

The Castle in the Forest by Norman Mailer. Little Brown 2007.

A new novel by Norman Mailer is always an event, and as the author's years increase an achievement also.

The Castle in the Forest provides irrefutable proof that Mailer, in his 85th year, has lost none of his powers as a story-teller, or as a controversialist.

This is a fictional account of the family into which Adolf Hitler was born in 1889, particularly dwelling on his father Alois, an amoral goat of a man who cut a swathe through all the available women wherever he happened to be living regardless of whether or not he was married at the time, and whose retirement obsession with bees provides a powerful paradigm for his infamous son's later social vision; his mother Klara, who may also have been his sister, and his other siblings.

Mailer brings to life the modus vivendi of the family, the atmosphere in the family home, and the relations between the family members; he clearly lays the ground for the man and the monster that the adult Adolf would become and does so persuasively.

Perhaps the greatest stroke of genius is in the person of the narrator, an assistant devil who is both able to speak from the midst of whatever is happening and to take a more distant, historical perspective.

Many of the familiar Mailer themes, not least sexual and scatological, are present in abundance, and apart from one significant digression into Tzarist Russia, which didn't enhance the novel in my view, this is a powerful and memorable book by a master.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh