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Mailer, Norman. *The Naked and the Dead*.
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"... they had forgotten everything; they did not think of themselves as individual men any longer. They were merely envelopes of suffering. They had forgotten about the patrol, about the war, their past, they had even forgotten the earth they had just climbed. The men around them were merely vague irritating obstacles into which they blundered. The hot glaring sky and the burning rock were far more intimate. Their minds scurried about inside their bodies like rodents in a maze, concentrating fruitlessly on first the quivering of an overworked limb and then on the smarting of a sore, became buried for many minutes in the agony of drawing another breath." These are the members of a reconnaissance squad, half the protagonists in *The Naked and the Dead*, at the last stages of total dissolution. The Pacific campaign against Anopopei Island has been leading up to this end with the gradual inevitability of time. Driven by their Sergeant, the lean, blood-hungry Croft—who has brought them by his own contriving on a back-breaking patrol that later turns out to have been utterly fruitless, unnecessary and unrelated to advance or victory—these men represent the physical break-up and the moral laniation of the individual in the face of the mass crumbling process of modern war. Fear, pain, hatred, bewilderment and the need to go on have ground their being in the teeth of the machinery of combat until all distinctions of personality have been submerged in the aggregate identity of suffering men.

There is no plot to *The Naked and the Dead*, just the beginning, middle and end of one little operation, a dot on the map of global conflict. What creates its tension and unfolds its larger dramatic consequences lies in the reaction, the laying bare of character in conflict, like raw nerves under the surgeon's knife. Big easy going Wilson from the South, a good natured animal with an obscene mouth, catches a bullet in his belly and through the lucid moments of his delirium lies baffled by the fact of his dying. Roughneck Gallagher out of the slums of Boston, hating Croft yet fearing him, and hating himself because of his fear, occasions the only poignant episode in a book whose core is hardness, when he continues to receive letters written weeks before by his wife who died in childbirth. "The first one came a few days after Father Leary had told him about her death; it had been mailed almost a month before . . . 'I been worrying about you, Roy, you're always so angry about everything, and I pray for your safety every night. I love you so much when I think of the baby, only sometimes I can't believe that it's going to come so soon'." Finally, "Roy, honey, this'll be the last letter I'll write for a couple of days, the pain started just a little while ago, and Jamie went down to get Dr. Newcome. I'm awful scared cawse he said I'm going to have a hard time . . ." Gallagher watching his wife die after she is dead.

Minetta pretends insanity in an endeavor to escape return to duty after a superficial wound. He hates the doctor, hates the army, hates anyone and anything to which he can transfer the onus of his shame and cowardice. Polack has been "figurin' the angles" since the ripe old age of six, an "operator" in the army sense of the word. Julio Martinez, the Mexican from San Antonio, is the best scout in the outfit, a proud American whom the rest affectionately call "Jupbait". Red Valsen from the mines, a rebel in the ranks, violently projects his earlier rebellion against the trap of life in a mining town against the symbols of authority. Only Ridge, the pious Protestant and Goldstein the pensive Jew manage to rise somewhat above the down-

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ward wrack and wrench of life under fire. Brown fawns on superiors, Wyman fails physically in operations, Roth falls on a mountain climb, three men dismal with weariness and fear.

General Cummings deeply realizing his botched failure at home seeks compensation in the mathematic of a martinet. His pleasures consist in humiliating Hearn, the aide, in masterminding the tactics of campaign and in dallying over the sexual symbolism of artillery. The last represents a frustration that trebles itself when he returns from a two-day absence to find that Major Dalleson, the unthinking drill-master, has broken the back of the Japanese resistance. Hearn is assigned to combat duty where he is killed through Croft's passion for action. Dalleson, slightly befuddled by his success, goes back to planning day-long, pointless programs for the occupation forces, while Cummings licks his wounds at Headquarters, a man shaken to the roots of his existence by the ironies of circumstance.

Far and away one of the best books to come out of World War II, *The Naked and the Dead* suffers from the best-seller complex of over-loading its guns with sex. Even the Dos Passos interludes of the *Time Machine* by which the author gives out the biographical data and the backgrounds of his characters, manifest a monotonous tendency to exploit puberty and the marital relationship. There is too, a wordiness in the writing that crops up now and then despite the chiselled quality of the dialogue, despite the subtle weaving in the fabric of each character's psychology. Here again, the interest of character misses fire on the unified impact of proportion. The inner tug and pull veers slightly to one side at times so that the dramatic effect emerges a little lopsided.

First novels sometimes herald the appearance of a writer of moment but the danger in most of them is that they frequently need a crutch on which to lean, some situation, plot or character that acts as a guarantee for its appeal to the public. The use of melodrama or the sensational for the sake of a loftier artistic end becomes understandable and excusable under certain circumstances. However, the tendency in the modern novel to guarantee popularity through the medium of sex exploitation while understandable, is neither excusable nor artistic. The early works of a Dostoevski, a Tolstoi, a Mann, and those of Melville and Henry James stand singularly free of this preoccupation with sex. Let the efforts of the writer succeed or fail according to his capacity for capturing the varied and integrated facets of human nature—sex not excluded—and he will effect a contact with the totality of the human person that makes the stuff of great literature, not merely an empiric report on the biological urges of man.

Norman Mailer is a Brooklynite with a Harvard Degree in Engineering, an ex-GI rifleman from Leyte, Luzon and Japan, ex-usher, soda-jerk, baker, cook, clerk, aerial photography expert. His writing has the virtue of honesty together with a forthright simplicity that is at first glance deceiving, so easily does it flow. If he can sustain the high quality of his beginning, tone down the amber accentuation of man as merely animal, he will undoubtedly produce a balanced realism and an acceptable, even a distinctly superior literature, for his style seethes with inherent power. As it is, he is one of the most talented, the most substantial of the new generation of writers. It is an unfortunate fault that the lecherous tone of *The Naked and the Dead*, its obscenity and general skulduggery, recommend it only to those professionally interested in literature.

Victor R. Yanitelli, S.J., Ph.D.,