusual chain of associations which led me last week from the International Surfing Museum to J.D. Salinger (him again) to the Dead Sea Scrolls, to James the more Jewish brother of Jesus, to Norman Mailer's vision of an impotent (well, non-omnipotent) God, to a very *outré* sexual act, once the specialty of certain Mexican whorehouses, that figures in a strange way in what may be a neglected novelistic prophecy of the hidden secrets of the Watergate scandal.

Let me begin with a call from a little town on California's surf coast, home of the International Surfing Museum, one of at least two museums of surfing history, each reflecting different spiritual conceptions of the evolution of surf philosophy, religious disputes (between long-board and short-board persuasions, for instance) of which I am an amateur student.

The call was from controversial Dead Sea Scrolls scholar-heretic Robert Eisenman, professor of Middle East religions and archeology at California State University at Long Beach, who, among other notable distinctions, is brother to deconstructive architecture theorist Peter Eisenman. I once wrote of the two heretical brothers that one deconstructs the orthodoxy of structural form in Western culture while the other seeks to disassemble the architecture of orthodox faith.

I'd gotten to know Robert Eisenman while researching a story (for *Vanity Fair*) a few years ago, one that took me into the murky, bat-infested caves of Qumran on the shore of the Dead Sea where the famous 2,000-year-old scrolls had been unearthed, and into the even murkier, sometimes even bannier controversies over the meaning of the Scrolls. In particular, the way the search for the fingerprints of God in a few tiny, nearly indecipherable scraps of ancient fabric had driven some of the most brilliant scholars in the world to madness, suicide, religious crisis, drink, heresy, bitterness and self-destruction.

Mr. Eisenman, a more hearty temperament, had channeled his passion into an ultimately successful drive to liberate the last unpublished scroll fragments from the clutches of an orthodox scholarly cartel. And was, when I last saw him in California, already mounting his next crusade: to link the Dead Sea Scroll writers' sect with the almost forgotten "Jerusalem Church" of James, the brother of Jesus. The Jerusalem Church is the long-neglected version of "Jewish Christianity" established after the crucifixion by Jesus' mostly Jewish followers, including the man named James, the man referred to in several New Testament passages as "the brother of Jesus" (and also generally regarded as the author of the New Testament "Letter of James"). Mr. Eisenman wanted to rescue the Jerusalem Church from the neglect and the erasures of orthodox church history, and to restore James

(rather than Paul) as the true (and truly Jewish) successor to Jesus. James and Paul seem to have split over the issue of making the Jesus movement more user-friendly to potential converts: Paul wanted to dispense with the painful requirement of circumcision. Paul prevailed, and James has been retroactively circumcised from history.

Anyway, Mr. Eisenman told me he'd been prompted to call because, while traveling in Spain recently, he'd come upon an issue of the *International Herald Tribune* that had reprinted David Streitfeld's *Washington Post* story on the forthcoming appearance of J.D. Salinger's last published story (*Hapworth 16, 192-f*) in hardcover. A story in which Mr. Streitfeld quoted me characterizing the long-unavailable *Hapworth* story as "the Dead Sea Scrolls of the Salinger cult."

Mr. Eisenman wasn't calling to protest the comparison, rather he had intriguing news: Viking would shortly be bringing out his 1,000-page-long study of *James the Brother of Jesus*, a book that is certain to stir up heated debates among Christian and Jewish scholars and believers. And don't rush to rescue the nearly erased, enigmatic figure of James from the oblivion his inconvenient cryptic presence has consigned him to.

One factor that argues for wider scholarly acceptance of Mr. Eisenman's thesis on the importance of James is that, in this book at least, he told me he will not be pressing his hotly contested claim that James was also the "Righteous Teacher" of the Dead Sea Scroll writers cult (most orthodox scholars insist that, although the Qumran sect may well have influenced the Jesus movement, their Dead Sea shore commune was sacked by the Romans before James and Jesus were born).

Instead, Mr. Eisenman told me he's focusing on James' role as leader of the Jesus movement after the crucifixion, on what Mr. Eisenman believes was the zealous, puritanical Jewishness of the Jesus movement in its earliest days, and on the way Paul and the "anti-Judaizers" among the early Church fathers—in their effort to define what became Christianity *against* its Jewish origins—tried to erase, rewrite and expunge James, and his Jewishness, from memory.

Mr. Eisenman believes that in seeking to recover who James was, in getting closer to the historical figure beneath the layers of rewriting and excising of the anti-Judaizers, we will be getting closer to who *Jesus* really was, and what He really believed. Getting closer to a far more Jewish Jesus than some Jesus believers will be comfortable with—although for many the "historical Jesus" has long been irrelevant to "the Christ of faith."

In any case, it was in the course of discussing the Jesus who can be glimpsed through the lens of James, darkly, that Mr. Eisenman brought up the subject of Norman

Mailer's forthcoming first-person Jesus novel, news of which had just surfaced. Mr. Eisenman expressed the hope that Mr. Mailer would not be relying upon the Pauline version of Jesus, the Jesus of the gospels, a figure who, Mr. Eisenman insists, was rewritten and reconceived by the anti-Judaizers.

