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Narrative for "The Longest Ball: At Bat Norman Mailer"

Produced and Directed by Jeffrey Van Davis

Norman Kingsley Mailer was born under the sign of Aquarius on January 31, 1923 in Long Branch, New Jersey. Mailer's family moved to Brooklyn in 1927 and he grew up there, playing baseball, the saxophone and making model airplanes. He attended P.S. 161 and graduated from Boys' High School in Brooklyn in 1939 on the eve of WWII. Isaac (Barney) and Fanny Mailer were loving parents and gave great encouragement to Norman and his younger sister Barbara. Mailer has lived in Provincetown, Massachusetts and other places in the East, but he has spent the majority of his life in Brooklyn, living in the same brownstone apartment house since 1961. Mailer's father died in 1972 but Mailer's mother still lives a block away from her son in an apartment whose walls are covered with family pictures and the awards and mementos of her son's literary career.

Mailer: I grew up in a world where really I was cultivated.

I was cultivated in the sense that my mother and father treated my sister and myself as very important people. We were the center of their universe and so it was the outside world that was difficult. You know, go out in the street and you know if you didn't have friends you get beaten up. It was as simple as that. And so I was always terribly alert to the outside world. I took the inside world for granted. And I was free to indulge myself too, to change from one personality to another.

draft
by Lennon
only used
in small
part -
drawn
from
original
transcript
JMV
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Mailer entered Harvard in the fall of 1939 as Nazi tanks were rolling into Poland. He enrolled as a student in aeronautical engineering and received his B.S., with honors, in this field four years later, but his interests soon shifted from engineering. In late 1939 Mailer discovered American literature. He took creative writing classes, wrote for the undergraduate literary magazine, the Harvard Advocate, and devoured the fiction of Dos Passos, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Thomas Wolfe and James T. Farrell. In 1941 he submitted his short story, "The Greatest Thing in the World," to the college writing contest sponsored by Whit Burnett's Story magazine. It won first prize and Mailer, a college sophomore, was launched on what was to become one of the most brilliant, productive, conspicuously public and controversial careers of any American writer in this century.

Before he was seventeen, Mailer had formed the desire to be a major writer and as soon as the war broke out he was weighing its literary possibilities. "In the forty-eight hours after Pearl Harbour," he later wrote, "I was worrying darkly whether it would be more likely that a great war novel would be written about Europe or the Pacific." Mailer wrote several more short stories and two novels, both unpublished at the time, before being inducted into the Army in 1944. He also wrote a play about his experiences working in a Boston mental hospital. It was called "The Naked and the Dead," a title he would use again.

Mailer was a rifleman, cook, clerk and surveyor of aerial photographs while serving with the 112th Cavalry out of San Antonio, Texas. He saw combat in the Philippines and served with the occupation forces in Japan. Discharged in May, 1946, he returned to Brooklyn where he spent fifteen months writing and rewriting The Naked and the Dead, the finest novel of World War II and the highwater mark of American literary naturalism.

No one who has read it can forget the odyssey of fear, exhaustion, pain and death, the swirl of forces larger than the individual, depicted by Mailer. Naked also contains a number of fascinating and prophetic dialogues between General Cummings and Lt. Hearn which foreshadow Mailer's later writing on fear, courage and twentieth-century totalitarianism. But what kept the book on the best-seller list for most of 1948 and established Mailer's reputation was what critic Norman Podhoretz called his "phenomenal talent for recording the precise look and feel of things." Widely translated and taught in college courses, The Naked and the Dead has sold nearly three million copies since it was published.

Famous at 25, Mailer was not prepared to live with success, which, he has said, cut him off from his past.

Mailer: To have early success is obviously a mixed blessing.

I went through the bends. I think one reason I've always been interested in prize fighters is that if I were to take a prize fighter . . . I find an analogy between my own experience and the experience of certain kinds of prize fighters.

Occasionally you find a prize fighter--Leon Spinks--a young prize fighter who before he knows whether he can really fight or not, wins a lucky fight or two and, lo and behold, he's champ.

And he doesn't really know if he can fight. That's terrifying.

That happened to me with The Naked and the Dead. I can understand what Spinks went through afterward. . . . I felt two ways at once. On the one hand I believed my reviews, on the other hand I felt that they weren't accurate at all. I knew that

The Naked and the Dead had been influenced by a great many writers. By Hemingway, by Farrell, by Steinbeck, by Tolstoi, by Thomas Wolfe, by Dreiser, very much by Dos Passos. And I knew in a certain sense that it was not my own book, that all these literary influences had flowed through me and that I had had the experience of being at war and I had written this book. And to top it all, I hadn't been a very good soldier. If you pick a company, in my case a cavalry troop, of a hundred men, maybe there were 75 or 80 soldiers who were better than me before you got to me in terms of ability as a soldier. So I felt I was a bit of an impostor. On the other hand, I had all these wonderful reviews and also had the experience of writing the book and there were times when I thought it was the greatest book written since War and Peace. Given all that, I carried two views of myself.

Uncertain of his future but determined, as he later wrote, not to write The Naked and the Dead Goes to Japan, over the next two years Mailer studied Russian revolutionary history at the Sorbonne, campaigned for Henry Wallace, who was running for president on the Progressive ticket, spent a short time in Hollywood as a scriptwriter for Sam Goldwyn and made an abortive attempt to write a novel about labor unions. He also became a father. Susan, the first of his nine children, was born in 1949.

Mailer's studies in Marxist history, the influence of the French writer Jean Malaquais, his Hollywood scriptwriting experience and the ideological debates of Naked all contributed to what Mailer called "the first of the existential novels in America." Barbary Shore, published

in 1951, is a feverish, claustrophobic novel centering around the interrogation of an ex-Trotskyite by an F.B.I. agent in a Brooklyn rooming house. Flawed by lengthy ideological debates and economic discussions, the novel was both a critical and commercial failure. Among Mailer's admirers, however, the book has a special place in his canon because of its bold break from the naturalism of The Naked and the Dead and because Mailer bravely pushed his radical critique of American society along lines everyone else was avoiding during the years of the Cold War.

Mailer was discouraged by the failure of Barbary Shore and his next novel, The Deer Park, emerged slowly. It was finally published in 1955. During the early fifties he also wrote political essays and short fiction and served as an editor on Dissent, a leftist periodical. He also co-founded and named the Village Voice and was divorced and remarried during this period.

