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THE NORMAN MAILER WRITERS COLONY

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The Norman Mailer Writers Colony
627 Commercial Street
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He was terribly confused. He tried to separate the ringing in his head from his memories. They ran away, he thought. He had seen them drive across the plateau that drained west of the escarpment, had watched them until they were out of sight. The tire tracks he had crossed floated in his mind. Only one set of tracks, he realized. The truck had never left. How could he have been so wrong?

As if to offer comfort, the elder caressed Ian's forehead. The man's hair, shot with gray, looked nutmeg. It was as if his great age had worn the shine off the strands and leached away the pigment. His eyes were luminous, though, beyond the touch of time. Ian thought of the dingoes that gazed into his spotlight. The dogs always waited, knowing he would leave the kangaroo's heart and liver and kidneys for their feast.

Suddenly he understood. This man, with his cockatoo feathers and precisely painted designs, was a shaman. Ian had been lured into the cult just as he had been tricked into speeding down the highway the week before. He smiled and reached up.

"There now," the man soothed, and flicked his blade across Ian's throat.

LAINE CUNNINGHAM, after camping alone for six months in the outback, began performing traditional Dreamtime tales and the music of the didgeridoo. She owns and operates a book editing service in Asheboro, NC, and is working on her second novel.

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James Jones

The James Jones Literary Society announces its annual \$10,000 award for a first unpublished novel and \$250 runner-up honorarium. Submission deadline is March 1, 2005. For eligibility and guidelines visit:

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James Jones First Novel Fellowship
c/o English Department
Wilkes University
Wilkes-Barre PA 18766

The Second Annual Conference of the THE NORMAN MAILER SOCIETY

will be held in Provincetown on November 13, 2004

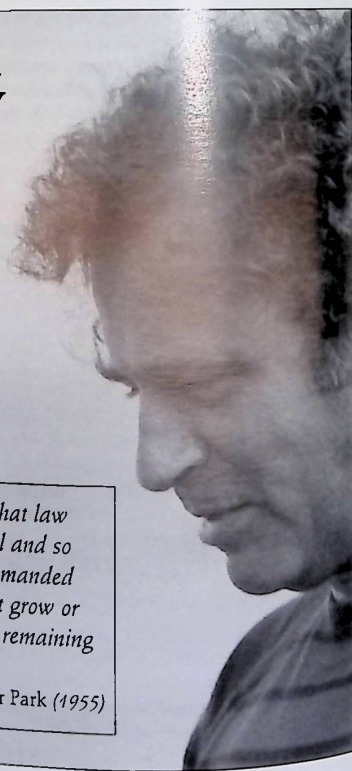
The conference will present panel discussions on Mr. Mailer's life and work highlighted by an evening reading for Society members at the new Provincetown Theater. Other sessions will be held at the Provincetown Inn (a block of rooms has been reserved for Society members), the Fine Arts Works Center and the Pilgrim Monument & Provincetown Museum. Registration is \$80 before October 1st (\$100 after), and includes continental breakfast, catered lunch (with speaker), cocktail reception and admission to all panels and Mr. Mailer's reading.

Only members may attend the conference events.

Annual dues are \$20/person, \$25/couple, \$250 for life membership. To join and to register for the conference, send your check, made out to The Norman Mailer Society, to David H. Light, Treasurer, 75 Jennings Lane, Windham, CT 06280. Email: dlight@snet.net

"There was that law of life so cruel and so just which demanded that one must grow or pay more for remaining the same."

The Deer Park (1955)



