
Norman Mailer

Ancient Evenings

Title: Ancient Evenings

Author: Norman Mailer

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Description

Egypt, 1100 B.C.: a narrator without memory ("I still did not know who I was, nor how old I might be") finds himself in the Necropolis, in the tomb of young, dead nobleman Menenhetet the 2nd...& only slowly realizes that he's in fact "nothing but the poor Ka" of Meni II. An unnerving, disorienting, promising beginning for this 700-page novel--but then, alas, the Ka of Meni II meets the Ka of his great-grandfather Meni I, a much-reincarnated High Priest who will be the primary narrator in the six long, lifeless sequences that follow. In "The Book of the Gods," Meni I offers a minihistory of Ra, Isis, Horus, Set et al., seen in terms of "shit, blood-sacrifice & fucking" (especially homosexual rape--a major preoccupation throughout). In "The Book of the Child," Meni II remembers a childhood visit--with father, mother Hathfertiti & Meni I--to Pharaoh Ramses IX, an endless evening during which Meni I tells the four-"Book" story of his previous existence in the bygone era of Ramses II: he is the Pharaoh's Charioteer & rape victim ("I was no longer myself but His, & loved Him...but I also knew I would never forgive him"); he's a leader in the Battle of Kadesh against the Hittites (powerful war scenes), indulging in cannibalism; he then becomes "Nanny of the harem," consorting in kinky rituals with the sorceress/courtesan Honey-Ball (but also having threesies sex with the Pharaoh & a pig); next he's courtier/lover to Nefertiri, the Pharaoh's dumped queen ("you fucker, give Me your obelisk," she murmurs); eventually, in life #2, he'll become High Priest. & while Meni I's reminiscences go on & on, Meni II's passive father sleeps (one can hardly blame him)--but the 6-year-old Meni II himself becomes increasingly aware of the sexual cracklings in the air: the lust between Ramses IX & Hathfertiti, the sexual secrets of Meni I and Hathfertiti...&, above all, Meni II's own simmering "desire for my Mother" (they'll indeed become lovers). Did Mailer's research into Ancient Egypt reveal a cultural fixation on Oedipal incest, fellatio, anal rape & castration anxiety? Or is this a willful projection of Freudian preoccupations onto the world of the Pharaohs? Whichever the case, the result is oddly stagnant fiction--straining to conjure up a nexus between mysticism & sex. Though there are passages of vividly exotic Egyptology, along with a few of coarsely amusing anachronism, this flatly episodic epic most often seems embalmed in its own obsessions--with little to reward the many readets who'll be drawn by the Mailer name & the media interest.--Kirkus

Insightful reviews

Amy: I rarely don't not find.ish a book, but sadly this was a struggle that I chose not to continue.Sorry N.Mailer!

Chris: Really Norman? An anal & incest fetishist's interpretation of the whole Osiris myth? Not only is that disrespectful to Egyptians, but obscene to people who care about mythology. I didn't care to read it long enough to find out if Menenhetet was just putting his own filthy twist on the myth, or if Norman really thought it was ok to have their Gods corn-holing each other just because Egyptian pharaohs wanted to keep their genes pure by copulating with their own family. This ghastly choice of context only reiterates his own twisted psychology. Holly was right, dude has issues... many many issues.

Gave it an extra star for the style.

Sara: In a recent [post on my blog](#), I spent a good deal of time discussing how ancient Egypt receives a disproportionate amount of popular attention as far as classical history goes. And then I promptly began reading a novel by Norman Mailer set in ancient Egypt. I learned about Ancient Evenings (and a number of other extremely interesting books) from a post by Wilfried Houjebek on the original and worthwhile site [SpaceCollective](#). Houjebek describes it this way:

"[Ancient Evenings] is the autobiography of a Ka, the lowliest soul of the seven souls of the ancient Egyptians, which makes for unusual reading. Especially because Mailer uses an uncensored version of Egyptian mythology which, to put it mildly, differs from the version you get of it from the National Geographic. The Egyptians practised sex magic with the stamina of a bonobo. Mailer makes Aleister Crowley look like a prudish schoolboy. This is the boldest attempt to recreate a radically different mind from ours that I know of, and does so successfully."