Mailer's concern with political themes continued in The Deer Park. The novel examines the unnatural life of a Hollywood resort, focusing on the love affair and struggle for artistic freedom of a talented, corrupted director during the McCarthy era. Although it received mixed reviews--Maxwell Geismar called it "empty and flat," but Malcolm Cowley said in his review that Mailer was "one of the two or three most talented writers of his generation"--it is now considered to be one of the finest Hollywood novels. Because of a dispute about supposedly obscene language, Mailer's publisher broke their contract and six other publishing houses turned it down before it was accepted by G.P. Putnam's. Mailer's battle with the publishing industry and the lack of the novel's clearcut success drove him in on himself and punctured what he called his "nineteenth century naïveté."

Soon after the publication of The Deer Park, Mailer began writing a column for the Village Voice in which he presented some of his most idiosyncratic ideas. More important than these, however, was a long essay published in Dissent in 1957 called "The White Negro." The essay, which arose partly out of a disagreement with William Faulkner, is a brilliant attack on the impoverishment of the romantic spirit in America. It also offers a prospectus for a new hero--the hipster, an urban adventurer seeking new energy in the wild west of American night life. Alternately attacking the deadening repetitions of bureaucracy and technology and celebrating jazz, sex and the life of the urban Black, Mailer's essay had a powerful impact in the late years of Eisenhower's presidency. Challenged at a half-dozen weak points by critics from both the Left and the Right, the essay continues to be reprinted and discussed as an affirmation of human growth. Instead of defining men as good or bad, Mailer's hip manifesto prefers to see them as, quote, "a collection of possibilities." If societal restraints are removed, Mailer writes, "man would then prove more creative than destructive." "Movement," he argues, "is always to be preferred to inaction. In motion a man has a chance, his body is warm, his instincts are quick, and when the crisis comes, whether of love or violence, he can make it, he can win, he can release a little more energy for himself since he hates himself a little less, he can make a little better nervous system, make it a little more possible to go again. . ."

Student: You called yourself in Advertisements for Myself an American existentialist. In American Dream, for instance, there is a passage in which after you killed your wife in the book, when things like habit, discipline, and pretence and compromise as sort of civilized as bad qualities disappear from you and

you become your instinctual self. That's how I understood the passage. I'd like to know if you still believe that you are an existentialist and how the modern man has to live in that way?

Mailer: You're asking me a small question. (Laughter.)

Let's break it down. It will be easier to reply if . . . To begin with, as I understand what you're asking me, you are saying in effect do I believe that to be an existentialist one must eschew discipline, habit, and so forth. I would say no. But you must be very aware of the negative powers of habit and discipline. There is very little that could ever be accomplished that's purposeful and that takes many months or years to accomplish that can be done without habit or discipline. But because they are necessary to serious and ambitious projects doesn't mean that we can ever ignore the fact that they are very dangerous medicine for us. We have to live with the fact that these habits that are enabling us to be productive are at the same time dangerous to our psyche and perhaps even to our soul and be aware of that and in that sense live existentially. When I say live existentially, I don't mean that every day we jump from the roof of one building to the roof of another. Although that is certainly as existential an experience as one could look for. Especially if the jump is just at the very limit of our ability to leap. In other words, if we do not know if we're going to be able to make the jump successfully, that would be the pure definition of an existential experience. We're either going to feel a

great rush of adrenalin and happiness if we complete the jump, or we're going to know broken bones or disaster and death if we don't. That's an existential experience. Now obviously, if I speak of living existentially in relation to one's habits and one's discipline, I don't mean jumping across the roof every day. However, it may be that one has to jump across that roof once a month (I speak now figuratively) or once a year or whatever one's inner rhythm is. And there comes a point when if one lives, if one uses these habits in order to achieve certain serious projects in one's life, one uses one's discipline, there comes a point when one becomes a slave of the discipline and the habits. That's the point precisely when one must look for an existential encounter with oneself. What I'm trying to say, I suppose, is that the horror is that there is no royal road to happiness for the psyche. We achieve the smallest amount of self-satisfaction or a sense of personal integrity only through the greatest efforts and through the greatest awareness of the opposites between which we must navigate our course.

Mailer reprinted "The White Negro" in his next book, Advertisements For Myself, which was published in 1959. This omnibus volume also contains selections from his two previous novels, portions of the long novel he began in 1952, and a dazzling variety of essays, short stories, interviews, dramatic fragments, letters, poems and some of his Village Voice columns. The separate pieces are held together by a series of introductory "advertisements," as Mailer called them, in which he candidly dissects both his past performance and his current artistic and personal

problems. Although Advertisements was initially ignored or sharply criticized by much of the literary establishment, it became something of an underground classic as the sixties progressed. It is now considered to be one of Mailer's finest books and is indispensable to students of his work.

In one of the book's last "advertisements," Mailer adds up his accounts and says, "I cannot like myself too much, for I was cowardly when I should have been good, and too brave on many a bad chance, and I spent my first thirty years abusing my body, and the last six in forced marches on my brain . . . from fear and vanity I paid out too much for what I managed to learn." Despite this bleak assessment, Mailer still predicts that he will write a huge novel, quote, "fired to its fuse by the rumour that once I pointed to the farthest fence 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 . . . a novel which Dostoyevsky and Marx, Joyce and Freud; Stendhal, Tolstoy, Proust and Spengler; Faulkner, and even mouldering old Hemingway might come to read, for it would carry what they had to tell another part of the way." Portions of this big novel, a descendant of Moby-Dick, as Mailer called it, appeared in Advertisements, but ten years later the novel was still uncompleted and apparently abandoned.

But Norman Mailer is still at bat. In 1971 he began work on another novel, another attempt to hit "the longest ball."

Lennon: The great book that you hope to write, will that require some new ideas or are you going to be able to use the old ones, the old system, the old philosophy?

Mailer: If I can bring off this three-part novel I'm talking

about, I will have to get into places I've never been before. And I'll have to come up with new ideas. I'll have to be bigger and better than I've ever been before. So it is not at all certain to me that I can bring off this three-part novel. I think I'll be able to, but I'm not laying odds on it. It's an even money bet.

Lennon: You're off to a hell of a good start.

Mailer: With the Egyptian novel? I hope I'm off to a hell of a good start. Practically no one has seen the book, you know.

Lennon: No, but I've heard Bob Lucid and I've heard about your reading and everybody says it's an amazing book.

Mailer: Well, it's amazing, I mean chapter for chapter there is amazing stuff in it. If you read a chapter here or a chapter there that I would pull out, you would say, "Wow." But the question is whether it will hold up. It's one thing to write wonderful chapters but will the book as a whole be something and will it also be . . . It's not enough for a great book to have great writing. A great book finally has to live in other people's flesh and minds and it has to change them. When I think of great books, I think of books that have changed my life.

