

Book-review [i.e. review] : The Deer Park, by Norman Mailer

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BOOK-REVIEW

THE DEER PARK, by Norman Mailer; G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York.

This thick novel contains very little about homosexuality. Then why is this notice appearing in *Der Kreis*? Because in an article in the American magazine ONE, presented to European readers in German by *Der Kreis*, Norman Mailer admitted that he had shown the homosexual as a sinister and despicable type, admitted that this characterization was born of an unexamined prejudice, and declared that he did not intend to use homosexuals as fictional whipping boys in his future writings. Work on *The Deer Park* was nearing completion at the time Mr. Mailer wrote *The Homosexual Villain* for ONE. Although he warned us that his change of attitude had come too late to enable him to present the homosexual in that novel as he would now wish to do, he expressed the hope that he could avoid any serious injustice even if unable to do positive justice to this theme.

The Deer Park is a Hollywood novel. One of its minor characters is a juvenile lead who isn't so juvenile any more. Although rather a weakling he possesses a certain gentle integrity. In one of the finest chapters of the book, rich with insight and subtle satire, the waning star frankly declares his homosexuality to the crude ignoramus who is tsar of the studio for which he works and who is trying to bulldoze him into a marriage for publicity's sake. The over-ripe juvenile manages to hold his own in this interview with a sort of mild firmness which is very touching. The author could have made very effective fun of this character in this situation, but none of the grim humor of the scene is at the homosexual's expense, quite the contrary, in fact.

Towards the close of the novel Mr. Mailer's homosexual idol of an earlier generation of bobby-soxers publicly declares his friendship for a young criminal who is in jail and friendless. He performs this act of loyalty even though his own career is at an all-time low and he can ill-afford to risk bad publicity. His gesture is rather impressive in context because in the midst of all the lush erotic shenanigans of *The Deer Park* there occur a thousand betrayals, great and small, which act upon the reader like the bastinado.

The dwindling star discussed above is the only exclusive homosexual appearing in the book. His criminal friend is bisexual, a play-boy pimp who tortures himself and others with a religion of evil, born of a deep disgust for life, in its turn the result of having been reared in «The Deer Park» of Hollywood. I seem to recall that one of the feminine characters admits to having had what Dr. Kinsey might call «incidental homosexual experience» in the course of her extensive and elaborate love-life.

In dealing with the heterosexual Mr. Mailer takes the reader inside relationships and explores the intimate politics of the erotic life. But, while the fact of homosexuality as an ever-present element in human society is duly reported, Mr. Mailer does not attempt to explore the emotional, ethical and actual contents of the fact. Nevertheless, this

reader found *The Deer Park* a deeply moving book, because in the last analysis the humanity of the heterosexual and the homosexual is the same. But if heterosexual and homosexual are more alike than different in the essentials of their humanity, it is important to say that they are also alike in their inhumanities. Many of us tend to idealize heterosexual life, because we do not know it as intimately and realistically as we know our own way of life. At the same time we are often tempted to believe that homosexuals are especially faithless, heartless, cowardly, hedonistic, unstable, vain, exploitative. Now, among the heterosexuals of *The Deer Park* we find exposed all the tragic and distressing defects of character with which we become familiar in the world of «queens». It is cold comfort. But this observation suggests that decency has little to do with whom you love, man or woman, but with how you love. In the immortal words of that old blues-shouter, Miss Edith Wilson, «A good man . . . is mighty hard to find.» Yet, God help us, we try . . .
Luther Allen.

A dirty book

by John Bowen

Late last year Peter Wildeblood's book *Against the Law* was published by Messrs Weidenfeld and Nicholson; it was reviewed in «Truth» by Ludovic Kennedy. Mr. Wildeblood, one of the defendants in the «Montagu Case», had been sentenced to eighteen months' imprisonment for a homosexual offence, and his book is an account of the events leading up to the trial, and of his experiences in prison. In it he propounds three theses; that homosexual acts committed in private between consenting adults ought not to be considered criminal, that in any case prison is an environment that encourages homosexuality and not cures it, and that, in Wormwood Scrubbs in particular, living conditions are so squalid that, whatever the deterrent effect of prison may be to most criminals, its rehabilitating effects do not exist, and that in this respect English prisons compare unfavourably with the prisons of the USA, the USSR and many continental countries.

Against the Law is written seriously and without self-pity. It has been favourably reviewed in *Truth*, *The Spectator*, the *New Statesman and Nation*, *The Observer* (in which Eward Crankshaw has listed it as one of his «books of the year»), the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Listener*. The *News Chronicle* carried a leader on it; the *Daily Express* and *Empire News* quoted from it in their news columns. It has appeared at a time when the Church Council, the BMA and a Royal Commission (before which Wildeblood himself has given evidence) have all been concerned with the position of the homosexual in our society, but all its topicality and its serious sponsorship have been unable to keep it from being considered, in certain quarters of respectable