Strangely and despite my bellyaching about all of the historical attention paid to ancient Egypt, reading this novel has underscored how seldom ancient Egypt has been explored in fiction. Science fiction has adopted Egypt as an aesthetic treasure trove from which to draw tropes and visuals (much like fantasy has used the Middle Ages), but fictive explorations of historical ancient Egypt remain scarce. Ancient Evenings in this respect certainly provides a thrill on par with Apocalypto, Mel Gibson's cinematic rendering of the pre-Columbian Mayan civilization. For reasons best known to the 100,000th author to set a novel in Victorian London, we rarely get to place ourselves imaginatively in certain more neglected places and periods. It is a treat to go along with an author or filmmaker while they portray these lesser attended worlds and their inhabitants.

To work, this kind of venture requires at least a gesture towards the detail and methodological sophistication of an adept historian. It is not sufficient to project one's modern sensibility into a premodern time period; neither is it useful to envision all precursors to our modernity as quaint, rubish versions of ourselves. That kind of shortsighted anachronism seems clunky and unconvincing even when applied to time periods much closer to our own (a great - by which I mean rather dreadful - example of this is *One Thousand White Women*). The author undertaking such a project ideally realizes that past cultures operated not just in different material worlds than we do, but within truly foreign paradigms and cosmologies. The cultural assumptions upon which they based their value systems, their ideas of self and of the world depart radically from our own. When executed with sensitivity, such a project demands not merely sound research but a real shift of one's entire epistemological framework.

I think Mailer understood this and attempted it sincerely. He not only spent a good deal of time researching the world in which he set this novel, but his narrative choices exhibit an awareness that ancient Egyptians viewed the world and humans' place in it in a profoundly different way than do we. Their minds were not our minds. It took Mailer 10 years to complete *Ancient Evenings* and, without being an expert on ancient Egyptian civilization, I can offer that every time I looked up a reference which seemed either farfetched or peculiarly well-imagined, a factual basis existed for it. I have actually become so curious regarding the breadth of Mailer's research that I procured a couple of academic histories about ancient Egyptian society and culture. I expect by reading them to form a more complete opinion concerning Mailer's level of

scholarship and authenticity* in portraying ancient Egyptians, but I suspect it is rather high.

Authenticity and historical imaginative responsibility aside, the book possesses other artistic merits. Mailer has given the novel a story-within-a-story narrative structure reminiscent of *The Thousand-and-One Nights*. As indicated above, we do begin with our protagonist Menenhetet's ka, or vital spark - that essence which distinguishes the living from the dead - as he awakens in an Egyptian necropolis and realizes he is dead but cannot remember who he was. Slowly, Menenhetet's ka recalls himself and, soon, meets the ka of his namesake great-grandfather. The story moves across generations, telling the story of the elder Menenhetet's four previous lives, and involves tales of charioteers, concubines, and priests, embroiled in wars, palace intrigue, and religious rituals; and yet, through Mailer's careful emplotment and through the almost supernatural connection of his ancient Egyptians to each other and to their own history, the reader gleans a coherent narrative from the maze. In contrast with *The Thousand-and-One Nights*, the story-within-a-story structure of *Ancient Evenings* supplies a feeling of unity rather than the Arabian tale's feeling of disjointed rabbit-holing.**

The most self-contained narrative episode of *Ancient Evenings* relates the story of the deities Isis and Osiris. But again, while discrete, this story adds much to the arc and cohesion of the novel as a whole given the centrality of deities to daily Egyptian life (and so, to Menenhetet's lives). The tale of Isis and Osiris introduces the reader to the main players in the Egyptian pantheon and also offers a good example of the gods' vacillating powers, aspects, and associations with one another. This information proves useful as we crawl into Mailer's well-realized, and highly religious, ancient Egypt. It also begins to inure us to the litany of sex acts, detailed descriptions of which we will have to wade through in order to make it to the end of this 700plus-page book.