Nine Letters from NORMAN MAILER, 1963-1966

Norman Mailer has said more than once that *An American Dream*, his fourth novel, may be his best. Controversial when it appeared, it is now generally seen to contain his most richly evocative and lyrical prose. This 100,000-word narrative follows the activities of a former congressman and war hero, Stephen Richards Rojack, now a professor of existential psychology and public intellectual. He murders his aristocratic wife in chapter one and things go up and down for the next 32 hours in this opera of a novel—a libretto was written in 1969 by Charles Matz. At the conclusion of *An American Dream*, the following note appears: "Provincetown, New York, September 1963-October 1964." He wrote parts of the first, serialized version (which first appeared January-August 1964 in *Esquire*) in Provincetown and completed the revised version (published by Dial Press in March 1965) there as well. In the letters Mailer wrote to friends, family and literary associates during the months of composition, and later as he read the reviews, the intense effort required by his self-imposed challenge of writing a novel to deadline in the manner of Dickens and Dostoyevsky is almost palpable. But Mailer also comments on other events in his life—his marriage to Beverly Bentley, the births of his sons Michael and Stephen

and the publication of his 1963 volume of essays, *The Presidential Papers*—as well as the national trauma of Kennedy's assassination. Dictated in moderate haste to his secretary, Anne Barry, the letters are nevertheless rich in cultural insight and filled with Mailer's marvelous metaphors. The nine letters presented here are taken from a recently published edition containing 73 of Mailer's letters on *An American Dream*. Norman Mailer's *Letters on An American Dream, 1963-1966* was published earlier this year in a limited edition by Sligo Press (67 S. Pioneer Ave., Shavertown, PA 18708). J. Michael Lennon, Mailer's archivist, who resides with his wife Donna part-time in Provincetown, edited the volume, the first selection of Mailer's correspondence to a variety of correspondents to appear in print. Lennon is also the editor of Mailer's collection, *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing*, published by Random House in 2003. He wishes to gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the students in his Norman Mailer seminar, spring 2003, Wilkes University, Wilkes-Barre, PA. They are: Helene Capnari, Monica Cardenas, Justin D'Angelo, Patricia Dibble, Katherine Green, Mark James, Marcia McGann, Sabrina McLaughlin, Jessica Skutack and Gregory Specter.

TO: ANDRE DEUTSCH

Mailer's letter to Andre Deutsch is the first to lay out the plan of serial publication of a novel in *Esquire* followed by hard cover publication by Dial Press and soft cover publication by Dell Books. Deutsch (1918-2000) was the principal director of Andre Deutsch Limited, Mailer's British publisher from 1959-1966. Mailer married Beverly Bentley (1930-), his fourth wife, in December 1963. Alain Robbe-Grillet (1922-) is a French novelist known for the flat, objective descriptions of his novels. The "big book" Mailer refers to is the one he promised in *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), a novel "fired to its fuse by the rumor that once I pointed to the farthest future and said that within ten years I would try to hit the longest ball ever to go up into the accelerated hurricane air of our American letters." Walter Minton was the president of Putnam's, Mailer's American publisher for four of his books from 1955-1967, but not, as the letter indicates, *An American Dream*, which was still unnamed at that time. Charles "Cy" Rembar (1915-2000) was Mailer's first cousin, longtime lawyer and sometime literary agent, although it was Mailer's new agent, Scott Meredith (1925-1991), who helped broker the deal with Dial and Dell after Mailer himself sold the idea to Harold Hayes (1926-1989), the editor of *Esquire*. Corgi, an imprint of Transworld Publishers Limited, published the soft cover British edition of *Advertisements for Myself* in 1963. Diana Athill (1917-) was an editor and director at Andre Deutsch.

142 Columbia Heights
Brooklyn, New York
October 15, 1963

Mr. Andre Deutsch
Andre Deutsch Limited
105 Great Russell Street
London WC 1, England

Dear Andre,

First, a long belated thank you for the cook books, which Beverly [Bentley] received with glee and from which I expect to draw dividends over the years. They are, by the way, damn good books. I read parts of a few of them just for pleasure. They stack up very nicely against [Alain] Robbe-Grillet.

Much has happened since I saw you and doubtless you've had wind of it. I came to the grim conclusion over the summer that I was just not going to be able to do the big book well, considering my financial situation, because

although the advance royalties were quite decent I still would have been able to work only two weeks a month on the novel and the other two weeks would have to be given over to getting my pen hired for the best going price, or else giving lectures for fees. These secondary activities are always chancy and they open the danger of using up more effort than is commensurate. So I decided the only way out of my impasse was to dare a bold stroke. I contracted to do a novel in eight installments for *Esquire*, talked Walter [Minton] into releasing me for one book, and managed to sell this absolutely unwritten work for an incredible sum to Dial and Dell. This is in the strictest confidence, but they are paying me \$125,000 against the hard cover and paperback rights and so of course this solves my difficulties for a year or two, or ideally three or four. Now all I have to do is write a first-rate novel in eight months, and I can tell you this gives me pause. At any rate, I won't be working on the big novel for about a year (I think I'll need four months to recuperate from the next eight months) and that was why I told Cy [Rembar] to tell you that I didn't wish to draw royalty payments yet.

Now as far as this new book goes, I'm quite ready to work up a contract with you right now if you so desire, but I think it might make more sense to wait and see how the book turns out. If it's a good book I might ask you for a fairly good royalty for it. If it's a bad one, I obviously could not. But if we wait there at least would be no feeling of A) holding you up or B) giving something away. And you can have my word and my hand across the sea on it that I will certainly give you first and complete crack at the book. In any case I don't feel there's a vast rush on this—at least I'm in no hurry. So if you'd like to wait and see what you're buying, that will be fine with me. Incidentally, to the best of my understanding all this happened very quickly, the paperback rights have already been bought by a subsidiary of Dell who paid a vast price—twenty-five grand, my friend, again in the strictest confidence. What bothers me about this last is that I've been very pleased with Corgi for the job they have been doing, but the English paperback rights were tied into this deal and I had reluctantly to go along with it, since Dial and Dell were paying so much for the American rights. I'm going to write a letter to Corgi today so they won't bounce too hard when they get the bad news.

And when I see you this January—I certainly hope you'll be making a trip this year—I'll tell you the story of how the ante got up so high. It's a rare account of the mating habits of that most curious bird—the American publisher.

Say hello to Diana [Athill] and my best to you,

Norman

TO: MICKEY KNOX

Knox (1921-), one of Mailer's closest friends, met Mailer in Hollywood in the summer of 1949, which Knox recalls in his memoir *The Good, the Bad and the Dolce Vita* (2004). In the late 1960s, Knox acted in the dramatic version of *The Deer Park* and two of Mailer's experimental films. Mailer met the poet Richard Wilbur (1921-) in Paris in 1948. The book he refers to in the third paragraph is *The Presidential Papers* (1963), the dust jacket of which depicted Mailer sitting in a Kennedy-style rocking chair. Joan was Mickey's third wife and the sister of Mailer's second wife, Adele Morales (1925-). Mailer's friend Roger Donoghue was a professional boxer in the 1950s and early 1960s. Mailer introduced him to his wife Faye Mowery, a Provincetown native.

142 Columbia Heights
Brooklyn, New York
December 17, 1963

Dear Mick,

The Kennedy thing hit very hard here. Women were crying in the streets (mainly good-looking women), a lot of middle-aged Negroes looked sad and very worried, and then we all sat around in gloom and watched the television set for the next seventy-two hours. Altogether it was one of three events having something profoundly in common: Pearl Harbor Day and the death of Roosevelt being the other two. And the Ruby-Oswald stuff was just too much on top of it. I haven't felt like writing a word about the whole thing, I've been too fucking depressed every which way. The main loss I think was a cultural one. Whether he wanted to or not Kennedy was giving a great boost to the arts, not because Jackie Kennedy was inviting Richard Wilbur to the White House, but somehow the lid was off, and now I fear it's going to be clamped on tight again.

As for Oswald and Ruby, I don't know what was going on, but I don't have the confidence we'll ever know. I'd like to believe that the FBI had a sinister hand in all of this, but somehow I doubt it. I suspect the real story is that two lonely guys, all by themselves, put more grit in the gears than anyone ever succeeded in doing before, and it's just a mess, a dull miserable mess.

The book of course falls by the side in all of this, one of the million minor casualties. With Kennedy alive it was a good book, but with him dead, it's just a curiosity, and somehow irritating in tone. I don't even mind the loss of it in a funny way.

As for the movie piece, there's been a startling lack of interest in it, and no nibbles at all. I think if someone had five or ten million bucks, it could make a great movie. But I suspect it's not going to be bought

until something else I write is made into a movie and makes a lot of money. The trouble with it is that it's not the sort of thing that can be done by an independent producer or on a small budget because to be successful it would need epic treatment.

Which somehow brings up your remark about "intellectual adventurer." I'd forgotten that you'd said it, but your mention of the fact brought it back to me, except that you mentioned it in an altogether different way, using the phrase approvingly. The character around Kennedy who said it was of course using the term spitefully.

As for the debt, I guess you're right. I had of course not forgotten the cruel repayment I exacted by giving you that C.K. research project. Somehow I had the impression there was another debt. I realize now, thinking about it, that I'm dead wrong. So accept my apologies, old buddy. When you're back, we can exchange wedding presents. Incidentally, I saw Joan one night at the fights. She went with Roger and Faye [Donoghue] and I held up the other end because Beverly was tired that evening. We were sort of friendly but a bit cool, and she was kind of sweet, got tired early, and went home early. She said something about going back to Europe sooner than she originally thought she would. Who knows, she might even be missing you. As for the wedding itself, Roger was not excluding you. The only people present were Bev and me (because I was the best man) and a girl named Fifi Bergman who was bridesmaid for Faye. At the last moment Faye's best friend and her boyfriend arrived from Pittsburgh, but it isn't as if fifteen or twenty people arrived and you were passed by. That's the truth, Mick. Roger's really fond of you. I've never heard him say a really bad word about you. You're right that Roger doesn't have too much sympathy with my ideas, but then, what the hell, Roger was still taking his pitch from the *Journal-American* when I met him, and while I've had some influence on him I expect I'd be surprised if I had had a really large influence because we started from preconceptions which are too far apart.

The scene here is quiet. Much hard work for me and then more hard work. I'm plugging away on the serial and now have gotten through the third installment. It's a pretty good book so far but I just hope and pray I can keep it up, because the strain is tremendous. It's like being an old pro and fighting an eight-round fight when you're not in the best of shape. Anyway, if I can bring it off, next year ought to be more relaxed.

I'm damn sorry you left when you did. It always takes us a couple of weeks to loosen up around each other and the time was a damn shame because I think we're really getting to the point in our lives where our respective ears are getting better and we can listen more carefully to what each other has to say. The passing glimpses you've given of Yugoslavia are fascinating and if you get a chance, let me hear a little more of your impressions.

Love,
Norm

TO: FRANCIS IRBY GWALTNEY

Mailer served in the Army with "Fig" Gwaltney (1921-1985), a teacher, novelist and native of Arkansas. During a visit there in March 1975, he introduced Mailer to the woman who became his sixth wife, Barbara Norris Church Mailer (1949-). Stendhal (1788-1842), Marcel Proust (1871-1922) and James Joyce (1882-1941) are writers much admired by Mailer.

142 Columbia Heights
Brooklyn, New York
December 20, 1963

Dear Fig,

Now you've really got me curious to read the rejected novel. Is your only copy at Secker and Warburg? Or could I get a chance to see it? I don't want to moralize, but the difficult thing about writing well when one is angry is that the truth of it tunes up one's whole body

physically so you tend to lose the cool sense of each moment passing into each new moment in your book. That sense of knowing when you're right and when you're getting off your balance. I know when I'm mad, I tend to accelerate not only in the physical speed with which my hand writes down the words but I also telescope the progression of the ideas and so something which makes sense internally to me is hysterical in its external manifestations. If it weren't for this difficulty I think anger might be the best single emotion to write out of, for it firms up one's balls and burns out all the half-shitty half-loyalties to people who we don't really like or admire.

I'm working sixty days ahead of publication (that's my automatic deadline); I've now finished the first three installments of the serial. Everything is fine so far except that I can't describe a screw as thoroughly as I might like to, and I ain't moving quite as fast as I should be moving. In the first three parts I don't think I've gone a quarter of the way. It's a little like giving a course and taking too long on the earlier writers so you find you have one lecture left for [Marie-Henri Beyle] Stendhal, and a half lecture for [Marcel] Proust, a half lecture for [James] Joyce. But writing the serial is in itself fun. It makes me work.

