

If two people are driving from San Luis Obispo to San Francisco following the coastal road, they're likely to stop at the same roadhouses en route, they're likely to sleep at the same inns and so forth and so forth and so forth. And that book had a clearly marked line of narrative, if ever a book did and, therefore, if you're going to do a script with it, you'd be following the book. So we each were following the book very closely. The difference was that I felt that I knew the book in a way that no one else did.

The Guild's judgment was based on reading the two scripts with the writers' names coded, Writer A and Writer B. Besides the subtleties of tone and pace, Mailer's script also contained, according to Schiller, new scenes drawn from the original interviews and research, material not used in the book. Mailer's familiarity with this material was an obvious advantage, and the Guild awarded Mailer sole screenplay credit. Wynn accepted the ruling, and Mailer made a statement: "I'm trying to be a gentleman about this, so will only say the Writers Guild preferred my claim, for I confess to liking my script much more than Tracy's." The decision was confirmation for Schiller that his decision was based on merit. Mailer, rankled by the rejection of his screenplay by Sergio Leone five years earlier, felt vindicated.

There was fine-tuning on the script right up to its filming in the fall of 1981. Mailer even visited the location in Utah, as he said, "to protect the dialogue." He was also working intermittently on "Strawhead," his play about Marilyn Monroe. *Ancient Evenings* was still a long way from completion, but first he had to finish work on his new collection, divided into a dozen essays and prefaces (*Pieces*) and 20 interviews (*Pontifications*). His reflections on television, "Of a Small and Modest Malignancy," his comic memoir of the *Harvard Advocate*, "Our Man at

Harvard,” and his essay on Watergate, “A Harlot High and Low,” were the key essays. The interview section was comprised of five published in the 1950s and 1960s, and 15 newer ones, including 1975 interview with Laura Adams on reincarnation and magic. This last interview, one of Mailer’s most important, contains a long discussion of Mailer’s belief in magic, something he was exploring in *Ancient Evenings*. The 400-page collection, which he dedicated to his sister, appeared on June 21, 1982, not long after Abbott was sentenced. The timing did not help the book’s reception, which was quiet and mixed.

Pieces and Pontifications, Mailer’s fifth miscellany, is a product of the 1970s, when he “was much out of step.” Besides dropping the third person personal and shifting focus away from his opposed selves, he had withdrawn from politics to a great extent after the 1972 election. Unable to find a handle for Watergate and, like many Americans, numbed by the downturns and disasters of Carter’s one term in office: the energy crisis, a wobbly economy, the nuclear disaster at Three Mile Island, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the event which doomed Carter’s reelection—the imprisonment of the American embassy staff in Teheran. In his review of *Pieces and Pontifications*, Lucid put his finger on Mailer’s malaise in the decade: He spent his first 20 years as a writer “envisioning and anticipating moments of climactic crisis,” in his personal life, in politics and culture, and sometimes all three, overlapping. “But always the crisis was *about* to happen. Always our situation was *before*. The 1970s represented *after*. The counter-culture was over. The war in Vietnam was over.” One world was dying and a new one had not yet been born. “Post-apocalyptic dwindle,” was how Lucid characterized the interregnum.

He ends his review by noting that *The Executioner’s Song* was “the first child” of the new time, the first re-imagining. While the film version (broadcast in November 1982) did not enjoy

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the huge popularity of the book, it was deemed a success by the critics and the television audience, garnering the highest rating for an NBC program in 15 months. It was nominated for five Emmys, including one for Arquette as Nicole and another for Mailer's adaptation. It won two, one for sound production, and one for Jones as best actor. The film led to a directorial career for Schiller and was a breakthrough for Jones. Mailer's achievement whet his desire to write more screenplays, and to try his hand again as director.

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Through all this period, from the publication of *Song*, through his divorces and marriage to Norris, Abbott's release and Adan's death, work on *Strawhead*, *Pieces and Pontifications* and the teleplay of *Song*, Mailer had slighted his patient literary spouse, the Egyptian novel, working on it sporadically. But in the summer of 1982, Little, Brown was pressing him. As Mailer wrote to a writer friend, Bruce Dexter, the prospect of trying to write several hundred more pages of *Ancient Evenings* in a short period was "a perfect expression of my character: work ten years with great care on something, and then arrange matters so that I have to sprint at the end." ✓ worked all summer in Provincetown and Maine. Barbara and Al visited, and Susan carried her first grandchild, Valentina. Unlike previous summers, several of the children were either traveling or working, and the house was not always full. In the fall he finally finished the novel, completing the last revision of the galley in early December. He announced the end in a long letter to Rick Stratton. "I really need another year to get this behemoth into classic shape for the ages," he said, but further delay was out of the question. He felt he had realized his goal of recreating for the reader

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some possible Egyptian society, full of its pagan, sacramental sophistication, a world without Moses or Jesus, but stacked with acquisitive and elegant society—quite a trick, I tell you—for eleven years I’ve been fumbling around in it, but now, going over it for this last time, I begin to recognize how much of me is in it and in ways too deep for even me to understand. My sister after reading it laughed and said, ‘You know, in a funny way, this is the best argument for karma I’ve ever come across.’ How could [you] ever know all this stuff if you didn’t live then was what she finally said by implication.

Little, Brown set publication for April 4, to be followed by the novel’s appearance in England in late May.

Mailer’s letter to Stratton reached him in Portland, Maine where he was awaiting trial on charges of drug smuggling. A raid by an American-Canadian drug enforcement team in March 1982, “Operation Rose,” led to the arrest of Stratton and 14 others in Maine, Quebec and Toronto, including the pilot of the light plane used for smuggling. The drugs, smuggled in from Beirut, had a street value of \$30 million, and Canadian authorities said the 36-year-old Stratton was the boss of “the largest hashish and marijuana smuggling ring ever to be broken in that country.” Stratton denied the charges, stating that he was researching a book about the international drug trade. The end point for the drugs—2500 pounds were seized—was Robert Rowbotham, a friend of Stratton’s who Mailer had testified for at an earlier drug trial in Toronto. Stratton admitted receiving approximately \$200,000 from Rowbotham, which he said was payment for a biography of the marijuana guru, nicknamed “Rosie.”

A few days after telling Stratton that he would be a character witness for him at his upcoming trial, Mailer got a call from Buzz Farbar, who had been working for Stratton, to set up a lunch date. On December 9, Mailer met ^{him} ~~Buzz~~ at a Brooklyn restaurant, Armando's on Montague Street. He had no way of knowing that three weeks earlier Farbar had been arrested at gunpoint for paying \$24,000 for a kilo of what he thought was cocaine from an undercover DEA agent, Martin McGuire. Within ten minutes of his arrest at his New York apartment, McGuire said to him, "We know your friend Mailer is involved." The feds had "a serious hard-on" for Mailer, Stratton said. "After Mailer had testified at the Rowbotham trial, up in Canada," Stratton recalled, "they broke into Norman's place in Brooklyn and rifled through his stuff, found a couple of ounces of pot, and left it right in the middle of the bed as a kind of sign or warning. *We're watching you, Mailer.*"

It was Farbar who, unwittingly, had made Mailer a DEA target. In 1981, he had organized a dinner party for Mohammed Bero, his son Nasif—"my heavy connections in Beirut," as Stratton described them—their translator, Sobhi Hammoud, and the Mailers. "Buzz was showing off," Stratton said,

It was like here are the Arabs, meet Norman Mailer. He implied that Norman was an investor in this hashish smuggle we had done. Buzz did this unbeknownst to me. I had no idea he was implicating Norman in my business. After I was arrested, Buzz told Hammoud that Norman *was* an investor in this hash trip. I'm not sure why he did that. Perhaps it was to elevate his position, to make himself seem more important. The thing about Buzz was that he had very little understanding of what was really going on. His role was limited. I used him as a

money courier and he entertained the Arabs when they were in New York, when I was out of town. Buzz would take them out, go to dinner with them. But he never had any contact with merchandise; he had very little to do with the actual smuggling enterprise. I never wanted to hire him in the first place, quite frankly. That's one thing I will say: I did not like to involve people who are not part of that world. But Norman rallied for him. Buzz needed a job.

As Stratton was to learn, the Lebanese were cooperating with the American authorities, and his arrest, and later Farbar's, resulted from information they had provided. It was Hammoud who introduced Farbar to Martin McGuire, who was posing as a drug dealer. But the DEA wasn't particularly interested in Farbar. They wanted Mailer, Stratton said.

It was a time when John DeLorean had been set up in that sting operation in Los Angeles. John Lennon had been busted. They were making drug cases against famous people to discredit them. It was propaganda in the war on drugs. They figured that Mailer's scalp would've been great to have on somebody's belt. He was already a government target for a lot of other reasons, because he was so vocally critical of the government. And people listened to Norman, particularly a generation of young people who were already fed up with the lies our government was telling us about Viet Nam, pot, and what have you.

The DEA had given Farbar a lie detector test and asked him if Mailer had invested in the hashish deal. He denied it. "We know you've been lying," he was told. "You have a family on the one hand, and Mailer on the other. One will have to go." Knowing that Mailer was innocent, Farbar agreed to wear a recorder at his lunch with Mailer. As instructed, Farbar brought up

Stratton's hashish smuggling. Mailer indicated that he didn't want to talk about it. Farbar persisted and an irritated Mailer told him to stop. "I'm possibly going to be testifying at Richard's trial as a character witness, and I certainly don't want to get into a situation where I'm going to be in jeopardy of perjury." He went on to say that Stratton was a great friend, but he didn't know much about his background; he knew him as a writer. Farbar kept pressing. "I've never had anything to do with the drug business," Mailer said. "I don't want to hear nothing about Richard, all right?" Farbar said that he brought up the subject out of concern for Mailer. "I'll worry about my own ass in my own way," Mailer replied.

When the DEA agents heard the recording, they said the conversation appeared to have been rehearsed and, therefore, no clemency would be recommended. As Murray Kempton put it in a column, "Having lost the whale, they now fall savagely upon this minnow." Farbar was convicted and sentenced to six years for hashish smuggling, a harsh sentence for a first offender. The government noted his refusal to cooperate before he was sentenced. When he came up for his first parole hearing after seven months in prison, he was asked if there was any reason why his sentence should be reduced, any factor beyond his stated remorse and documented good behavior. "No," he said. The next day, he was called on the telephone and asked again, and again he said no. "They wanted me to roll over, give them someone."