Mailer does a reasonable job of linking sex to some sort of spiritual alchemy. Most Bronze Age cultures situated procreation and fertility, metaphorically and actually, at the center of their religious mythologies and rituals. Mailer's ancient Egypt reflects this. Sex comprises an exchange of power, equal or unequal depending. The sexual activity of the pharaoh, indeed all of his physical experiences, are tied to the land itself and to the vital cycles of the Nile. Sex can establish something like a psychic link; although in general Mailer's Egyptians are capable of hearing each others' thoughts and even seeing each others' memories. In short, sex certainly has a relevant place in the world of Mailer's story. Nevertheless, the endless (if inventive) sex scenes made me feel half like a baffled and enthralled, probably giggling, child nervously flipping through a pilfered porn magazine; and half like a bored adult, scoffing and rolling eyes, because I have actually had sex and now these images do not feed my curiosity, but seem superficial and disappointing.

I do not here lodge any accusation of rank sexism at Mr. Mailer, nor am I calling *Ancient Evenings* pornography. I have formed the distinct impression that Mailer truly used, or felt he used, his depictions of sex to communicate the centrality of sex-as-act and sex-as-metaphor to the spirituality of ancient Egyptians. That is, he does not treat his descriptions as gratuitous and I believe he meant by them to reveal how open and un-tabooed Egyptians behaved with regard to sex. Mailer's sex scenes tend to punctuate if not always further the plot. The sex he describes does not only involve bodies, but egos and psyches as well. Additionally, he references most

types of sex imaginable: between men and women, men and men, women and women, people and animals; participants range from two to the hundreds (seriously, you have never seen battle depicted like this); oral, anal, manual and anything else you can imagine occurs; he portrays sex as it demonstrates (for both sexes) love, lust, domination, curiosity, rage and friendship; sex for Mailer's characters can yield shame, elation, or insight. As with actual sex in the actual world, the meaning all depends on context and participants.

In this way, I would not call Mailer's use or depiction of sex sexist. I am, however, tempted to call plenty of it juvenile. Mailer definitely crafts female characters with more agency than round-mouthed blow-up dolls, but the drives of their sexuality still seem to mimic the drives of men. They use sex the same way men do; they want the same things...ahem...thing. Compiling a list of Mailer's euphemisms for the penis would yield a monotonous, if periodically amusing, read. And this goes back to the feeling I kept getting while reading the novel; that I was, in fact, peeping at girly magazine. *Ancient Evenings* is not like porn insofar as it has a higher purpose than portraying sex for titillation. It is exactly like porn insofar as it is so profoundly phallicentric as to seem frequently comical.

The male member is described, referred to, manipulated, named, and prized to a farcical degree by Mailer via all of his characters. Women and at least one of their erogenous zones are not ignored certainly, and some female characters (only the most powerful and goddess-like, however) are more three-dimensionally drawn than others, but female sexuality as a whole in *Ancient Evenings* retains the unidirectional telos and *raison d'être* of porn: it's all about the cock.

True, many modern portrayals of sex, pornographic and otherwise, echo Mailer's phallic obsession. It is possible that ancient Egypt simply resembles our own time and place in this respect, but I rebel against this thought. I find the omnipresence of phallic symbols as fertility symbols very believable, but I assume Egyptians would know and employ other symbols as well and that female symbols of sexual power might also engage their sexuality. *Ancient Evenings* is an otherwise well-imagined portrayal of a people for whom the powers-that-be appeared more sexually balanced than strictly patriarchal, and who validated women's sexual appetites (and so, I dare to hypothesize, understood and even indulged them). It would have been refreshing to read about a group of women who do not behave as though they were reared on the assumption that their own sexuality exists primarily for the use and pleasure of men; or that their sexuality mirrors, in perfect inverse, that of men.

Observing the many-columned Temple of Hatshepsut, Pharaoh Ramses II says to the elder Menenhetet: "Only a woman would build a temple with nothing but cocks". (278) And there is no satire in this comment, no inkling of a minor truth that women learn when still little girls and continue to observe as the boys they know become men: many, many males are fascinated by their own dicks and project this fascination out into the world (and on to females) with an astounding lack of self-reflection. I suggest, only a man would imagine a woman would build a temple with nothing but cocks.