Since it's been eight years since I've set out to write a novel and finish it, I think I would have taken forever to get somewhere if it weren't for the fact that I have to make my decisions in great haste and stick by them. It's a little like playing ten-second chess. You have to take the bold choice each time, because you know you can depend on getting something out of the bold effects—the subtler choices may prove too subtle and fail to come to life in the speed with which you have to write. I don't know how good the book will be, but it's interesting writing a serial. I'm not so sure I'll say when I'm done, I swear, never again. Since I, like you, used to be very much of a second, third, or even fourth draft novelist, it occurs to me that much of the possibility in this may have developed over the last twelve months when I was writing against a deadline once or twice a month and so formed the habit, for better or worse, of having my first drafts become the basic body on which the final result was clothed.

Anyway, that much for shop. Bev is coming along nicely and should have the baby by the middle of March. She hasn't put on any weight

TO: DIANA ATHILL

Mailer complains here of the way the British edition of his novel is described in the Deutsch catalogue of forthcoming books.

597 Commercial Street
Provincetown, Massachusetts
July 5, 1964

Dear Diana,

On the negative side, I have only a few comments for the catalogue page. I think "evil wife" oversimplifies too much. I think "tragic, tormented, half-evil wife" or something of that ilk might be more satisfactory. Also, "sane love" with *Chatter* sounds hygienic. "To find some part of his dream of love" might ignore what we need. Outside of that, I think it's fine. But I also think you're giving away much too much by saying that *An American Dream* is "unlike" "mannerly British fictions," for it seems to me that the virtuous aspect of *An American Dream* is that it is so mannered a book. Violent people always are mannerly, or chaos would result if there were not a spectrum of manners in their dealings with each other. Now this has always fascinated the British—[Dashie!] Hammett, [Raymond] Chandler and forth. But of course the manners they showed there were essentially false ones. The reality is curious and somehow subtler, and I was trying to get toward that reality in *An American Dream*. But I think it would be a serious mistake to abdicate from any claims this novel can make in the dominion of manners, because it is precisely by

TO: EIICHI YAMINISHI

Mailer never met Yaminishi, his longtime Japanese translator.

597 Commercial Street
Provincetown, Massachusetts
July 7, 1964

Dear Eiichi,

This is just a quick note. By now, ideally, you've received the last three installments (six, seven, and eight) of *An American Dream*, and so you can think about the book as a whole. Much of the news you have heard about the novel is untrue or inaccurate. For instance, it will not be published in October or November, but in January. Same for England. And it has not been sold to the films. Warner Brothers took an option but of course may decide not to buy it. That of course is all by the bye. The book may make a vast amount of money, it may not—but what it has done is to provide me with sufficient income so that for the next two

since this summer except around the middle, and we're both looking pretty good, although I am definitely on the plump side. If I get any fatter I'll need an old skinny gal like Ecey to shake some life into me. But now you tell me Ecey's getting plump too. God almighty.

As for *The Presidential Papers*, I'll send you off a copy tomorrow. I was working so hard on the serial that I goofed on preparing a list of friends to get the book, and so practically no one I know has received a copy. Only my enemies. The publicity girl at Putnam blithely went ahead and sent out copies to people I don't even speak to. That's the literary life, dear friend. Incidentally, you'll find the book very odd reading. Like everybody else, I discovered I cared a lot more about Kennedy than I thought I did, and so his death was directly depressing, and turned much of what I wrote. A lot of it seems off balance now. Anyway, let me know what you think.

And love to Ecey, Yee Yee, and Frank, Jr.
Merry Christmas
Norm

the play of manners that I've tried to tell the story. One could even go so far perhaps as to argue that the novel is a study of the bizarre, incisive, and very elaborate manners of some of the kinds of people who live in the social worlds and under-worlds of New York. So I think we might emphasize the book is in its way as mannered as a novel by Henry James. What creates the—it is to be hoped—fascinating confusion is that the material is closer to a Mickey Spillane.