At Stratton's drug trial in March 1983, his lawyer likened his client to an enthusiastic spectator watching a game, carefully noting all the details of play, but not taking part. He claimed that Stratton was gathering material for a novel-in-progress, "Drug Wars," and had witnessed smuggling and illegal activity, but had not partaken in it. "I may have done stuff like close hangar doors," Stratton told a reporter. The first 300 pages of his novel were delivered to

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the Scott Meredith Literary Agency just before the trial began. Dick and Doris Kearns Goodwin were old friends of Stratton, and they attended the trial. She and Mailer testified to his literary abilities, she noting his well-drawn characters, and he citing "the solidity in the structure" of his novel. Thomas "Dynamite" Heffernon, a Boston lawyer and friend of Stratton and Mailer, testified that he had drawn up a contract for Stratton to write a biography of Rowbotham, and had sent it to him in Canada. This "higher purpose" defense, as lawyers call it, failed in the face of a wave of testimony from government witnesses, most of whom had been involved in Stratton's drug operation. He was convicted and sentenced to 15 years in federal prison.

Stratton was on his way to the penitentiary, ready to do his time. But the federal drug prosecutors hadn't given up on nailing Mailer. They pulled Stratton off the bus in New York, and told him they were going to charge him under the continuing criminal enterprise or, "Kingpin," statute. He met the prosecutor, who said in effect, "Give us Mailer, and you'll walk." They were also interested in Hunter Thompson, a noted drug user, and a few other high profile figures. "I refused to cooperate with the government. I figured, I did this, let me pay for it." Stratton defended himself and lost. Mailer was not permitted by Judge Constance Baker Motley to testify at his second trial. She sentenced Stratton to an additional 10 years with no possibility of parole, basing this extraordinarily long sentence on his refusal to cooperate. Stratton later wrote his own appeal, which argued that individuals can only be sentenced for their crimes, not for refusing to implicate others. The courts agreed with his appeal, and he was released after eight years in prison. Farbar got out after 46 months.

To the surprise of some of Mailer's friends, he did not break with Farbar. "I figure some dealer was throwing my name around in an attempt to impress people," Mailer said. "The feds

must have heard it on somebody's wiretap. You could smell their lust from here to Laos." Asked if he was angry at Farbar, he said, "There was a squeeze on Buzz of a horrendous sort. He was trying to protect his family. If I had been in the same situation, what would I have done?" Mailer visited Farbar and Stratton in prison, and wrote to them regularly.

He did not visit Abbott, but he continued to write to him for several years, and sent him books, as did Robert Silvers. Mailer encouraged Abbott to write, and sent him some of William Burroughs' novels. He put Joyce Carol Oates in touch with Abbott, and she wrote to him, as did another friend, Mashey Bernstein, who corresponded with Abbott about Judaism. The biggest obstacle you face, Mailer wrote to Abbott, "is that the past draws you back like a magnet and you get so sorrowful and so enraged and so bilious, so incoherent with rage, and so vengeful and so mournful and so contrite and so proud and so much this and so much that that you can't think straight." His own troubles, Mailer said, "are on the other side. With rare exceptions, the past has lost its vividness for me, so I feel these days as if I'm writing with an empty gut." But in a letter a few days later to Gloria Macdonald, Dwight's widow, Mailer recalled old days with him, including the time Dwight got into an argument with a man flying an American flag in his garden, which Macdonald saw as phony patriotism. Mailer said his death had made him recognize how much his own writing owed to "the clarity and logic and wonderful natural wrath" of Macdonald's style. He later wrote a memorial piece expanding on these sentiments.

Fig Gwaltney, the army buddy at whose house Mailer met Norris, was another friend that he eulogized. When Fig died a year earlier, Mailer promised his wife, Ecey, that he would come to Arkansas in March 1983, give a talk, and donate the honorarium to a scholarship in his memory. Fig was his oldest friend, and although they had not seen each other recently, Mailer

remembered his loyalty. A few days after writing Ecey, he turned 60. He said, "Fifty caused a long, continuous woe. Fifty had an awful sound to it. Worse than 60. Sixty feels all right. Forty felt great. Thirty felt lousy. Maybe I've just got something against odd numbers. Maybe at 70 I'll go into a tailspin." In fact, his next decade, while not free of difficulties, would be one of his happiest.



Mailer had been paid handsomely for *Ancient Evenings*, but the money was gone, and he was again in arrears to the IRS. In mid-January he flew to Boston to try to renegotiate his contract with Little, Brown. He had already received \$1.4 million, and the contract called for an additional \$2.5 million for the final two novels of the trilogy, but the executives were not eager to advance much of this sum until they had a fix on the sales of *Ancient Evenings*. They were fearful, Mailer said, of losing three-quarters of what had already been advanced. The contract also called for a short novel to be delivered in the fall of 1983. Having pushed back deadline after deadline for him over the past decade, Little, Brown was insistent that he meet this one. But before he could begin thinking seriously about this new novel, he had to go on a very demanding tour for the current one. Mailer had stated publically that the Egyptian novel was his masterwork, and he intended to and take every opportunity to hold forth on its merits.

His first big outing for the book was at the Lotus Club in New York on January 28, a luncheon meeting with six out-of-town book editors. Over drinks and a meal, Mailer was expansive on his research for the book, citing Budge's edition of *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, a collection of prayers belonging "to an infinitely remote and primeval time." These prayers were painted and inscribed on the tomb walls and sarcophagi of the wealthy, written on papyri

placed in their coffins, and also on the narrow linen bandages with which the remains were swathed. "Properly uttered," Budge wrote, these prayers "enabled the deceased to overcome every foe and to attain the life of the perfected soul" in Aaru, the abode of the blessed. Those souls virtuous enough to traverse the Land of the Dead, the Duad, ~~Mailer changed it to Duad~~ would enjoy unspeakable, eternal happiness in the company of numerous gods and goddesses, and ride in the Boat of Ra pulling the sun through the heavens. There is no definitive version of *The Book of the Dead*, or complete agreement about the nature of the Duad and Aaru. The possibility of the soul expiring after the body, however, was accepted dogma. The Egyptian belief in a possible second death "had huge interest for me, he said, "because I'd really been writing about that in one way or another for a long time." Gilmore's desire to protect his soul by sacrificing his body is one instance. Rojack's similar fear in *An American Dream* is another. ~~Mailer's belief in a dangerous, existential afterlife was unwavering.~~ At the luncheon Mailer also mentioned Flinders Petrie, a pioneering Egyptologist, who in 1896 discovered a stele or monument stone, on which a pharaonic victory over a tribe from Israel is recorded, the first mention of that nation in an ancient Egyptian record. Moses and his revolt in Egypt are mentioned briefly in the novel. Using a dictionary compiled by Budge, Mailer began learning hieroglyphics, but found it too difficult. What fascinated him was its dialectical nature, how "words often reverse themselves in different contexts," an existential language.

The editors asked if Mailer had read Vidal's novel, *Creation*, about ancient Greece and Persia, and he said ~~he had not~~. ^{no} "Gore and I are always working in terribly different directions." Vidal is a rationalist and an atheist, he said, and comparatively speaking, I am "a diabolist and mystic." Mailer's protagonist, Menenhetet I, is a magus who seeks the links between the high

and the low, excelsior and excrement. As Begiebing notes in his study of the novel, in Menenhetet's Egypt, "there is no clear division between the sacred and the secular, no desacralization of the world." For the Egyptians, "death is risky and adventurous," he says, and "the debts and wastes of one's life carry significance beyond earthly existence." The appeal of such a belief system to Mailer's ~~sensibilities~~ was powerful. He had also avoided Vidal's novel because he wanted to keep his rational side on short rations during the Egyptian excursion. "Gore is not the worst writer in the world," Mailer told the editors. "He can even be delightful and he can be seductive." His anger with Vidal, it appears, was subsiding.

✓ ~~The~~ ^{he was also} editors asked if he was he making oblique statements about American imperialism or American class structure in the new novel. "I've spent my writing life trying to understand America," he said, and this novel was an attempt "to try and get some idea of what life was like before anything we know" before the Judeo-Christian tradition. Over and over during the book tour he was asked if he had allegorical or symbolic intentions linking ancient Egypt and contemporary America. "Piety and snobbery," Mailer said, are the only traits that existed in both ancient Egypt and the modern world. Going to Egypt, he said, was "pure escapism." More than one critic compared *Ancient Evenings* to *Salammbô*, Flaubert's novel set in third century B.C. Carthage. Both are bloody, bawdy and exotic, and both were published shortly after works of excruciating realism—*Madame Bovary* and *The Executioner's Song*.

One of the earliest inspirations for the novel, he said, was Andre Schwarz-Bart's novel, *The Last of the Just*, which begins with the Crusades and ends in the Nazi death camps. He was impressed by how the novel moved swiftly through a dozen or more Jewish cultures. "I thought that I would take a character, start in Egypt, have him reborn in Greece, then Rome, then

somewhere in the Middle Ages, and so forth," following Schwarz-Bart's example. But Mailer was unable to make the leap after he got enmeshed in the ~~world~~ ^{fascinating, eclectic practices} of the ancient Egyptians. He

was, for example, deeply attentive to the fact that a dung beetle had been deified as Khepera, the God who propelled the Boat of Ra out of the Duad in the morning, and pushed it below the horizon at night. For decades he had been fascinated with magic, and had read widely in works such as Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, and Thorndike's eight-volume *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, both of which he owned. Ancient Egypt, a culture saturated in magic for thousands of years, was the perfect place for him to explore his interests. "Magic," he said, "was their substitute for technology. As you start getting into it, the problems they solved with their magic were about as cock-eyed and absurd as the problems we solve with our technology."

When asked what *Ancient Evenings* was about, he often said, "It's a novel about magic."

He followed his sources with modest rigor in regard to magic and religion. Professor

David B. O'Connor, an Egyptologist at the University of Pennsylvania, said that he enjoyed the

novel because "Mailer had so well grasped the cultural and historical thrust of ancient Egypt,"

despite a few errors. The largest of these, as Mailer readily admitted, ~~was~~ the practice of

telepathy, ~~which was~~ ^{was} never part of Egyptian belief. Several of his characters send and receive

mental messages, and Mailer argued later that at some point in the distant past, before the Egyptians, humans had the power of telepathy. But in modern times, he speculated, "the amount of electromagnetic disturbance all our machines make, particularly our communication machines, has polluted whatever that ring is around the earth that transmits messages." He based this belief, in part, on the fact that dogs never watch television. "I think," he said (remembering

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the clairvoyant Tibo), "they live in so complete a telepathic framework that the set communicates nothing to them." Such were the wrinkles in the mind of the novelist at 60.