*Whatever "authenticity" may mean in this context.

** Small wonder given the folkloric and oral provenance of *The Thousand-and-One Nights*; I intend no criticism of that amazing work.

Don: Mailer exhibit ambitious erudition during this huge account of dwell within the court docket of the Pharaoh Rameses II as informed to his descendent, Rameses IX by means of his courtier, Menenhetet who's no much less that the fourth reincarnation of a prior Menenhetet who had served as a charioteer on the conflict of Kadesh and later as common on the head of the armies of Egypt. The account blends jointly the politics of the traditional global with a non secular point of view during which the Gods in hundreds permeate each point of truth and make of the king of the traditional land one among their ranks. however it is a faith of unsatisfied in addition to strong gods, with one in torment looking to intrude with the efforts of humankind to placate people who find themselves within the ascendancy. The extra subject is intercourse and the function that it performs in consolidating the ability family members among people and the god, the notables and the lesser ranks, correct the best way via to the most common humans and their enemies at the battlefield. Buggery and fornication is everywhere, and is even anticipated if the typical order of lifestyles is to be maintained. the ladies of the court, Nefertiri, the Hittite Queen Ma-Khrut, and during the IXth, Hathfertiti, in addition to the 'little queens' of the harem play an entire position in mediating the sexual/magical politics of the state.

Caitlin: because the reports under suggest, this may be a 1 megastar or a five megastar for you, yet not likely to be something a lot in between. i am keen on Mailer - for his cockiness, his absolute conviction of his personal brilliance, for the sentences whose constitution make me drop my jaw and laugh, for insight, and for buggery. Who else might write a sprawling Egyptian epic filled with dirt of roaches and make it so completely mine? i admire this better of all he is written and give it some thought greater than the remainder combined. God support me if i will be able to let you know precisely why. This booklet made me consider like a child back - wanting to show yet another page.

Leo Robertson: this can be a strange one. This is, I think, what Stephen King used to be attempting to say approximately writing even enormous books around the size of a season and no longer. Few authors can pull off greatness in terms of initiatives they carry directly to for too long. They get complicated, overly dense, they carry onto passages that are supposed to be snipped out, they disregard the eureka second that spurred the writer to jot down them, they be afflicted by Will Self's everything-itis. Heller was once winning with whatever occurred and sure different books of his, but if it involves tomes as dense as William H. Gass', i admire what John Gardner said: "The distinction is that my 707 will fly and his is just too encrusted with gold to get off the ground." I'm thoroughly not able to consider extra dense tomes in the intervening time simply because I simply woke up, yet confidently you spot what I'm asserting :). Mailer did an entire load of study for this one and desired to pack loads of Egyptian background into this book. However, this suggests compromising much on placing the reader right into a scene. What I suggest is, on the way to create a publication this dense, Mailer has to take advantage of loads of narrative precis and many that factor you're bored of analyzing in reviews, usually patronisingly italicised: telllllllling now not shoouooooowing. For example, i'll say "On the twenty second of February 2013, I shot the relations cat." Or i'll say "Heat. Light. For the 50th fucking time I woke up with the feeling of a stinging scratch like a feline-sized rapier sliced out my left cheek again, yet newly accompanying this used to be a creeping vengeance in my core: Mittens used to be fucking getting it. I stumbled out of bed..." etc for, like, 20, a hundred pages. Whatever. yet in stretching out the story (tail lol) I lack compression and am not able to place such a lot of occasions in my book. but when I compress too much, I'm now not portray a

scene for the reader. And this is often the place Mailer understandably suffers. He couldn't select what to concentrate on, so he installed everything. This booklet will be might be 7 assorted volumes which include an absolutely extended story, each scene painted in Mailer's top Proustian prose, but when this used to be the case, may I learn them all? most likely not. might I take pleasure in quantity 1 of that elevated e-book greater than I loved this? Probably, yet I'd even be left with the dissatisfaction that I'd started a sequence I didn't are looking to finish. So I settle for this sense as an inevitability of the project. Like a sub-par Vollmann or a Pynchon mis-step. yet when it comes to literature overall, that also ranks it approach manner hugely :)

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