Lennon: You're experienced enough and are professional enough as a writer to know the difference between the good emotion you feel when you finish writing something and the emotion of satisfaction you're going to feel five years later when you look back on it.

Mailer: This book is absolutely beyond my measure of anticipation. One, I don't know if I'm going to be able ever to bring it off. I think I'll finish the Egyptian novel because I'm two-thirds through it. I've then got a novel I want to do about a space ship in the future, maybe a century or two from now, three centuries from now, and I'm appalled at the difficulties of the task. I'm going to have to sit down and become somewhat familiar with science fiction, which I've never read. I'm going to have to get up on the most advanced astro-physics that we have available now. I know it will be a difficult study for me because I'm not smart that way at all any longer even though I did study engineering once in college. But then I'm going to have to get up on all that stuff, knowing that it is all going to be, that I'll have to throw it away after I absorb it. The only value it had for my novel is that the narrator of that novel would have to say at a certain point, "Yes, back in the 20th century they believed this and this was true about the universe. How wrong they were!" So that book is going to staggeringly difficult to write something that will be serious in that book and at the same time won't be just absurd to our modern mind. It's going to be in my mind as the writer. Then, of course, the third book, which I look forward to if I ever get to it, will be contemporary. That will have all the demands of writing a modern novel, which is no small task. So we'll see. There is nothing automatic or routine about these books.

Lennon: Will your short story "The Last Night" have any influence on the later novel? That was such a fine short story.

Mailer: Yes, it's going to be in the second novel. But I'm not telling you how. That's not going to be the story of the second novel, it's just going to be in the second novel. I've got a couple of tricks up my sleeve that I can't talk about, of ways of tying together the Egyptian novel, the novel of the spaceship in the future and the contemporary novel. So they will all truly be three parts of the same novel, but in the way a tree might grow and have three trunks growing out of a common root.

Advertisements marks the end of the first phase of Mailer's career. Always drawn to politics, Mailer's interest intensified in the sixties. From 1960 to 1972 he published a series of dramatic and discerning nonfiction narratives on presidential candidates, conventions and elections. But Mailer's narratives only partly resemble Theodore White's "Making of the President" series. Politics as politics were not his chief interest. Mailer's goal was to explore and perhaps bridge what he called "the double life of Americans." In an essay on John F. Kennedy, Mailer wrote: "Since the First World War, Americans have been leading a double life, and our history has been moving on two rivers, one visible, the other underground; there has been the history of politics which is concrete, factual and unbelievably dull . . . and there is a subterranean river of untapped, ferocious, lonely and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream life of the nation." Mailer's early work is a preparation for the "radical bridge," as he called it, between these extremes, between politics and the dream life, public and private, the worlds of Marx and Freud. In the second phase of his career, beginning with the Kennedy essay, Mailer began to build his bridge. The

essay, entitled "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," was published in Esquire on the eve of the 1960 elections. Mailer sensed that Kennedy, after the doldrums of the Eisenhower administration, could help the nation recover "its imagination, its pioneer lust for the unexpected and incalculable," as he put it, and the essay was admittedly intended to promote Kennedy's chances. He described the young senator from Massachusetts as a "handsome prince of the American Dream," recounted his war heroism, and said his "most characteristic quality is the remote and private air of a man who has traversed some lonely terrain of experience, of loss and gain, of nearness to death . . ."

As Kennedy's star rose, Mailer's fell. Shortly after the election Mailer stabbed his wife with a penknife and was arrested. His wife did not press charges and Mailer received a suspended sentence and was placed on probation. This event, which Mailer's friends called "The Trouble," led to a dark period in his life. Further depressed by Hemingway's suicide in 1961, his work on the big novel all but stopped. Drinking heavily, he published little but a few essays and a book of poetry in the next couple of years. During a two-year period from 1962 to 1963 he was divorced and remarried twice. Nineteen sixty-three saw the publication of a collection of political essays called The Presidential Papers, written with a desire to influence the President. The collection contains some of Mailer's most forceful essays, including his long piece on the boxing death of Benny "Kid" Paret, but Kennedy was assassinated within a few weeks of the volume's publication and it did not receive the attention it deserved.

Mailer began writing regular columns on a variety of subjects for Commentary and Esquire in 1962. The Esquire column ended in December, 1963,

but Mailer announced in the last column that he would attempt to publish an entire novel in the magazine over the next eight months, following the example of Dickens, Dostoyevsky and other nineteenth-century writers. The title of the book is An American Dream and its first lines read as follows: "I met Jack Kennedy in November, 1946. We were both war heroes, and both of us had just been elected to Congress." The novel covers thirty-two hours in the life of Stephen Richards Rojack, a professor of existential psychology and TV talk show host who murders his wife before she can destroy him, and then survives a series of increasingly dangerous confrontations with the New York City police, the Mafia and the multi-millionaire father of his dead wife, Barney Oswald Kelly, "a solicitor for the devil." No outline can do justice to the book, which Mailer has called his best, but it is safe to say that An American Dream is deeply concerned with the diminishing possibilities of moral choice in our modern society. Critic John Aldridge described the novel as "a radically moral book about radically immoral subjects," an attempt to dramatize "the various ways a man may sin in order to be saved, consort with Satan in order to attain to God." A great number of reviewers and critics agreed with Aldridge's estimate; almost as many were appalled by the novel and wrote it off as either immoral or a put-on in the age of pop culture. Elizabeth Hardwick called it "a fantasy of vengeful murder, callous copulations and an assortment of dull cruelties." But An American Dream was a best seller and has been a staple on college reading lists for fifteen years. The novel gave Mailer the energy of new success he had desired since the failure of Barbary Shore in 1951, and propelled him to the pinnacle of achievement among living American writers. As Aldridge wrote, Mailer alone "seems likely to possess the power to shift us out of our

old comfortable modes of seeing and feeling and cause us to experience the shock of recognition we always experience when we have placed before us realities seen for the first time with the honesty of a truly original talent."

