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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS

Ransom Center to get Norman Mailer archives

Pulitzer Prize-winning author says bond he forged with Texans in World War II might have helped steer him toward university.

By Jeff Salamon
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Tom Staley had long heard that Norman Mailer's archives would sell for "this huge amount."

"I was hearing \$4 or \$5 million," the director of the University of Texas' Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center said Sunday of the cost of purchasing the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer's papers.

But when New York bookseller Glenn Horowitz contacted Staley late last year about buying the Mailer archives, Horowitz asked for what Staley calls a "fair" number: \$2.5 million. Staley said he didn't even bother to negotiate. On Thursday, the final signature was put to the agreement.



Sara Krulwich/THE NEW YORK TIMES
 (enlarge photo)

Bonds forged with Texans in World War II helped him pick UT, Norman Mailer said.

As a result, nearly 500 boxes weighing more than 20,000 pounds are expected to arrive in June at the Ransom Center, where they will be processed and eventually made available to scholars and the public.

Mailer, who will speak at UT on Wednesday, will officially announce the purchase of the collection this week.

The price, which will be paid out over five years, will be evenly borne by the university and by the Ransom Center, which has raised most of his half.

Mailer is also donating \$250,000 to set up an endowment to support the collection, money that will go toward archiving, online processing and paying for lectures.

Mailer, who became famous with his debut novel, 1948's "The Naked and the Dead," has been a giant of American letters for more than half a century. Among his best-known works, both fiction and nonfiction, are "Advertisements for Myself," "The Armies of the Night," "Miami and the Siege of Chicago" and "The Executioner's Song."

He has also been a controversial public figure, both for his political activities (he was arrested at a 1967 protest at the Pentagon and ran for mayor of New York in 1969) and his turbulent personal life (in one infamous 1960 incident, he stabbed his wife).

Along the way, he has kept a thorough record of his doings. For instance, about 25,000 of his letters have been saved as carbon copies and computer files.

Michael Lennon, executor of Mailer's estate, called Mailer a "string-saver." According to Lennon, who has catalogued much of the archive, it is brimming with literary oddities: a dozen finished screenplays, including one about Civil War Gen. Dan Sickles; French aviation scrapbooks; observations on New York graffiti art; and copies of CIA intelligence reports he used in researching his 1991 novel "Harlot's Ghost."

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And beginning in Mailer's earliest years as a writer, his mother, Fannie, relentlessly squirreled away his notebooks, family photographs, canceled checks, sales receipts and even his dogs' identification tags.

"She was formidable when it came to compiling scrapbooks," Mailer's authorized biographer, Robert Lucid, said. "Her view was, anything that emanated from Norman had value."

In an e-mail exchange with The New York Times, Mailer, now 82 and living in Provincetown, Mass., cited several reasons for choosing the University of Texas, including a strong bond he forged with his fellow soldiers, many from Texas, in the South Pacific during World War II.

"I went overseas from a Fort Bragg artillery training unit to Leyte, where I was assigned to the 112th Cavalry," Mailer said in his e-mail. "They had been stripped of their horses, becoming, in effect, infantry. In that outfit, I learned a good bit about Texas and Texans, so that may have been a factor in choosing the University of Texas."

"However, despite a few sentimental and cultural attachments to the state, the largest part of my decision grew out of the fact that the Ransom Center at the University of Texas has one of the finest, if not the finest, collections of American literary archives in the world."

The center, which was founded in 1957 and boasts holdings that are said to be worth \$1 billion, owns the papers of many prominent writers, including Jorge Luis Borges, Doris Lessing and Arthur Miller.

Recently, it purchased the archives of Don DeLillo, and in 2003, it acquired the Woodward-Bernstein Watergate papers for \$5 million. That same year, the center unveiled a sweeping \$14.5 million renovation of its facilities.

"The acquisition of the Norman Mailer archive further solidifies the legacy of Harry Ransom and Tom Staley in establishing our Humanities Research Center as the premier resource for pursuing significant social and literary developments of the 20th century," UT Provost Sheldon Ekland-Olson said in an official statement. "Closing this agreement is a red letter day."

Staley said Mailer's archive is particularly valuable because Mailer was "involved in so many of the major issues of the 20th century: Vietnam, the First Amendment, the death penalty. . . . He did so many things that changed the novel and the ways in which we write."

"Scholars writing on recent America will need to make a pilgrimage to Austin," Horowitz, the bookseller, said. "You name the person — Neil Armstrong or Robert Kennedy or Pablo Picasso — and Mailer wrote about them."

According to Staley, the only thing missing from the archive is one of the five drafts of "The Naked and the Dead," which Mailer gave to Yale University years ago.

Does Staley expect that someday Yale might part with its small chunk of Mailer history?

"That'll be a cold day!" he said.

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