The earliest excerpt, he published (in the *Paris Review*, four months before the novel was published) is also the one he read to audiences for decades. It comes from the first book (of seven) in the novel, "The Book of One Man Dead," and is a description of the embalming of Menenhetet's great-grandson, Menenhetet II (hereafter Meni), who died in a drunken brawl at the age of 21. All the sensuous particularities of the embalming process, including the removal of the inner organs, which are sealed in canopic jars and accompany the Remains, the Sekhu, on its final journey, are rendered by Meni himself, the embalmer:

Somewhere in the first few days they made an incision in the side of my belly with a sharp flint knife—I know how sharp for even with the few senses my Remains could still employ, a sense of sharpness went through me like a plow breaking ground, but sharper, as if I were a snake cut in two by a chariot wheel, and then began the most detailed searching. It is hard to describe, for it did not hurt but I was ready in those hours to think of the inside of my torso as common to a forest in a grove, and one by one trees were removed, their roots disturbing veins of rock, their leaves murmuring. I had dreams of cities floating down the Nile like floating islands. Yet when the work was done, I felt larger, as if my senses now lived in a larger space.

The embalming tent was "no bloody abattoir," Meni recalls, but an "herb kitchen" where his body cavity is cleansed and soothed.

Over time, Meni's senses become confused; he hears odors, smells colors—synesthesia—and then his consciousness dims as his Sekhu, held down by weights, renders up its moisture in a bath of natron, a salt mixture found in the dry lake beds of Egypt. After 70 days, "I became hard as the wood of a hull, then hard as the rock of the earth, and felt the last of me depart to join my Ka, my Ba, and my fearsome Khaibit." His aural faculty, the last to go, finally departs, and his Sekhu changes into something rich and strange, "like one of those spiraled chambers of the sea that is thrown up on the beach, yet contain the roar of waters when you hold them to your ear." Entombed, his Sekhu becomes "part of the universe of the dumb." The remaining six parts of his being (borrowed mainly from Budge) are: Ka (double); Ba (essential personality), Ren (secret name); Sekhem (soul or vital energy); Khu (guardian angel); and Khaibit (shadow). Mailer introduced these "lights and forces" of the Soul at the beginning of the novel to show the complexity of Egyptian belief, using the terms in the conversations of his major characters, sophisticated and wealthy Egyptians versed in magic and religion—two sides of the same coin for them.

Those of his friends and family who heard him read the embalming scene more than a few times became familiar with the characteristics he would repeat: the Ka has only one seventh of the strength of the living person; the Ba is depicted as a bird with a human head; the Goddess Maat takes the form of a feather against which the moral worth of the deceased's heart is weighed; and the Khaibit is both a shadow and the memory. His secretary, Judith McNally, who typed large portions of the novel and is thanked in the acknowledgements, knew Egyptian myth and lore nearly as well as her boss. An adherent of Wicca, Judith had a black cat named Khaibit.

Experts have not found fault with his religious explications, nor his vivid retelling of the foundational myth—the story of Osiris and Isis. Told in the gloom of the tomb by the Ka of Menenhetet to the Ka of Meni in the novel's second book, "The Book of the Gods," it derives in uncertain percentages from Lepsius, Budge, Petrie and Adolf Erman (his *Life in Ancient Egypt* is a key source), and perhaps other versions (Plutarch) of this magnificent story of the Egyptian gods in their primal years. "In this telling," reviewer Benjamin De Mott said, the myth "is made utterly new." Mailer combines episodes from different sources, adds flourishes of his own, and allows Meni to ask his great-grandfather questions that clarify, heighten interest and provide breathing spaces. The interaction of teller and told adds immeasurably to the richness of the telling, allowing the reader to share the thrill of discovery felt by Meni.



During the years he spent writing *Ancient Evenings*, 1972-82, Mailer gave several important print interviews, but he also turned down many, and was chary about talking about his novel-in-progress. But in the months before and after the novel appeared, his reticence Begiebing interviewed him for *Harvard Magazine* (where he discusses power and w ancient Egypt); Marie Brenner for *New York* (the cover depicted Mailer as King Tut); Eugene Kennedy for the *Detroit News* (here he speaks of being guided by "the murky light of the unconscious"); George Plimpton for *People* (who engaged him on his problems with plot); William F. Ryan for *Virginia Country* (the most exhaustive discussion of the novel's sources); and during an English book tour, James Campbell in the *Literary Review* (where he discussed the rational and mystical tendencies of his work). These are only the most important of the more than 50 interviews he gave in 1983. The media campaign for the novel exceeded those for all his

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earlier books but, as Mailer told Begiebing, too much visibility is worse than too little. Authors who have good sales "get very little personal publicity. We don't read much about Saul Bellow,

John Updike." He admitted that he had lost the battle with those who carved nasty messages

the sarcophagus of his legend. "So I've just said the hell with it." Mailer likened his clip file

the tail of a dinosaur. Collectively, the reviews were worse than those received by any of his

books since the 1950s. In his review in the *Times Book Review*, De Mott called the novel "a

disaster." There were, ~~however, some~~ notable exceptions, *however.*

Several friendly reviewers—Vance Bourjaily, Richard Poirier, Barry Leeds, Christopher Ricks, Anthony Burgess, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, and his former Harvard professor, Robert Gorham Davis—reviewed *Ancient Evenings* positively but, with the exception of Ricks, seasoned their admiration with reservations and puzzlements. The words "audacious," "paradoxical," "demanding," and "risky" reoccur in these reviews, as well as a general lack of enthusiasm for the novel's many presentations of anal, fecal and incestual events, and the swarm of olfactory clues that accompany them—*Ancient Evenings* rivals *An American Dream* in this regard. Menenhetet supping on a paste made from bat dung to learn its healing powers is noted by many reviewers; it emerges as the touchstone of Mailer's *outré* preoccupations. Davis says that his treatment of bodily secretions and odors "is often done with great ingenuity, but sometimes it is in the spirit of the fat boy in Dickens who wanted to make our flesh creep—or our throats gag." Burgess disagrees, arguing that these passages are appropriate to the Egyptian culture. Menenhetet eats bat droppings because "Khepera, the greatest of the gods, is a dung-beetle; the Land of the Dead is his, and in it you must face the worst of fecal odours in order to achieve a passage to the next life." To fully understand the deadly contest of Ahab and the White

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Whale, one must labor through the cetology chapters of *Moby-Dick*, and to completely grasp the meanings of Menenhetet and Meni's harrowing journey in the afterlife, one ~~first needs to~~ ^{must} be immersed in its abominations.

Those reviewers who liked parts of the novel almost always point to the re-telling of the Osiris-Isis myth, which Mailer believed could be published as a separate narrative. The Battle of Kadesh, another favorite, could also stand alone. The defeat of the Hittites and their mercenaries by the invading army of Ramses II takes up all of "The Book of the Charioteer," a 150-page *tour de force* that is the narrative heart of the novel. The barge trip down the Nile to Memphis in northern Egypt, composed, no doubt, with Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* at hand, is also cited as one of the novel's most splendidly imagined passages. But it is the chariot battle ^{that} stands out.

His desert troopers outnumbered and skittish in the misty, green landscape, Ramses hurls himself against the Hittites with the unswerving confidence of a deity. General Menenhetet rides with him, and the Pharaoh and his General fight back to back against the fierce, long-bearded Hittites. The battle tide swells and recedes, and at one point the Hittites capture and burn the royal pavilion, blackening the statue of the God Amun that always accompanies him. A massive Egyptian soldier burns his body retrieving it, whereupon Ramses kisses the soldier, and then, kneeling, "took one end of His skirt and wiped all that was black from the God's face, kissing the God on the lips even though His own mouth blossomed at once into two great blisters which He wore in combat." At that moment a feather from the wing of Maat, the goddess of balance who keeps chaos from reclaiming the universe, flutters to the ground at Menenhetet's feet. When he picks it up, the feather "moved in my hand like a knife, it had weight. I knew enough to kiss it.

So soon as I did, a terrible heat went out of my Pharaoh's lips into mine, and, lo, I, too, was now to fight with white and swollen blisters upon my lips." The battle ends soon after this scene. All through the night, the victorious Ramses stands solemnly in his chariot receiving the severed hands of the slain Hittites from his soldiers, and giving each soldier's name to the scribe for his bounty.

He never moved His feet. Each time He cast another hand onto the pile, and may I say the pile grew until it was the size of tent, He threw it with the same grace by which He steered [his horses] Maat and Thebes when the reins were about His waist, that is, He did the task perfectly. One could not think of another way to have done it. He was showing us the nature of respect. The right hand of the dead warrior, the same right hand that might have seized His own in a treaty, having been given to Him, so did He cast it onto the pile with care, and to the place where by His eye it belonged. The pile grew like a pyramid whose corners are rounded, and never did He allow the base to become too broad nor the top too blunted. Yet He was also careful to avoid the vanity of building too fine a peak, for then one misplaced throw could destroy the shape.

Commentators often point to the complicated way the story is narrated. It is not told by an anonymous narrator as in *The Executioner's Song*, but by the Ka of Meni who, while conversing with his great-grandfather's Ka in the great pyramid, remembers a night 15 years earlier, a night of dusk-to-dawn storytelling. Meni remembers himself, at the age of six in the company of his mother, Hathfertiti; his father, Nef-khep-aukhem, the Overseer of the Cosmetic Box; the Pharaoh, Ramses IX; and Menenhetet. He is the chief storyteller, and most of that

ancient evening (and most of the novel) is given to his recounting of his extraordinarily long life, or lives—he has lived four—as they recline in the Pharaoh’s sumptuous garden lit by thousands of captured fireflies. Meni is clairvoyant and when Menenhetet pauses in his tale, or holds something back, Meni knows it, and also knows what the others are thinking as well. His mother and great-grandfather share this ability. It is the voice of Menenhetet, however, that we hear most, relayed to us by Meni. As Poirier noted, Mailer had “a felt need to justify in some way the telling of story,” and resorted to this awkward provenance. The overlay of voices is strained and confusing—Mailer said later that “the transitions of the narrator’s voice were the hardest” challenge he faced—but he was wed from the outset to his nested voices.