Mailer, whose fourth and fifth children (both boys) were born in the mid-sixties, began to hit his stride again after the success of An American Dream. During the period from 1966-1968 he published eight books, all of which demonstrated, as critic John Wain put it, Mailer's "desire to position himself so as to stand face to face with our time, our time in America." Some of these books, The Short Fiction of Norman Mailer, for example, were collections of previously published work, but this amazing outpouring also included what some believed to be his most provocative collection of essays, Cannibals and Christians, which appeared in 1966, and three works which were nominated for the National Book Award: his 1967 novel, Why Are We in Vietnam?; The Armies of the Night (which did win this award, and the Pulitzer Prize as well); and Miami and the Siege of Chicago, which like Armies was published in 1968. Other volumes published during this period include a short study of the bullfight and the dramatic version of his novel, The Deer Park. The play was performed off-Broadway and had a run of several months.

As if these varied activities were not sufficient, in 1967 Mailer began making films. Using hand-held cameras and working without a script, Mailer made three films in the late sixties: "Wild 90," which dealt with mobsters holed up in a run-down hideout, and "Beyond the Law," which dealt with cops and suspects in a police precinct, were both made in 1967. The third film, "Maidstone," was filmed in 1968, but not released until 1970. The first two films were marred by poor sound quality. The technical

quality of "Maidstone" was much improved and the film broke attendance records when it was shown at New York's Whitney Museum. Mailer played roles in all three films and demonstrated considerable talent as an actor. (He recently played a small role in Milos Forman's film, "Ragtime.") In "Maidstone" he played the role of Norman T. Kingsley, a famous movie director who is both a potential presidential candidate and a potential assassination victim.

Student: You said the best movies you've seen lately come from Germany. You've seen "The Tin Drum" and "Maria Braun" and they are highly professional. Have changed from cinema verite when you say you like the German films now? I mean they are not typically German films. One major point is that the Americans control them in their cinemas because they're highly professional, they're nearly American movies.

Mailer: That isn't why I like them. I respect them for being highly professional films, but that isn't why I like them. I like them because I felt they were entering areas of experience that were more appropriate to film than the average film. You see, I think that film bears a profound relation to the dream. I think that film is all together different from literature. One might just as well be talking about the state of Kansas in America and Mars as to talk about literature and film in the same breath. Literature I believe is closer to theater than it is to film. I mean theater is closer to literature than it is to film. Because film occupies the most peculiar place in the mind. If I say to you, "Think of a favorite uncle of yours," you'll have a mental image in

your mind for a moment. If I say to you think of Humphrey Bogart, you'll have a mental image in your mind and the two are not that different. Film inhabits an area of the mind that's somewhat mysterious. It's that area somewhere between sex and sleep, somewhere between sex and the dream. It's always as if you can establish a hierarchy of existential states that are less and less definable and more and more mystical. You could almost say that it would be: memory, sex, dream, death. And perhaps between sex and dream, you can put film. Film always has something slightly sinister about it when it's good. The trouble with most professional films is that they are photographed stage plays. The emphasis is upon story and upon all the values of the theatre. And so the average film has an artificial unpleasant quality, a certain aesthetic emptiness to it no matter how well made it is. What I loved about those two films is exactly that they had this quality. They were sinister in a lovely way. They were not films in which you could afterward describe the plot in such a way that the plot was coherent. It's almost a vice if you can tell the story of a film clearly, it's a bad film at the highest level. Film should be evocative. The best films are like personal experiences that you keep returning to because the experience was so particular, at the same time so mysterious that you cannot define it, you cannot circumscribe it with words. And to the degree that film inhabits a region of the mind or the psyche that's beyond words, it's successful film. And to the degree it does not, it is merely a debased form of literature or theatre.

It was during this time that the reading public became aware of Mailer's diverse projects and abilities. Making movies and producing a play, appearing on talk shows and running for public office, involved in anti-war activities and turning out book after remarkable book, Mailer's image became almost ubiquitous in the media. As one critic put it, Mailer is "the Lon Chaney of American letters."

Lennon: Norm, one critic of American literature and a friend of yours once described you as the Lon Chaney of American letters. I've always thought it was a good line. How over the years have you managed to keep out of the groove of one style, one mode? What do you attribute your ability to move from style and mode to mode?

Mailer: Well, I don't know if I can attribute it. You know I found that I was moving from one style to another. And writers are notorious guardhouse lawyers. They can re-write their case after it's been brought in. In other words, a writer can always give you an explanation of why they are doing something after they have done it. They are splendid. So I can give you a lot of wonderful reasons why, the way I have developed my aesthetic by searching for new styles and new modes of expression and so forth but I expect I could probably do that about as well as the next writer. But I really don't know. I ponder this, why I keep changing my style. And I think, finally when you get down to it, there are two kinds of writers. There are writers who have a powerful sense of identity

and the attraction of their work comes from that identity, coming into collision with a world which may be moving in directions away from them. I think the greatest single example of that would be Henry Miller. All of Miller's work for me consists of the world banging on Henry Miller and Henry Miller banging on the world. Hemingway too. Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe. Now, you get to people like Steinbeck and you get the reverse. Steinbeck kept changing his identity for every book he did. When I say changing his identity, he kept changing his style. If you change your style you are changing your identity. I think there is that other kind of writer. I've named Steinbeck. I've named myself. We can figure a few more as we go along. Ed Doctorow, who I think is a pretty good writer, is a perfect example of that. And I think there are writers who find that as the world changes and as they change they are perpetually in search of their identity because their identity is a function of the change in the world and the change in themselves. And it is almost as if the act of writing is a different sort of act for them. There is a different, how to put it, the solution they find in writing, the attraction of writing, the benefits of writing, are different for them than they are for people like Hemingway or Miller.

Lennon: Well how about an example sort of like, he's not a writer, but I'm thinking of Picasso. Picasso went through so many styles and it's been attributed by some, because of the new Picasso show in New York, they talk about his various marriages, his relations with his families, is that true in your case to any

extent? Have your marriages, your relations with your families, has that had a major impact in some underground fashion, some shift in style or mode?

Mailer: I remember reading some writer on Picasso. I forget who. It doesn't matter. Maybe it will occur to me later. Anyway, he made that point, that Picasso worked in a different vein for every wife and of course it's true. And reading that I thought, well, I could say the same for myself up to a point. I've written a different kind of book with every wife and had a different style. And I think if you had been married as many times as I have you are a different man in each marriage. But on the other hand, the same is true of Miller. Miller was married many times but he did not change his identity.

Lennon: So what is the crucial difference between you and Miller?

Mailer: I think some people are born with a very firm sense of identity, very clear roots. They know exactly where they came from and who they are and what they are, and it is the world that is mysterious to them. And I've always been one of those people who is very sensitive to the world and forever in the course of discovering myself and who I am and what I am.