By the way, Diana, how do you all feel about the end of the book? There's been not a word about that from Andre [Deutsch] or from you. If you're unhappy, now's the time to talk, because I hope to put in about five to ten thousand words and take out a little of the old, all of this to be accomplished by September 1. Since I'm also going to do the Republican Convention, there'll be only a few weeks for this, probably from August 10 to September 1. But in the month between, there would certainly be time to get your comments. Please believe me, I'm not so delicate as to be afraid of negative comments. And this can go right down to the individual sentences. It's really a good idea to let me know now whatever bothers you and Andre. Of course, if the end is a vast disappointment to you... But then I hope not. I was so tired by the time I finished I was willing to accept any external verdict that it was very good or very bad. The good remarks I heard were that it was very good, but then it was the agent and publisher who said that, and they're not exactly similar to the critics in their interest. At any rate, give us a reaction.

Best for now,
Norman

years I can concentrate on doing the best writing of which I'm capable without fear or wonder how to meet my expenses.

Apart from the fact that this was a commercial book (that is, one of the basic motives for its conception was the desire to make a great deal of money) it is also my attempt to write as good a novel as possible under the circumstances, and as I think you will see, the book, while conventional in many aspects, is also unusual in its "psychic world," and may in this sense go further than any novel I know. Incidentally, I'm going to spend a few weeks this summer making changes in the text. They will be little changes, but numerous ones. For that reason, I would suggest you do not start your translation until the middle of September when I can give you the final copy, unless it should prove necessary to go to work earlier. If that proves the case, we'll have to figure a way to send you the changes. That of course will mean more work for you and more work for me. At any rate, dear Eiichi, my best to you for now, and hope that all is well with your fine family, so many good sons and daughters.

Warmly,
Norman

TO: DIANA TRILLING

Trilling (1905-1996) was a literary critic and wife of the Columbia professor and man of letters, Lionel Trilling (1905-75). Her 1962 essay, "The Radical Moralism of Norman Mailer," which appeared in *Encounter* in November 1962, is perhaps the most intelligent examination of Mailer's work through Advertisements for Myself. Mailer did meet Iris Murdoch (1919-1999) during his visit to England. Gilles de Rais (1404-1440) was a Marshall of France during the Hundred Years War. Accused of satanic beliefs, he confessed to torturing and killing over 100 children and was executed. E.M. Forster (1879-1970) wrote a series of novels of English social life in a crisp, ironic style.

142 Columbia Heights
Brooklyn, New York
March 25, 1965

Dear Diana,

It's perfect, but after all our talk about how reliable I am, I now pick up the pen (what a metaphor this has become) to tell you that we must go ahead and make plans for my appearance at Oxford even though I may never get to England at all. (That will touch you, darling, to be so genteel and fucking liberal) but you see, I'm having a disagreement at the moment with my British publisher. I don't like the jacket, I don't like the blurb, both of which of course they had to do themselves, and I told them I won't come to England unless we can agree on the kind of publicity. Knowing Andre Deutsch, he will probably want me to go on a round of television and radio appearances, and since I don't do that in New York for a book, I don't see any reason to do it in London. So I have posed other possibilities to him, and now must wait to see if he will agree. Odds are much better than even, however, that I'll be in England, the main reason being that I want to go. So look, let's set a date, I leave it to you, any time after the 23rd, except perhaps publication day, which is something like the 26th or 27th—a phone call to Andre Deutsch in London (Langham 2746-9) will establish the day, and then let me know which day you've chosen. It will be yours.

Now what I'd like ideally is a dinner for eight at your house and then perhaps a few more people in afterward. One can't possibly get to talk

to sixteen or twenty people at dinner by any method known to man, and the Senior Common Room, while appealing to the novelist in me, and very suitable and exciting if it should come to pass, promises still less in the way of a delight than dinner for eight in the charming small house you seem to possess. Surely even at Oxford people have been known to drop in after dinner. Isn't that remotely possible? I have only one firm request: you must get Iris Murdoch for dinner. I loved her novel, *The Severed Head*, and have always wanted to meet her since.