Other reviewers were put off by the extravagant attention devoted to Mailer’s hobbyhorses and theories, as listed by Lehmann-Haupt: “psychic darts, single combat, staring contests, mindreading, vibrations of evil and virtue, all manner of magic and sorcery, the rich possibilities of sex in all its forms, the mysteries of excrement and, above all, the curious fantasy that one can literally reconceive oneself by dying in the act of sexual intercourse,” one’s soul passing into one’s semen and then into the womb of a woman, whereby one’s lover becomes one’s mother. Menenhetet has three rebirths and lives 180 years, by this technique (taught to him by a Hebrew slave who learned it from Moses), a hat-trick that enables Mailer to build a narrative bridge, cantilevered and creaky though it be, between the reigns of Ramses II and Ramses IX, as well as to have sex with his own granddaughter. The strangest of the long chain of sexual encounters in the novel, however, is when the Ka of Meni finds himself with the member of the Ka of his great-grandfather in his mouth as he kneels before him in the tomb of Khufu, the place where the novel begins and ends, a truly seminal encounter comprising the frame for a

long, long night of story-telling, one that rivals those of Scheherazade. If Mailer's editors suggested that he eliminate the unmemorable Ramses IX, Mailer didn't take the advice. He rarely did. Jason Epstein, who would be Mailer's next editor, said Mailer always listened politely to his suggestions, but completely ignored them.

Providing Menenhetet the secret of fathering himself allowed Mailer to depict him as an advisor to Ramses IX in his fourth life, and as a charioteer General for Ramses II in his first, 150 years earlier. But his second, third and most of his fourth lives remained unexplored; after the Battle of Kadesh, the novel goes on for 300 pages until he turns to them. Mailer had become so knowledgeable about ancient Egypt that he was unable to resist the temptation to present much of what he learned, too much, in the second half of the novel. This indulgence was costly, if not disastrous. As far as plot was concerned, he had painted himself into a corner. It is not surprising that he wanted another year to rework the novel. Lehmann-Haupt notes the misplaced emphasis: "What every good historical novelist knows is that once you've established the landscape, the culture and the precise exotic flavor of the world you're imagining, you start making them work for you instead of continuing to work for them. In short, you use them to tell your story." Mailer did not. Instead, he went on far too long describing the rituals, court intrigues and festivals, scrying and other methods of divination, dung details (the Pharaoh defecates in a golden bowl, and his turds are both sacred and worth their weight in gold), fancy fornications ("The Book of the Queens," set in the harem, runs for 130 pages), buggeries galore, and an episode set in the Pharaoh's gold mines in Nubia. All this exposition and over-embroidery, Lehmann-Haupt, says, "is simply exhausting." Echoing this conclusion, Harold Bloom (borrowing what Samuel Johnson said of Richardson's interminable epistolary novel, *Pamela*) said that "if you read

Ancient Evenings for the story, you will hang yourself.” Yet Bloom finds much to admire, and says that the novel is “an extravagant invention, another warning that Mailer is at home on Emerson’s stairway to surprise.” He sees that Mailer, like the Transcendentalists, believes in the Hermetic law of correspondences—“As above, so below.” The earthly and the supernatural are not merely linked, they interpenetrate everywhere, nowhere more so than in the Egypt of Ramses II.

Menenhetet is sixty when he tells his stories in the Pharaoh’s garden, the same age as Mailer when the novel was published. He denied, repeatedly and unconvincingly, that he was writing about himself in any important way. When his sister told him that it was his most autobiographical novel but couldn’t decide whether he was Menenhetet or Ramses, “he said with uncustomary modesty, ‘More like Ramses IX.’” He did not deny, however, that his protagonist’s many careers—charioteer, harem master, high priest, tomb robber, brothel-keeper, papyrus merchant, speculator in necropolis sites, wealthy noble and pharmacist-magus—were of special interest. They were. For example, the researches of Menenhetet into bat dung align with Mailer’s homeopathic explorations in “The Metaphysics of the Belly.” As a magus, Menenhetet gains knowledge of cures that “depended on the judicious use of all that is revolting.” Bat dung is one of the most reliable. Shit, therefore, contains clues to character—never ignore it. Mailer, always hungry for new experience, was eager to explore all of these careers, but his dilatoriness after the account of Kadesh forced him to “sprint” through Menenhetet’s last three lives in 50 pages. As Bloom points out, despite its length, the novel “gives every sign of truncation.” After the sprint, we are taken back to the future, back to the interior chamber of the great pyramid where the Ka of Menenhetet and the Ka of Meni prepare to set out on their journey to the Duad.

In the last three brief chapters we learn that Menenhetet's attempt to gain a fifth life failed when Hathferti vengefully aborted him two months after their last carnal union. After his embalming, his Sekhu was buried in his great-grandson's tomb. The miserable ends of the other major characters—undone by lust for power—are revealed, after which his great-grandfather leads him into the Duad. They pass through several perilous portals, all the while observing with horror the punishments of those with impure hearts, many of which recall the sufferings of lost souls in Dante's *Inferno*—boiling lakes, for example. As Begiebing points out, "This sequence is what puts the lie to those who argue Mailer neither here nor elsewhere ever takes a moral stance; it's just not a commonplace or pious moral stance. And courage is at the center—the Ur-ethic on which all others depend."

The stench of the Duad are full of foreboding for Meni, and fecal waters rush over him. After his great-grandfather's Ka, unbidden, merges with his, he feels hope. Joined by his Ba and his Khaibit, he begins to ascend the "ladder of lights" (as described in the *Book of the Dead*) toward "that place in the heavens where one might gaze like Osiris upon the portents of all that is ahead." Despite his many failings, he receives a message from his Ba that "purity and goodness were worth less to Osiris than strength" (a restatement of Rojack's belief that "God is not love but courage"), and Meni has an abundance of it, it seems, for he is welcomed into the Boat of Ra. But then he feels a great pain coming, followed by "the scream of the earth exploding." The knowledge comes to him that his destiny is to "enter the power of the word," and to be born again as a storyteller. Ra's Boat, "washed by the swells of time," sails away and the novel ends as "past and future come together."

Mailer intended that "The Boat of Ra," the second novel of the trilogy, would begin with the same explosion that concludes *Ancient Evenings*. In "The Last Night," his 1963 short story, a lone spaceship is propelled out beyond the sun's gravity by a series of planned nuclear detonations that destroy the earth, sending "a scream of anguish, jubilation, desperation, terror, ecstasy" across the heavens. Aboard are eighty humans and some animals seeking a new home in distant galaxies. Most of the novel, beginning with this story, would take place aboard the ship. Meni will be aboard, reincarnated in one of the survivors of the earth, which has been ravaged by corruption, plagues and wars. Humans may have been "mismated with earth," and "the beauty that first gave speech to our tongues commands us to go out and find another world," one where the power of the word will have primacy. Mailer's short story ends with "a glimpse of the spaceship, a silver minnow of light, streaming into the oceans of mystery, and the darkness beyond." A decade later in the mid-1990s, he and Norris collaborated on several versions of a screenplay based on this story, the last attempt to salvage something of the "big novel."

The final novel, "Of Modern Times," would introduce a final reincarnation of Menenhetet-Meni, now known as "Norman Mailer." After the account of his conception and early years (taken from "The Book of the First-Born"), he would grow into the writer who would write *Ancient Evenings*, thus completing the circle. Mailer saw that it would be a vainglorious mistake to lay this out when the first novel was published, to reveal that Menenhetet was indeed a fictional forebear, or that Meni would fulfill "the power of the word" aboard the spaceship. He also didn't know if he could pull it off, and as we know, he could not.

Poirier was astute in ending his review by stating that what undergirded *Ancient Evenings* was "the desire, once and for all, to claim some ultimate spiritual and cultural status for the teller

of tales, the Writer.” Poirier calls it “his most audacious book.” Ricks also found it to be a terrifically risky book, but endorsed Mailer’s gamble by quoting a passage from T.S. Eliot about another risk-taker, Harry Crosby, the sun-worshipping American writer and editor who died in a murder-suicide pact in 1929: “Of course one can ‘go too far’ and except in directions in which we can go too far there is no interest in going at all; and only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out just how far one can go.”

Upon publication, the novel jumped onto the best seller list, and stayed there for 17 weeks before dropping off in mid-August 1983. Without having read it, a Swedish publisher paid \$100,000 for rights, which went for \$120,000 in England. Other foreign editions brought in another half-million. The paperback—sold to Warner for \$501,000—did even better, reaching number two on the paperback best seller list the following spring. Total hardback sales in the U.S. exceeded 200,000, and when income from foreign and subsidiary rights—over \$750,000—is added, the novel “earned out,” recouped its advance.

Mailer’s pride was injured enough to strike back at the novel’s detractors. He assembled negative excerpts from the reviews of four of his novel’s major detractors, and added to them ripe snippets from rotten reviews of classic works: *Moby-Dick*, *Anna Karenina*, *Les Fleurs Du Mal*, and *Leaves of Grass*. Printed on poster board under the headline HIDEOUS REVIEWS, the assemblage was distributed to major bookstores as a counter display. A sampling: Captain Ahab is “a monstrous bore”; Tolstoy’s masterpiece is “sentimental rubbish”; Baudelaire’s poems are “filth and horror,” a verdict appearing above Rufus Griswold’s dismissal of *Leaves of Grass* as “a mass of stupid filth.” For *Ancient Evenings*, Mailer selected De Mott’s “disaster” comment, followed by James Wolcott’s “a muddle of incest and strange oaths . . . reducing everything to

lewd, godly, bestial grunts"; Rhoda Koenig's condemnation of "the vanity that permeates the entire work"; and Eliot Freemont-Smith's summary: "holistic poop."

The novel's flaws—a tortured point of view, massive digressions, and the curtailed depiction of Menenhetet's later lives—are balanced by its strengths, most notably the heroic ethos of the early reign of Ramses II, and the story of Isis regenerating Osiris, which prefigures Ramses' victory at Kadesh. Obscured by the narrative clutter is any clear sense of what Begiebing, the novel's finest interpreter, says is Mailer's chief theme and "the largest structural principle of the novel—the conflict between entropy and vitality." Ramses II does not share his victory at Kadesh with his generals, builds monument after monument to his personal glory (Ramses is Ozymandias to the Greeks), and treats his comrade-at-arms, Menenhetet, shamefully. Evil begets evil. "Ramses II," Begiebing says in summation, "fails to maintain his earlier power as an Osirian king of fertility and civilization whose lands, people, and political systems all depend on him for continuous productivity and harmony." Except for the brief final chapters, the novel ends bleakly. But *Ancient Evenings* was only the first phase of the dialectic for Mailer; Purgatorio precedes Paradiso. It seems likely that he planned to demonstrate counterpoint and resolution in the next two novels." We do know, however, that the "The Boat of Ra" would begin at the lowest point of entropy—the destruction of the planet—after which a saving remnant would recreate human life on a new planet. The final novel, "Of Modern Times," we can speculate, would depict a return to Osirian harmony and vitality.