Mailer was opposed to the Vietnam War from its earliest days. In 1965 he gave a ringing anti-war speech at the University of California at Berkeley. But it was with the three books mentioned earlier--Why

Are We in Vietnam?, The Armies of the Night and Miami and the Siege of Chicago--that he made his most powerful indictments against the Asian war.

The first book, a novel, tells the story of a group of Texas corporate executives on a hunt for big game in Alaska. Mailer's description of his characters' armed and unarmed confrontations with the Alaskan wilderness is perhaps the best nature writing in an American novel since the work of Faulkner. Depicting the hunting of Alaskan bear from helicopters with large gauge rifles is only one aspect of the book's oblique comment on the Vietnam War. The novel, which is narrated by D.J., the teenage son of one of the executives, is not easily summarized. It is a diatribe against the war but it is also a comic novel in the tradition of Huckleberry Finn and something of a linguistic tour de force. In the surprising conclusion Mailer reveals the extent of the nation's war lust as D.J. and his buddy Tex plan to sign up in the Marines and go to Vietnam.

The Armies of the Night, published in 1968, is also a corrosive attack on the War, one which strengthened considerably the anti-war cause. Armies follows Mailer's activities during a weekend in October, 1967 when he participated in the March on the Pentagon and was arrested and sentenced for crossing a military police line. A great part of the book's success can be attributed to its unusual point of view. Mailer describes himself in the third person, dividing himself by aesthetic fiat into subject and object as a way of gaining detachment on himself. The method, according to one critic, allows Mailer to be "funnier and more devastating on the subject of his own vanity than anybody else will ever be." Linking his analysis of the March and a nation at war with his own continuing education in the American Dream, Mailer produced a narrative work that cannot be simply classified as either autobiography or history, memoir, essay, tract or fiction.

It is, nevertheless, in the words of Alfred Kazin, "just as brilliant a personal testimony as Whitman's diary of the Civil War, Specimen Days." "Mailer's intuition in this book," Kazin said, "is that the times demand a new form. He has found it."

The March on the Pentagon, Mailer wrote in Armies, "took place in . . . the crazy house of history," and "once history inhabits a crazy house, egotism may be the last tool left to history." Later in 1968 Mailer published Miami and the Siege of Chicago, the second of a half-dozen works in which he simultaneously analyzes his own egotism and uses it as a tool to elucidate the incredible events of the sixties and early seventies.

Lennon: You said that when you were writing Armies you had this terrible depression, you were feeling terrible, was this before or after? I mean what happened? You've explained this to me before. You've said all of a sudden in fooling around, trying to get started on it, you finally tried the third person and it worked for you. Didn't that, was that a release of some pressure?

Mailer: No, it merely shifted the pressure. Of course then I began to worry. It seemed to me it worked, maybe it worked. On the one hand it seemed interesting, on the other hand it seemed a little odd. I remained uncomfortable with it for quite a period. I'd say I was half way into the book before I had gotten used to it. It took me longer to get used to it than any reader. And you may remember when you started reading the book, it was a little funny in the beginning.

Lennon: It was a shock.

Mailer: And it was not all together agreeable for a while, that is, until the benefits of it began to be visible. It's a very funny way to look at oneself and we all do it.

Lennon: Nevertheless, it was like an old shoe by the time you got rid of it.

Mailer: Yes, but the time we were done with it, one missed it. In fact I missed it so much I kept going back to that in book after book thereafter. And it never worked as well again.

Lennon: I think you said in The Fight that you were getting tired of that style, your wheels were starting to spin, tired of your own pronouncements and commentary, and you wanted to be a little . . . Well, I think you got more and more detached as you follow those books from Armies all the way through to The Fight. Is that correct?

Mailer: I got less and less interested in myself as a protagonist. In The Armies of the Night I was a true protagonist of the best sort, which is half heroic and three-quarters comic. That makes for a marvelous protagonist.

Lennon: Like a Stendhal hero?

Mailer: No, no. Nothing like it. Nothing so large.

Lennon: No, but still, all proportions noted, as you say, "up one day down the next." You had a success and you had a failure,

you were on top of it, you were sick of yourself. That's a little bit like Julien Sorel, I think.

Mailer: Except he had this vast project which is that he was going to become one of the mightiest men in France. All I wanted to do, if you remember, I wanted to make a dinner party that night.

Lennon: But still, you did say to yourself, "This could be the beginning of a guerrilla warfare in America." And if the war in Vietnam had not ended, it might indeed have been somewhat like it. You were prepared for that.

Mailer: I was prepared to go to jail eventually. I had the feeling if things got worse and worse, and the war didn't end, at a certain point in time a lot of us who were marching on the Pentagon might end up spending a year or two in jail, at the least. And so we were all somewhat heavy-hearted marching on that Pentagon. Because it was a way of putting ourselves on record. But I still wouldn't compare that to Julien Sorel.

Lennon: I always think of Armies of the Night as a nineteenth-century novel.

Mailer: There is no sex in it. But it is a nineteenth-century novel. It's courtly, it's deliberate, it's amused with its time and its place. It entertains itself with the antics of its hero. The notion of personality is somewhat charming because it is taken for granted that these are all very fine and substantial people. When all is said they may be up to their shenanigans,

but finally we know that it's all going to turn out well in the end. It has that restrained merriment of the early nineteenth century picaresque novel.

In 1969, Mailer entered the New York mayoral race, running on a ticket with journalist Jimmy Breslin, who ran for the presidency of the city council. Their slogans were "Vote the Rascals in" and "No more bullshit." The Mailer-Breslin platform contained a number of new and even startling ideas. They proposed, for example, to establish New York City as the 51st state. Welfare policy was another of their concerns.

Mailer: You know when I was running for mayor in '69, a lot of people took us aside and said, "Look, welfare is the biggest single problem in New York. The blacks are ripping off welfare. Why don't you go up there and talk to some of them because if you can work out something with them that looks like it makes a little sense, that's your best chance to show people you're serious, that you are doing something the other candidates are not doing. Maybe you'll have a chance to draw a lot of votes and get into real contention." So Breslin and I went up to Harlem and met some mothers who represented a Harlem welfare organization. I remember one black woman got on and she said, "Mrs. Richbucks over on Park Avenue, she says I'm taking my welfare check and I'm riding around in a Cadillac and you know what I say, I say 'fuck her.' My Cadillac is five years old and I have a lot of trouble meeting the payments on it, and she's riding around in a brand new Cadillac." She went on with this

thing and said, "Mrs. Richbucks over on Fifth Avenue says I've been married three times and I got eighteen children and I'm drawing welfare for each one of them and I only got thirteen children and I'm ripping off the government and I say, 'fuck her.' I may be lying about that five children, but I got the other thirteen to take care of, and I have been married three times. Mrs. Richbucks over on Fifth Avenue she don't have to get married because she's got lovers all over the place and furs and diamond rings." She went on and on like that and finally she glared at me and she said, "Look, we want our share of the waste." And I thought, "Madam your argument is unanswerable." I walked out of there and I came back to headquarters and I said, "Fellows, we got no welfare program."