The reception of *An American Dream* has been—believe it if you can—more schizophrenic than anything of mine which preceded it. I've gotten the very best and the very worst reviews I've ever received. John Aldridge of all people, writing in *Life*, of all the places, said in effect that I was doing the most important writing in the country since Faulkner. Stanley Edgar Hyman in *The New Leader* said it was a dreadful novel. Philip Rahv detested it, so and so loved it. As you can guess, I've enjoyed all this secretly very much, because no vice of mine could be greater than my desire to create a sensation and be forever talked about. Sometimes I wonder, beloved, if I am the ghost of some long-dead London beauty. Well, well, I expect the British will give me good whipping with the thinnest strings of leather for the outrages I've committed in the name of literature. But when you feel in the mood, you must write me what you think of the book, even if you don't like it at all, although I suspect you might just like it, it's an extraordinary novel in its funny fashion, extraordinary, that is, in what it does with the art of the novel, whether for good or ill. It's as if Gilles de Rais had captured the style of E.M. Forster and was running amok with it. So far of course none of the critics have had even the remotest notion that the real debating ground of *An American Dream* is precisely on how it does and does not contribute to the grand art of the novel but I get them so poisonous and upset they can't think straight, and that always tickles my devil, for there is no sight in all the world quite so funny as an intellectual who is too agitated to think. They are then like elephants without a trunk, nothing but his popotami.

Love,
Norman

TO: JOHN W. ALDRIDGE

John W. Aldridge (1922-) became friends with Mailer in 1951 shortly after Aldridge's *After the Lost Generation: A Study of Writers of Two Wars* appeared earlier that year. It contains the first major appreciation of Mailer's work; Mailer wrote an introduction to the 1985 reprint. Aldridge went on to write extensively about Mailer, including reviews of most of his books. Elizabeth Hardwick (1916-) wrote a scolding review that appeared in *Partisan Review* in the spring 1965 number. Richard Poirier (1925-) wrote a very warm review of the novel in *Commentary*, June 1965. In 1972 he wrote Norman Mailer, perhaps the most perceptive study of the first half of Mailer's career. William Phillips (1907-2002) was the longtime editor of *Partisan Review*.

142 Columbia Heights
Brooklyn, New York
April 23, 1965

Dear Jack,

I've held off sending you a batch of reviews, because there seemed no order to most of it. Just New York, dependably, whenever a review was done by someone who lived in New York, the review was bad. There is of course no vast mystery to this. The book was around in serial form for eight months and every literary mind in New York had an opportunity to test his message on every other literary mind, so the intellectual establishment was all bad. Philip Rahv bad, Elizabeth Hardwick in *Partisan Review*, Stanley Edgar Hyman in *The New Leader*, so it will go.

Only Richard Poirier in *Commentary* will be good, and that's not out until June. Also, grand surprise, *National Review* had a rave done by Joan Didion, who writes very nicely. At any rate, I'm getting together a batch of duplicates, and I'll send them off with this letter to you. But could you send them back after you've glanced through them, for I think then I'll be mailing the same set on to my daughter in Mexico. Finally, I decided to take out an ad in *Partisan Review*. Elizabeth Hardwick's review was so bad that I decided to oppose it with yours. Originally I planned to use your entire review on two pages, but William Phillips decided that was impossible because of the smallness of the print. And so he cut a couple of hundred words out. I just hope he did the job well. I wasn't here at the time, I was in Alaska, giving—what else—a lecture. And so was unable to see the copy before the deadline. He's conscientious, however, and so it should be all right. Although I must say cutting that piece of yours is not so easy.