A year after the novel appeared, Philip Bufithis sent Mailer an essay he had published on ~~the novel~~. It praises aspects and parts of the novel, especially the opening where Mailer displays a consciousness "not met with in any other fiction. The reader is pulled into the Ka's strange

cares and yearnings as it painfully orients itself to the shock of its nonmortal existence and meets the grim, awesome Ka of Menenhetet." Bufithis takes reviewers to task for deciding that *Ancient Evenings* is a study of decadence, instead of recognizing that Mailer is "inveighing against American parochialism" by writing what might be "the most olfactory novel ever written." It was "his way of assailing America's ongoing obsession with sanitizing nature out of more and more areas of life." But he finds fault with the lack of "richness, radiance, and imagination" in many of Mailer's metaphors, and sees other weaknesses, the most important of which is characterization: "Its people are insufficiently people. They are not felt presences. Their emotions, therefore, seem empty. Graphic and frequent, for example, as the novel's sexual episodes are, they remain tepid." Given Mailer's belief in the primacy of character over plot in fiction, the essay, coming from ~~Deo~~ Lucid's former graduate student, must have been painful to read. He wrote back to Bufithis right away, and said that his criticism "is, I fear, all too good. I confess it's close to my own evaluation of the book when I feel depressed at all. I failed to ignite in every corner of the conception." Mailer's candor about a work that he described on publication as "the best book I've ever written" may seem extraordinary, but he was keeping faith with the pledge he made 40 years earlier, in his Harvard journal, to probe for and admit to his sins and failures. His views shifted somewhat, however, especially after reading Begiebing's laudatory essay on the novel, published in 1989. He wrote to him to say that it was "the best thing I've read so far on that weighty tome and I was pleased at the thoroughness and insight, and—dare I say it?—the understanding you brought to it." In later years, when asked to name his best books, as he did on several occasions, *Ancient Evenings* was usually on the list, along with *The Naked and the Dead*, *An American Dream*, *The Armies of the Night*, *The Executioner's Song* and *Harlot's Ghost*.



However much Mailer was hampered by the first person point of view in *Ancient Evenings*, he was not ready to abandon it. He used the same perspective—minus the telepathy exercised by Meni—in his next novel, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, a murder mystery set in contemporary Provincetown. It is narrated by Tim Madden, a 38-year old bartender with literary ambitions who spent three years in prison for selling cocaine. As Mailer explained to a friend ^{Dexter} after completing the novel, the first person was amenable because a good novel, he said, “can come out of the simplicity of an interesting, intelligent voice, full of unexpected turns and agreeable perceptions.” Madden’s colloquial American is a relief after the orotund locutions of Menenhetet. Conversant with literary and philosophical topics, Madden ~~and~~ is well-travelled on both sides of the tracks. He attends séances, collects coincidences, and is sensitive to the stark beauty of the Provincetown Spit, which he describes as “the fine filigree tip of the Cape [that] curls around itself like the toe of a medieval slipper.” All of his senses are unsheathed, especially his olfactory abilities, which come close to matching those of Menenhetet. His vision is sharp enough to distinguish among the dozen shades of dun in the winter woods of the Cape; and his ears subtle enough to discern “the rustle along the beach that comes with the turning of the tide.” He lives on the water side of Commercial Street in the quiet East End of town (near, therefore, to the three-story brick house Mailer rented from 1970-72, and purchased in the early 1980s). The house is owned by Madden’s wealthy wife, Patty Lareine, who on the “drear” November morning on which the novel opens, has been gone for 24 days. She has left him for a tall, powerful black man, a sexual athlete named Bolo.

Like Fire Island, Provincetown has a summer crowd of tourists, artists, college kids, a large LGBT contingent, and assorted eccentrics. It's a party town, but it also has some real history, and its colonial roots are impeccable since the Pilgrims, before settling in Plymouth, spent three miserable weeks on the dunes near Race Point. They made landfall on November 11, 1620, the Mailers' wedding day 360 years later. He liked to give lectures on the town's history to visiting friends, sometimes while standing before the observation window at the top of the Pilgrim Monument, a 252-foot stone monument to the Pilgrims that resembles the Palazzo della Signoria in Florence. Dotson Rader recalled hearing such a lecture a few years before Mailer died.

He climbed, I mean he literally pulled himself up the steps, and we stood on this platform that overlooks the Cape. I was very excited listening to a spiel that he had given probably 500 times to other people that had been up there. He was very proud of Provincetown. And he was going on about this thing, and he was making this point. He was making this very strong, almost angry, point, a very emphatic point that Provincetown was the first place they landed. That the whole Pilgrim story was wrong, and that somehow Provincetown had been robbed of its true place in American history. And I thought listening to him, 'Norman always had gripes, but this really hits home to him.' It's the first time, after all the time I knew Norman, that it suddenly occurred to me that Brooklyn wasn't really home to him emotionally anymore. Home to him was Provincetown.

The oldest art colony in the U.S., Provincetown also has white gabled houses and dune shacks, a dozen fine fish-and-chowder restaurants, and a huge harbor running the length of the

town. There is also a sizable Portuguese community of fishermen, many of whom Mailer had known for years, and drank with in local watering holes. In the fall, as the weather changed, people stayed in-doors, as Madden explains,

with everyone gone, the town revealed its other presence. Now the population did not boil up daily from thirty thousand to sixty, but settled down to its honest sentiment, three thousand souls, and on empty weekday afternoons you might have said the true number of inhabitants must be thirty men and women, all hiding. There could be no other town like it. If you were sensitive to crowds, you might expire in summer from human propinquity. On the other hand, if you were unable to endure loneliness, the vessel of your person could fill with dread during the long winter.

All that remains are some year-rounders, including a clutch of burnt-out cases. One of these is Madden, who drinks alone every night at the bar of a local restaurant, the Widow's Walk. Christopher Ricks compares him to the hero-villains of Jacobean tragedy who have been "in complicity with evil. Like them he has wit and humour and courage, and a little grain of conscience keeps him sour." Distraught but not despairing, he sips bourbon, writes in his notebook, and recalls how twenty years earlier, "held in the grip of an imperative larger than myself," he tried to climb the side of the Monument. Near the top, he froze and had to be rescued by the fire department. The effort buoyed his spirit, however, and he slept better afterwards. "The importance of the journey must be estimated by my dread of doing it," he concludes. Risk-taking is the engine of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, which Mailer often referred to as an "entertainment."

Locked into what he calls “the dungeon of my massive self-absorption,” Madden stumbles through day 24. In the early evening he returns to the Widow’s Walk. There, while brooding over his decamped blonde wife, he meets another blonde, Laurel Oakwode, and her escort, a bisexual lawyer named Lonnie Pangborn, in town looking at real estate. They drink, Oakwode and Madden flirt, and all three leave together. The next morning, Madden finds himself with a ferocious hangover, a splintered memory of seeing his wife the night before, another of Oakwode, an erection premised on it, and a new, crusty, tattoo on his arm—a heart surrounding “Laurel.” The telephone rings and Police Chief Alvin Luther Regency, a macho Vietnam veteran who collects guns and knives, tells him to clean up the passenger seat of his car. Madden finds it covered with blood. At a meeting with Regency—who describes himself as half enforcer, half maniac—the Chief suggests that he check his marijuana cache buried in a burrow in the woods of nearby Truro. He does, and is terrified to find a plastic bag containing the severed head of a woman, a blonde. Unable to look at the face, he reburies it. The next time he checks, it is gone. The third time, there are two blonde heads.

The situation at this juncture is compelling, worthy of novels by Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett, which Mailer had read before beginning *Tough Guys*. Madden has many questions: Did he have sex with Oakwode? Did Pangborn, who has gone missing kill Laurel after watching them have sex? Did Regency, who somehow knew the burrow’s location, kill Laurel, or both women? Could the killer be another bisexual character, the stately, plump Meeks Wardley Hilby III, Patty’s millionaire former husband, who had a chance encounter with Madden after he left his burrow? Perhaps it is Bolo, another bisexual, who is back in town? Could Patty, who Regency claims to have caught a glimpse of that night, have killed Laurel? Or

vice versa? Two local criminals might have done the deed—Hank “Spider” Nissen, expert with a knife, and his Portuguese sidekick Stoodie, whose weapon of choice is a tire iron. Underlings for Regency, they also work for Hilby. The darkest possibility is that Madden himself is responsible. He can’t remember. As he sorts through the possibilities, he finds that his mind “is a book, where pages are missing—no, worse, two books, each with its own gaps.” One part of him wants to solve the crime, one doesn’t.

The first person point of view works ^{smoothly} beautifully for the novel’s first 100 pages, as Madden provides back story—a tissue of coincidences—and ponders the identity of the decapitator(s). But from that point on Mailer runs into the same problem he encountered in *The Deer Park*: first person narrators can’t be everywhere at once—unless they possess the clairvoyance of Meni. Because Madden was not present at many key events, Mailer was forced to use long conversations between him and several of the principal characters—Regency, his wife Madeleine (a.k.a. Laurel, Madden’s former lover), Hilby (his prep school friend and prison mate), and Dougy “Big Mac” Madden (his father, a retired longshoreman who has cancer), and shorter ones with Nissen, Bolo, and Harpo (his tattoo-er)—to get answers to his questions, along with detailed descriptions of their sexual activities. “The book is interested,” Mailer said, in “the spectrum of male behavior,” and hetero, homo and bi-sexuality are explored more thoroughly in *Tough Guys* than anywhere else in his work. Sam Spade learns what he needs to in a few minutes of conversation. Madden inches along. Hammett and Chandler, “could be completely executive,” Mailer said. They could bring in a character, despise him and shoot him in a page and never look back,” “I tend to linger over my characters and brood over them.” He told James Campbell in 1983 that his plots never came easy. “I have to work them out bit by bit, and eke them out.” In

this novel, the plot is the weakest element. The last third, he admitted, “drifts heavily and ponderously from revelation to revelation.”