The critical acclaim that Mailer received for Armies and Miami further consolidated his position as one of America's most talented and versatile writers. He continued his engagement with the tumultuous events of the time and produced four more books in a three-year period: Of a Fire on the Moon, on the astronauts and the first moon shot (1970); The Prisoner of Sex, on the women's liberation movement (1971); St. George and the Godfather on McGovern, Nixon and the 1972 conventions (1972); and Existential Errands, a collection of essays (1972). Aquarius, as Mailer calls himself in some of these books, is more reserved and detached in the later narratives, but his speculations and conclusions are as penetrating and controversial as ever. This is especially true of his comments on women's liberation in The Prisoner of Sex, which gained Mailer the reputation, unjustified in his mind, of being one of the nation's outstanding male chauvinists.

Student: You said that the women's movement tends to become totalitarian and that you don't like that. Don't you think that the male system as it is in America is totalitarian?

Mailer: Yes, but I always thought that women had more sense than men.

Student: Why is that? Why should women be better than men?

Mailer: Because they have been forced to suffer our brutalities and our stupidities and our dominance and people that are on the bottom should always be smarter than people that are on top, or there is no hope for humanity.

Student: But you don't get better by suffering.

Mailer: You don't get a better person, but you should get a smarter person. I think that the average black knows more about life than the average white in America. I've never met--this is a remark I made before and people think that I'm blowing smoke--I've never met a stupid black man. I've met any number of black men I couldn't speak to, who wouldn't talk to me or I couldn't talk to them, but I never met a black who I felt was stupid. Because stupidity is a choice. It's not a choice that black people can afford.

Student: But you can't compare blacks in every respect to women.

Mailer: Well, but the women in America do. They say we are your blacks.

Student: This isn't true in all respects.

Mailer: No, of course not. That's one of the troubles with the women's movement. They say a great many things that are not true in all respects but they say it as if it is true in all respects.

Student: But why can't you answer my question in respect to women? Why should women be smarter than men and do everything better than they and be more clever than they are?

Mailer: There's no reason why they should be better. On the other hand they should not be worse. Men over the centuries have acquired willy nilly a certain small rudimentary sense of fair play. The women have yet to learn it. I think they may well learn it. I'm not saying that it is impossible for them to learn it. But the women's movement has not gained respect among those men who are willing to give it respect over the last ten years. The general attitude among the women in America by now--I do not pretend to speak for them, it's my impression--is that many mistakes were made seven and ten years ago when the movement first came into prominence. There were great excesses, and that the problem is much more difficult than they ever realized. I think there was a certain optimism, almost a manic optimism, among the women back in the early seventies. Because they thought they were going to have a quick breakthrough and they were going to change the world very quickly and I think that what they've come to recognize is--and I think this is all to the good--that they've come to recognize the profound and

serious problems that men who were trying to change the world also have. I think that out of all this we may yet arrive at certain community of agreement that changing the world is a problem that goes far beyond sexual gender.

Student: But you could start with that.

Mailer: You could start with that, but you could start with other things as well. You could start with the idea that the most evil substance on earth today is plastic and that the way to improve society is to tax plastic heavily and reduce all other taxes. If you could remove plastic from human existence, things might be better because people's senses might be little more lively. If people's senses were more lively--for instance if we were in a room with chandeliers instead of these goddamn fluorescent lights overhead--we might all have a little more communion with one another.

Student: Yes, but that's exactly the problem. The women's question is postponed to all other questions.

Mailer: Well, that's your point of view and I respect it. That the women's question does not have enough prominence. My feeling is that the women have had a huge amount of prominence because the nature of their question was such that television loved it. It made good television--the women having a revolution. But in fact in America all the women revolutionaries stayed in New York where they were comfortable and safe and very few went down to Texas. It's one thing to be a revolutionary,

It's another to be a brave revolutionary. I don't mock the women, I just say that they're not quite as good as they pretend to be.

The second phase of Mailer's career ended with the publication of St. George and the Godfather in 1972. Mailer's interest in writing about politics waned in the seventies.

Lennon: Wilfred Sheed once said, it might have been in an essay on you, that as writers get older, especially good writers, they continue to grow, change, take on new styles, but they may not necessarily keep up with what's going on around them. Have you felt any of that? Especially in the 70's?

Mailer: Oh, I felt a great deal of it. The 70's are a blank for me. I don't know what happened in the 70's. I felt in close touch with the 60's, I thought I understood the 60's fairly well. Maybe in fact I even did. But in the 70's, I just felt as if everything had gotten away from me. I didn't feel at all close to young people anymore. I remember I'd go out lecturing in the early 70's and didn't understand college audiences any longer. They seemed apathetic, where in the past audiences in the 60's would be reacting to what I was saying. The history of the 70's was a blank. Nixon, Ford and Carter made up a series of particularly dull presidents for me. People Magazine, I think, was the greatest phenomenon of the 70's, it began to take over the country. Television certainly took over the country. I hated the 70's. I literally don't know whether my lack of touch

with the 70's . . . I mean I certainly had the feeling what Sheed was talking about that I'm getting older and in certain ways I'm getting better as a writer, but I really know very little about the present. I don't know to this day whether it is my fault or the fault of the 70's. I don't think it's a decade that one can get tremendously attached to. It was like the 50's. If you fall in love with someone in the 70's, you might have sentimental memories that way, but certainly not for the period. On the other hand, The Executioner's Song I felt was very much a book of the 70's. But, of course, that was not a book that came out of my own imagination so much as from found material. In a certain sense it is a collage of found material.

Lennon: You've also talked about in The Deer Park, and in other places, about "time dynamic and time potential." I try to connect that with some of the things you've said about the 70's. The 70's were sort of a dead time. Time wasn't really happening. There was no movement in the country. Would you compare it to the 50's in that respect?