I will not presume to predict the specific character of Norman Mailer's Jesus (although let me make note that my predictions here last November about Thomas Pynchon's as yet unseen new novel, *Mason & Dixon*, predictions based upon the title alone, were characterized as "amazingly close" by one of the few who has seen the much anticipated Pynchon manuscript, his publisher at Henry Holt, Michael Naumann). But I would venture to say that Mr. Eisenman need not fear that Mr. Mailer will be faithful to the conventional, gospel Jesus.

In fact, I've always felt that one of the least appreciated, most neglected aspects of Mr. Mailer's work is the heretical religious vision that has been at its heart almost from the beginning. Many people are so distracted by the pyrotechnics of Mr. Mailer's public persona that they don't recognize him as, ultimately, a *religious* writer, one who almost obsessively returns, in both his fiction and nonfiction, to a vision of an embattled God he had in the early '50's, a vision that he presses all his key characters—from the philosophical Hollywood pimp Marion Faye, in *The Deer Park*, to the "Gary Gilmore" he invents in *The Executioner's Song*—to obsessively express. I wouldn't be surprised to see that same vision show up in the ruminations of Mr. Mailer's Jesus, although I suspect he might give the most brilliant explication of it to Judas.

It's a vision Mr. Mailer shares, surprisingly, with a number of post-Holocaust theologians, the ones who have sought to explain the apparent absence or silence of the Deity in the death camps, by postulating a God who is *not* completely in control of things, a God who is not omnipotent, who has left man alone to contend with the radical evil unleashed on earth. In Mr. Mailer's typically combative variation of this vision, it's a God who is engaged in what looks like a losing heavyweight-title match with the Devil.

It's different from the Gnostic and Manichean visions it somewhat resembles in that, in those strict dualist visions, this world has *always* been the playground of the Devil. While in Mr. Mailer's vision, the issue is still up for grabs—a weakened God is still in the ring, battling, despite the battering he's taken from the Evil One. In Mr. Mailer's vision, we're part of the struggle: At every moment that we choose between a courageous and cowardly act, that choice strengthens or weakens the embattled Deity on the ropes in his bout with the Devil. We don't need God so much as God needs us.

Hey, I said it was heretical, and I'm not going to dwell on it any further except to say that I'm looking forward to both Mr. Eisenman's *James* and Mr. Mailer's *Jesus* as further brotherly adumbrations of Jewish heresies about the Jew who became Jesus Christ.

Those who have trouble accepting Mr. Mailer as a religious novelist—a heretic in God's corner—will have less reluctance. I as-

sume, in accepting him as a prophet of the Dark Side. I've always wanted to put on record what I regard as a remarkable moment of prophecy I've noticed in Mr. Mailer's 1964 novel *An American Dream*. I've always believed the novel (a still-electrifying, only slightly antiquated existential thriller) has not got its due as historical prophecy, envisioning as it did the C.I.A. and the Mafia and the Kennedys all in one seamy bed together covering up a murder, long before the closely linked C.I.A.-Mafia-Kennedy assassination plots (and C.I.A.-Mafia-Kennedy bed partners like Judith Exner) were exposed by Congressional investigations in the 1970's.

Either Mr. Mailer Knew Something back then, or he had the novelist's gift for tuning into the dark subcurrents of the *Zeitgeist*, intuiting the nightmare beneath the Dream. But I think some even *more* eerily necromantic facility was at work in his "plumbers" image in *An American Dream*, an image which rises to the level of a prophetic psychic anticipation. At the dark heart of *An American Dream* is a—literally—unspeakable sexual act. Unspeakable in the sense that even the Maileresque narrator cannot bring himself to describe it explicitly (it was 1964, after all)—although one can *guess* at it if one seeks to. A reference the narrator's wife makes to her enjoyment of this particular act with another man triggers the narrator's murderous rage in the opening chapter of the novel—a murder that draws down upon it a dark convergence of secret world (C.I.A., Mafia, Kennedy) cover-up forces.

It's a sexual act that is only described in the book as a specialty of a certain kind of prostitute in Mexican brothels who "will commit those acts which other prostitutes, for reasons of relative delicacy, refuse to perform." Those who do it are referred to in the novel as "plumbers."

But then, 10 years later, it turns out that "the plumbers" was the name the Nixon White House gave to the secret squad of "dirty tricks" operatives who would commit the covert acts of political espionage and sabotage that others, "for reasons of relative delicacy," refused to perform. It was the plumbers' squad who arranged the back-channel hush-money payouts to the Watergate break-in team through a Mexican dirty-money laundry. It was the plumbers' squad whose other major assignment was to expose the dirty secrets that linked the C.I.A., the Mafia and the Kennedys to assassination plots against Fidel Castro.

Coincidence or psychic anticipation? Was it just an accident that Mr. Mailer links dirty tricks performed by women called "plumbers" in Mexico to C.I.A.-Mafia-Kennedy intrigue, a *decade before* a dirty-tricks squad called "the plumbers" used a Mexican connection to stop leaks about Watergate? Once, at some party years ago, I actually, ill-advisedly, attempted to articulate my notion of his "plumber" image as prophecy directly to Mr. Mailer. I think my intensity at the time spooked him. In any case, with great humility, he disclaimed any prophetic intuition. But an epigraph from André Gide in one of Mr. Mailer's books pleads, "Do not understand me too quickly." Perhaps Mr. Mailer shouldn't understand himself too quickly.