There was no time for meaningful revision. “I had been trying to start all year and I hadn’t been able to get near it,” he said. And it was as if suddenly my mind cleared. It was one of those joke situations where they give Popeye the can of spinach. It took 61 days.” With the exception of a day off to bring Michael to Harvard for his freshman year, ~~and a few other breaks,~~ he worked from 11 to 9 every day through the late summer of 1983. During this time, his relationship with Little, Brown began to fray, and before he was done with the novel, he had severed his ties, quite amiably, with the firm he had been with for 15 years and seven books. As he explained in one of his regular letters to Abbott, Little, Brown had suggested that he find a new publisher. The arrangement “was too rich for their blood,” he said, “and in more ways than one.” Mailer’s agent, Scott Meredith said that while Mailer was close to his Little, Brown editor, Roger Donald, he felt that having a New York-based publisher was desirable.

In early August, Mailer signed a four-novel deal with Random House, reported in the *Times* to be \$4 million. Mailer’s new editor, Jason Epstein, said, “I don’t know where that figure came from, certainly not from us,” and called it “Mailer’s agent’s advertisement for himself.” But he acknowledged that Mailer could make over \$3 million, all told, from the four novels—nonfiction books would require separate negotiations. The key provision of the contract, continued from Little, Brown, called for a \$30,000 monthly payment, essentially an advance against royalties. Mailer would collect it from Random House, his last publisher, for 24 years. When annual income from other projects—essays and screenplays, readings and lectures—was added, he would finally be able to pay his debts and support his family, although he carried

sizeable mortgages on his homes to the end of his life. "Money," Madden says, "was the game other people played that I tried to avoid by having just enough not to play it." The same was true for Mailer.

✓ A few months later, Little, Brown told Mailer that they were not ~~particularly~~ happy with the manuscript of *Tough Guys*. Meredith put a good face on it by issuing a statement: "We told Little, Brown we would count it a great courtesy if they would release the book so that it could be published with great fanfare instead of a swan song." Mailer said later, "I was shocked that they didn't like it," and surprised that they did not recognize its sales potential. Random House agreed to make the four-book deal a five-book deal, and the shift of publishers was complete. Mailer's new publisher advertised the book extensively, and published a first edition of 150,000 copies. As a paperback it went through at least 15 printings.

Meredith, who was instrumental in negotiating the new contract, had pioneered a new practice in the early 1950s, the literary auction. Agents sent the manuscripts of major books (or the promise of one) simultaneously to a dozen or more publishing houses for bids. This innovation replaced the one-publisher-at-a-time method that Mailer used to sell *The Deer Park*. Meredith was relentless in peddling his clients' writings, and would sometimes go to 50 outlets looking for a sale, which explains why a number of Mailer's short pieces were published in men's adventure and girlie magazines. He was never ashamed to stoop for a dollar. Roger Straus Jr., the head of Farrar, Straus & Giroux in the late 1970s, confirmed Meredith's reputation: "When a book needs hustling, he hustles it, better than any other agent in the business." For many years, Meredith also brought in income from a reading and evaluation fee—\$50 for a short

story, and \$150 for a novel—for unpublished works, a scheme that gained him the reputation of someone who takes pittances from poor, aspiring, unknown writers.

Loyal to his clients, Meredith lent them money (at eight percent) when they were in need. According to Jack Scovil, who worked for Meredith for decades, Mailer borrowed regularly, and ran up large balances. "If you knew Scott," Scovil recalled, "and his love of money, and his hatred of letting any dime slip past his grasp, the fact that he had lent somebody \$120,000, even Norman Mailer, I'm sure gave him many sleepless nights. But it all came back eventually." The two men were unfailingly loyal to each other. "They admired and respected each other," Scovil said, "and their intellectual talents. Scott was not an educated man. But nevertheless he was a very bright man, and one could even say brilliant in many aspects of his life. And he could parlay with Norman quite well." Mailer said Meredith has "a supple brain."

The Meredith Agency had an impressive client list: P. G. Wodehouse, Margaret Truman, Garry Wills, Mickey Spillane, Spiro Agnew, Carl Sagan, and J.F.K.'s mistress, Judith Campbell Exner (she received an \$800,000 advance), to name a few. Mailer, Scovil explained, "was *the* prime client of the agency. There's no question about that, no question in Scott's mind. Norman was the No. 1 client for, I think, both personal reasons but also for very pragmatic reasons as well. He was a name figure. He drew all kinds of people to the agency, simply by being there." The relationship began in 1963, when Mailer called Meredith on the phone.

X ✓ 'I hear you're the guy who gets the money, said Mailer.

'That's what I hear too,' said Meredith.

'Well, I need money,' Mailer replied.

X
Meredith negotiated the lucrative deal for *An American Dream*, got Mailer out of a financial hole, and became his agent for the next 30 years. "Before Norman, Scott was a scruffy kind of agent," Scovil said, who "was looked down on by the literary establishment." After Mailer came aboard, Meredith picked up many major clients. Mailer "legitimized the agency in the eyes of the outside world," Scovil said, although he was never the agency's biggest moneymaker.

Part salesman, part banker and part counselor,
Meredith bailed them out of jail, and listened to their marital problems. He did not spend much time reading their work, however. He left that to his able associates, Scovil and Russell Galen who, after Meredith's death in 1993, started their own agency. They wrote detailed reports for Scott's meetings with Mailer. "To the best of my knowledge," Scovil said,

Scott Meredith never read a word that Norman wrote. And I don't think Norman ever knew that, of course. The reason for the reports was to enable Scott to have his meeting, his dinner, there were always 'dinner meetings' after a manuscript was delivered. I don't think Norman was actually expecting any criticism in the sense of 'should I change this, or 'should I change that,' I don't think there was any question of that. But he did want to know what Scott's reaction was and Scott's reaction was based on how we were telling him to react. For the most part, if I remember correctly, the reports were quite lavish and laudatory.

Various people complained to Mailer about Meredith over the years, but their strong bond persisted. *Tough Guys Don't Dance* is dedicated to him.

X ✓ Reviews of the novel were somewhat better than those for *Ancient Evenings*, and it reached number four on the best seller list, Mailer's third book in five years to make ^{it} the list.

X
 Singled out for praise in even some of the unfavorable reviews was Madden's father, Dougy,
 another in the long line of male mentor figures in Mailer's fiction. Madden senior arrives in
 Provincetown the morning after his son has retrieved the heads from the Truro burrow. ^{In his former, a} large,
 strong man (six-foot-three, 280 pounds) ^{in his prime}, he is now weak from chemotherapy and,
 disgusted with the nausea that accompanies the treatment, has decided to give it up. Bourbon is
 his new medicine. Tim Madden is half-Irish, one-quarter Jewish and one-quarter Protestant, a
 "sensitive Irishman." But his father is a "pure ethnic," Mailer said, "I wanted him to be a real
 Irishman marked by that special kind of probity that they can possess, along with powerful
 murderous emotions." CNM 333

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During another gray P-town day, father and son pass the bottle and discuss cancer,
 courage and the disposal of body parts. Statistics, Dougy says, indicate that people in mental
 institutions get cancer at a much lower rate than the general population. "I figure it this way," he
 says, passing on one of Mailer's favorite dualisms, "cancer is the cure for schizophrenia.
 X ✓ Schizophrenia is the cure for cancer." But he discovers another medicine: ^{cure:} dirty jobs. The more
 X ✓ horrible, the ^{better} more salutary. Dougy secures baling wire to an anchor, ties it to spikes he has
 driven through the eye sockets of the two heads, and plummets them some fathoms down. Later,
 he gives sea burials to the bodies of the two women, as well as those of Nissan, Stoodie, Hilby
 and Regency, who is killed by Madeleine after he has a mental breakdown and a stroke. "Crazy
 people in serious places had to be executed," Madden says. A short time later, Dougy reaps the
 homeopathic benefit of his grisly work when his cancer goes into remission. "Maybe I was in the
 wrong occupation all this time," he tells his son.

Assigning responsibility for the other deaths with any precision is hard to do—some reviewers said they were unable to keep track—and probably not worth doing. The mayhem is hugger-mugger, very much as in Jacobean revenge tragedy, and motives are moot. Greed, blood and terror engulf everyone, save ^{The} ~~Madden~~ ^{SO} ~~father and son~~. Everyone is guilty to some degree. The last chapter of the novel tries and fails to explain how six people (Pangborn, who killed himself in a pang of sexual jealousy, makes it seven) could have disappeared without repercussions of any sort. What makes *Tough Guys Don't Dance* worth reading is not the tangled plot, nor the missing links between motivation and deed, but Mailer's horrid crew of miscreants, who are as lovingly and convincingly drawn as any in his novels. The other quality that lifts the novel above its flaws is the tense, melancholy mood created by Tim Madden. The objective correlative for the damp, drizzly November in his soul is the half-deserted, haunted town at the edge of America, the place Mailer loved more than any other.

Ψ Ψ Ψ

About six weeks before his concentrated effort on *Tough Guys*, Mailer completed an adaptation of Henry Miller's trilogy, *Sexus, Nexus, Plexus*, known as *The Rosy Crucifixion*. The opportunity to write his third screenplay came from a young editor at the *Village Voice*, Rudy Langlais. He wanted to use Miller's masterwork as the basis for "the first classy X-rated Hollywood film." After he read *Genius and Lust*, he knew that Mailer was the screenwriter he wanted. Langlais pitched Mailer the story of Miller's profound love for his second wife, June Edith Smith (Mona in the novel), and her affair with Anastasia, who lived with them for a time: "Boy meets girl, boy loses girl to girl, boy gets girl back." Mailer was enthusiastic ^{and} went to work.

Langlais, a novice in the film world, began the search for funding, and eventually gained the support of the head of Twentieth Century Fox films, Joe Wizan. Mailer was paid \$250,000.

After Mailer finished the screenplay, he sent it to Langlais, who had asked to read it first. When he did, he found that Mailer had followed the story line they had agreed on, but had added a framing character: "Old Henry," Miller as an 80-year old codger, who breaks into the action to make observations about himself as a younger man, played by a second actor. Mailer's desire for narrative provenance was again in play. Langlais felt that "Old Henry" was unnecessary, and with some trepidation, began a cut-and-paste operation. He took the edited version to Mailer's Brooklyn apartment when he was done, but Mailer didn't want to read it. He wanted to drink, and they proceeded to put away several bottles of Frenesi, the white wine Mailer was currently favoring, as they discussed the affairs of the universe. Langlais left as the sun was coming up. Later that day, Mailer called him up, and said: "How dare you, how *dare* you . . . be right!"