Mailer: Except, yes, except it was worse than the 50's. My idea of an exciting time is when you have a time when people are ready to die for an idea. Then you have a vital time, a lively time, a dangerous time, a memorable time, a time that people hark back to in their memories. Then you have periods when people are not ready to die for any idea around. I think that is the operative definition of the 70's. There wasn't one idea that anybody would die for. Women's liberation was the most powerful

set of ideas in the 70's and I have yet to meet the woman who is ready to die for her ideas with the possible exception of that woman who shot Andy Warhol. But other than that, you know those girls were real tough, but none of them were dying on the barricades were they? In the 50's there were people who were willing to die for their ideas, but they were all patriots. They wanted to die in Korea, they wanted to die to fight Communism. They never knew what Communism was, never knew that Communism was just as benighted as American capitalism. They thought there was something wonderful about Communism and that it had to be fought because otherwise it was going to win everything in sight. They didn't understand that they were same messed-up bastards that we are. Except that they had an even more oppressed system and were less able to do anything about it. But, I mean, people were ready to die to fight Communism in the 50's. In the 70's we didn't even have that.

Lennon: You said if any decade could ever kill a writer, the 50's almost killed me. Now you're saying the 70's may have been worse.

Mailer: Well, I think the 70's almost killed America. Nixon's great crime in my mind was not Watergate. Watergate was the kind of crooked thing that any number . . . I'm certain when we learn the true history of our period, I'm sure every American president had operations going on under his nose, to some degree under his covert knowledge, with or without his covert knowledge, that would rival Watergate. When you have a powerful secret

service like the CIA, as a powerful espionage agency, they are not going to sit around. You've got a lot of highly principled, highly determined, highly motivated men, they're not going to sit around and do nothing. They have all the tools, all the apparatus, they have all the paranoia they need to go out and pull real capers. So of course that was being done under every president. I always felt the fact that Nixon was taken by Watergate, in other words, that it was a set-up and he fell into it. A trap was laid for him and he fell for it. But Nixon's crime in my mind was that he didn't end the war in Vietnam when he could have, which was in '68 or '69. He protracted it all those years. And that's one of the things that truly killed the country. The country morally had come to the recognition by '68 that the war in Vietnam had to end. When people go through a moral revolution and they decide that they want to move from bad conscience to good conscience, nothing is more punishing, more cruel and finally more likely to render that person apathetic than to have to make them wait for four years or for many years or a long period to carry out that act of good conscience. And that's what Nixon did to America. Merely to build his own fortunes. That was a lost cause. No matter when we pulled out of Vietnam, it was going to be a disaster. Everybody knew that. But he protracted it and protracted it and protracted it because he wanted to make himself look good for '72. His vast majority in '72 came in part because of the four years he spent getting out of Vietnam.

In 1973, Mailer published Marilyn, a lavish biography of Marilyn Monroe which included a number of speculations about her mysterious death.

The book also included a collection of photographs assembled by Lawrence Schiller. Marilyn was the first of four books published by Mailer in the seventies that focused on major American figures. Mailer followed his biography of the nation's greatest female film star with a profile of the nation's greatest athlete, Muhammad Ali, whose fight with George Foreman in Zaire is chronicled in The Fight, which appeared in 1975. In 1976, Mailer published Genius and Lust, an anthology of the most important writings of Henry Miller, in Mailer's estimate, the nation's greatest living writer. Interspersed between chunks of the old master's works are chapters of critical comment, some of Mailer's best literary criticism. Over the years Mailer has written critical comments on many of his American contemporaries, "fellow racketeers," as he calls them.

Student: Who would you today consider to be major American authors, from your personal perspective? And why?

Mailer: There are probably twenty American authors who if you ask them that question, "Who do you think are the major American authors?" they would name an author--themselves. John Updike would say John Updike, and he might say my friend, John Cheever. Saul Bellow would say Saul Bellow.

Student: What would Norman Mailer say?

Mailer: Norman Mailer, you may depend upon it, would say Norman Mailer. I'm not just being snide about myself and my fellow racketeers. It's that we have a funny situation in American letters. It isn't as if . . . There are no giants around. There was a time when we had Hemingway, we had Faulkner.

Then you could name a few others that were in the second rank and so on. But now, we're all moving . . . we're like the spokes of a wheel. You cannot ask a spoke of a wheel, "Who are the major spokes?" The spoke will have to say, "I am the only spoke as far as I can feel it. I'm the only one connected between the axle and the ground."

Student: But since you're self-critical, of course, you know beside yourself different authors.

Mailer: There are a lot of writers of whom I have regard, who I think are very good writers. I think Saul Bellow is a very very good writer. I think John Updike is a very good writer, John Cheever . . .

Student: What about Gore Vidal?

Mailer: Vidal, I think, is a wit and he is a good essayist. Not a great essayist. If you compare Vidal's essays to Jimmy Baldwin, there's no argument. Baldwin has power in his essays and Vidal has wit. He's a bad novelist, Vidal.

Student: What about Truman Capote?

Mailer: Capote is a stylist and he was a very good writer, he's not done anything memorable lately. Of course he's been working on a novel for years called Answered Prayers which may be very good indeed. We'll have to wait and see it.

Student: Are there any authors which you dislike who are overrated?

Mailer: No. I think in a funny way we've had such a . . . It's very hard for a writer who's truly overrated to last for long given the state of American criticism. There are many more literary critics in America than there are working novelists who can make a living writing novels. We've all been examined and re-examined and we've all passed twenty, thirty examinations by now. And so it would be hard for someone who is really ersatz to get through.

Student: What about Pynchon?

Mailer: Pynchon, I'm not familiar with his work. It is possible that if there is one hoax in American literature, it would be Pynchon. Pynchon is either a genius or he is vastly overrated. I think it would be safe to say that. I've never been able to read him. But that doesn't mean that he therefore is a hoax. I've just never been able to get through the bananas in Gravity's Rainbow.

Student: Are there any Latin American authors which you are familiar with?

Mailer: Well I think there are two . . .

Student: Borges, or Márquez.

Mailer: I think those are the two most important writers in the world today.

Student: Why Borges? In political terms he is a reactionary is he not?

Mailer: Yes, he is a reactionary, but . . .

Student: How come you like him?

Mailer: Why do I care if he is a reactionary?

Student: You don't care?

Mailer: I detest having to think of a writer by his politics first. It's a little bit like thinking of people first by way of their anus. I mean, look, if we were all to regard one another that way, it would be intolerable, we couldn't do it. To me a writer's face is his style. It's his themes, his literary brio and Borges is absolutely fascinated with the problem of the novel. Borges has this magical ability to take plots and turn them inside out. I sometimes think that Borges may do in five pages what Pynchon does in five hundred. Which is, he shows us the resources of the novel. He's a magician's magician. In that sense I love his work. I can get more from reading ten or twenty pages of Borges than I can get from reading monumentally long books, including my own.