The book received such violently opposed reviews that—forgive this weighted metaphor—it was as if the intellectual crust of the nation were suffering a seismographic fault. It was not just the virulence of the bad reviews, except they weren't good on their own terms, and usually they are. The put-down was declarative rather than analytical; the weight of the indictment seemed to be placed by most New York intellectuals on the improbability of the plot, which is of course the given. That the narrative clichés were chosen precisely because I felt they had been despised so long that a novelistic magic had returned to them seems not to have occurred to Rahv and Co. And so the tone of their reviews is puzzled, irritable, full of loud statement and bad faith. Like an uncle displeased with a nephew and profoundly worried. But

TO: LOUIS and MOOS MAILER

The late Louis Mailer was the brother of Mailer's father, Isaac Barnett "Barney" Mailer (1891-1972). He and his wife Moos lived in South Africa but visited the U.S. several times. The first stage version of *The Deer Park*, in two acts, was presented at Act IV, a theater on the corner of Carver and Bradford Streets in Provincetown in August 1966, with Beverly Bentley as Lulu Myers. *Cannibals and Christians* (1966), Mailer's third miscellany, was published by Dial on 29 August 1966. Beverly gave birth to Stephen McLeod Mailer, their second son, on 10 March 1966. Basil is the son of Louis and Moos.

565 Commercial Street
Provincetown, Massachusetts

September 25, 1966

Dear Louis and Moos,

I haven't written in ages. Please forgive me for not answering your fine letters, but this summer's been unbelievable. I haven't worked so hard in years I got going at a great rate on a new novel and then just about the time I was half way through, everything in the scheme of things diverted me over to an old adaptation of *The Deer Park*, which I rewrote and

TO: WHIT BURNETT

Mailer's story "The Greatest Thing in the World" won *Story* magazine's national college contest and was published there by Burnett in November 1941, marking the beginning of Mailer's literary career. His undated letter prefaces a selection from *An American Dream* describing the murder of Deborah by Rojack that was published in Burnett's 1970 anthology, *This is My Best: In the Third Quarter of the Century*. Mailer's letter is perhaps his most considered and perceptive comment on the novel.

Dear Whit:

Sometimes it seems useful to think of two kinds of novels—novels of manners, and modern explosive surrealistic novels in which the very notion of society, let alone manners, is bulldozed away in order to see what strange mutations of fish and what buried treasure comes up in the ore. Out of my work I suppose *Why Are We in Vietnam?* would most satisfy the latter category, and *An American Dream* might prove for some to be my most substantial attack on the problem of writing a novel of manners. They are

changed from a five-hour play to a two-hour play. We did it up here in Provincetown in a theater Beverly helped to start (she is, by the way, a superb actress—woe is me—I'm not used to other talent in the family), and the play turned out well enough to be moved to New York. So we're going to put it on Off-Broadway this winter and if all goes well, it might be exciting, indeed. I have some hopes at any rate. As for the rest, all is well. Mother's recovered completely from the operation, which proved, of course, not to be necessary—when will people finally realize that medicine exists first for the sake of doctors and their beastly hospitals. *Cannibals and Christians* came out and, to my surprise, received fairly good reviews. If Dad hadn't taken care of it, I'm going to make certain a copy gets to you.

As for the boys, Michael is all box-office, prima donna, narcissistic, brilliant, spoiled, electric, frighteningly sexy, a complete self-starter, and Steve all attention and reaction and soft smiles and chuckles and fun. They're going to make a great pair, knock on wood, as my mother would say.

As for the movie, *An American Dream*, don't ask. An absolute disaster. My only consolation is that I had nothing to do with the makings of it, except for the tarty action of taking a large sum of money in sale from a large movie studio, for which I had no respect.

Give my best to Basil. Beverly sends love.
Norman

hard novels to do well. Now that we are approaching the end of the seventh decade of the twentieth century they are becoming novels which are almost impossible to do well. The old totemistic force of manners, the old totemistic belief that breaching a manner inspired a curse has been all but lost in the avalanche of social deterioration which characterizes our era. Yet what can appear more attractive and sinister to us than a tea ceremony at the edge of a cliff. So I often think *An American Dream* is my best book. I tried for more in this novel than anywhere else and hence was living for a while with themes not easily accessible to literary criticism, not even to examination. The passage I choose now is not obligatorily the best thousand words in the work, but comes from the latter part of the first chapter and therefore offers few discomforts of orientation to the reader, and no demand on me for a synopsis of preceding events. Perhaps it may also serve to illumine the fine nerve of dread back of every good manner. Manner is the mandarin of mood, and in the shattering of every mood is an existential breath—does laughter or the murderous next ensue?

Yours,
Norman Mailer