Before this occurred, however, the studio executives insisted that Mailer come to Los Angeles to close the deal. Langlais picked NM at the airport, and while driving him to the hotel, told him how much he enjoyed *The Fight*, especially the description of Mailer climbing from one seventh-floor balcony to another at his hotel in Kinshasa in an attempt to aid Ali. When they walked into Mailer's room on the 15th floor of the Century Plaza Hotel, a stunned Langlais watched as Mailer climbed to the railing of the balcony, and said, "I know what you're thinking: ~~this~~ goes my movie deal."²² Relief, and laughter, followed when Mailer jumped down.

The next day—April Fool's Day, 1983—they met with Wizan and a squadron of V. P.s eager to meet Mailer, who came in feinting and jabbing. The executives were pleased. As they were leaving, one of them said he was so happy that a film would be made about Arthur Miller

and his wife, Marilyn Monroe. Henry Miller was unknown to them, and they obviously had not read *The Rosy Crucifixion*. Like so many film projects, the film slowly collapsed over the next year. It remains on the shelf at the studio. Langlais remained a good friend, and later brokered another screenplay deal for Mailer with Universal Studios—"Havana," the story of Meyer Lansky running racetracks and casinos for Batista in the 1940s and 1950s. It also remains unproduced.



Mailer often sent the manuscripts of friends to Meredith. He also used him to funnel money to people. Sometime in the mid-1980s, Mailer asked him to send money to a new mistress, Carole Mallory, a former cover model for major magazines like *New York*, *Newsweek*, and *Cosmopolitan*, who also had small roles in a few films in the 1970s, including *Take This Job and Shove It*. A 20" x 28" poster (which she gave Mailer) for this ~~late~~ film, depicting a curvaceous Mallory in a bikini bottom and torn, scanty t-shirt, rivaled sales of Farrah Fawcett's famous swimsuit poster. Jack Scovil, who handled the transfer of funds, said that he was "surprised that Norman would get involved with someone like that," referring to Mallory's reputation as a star-seducer. In several interviews, numerous gossip column snippets and a 2009 memoir, Mallory lists the men that she had "picked up," including Clint Eastwood, Robert De Niro, Warren Beatty, Richard Gere, Sean Connery, Anthony Hopkins, Peter Sellers—she said Brits were "more fun than the Americans"—and Dodi Fayed, the Egyptian playboy who died in the car crash with Princess Diana. Plus a few rock stars. She was also engaged to Picasso's son Claude during the 1970s—he jilted her—and claims to have turned down propositions from Albert Finney and Jack Nicolson.

Buzz Farbar introduced Mallory to Mailer at Elaine's. A few weeks later, in January 1984, she read that Mailer would be speaking at a showing of his films at the Thalia Theater in Manhattan. When the event was over, she slipped him a note asking him to meet her the following day at a coffee shop. She wanted to get his opinion of a memoir of her years with Claude Picasso. They met, he read some of the manuscript—a chapter describing her night with Beatty—and she left some lipstick on his face. She also left her telephone number in Los Angeles. That summer, when he was in Los Angeles doing publicity for *Tough Guys*, they had their first tryst at the Bel Air Hotel. Soon, she was seeing him when he was in L.A., and was in love. She loved his fame, his wit, his sexual equipment, and his detailed writing advice. "I longed for an affair with a genius," she said. During their time together, she said, "I noticed that he used words like oxymoron, swath and sententious. Hearing him speak was an education." She also loved the money he gave her. But at one point, her \$200-a-week stipend ceased, as Scovill recalled:

Scott would never authorize giving Carole money unless Norman had authorized it. And there was a point where Norman wanted to cut her off and Carole had come up to the office and caused a great scene. She was crying and she was screaming and she was doing all kinds of things, saying all kinds of things, and that she deserved the money. I mean, she was sucking Norman's cock and she wanted her money. She viewed it as her money.

Another way of helping Mallory financially was to give her interviews, which he did on at several occasions. Through him, she also met other writers and celebrities. Joseph Heller, Erica Jong, Isabelle Rossellini and Kurt Vonnegut are some of the interviewees she mentions in

her memoir. Her interviews were sold to various magazines, with Meredith helping on sales, presumably. One of her interviews with Mailer was a three-way with Vidal, and was the cover feature in the May 1991 *Esquire* (he and Mailer had made up by this time), but Mailer said it was a weak piece, even after he had tweaked it. Mailer edited her interviews before they were published, with the exception of the last two, which she refused, in the name of honesty, she said, to let him review or change. Mallory was unaware that it was a common practice, and believed that it was "his way of hiding the truth." By revising his comments, she said, "he controlled his image for history." Norris eventually learned about Mallory, who was not timid about showing up at Mailer events, but the affair was fairly quiet until she moved to New York a few years later.

Mallory, by her own description, was an alcoholic, a sexaholic and a drug abuser. Money, and access to celebrities seemed to be her chief aspirations, although she did hope to become a writer, and did like and admire Mailer. She was 42 when they met, still beautiful and sexually appealing. Among Mailer's close friends, the affair caused consternation, but he waved off every warning. The relationship was based on passion, according to Ivan Fisher. "It was a huge part of his being. And a huge part of his passion was sex. And his relationship with Mallory was 100 percent sexual. Period. There wasn't the teeniest, tiniest, nanogram of anything other than sex involved there. If you are looking for an idea, read her book [Flash] *Flash*, yes. And you'll know exactly what this affair was about. It wound up causing her—Norris—enormous pain." *Flash* is Mallory's 1988 novel about an alcoholic, sexaholic, drug-abusing female flasher. "Mallory packs her novel with down-and-dirty sexual details," said one reviewer. Mailer gave it a blurb, as did, inexplicably, Gloria Steinem. By the time the book was published, Norris realized that Mallory,

unlike Mailer's other mistresses, lacked discretion, but not determination. She wanted to become the seventh Mrs. Mailer. The protagonist of her novel is trying, after an affair with a French millionaire, to win a major role in a film, via the casting couch. Her true passion, however, is for Sacha Sachtel, a sixty-year old producer, the "King of Kink," modeled on Mailer.

Gay Talese, who knew Mallory from Elaine's, recalls being at a literary event in the late 1980s, and being approached by Norris. "Mailer was somewhere [else], I don't know, but it was a big event, maybe something for P.E.N.," he recalled. "Anyway, she came to me and said, 'I'm going to leave Norman.' And I said, 'Why?' 'Because he's fucking around,' she said. 'He's having affairs.' I'm surprised because I thought it was still a relatively new marriage. She was quite gorgeous. I knew he was having affairs, but I said, 'You know, you shouldn't do that. With Mailer, it's just a little adventure, none of them means anything.' She was pretty pissed off." She was not angry enough to leave him, however.

Barbara met Mallory through her brother "He sicced her on me when I was working at Simon and Schuster," she recalled. "I didn't ask any questions, but I guessed he was trying to buy her off because she presented me with a couple of manuscripts which were just ghastly." She realized that there was nothing she could do with Mallory's work. "I wished I could because I figured this would be one way to help him—one of the manuscripts was about all the men she had slept with. Norman was not in it. I figured maybe he had asked her to keep him out of it." When asked about her motives in 2006, Mailer said, "She was totally on the make." Fisher's interpretation notwithstanding, Mailer had more than one reason for continuing his relationship with Mallory

In a 1973 interview with Buzz Farbar, Mailer described the four stages of knowing a woman:

First, there's living together. It's often thought equal to marriage. Not by half. You can live with a woman and never begin to comprehend her at all, not until you get married to her. Once you do that, you're in the next stage. The third, obviously, is children. Once again your woman is different. Say it's analogous to a culture going through major transformations. The fourth stage is knowing a woman once you're divorced. Then, indeed, you come to know something at last. So if it weren't for the fact that there are children, there would be something agreeable about moving from marriage to marriage, just as there is something exciting about spending five years in England and five in France. But there are children, and that's the vortex of all postmarital pain, which is always so surprisingly huge. Because finally the children come out of a vision in the marriage.

Mailer does not mention the stage of a relationship that precedes living together: an affair.

X/ Besides Mallory, he was still seeing Carol Stevens, and He Eileen Fredrickson whenever he visited Chicago, and called her regularly. When he was on the West Coast, he rarely failed to spend time with Lois Wilson, whose husband was aware of their relationship. They had a long correspondence. With both of these very different women, he never felt beleaguered, and enjoyed friendship, sexual intimacy, dining out and conversation. No strings. There were other affairs, but these were the most important.

One way to understand Mailer's relationship with Carole Mallory is to see it as part of his lust for experience, which he once defined as "the church—if the word may be allowed—of one's acquired knowledge." Experience was holy. His sister remembers him telling her, in so many words, that "experience was more valuable when you felt that you could, you know, turn it into art. Otherwise, there wasn't much point to it." Women were of inexhaustible interest to him—mysterious, dangerous, of infinite variety. Mallory was unlike anyone he had known before. He was fascinated by her crassness and amazed by her promiscuity, which seemed to match his own. There was so much to learn. When he was asked by *Cosmopolitan* his opinion of a woman if "she sleeps with you too soon," he replied: "No woman has ever slept with me too soon. I don't pretend I'm typical, but I've always found promiscuous women interesting. I suspect I would have been promiscuous if I'd been a woman. I certainly have been as a man. So I don't make judgments. The faster a woman would sleep with me, the more I liked her."

Mallory says that she was in love with him, and not merely interested in what he could do for her, and for a time, perhaps she was. She knew him but slenderly, however. Convinced that he was an alcoholic, she took him to one of her AA meetings. He went out of curiosity. He invited her to see a gay porn movie, and she took this as evidence that he was bi-sexual. Mailer once took Norris to such a film at the Adonis Theater in Manhattan, a well-known gay porn outlet. When the very large black woman selling tickets said to Norris, "Honey, do you know what kind of shows we have here?" Norris, said, "Yes, ma'am, I certainly do." Dotson Rader was in the balcony when the Mailers came in, and was astounded to see them. He recalled his conversation with Mailer about gay sex:

~~So anyway~~ when I was very, very young and in New York I knew people like Parker Tyler and Glenway Westcott, Ginsburg and Auden. They were all gay guys older than me. [. . .] One of the things I was continuously warned about, by Tennessee and others, was homophobia. Norman was on the list. I was warned that he was homophobic. I knew Norman quite well and I never had a sense of that, quite the opposite. I feel he was fascinated, intrigued, by homosexuals and homosexuality. He would go into the very specific, raunchy details, and to me very embarrassing details, about exactly what physically you did as a gay person. And he wanted the moist specifics about the encounter. Sometimes I provided them, sometimes I would get my back up and say this is too much.