Student: Márquez?

Mailer: Márquez is wonderful in the same way. In One Hundred Years of Solitude he created not one world but five hundred. I don't know how Márquez does it. People come into his books . . . In ten pages he'll create a family that has eighteen children and they go through ten years, you know every one of the children, you know all the events that occur in their life. In ten pages, I have all I can do to get around one bend in

the Nile. I'm writing a novel about Egypt in 1130 B.C. and I find I've written ten pages and what's happened? My boat has gone around one turn in the Nile. In the meantime Márquez has a history, so I admire him.

Student: Political attitude you don't care?

Mailer: I don't even know about it. What do I care about South American politics?

Student: Not at all?

Mailer: I'm an American. I think we're the center of everything.

Mailer is the father of nine children, five girls and two boys by previous marriages, one son by Norris Church, his sixth wife, and her son from a previous marriage. Their son, John Buffalo, was born in 1978. "It's very hard," he said in a 1980 interview, "to be an enfant terrible when you have nine children." It's even harder, one might add, when you are a grandfather. Mailer's oldest daughter Susan gave birth to a daughter in 1981.

Alimony payments and support of his huge family (several of his children are attending or have graduated from college) forced Mailer into a recurring pattern throughout the seventies: short periods of work on the big novel (now nearing completion), followed by work on a nonfiction book (which usually has taken longer than expected), and then back to work on the big novel again.

Lennon: Joyce Carol Oates is ahead of everyone. That's true.

And she will always be ahead if she keeps writing at this pace.

But she puts out those books pretty quickly. I don't know how many of them are going to last as long as yours. Nevertheless, something in your career has allowed you to continue to . . . has the change itself, the shift in change, has that been a function, is that one of the reasons why you produced so much over the years, that you never have got locked in any one mode? Jeff and I were counting up and we came to something like twenty-seven books, a couple of them are re-cycles but there is pretty close to that.

Mailer: Isn't it really more like twenty-one or twenty-two?

Lennon: Well not if you count The Idol and the Octopus, The Bullfight, Short Fiction. If you knock off about five, it's about twenty-two or twenty-three. And still, that is a tremendous production in thirty years.

Mailer: It's more than thirty years, thirty-two years. Well, if you are making your living as a writer there is nothing remarkable about that. You've almost got to put out a book every year-and-a-half if you're going to stay alive.

Lennon: Well if you consider though that the novel you've been working on for so many years, a mammoth work, is going to be appearing in the next five to six years over a period of time, you've got to be talking about a tremendous expansion, a production right there. I mean that book alone will equal what Thomas Wolfe wrote in a lifetime.

Mailer: No, well, that book is a long way from being done.

I mean I've got about two-thirds of the first book written.

And the first book will be almost as long as The Executioner's Song. Now if the other two are equally long, which they may not be, then we're talking about an awfully long piece of work. But that may be fifteen years off too because those long books take forever to write. They do because you get into . . . they have to grow, you have to grow with them. It's the oddest . . . you know I have the oddest relation to this book I've been doing about Egypt. For the sake of those who don't know about it I've been writing a book about Egypt, as you know well, that's Egypt in the Twentieth Dynasty, the reign of King Ramses the ninth, about 1130 B.C. This book now has eleven hundred pages of manuscript. And I started in 1971. And I keep writing it and then I leave it to do another book and then I go back to it. And it's become really like . . . my dearest wife. I mean this is the wife I can leave for two years at a time and I come back and all it says is, "Oh hello, good to see you again."

In early 1977 Mailer was contacted by Lawrence Schiller, with whom he had worked on the Marilyn Monroe biography and also on a book called The Faith of Graffiti, a 1974 study of the ghetto artists of New York City. Schiller had obtained exclusive rights to the story of Gary Gilmore, who had just been executed by a Utah firing squad for committing two murders. Schiller asked Mailer if he would read over a huge pile of interviews he had conducted with Gilmore and many others connected with the case and consider putting them together into a book. Like almost

everyone else in the country, Mailer had followed the Gilmore story and marvelled at Gilmore's insistence that he be executed on schedule. Mailer felt he understood Gilmore's resolution. One key to Gilmore's character and actions was his belief in reincarnation, a belief which Mailer shared. Reading through the huge pile of interviews, letters, legal and psychological reports that Schiller had amassed, Mailer became further intrigued with the complexity of Gilmore's character and the power of his personality on all those associated with him. Mailer was also impressed by Gilmore's passionate love letters to Nicole Baker, the young woman with whom he had attempted to commit suicide, and the course of their star-crossed love affair.

Although Mailer was making excellent progress on this novel at the time, the Gilmore story was too compelling, too near his own interests, for him to turn Schiller down. Mailer went to Utah and he and Schiller continued interviewing all of those related to or associated with Gilmore and Nicole. In the end they amassed over 15,000 pages of interviews. By one critic's count, there are 138 characters with speaking parts in the book. Working twelve and fourteen hours a day over an eighteen-month stretch, Mailer transformed this mountain of material into a smaller mountain called The Executioner's Song. At 1,056 pages it is the longest of Mailer's twenty-eight books, almost twice as long as The Naked and the Dead.

Every one of the book's reviewers note Mailer's absence from it with surprise. He does not even make an Alfred Hitchcock cameo appearance in the book, which he calls a "true life novel." The Executioner's Song is told by an omniscient, anonymous narrator in language as flat and bleached-out as the Utah landscape. "Only someone who has been writing

for thirty years," Mailer told an interviewer, "would be willing to relinquish his ego. I couldn't have done it fifteen years ago."

The book received rave reviews and in 1980 received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. In her front-page review in The New York Times Book Review, Joan Didion called it "an absolutely astonishing book."

In 1980 Mailer published Of Women and Their Elegance a "false memoir," as Mailer described it, told by Marilyn Monroe and accompanied by Milton Green's photographs of Marilyn and other elegant women. Although the early reviews of this book were less favorable than those of The Executioner's Song, the book again demonstrated Mailer's formidable powers of ventriloquism.

Mailer is now back at work on the long Egyptian novel, which should be published within the next few years. As his comments indicate, it will resemble none of his other works. Mailer says that it is even money as to whether the book will be the longest ball his admirers have waited to cheer since 1952. Place your bets, Norman Mailer is now at bat.