A couple of years before Mailer died, Norris pointed out that imputations of her husband being homophobic were belied by the fact that his current agent, editor and personal assistant were all gay men.

As Mailer explained more than once, when he had two motives, good and bad, for doing something, he felt a surge of energy. He attributed this to God and the Devil, or their minions, who, for their own reasons, agreed on the desirability of the action. He was not singled out for these nudges; he believed that all humans received them, often unknowingly. Later on, he would feel guilt or even self-loathing, but this did not negate the choice, not entirely. Much depended on the results, the fruits, of the action. Mailer told a friend that he learned something about venality from Mallory, and used it in the creation of Chloe, the ^{sexy} lubricious waitress in the opening chapters of *Harlot's Ghost*. "But," as he told Farbar, "the idea that people can be promiscuous without exploiting their own sensitivity is impossible." Promiscuity is a tradeoff, and while you

might gain knowledge, you also "take in waste from the other person's system." He continued, saying, "You pay for every last thing you get out of life."

Years ago, Calder Willingham told me a story about a situation where he tried every trick to make a woman leave him. Finally she began going with another man. Then he discovered he was jealous. He told this story on himself with great humor, and looked at me and said, 'Norman, you can't cheat life.' He said this in his inimitable Georgia accent. It's not a remark one hasn't heard before. But there's such a thing as hearing a maxim at just the right moment for oneself. Then it goes all the way in. So that remark stayed with me. Whenever I'm trying to work out some sort of moral balance for myself, I find the thought useful.

Mailer found some kind of moral balance in regard to Mallory, enough to continue with her for almost eight years. Like Faust, he was hungry for knowledge and ready to trade punishment to gain it. "The more prohibited the act, the greater the lure for Mailer," according to Rader. "He wanted to know everything."

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In early 1984 Mailer also went alone to Russia on a *Parade* assignment, traveling there for two weeks in mid-March. He went first to Lithuania, and traveled by train from Kaunas to Vilnius, not far from the towns where his parents were born almost a century earlier. From there he traveled to Leningrad and Moscow. Everywhere he went, he saw the vestiges of World War II's destruction. Buildings were crumbling, the people looked battered. "It's a sad place," he

wrote in the *Parade* piece, "A Country, Not a Scenario." "I felt as if I were back on the Lower East Side of New York 100 years ago. I could have been watching my grandparents walking by."

✓ ~~James~~ Schiller, who was in Russia filming *Peter the Great*, opened some doors for Mailer
 x / in Moscow. Mailer wanted to be relatively anonymous, Schiller got him a room in the massive
 x ✓ Rossiya Hotel, ^{near} ~~right next~~ to Red Square. His tiny room had a sink and toilet, but no bath or
 shower. Hot water was iffy. The toilet paper was cut-up newspaper. With the aid of a bottle of
 vodka, Mailer persisted for three days, and when he could no longer endure the bad food,
 sandpaper towels and rock-like soap, he called Schiller. "Get me out of here," he said. Through
 x ✓ his ~~film~~ connections, Schiller got him into the majestic National Hotel, overlooking the Kremlin.
 Built in 1903, the hotel hosted Russian royalty, as well as famous artists. What impressed Mailer
 was that its guests had included Trotsky, Lenin and Felix Dzerzhinsky, the first head of the
 Russian secret police. In his year of study under Malraux, Mailer had learned of the critical
 role played by Dzerzhinsky's organization, the Cheka, the forerunner of the KGB. Mailer would
 later write of Dzerzhinsky, an "evil artist" of counter-espionage. Schiller got him booked into
 Room 107, where Lenin had stayed. After the rubbery food at the Rossiya, Mailer enjoyed
 Chicken Kiev in the National's "hard currency dining room," Schiller recalled. He added that
 "Mailer went from the lowest of the low to the best of the best."

Mailer spent most of his time discovering the capital on his own, but Schiller introduced
 him to Vladimir Posner, the son of a Russian spy and a spokesperson for the Soviet Union in the
 1980s. Mailer also met Genrikh Borovik, a former KGB agent and journalist, who spent many
 years in the U.S. as head of Russian news agencies, and wrote a book on Soviet double agent,
 Kim Philby. Through them, Mailer met a number of Soviet intelligence figures who explained

X the structure and operation of the country's competing spy agencies. The *Parade* essay contains Mailer's initial observations on the KGB and the surveillance of citizens. Russia was much less of a police state than he expected, and he walked around Moscow unimpeded for several hours every day for a week. He met dissidents and questioned them about the reign of terror under the previous regimes. *Glasnost*, the open and frank discussion of the past, was about to commence under Mikhail Gorbachev, who became General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1985. In June, he returned to Russia, this time with Norris, and they spent three weeks touring.

In a letter to Abbott after they returned, Mailer said that he was "lying around and thinking, wondering whether a new book was starting in me." That summer in Provincetown he did no writing. He did interviews for *Tough Guys*, spent time with his children, swam, relaxed and spent a month deciding what he would write next. He told a reporter that he had narrowed the field to three possibilities. *The Boat of Ra*, promised to Random House, was the first.

X ✓ Learning enough science to make the inter-galactic voyage of a space ship credible worried him, however. Describing the voyage of Apollo 11 had been difficult enough, even with his Harvard X ✓ -engineering background to lean on. He felt that an understanding of astrophysics, a fast-changing X ✓ and complex field, would be essential, giving some realistic notion of traveling at the speed of light would be a challenge.

The second novel he was considering was "The Castle in the Forest." It opens in 1945 when a U. S. Army unit arrives at a German castle used as a concentration camp. "The leading characters," Meredith said, "are an American Jewish doctor and a German doctor who confront each other and clash over contending philosophies." In 1954, Mailer had made a false start on this novel, which he then called "The City of God." The third possibility was about the CIA. X ✓ a novel!

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 X ✓ The Russian trips and the end to the Cold War influenced his decision, as did his 1973 essay on Watergate, and ~~American intelligence agencies~~, "A Harlot High and Low." His continuing obsession with the assassination of J.F.K. played a part, as well as his own opposed identities: family man and philanderer, Left-conservative, activist and observer, rationalist and transcendentalist, to name the most important. All these coalesced in his decision to embark on a huge circumambient novel of the Cold War and the bifurcated lives of spies. His title, *Harlot's Ghost*, came later.

X ✓ Mailer did make a few more short trips in the summer of 1984. On June 3, he was awarded an honorary degree by Mercy College on Long Island. In July, he appeared at the tenth anniversary celebration of the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, a Buddhist-inspired educational center. He was invited by Allen Ginsberg, one of the founders, to appear with X ✓ William Burroughs. A few months earlier Mailer had sent a contribution to a *Festschrift* for the poet's sixtieth birthday:

Years ago I wrote a poem about Allen which went something like—I quote from memory—

Sometimes I think, 'That ugly kike,

That four-eyed faggot,

Is the bravest man in America.'

Well, over the years, Allen's gotten considerably better looking and has doubtless earned that most curious position of being a major and near to elder statesman in homosexual ranks and his poetry, bless it, goes on forever.

X

Mailer and Ginsberg had gotten close, when both of them were on the anti-war ramparts, but their friendship began tentatively. "Ginsberg and I met in a strange way," Mailer said. "Like scientists who are each working on the same problem—far apart in every other way." But now, he continued, "I have a lot of respect for him. He is truly one of few honorable men I have known in the literary world." Mailer also respected Burroughs, whom he called "the shyest man in the world." They did not have a close relationship, however. After Burroughs' death in 1997, Mailer said that he had spent perhaps the equivalent of six evenings with Burroughs, all told. At Naropa, the three men took part in a discussion titled "American Soul? What Is?" Mailer had warm memories of the session, "We had the damndest time out in Colorado," he said. "Being on with Burroughs is like being with W.C. Fields. He is one of the funniest men alive. He can say, 'It is eighty degrees today in Kansas,' and the audience is wiped out." Mailer added that he still admired *Naked Lunch*."

X ✓

Shortly after returning from Colorado, he went to a meeting of the American Chapter of P.E.N., the international association of writers. He had and served on the organization's executive board from 1968-1973. On July 25, he was elected president for a two-year term, and would preside over the 1986 International Congress in New York. "I always wanted to be president of something," Mailer said. For the next eighteen months, he would help plan the world congress, although most of his effort went to raising the money to underwrite it.

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Mailer's financial affairs in the fall of 1984, for the first time in 15 years, were not in total disarray. From early 1977 when Larry Schiller enlisted him in the Gilmore project, to the end of 1982 when he submitted the 1744-page word manuscript of *Ancient Evenings*, he had

been going flat out. After that, he told Carol Holmes, "the will to work collapsed, and I did nothing for a year." He rallied to complete *Tough Guys*, but now he wondered if he could find the energy to begin another huge novel. As he wrote to an admirer, Alex Hicks, "The next two books of the trilogy have to be written and that's never automatic. It's killing to write, you see.

Excessive bile gets secreted and all sorts of collateral poisons lay waste to your body. I groan at the thought of a thousand pages. Writers with jobs in higher education look forward to a sabbatical from administrative chores and teaching so they can research and write. For Mailer, the P.E.N. presidency was a reverse sabbatical that forced him to shelve his writing projects so that he could preside over committee meetings, twist the arms of potential givers, give speeches and deal with media. One reason he accepted the job was that "men like myself in small towns who've been reprobates all their lives go into church work" when they reach 60. After several years of monkish work, Mailer looked forward to the interactions that went along with the presidency.

Just as he was beginning his P.E.N. he was elected to the American Academy and National Institute of Arts and Letters, a group of 250 distinguished creators in literature, music, art and architecture. He was installed on December 7, taking the seat of Tennessee Williams, who had recently died. Mailer said he was glad to have Williams' seat, and hoped some of his talent would rub off. Coming on the heels of his election as P.E.N. president, the honor was recognition of his status as "one of the giants—if at times a wounded giant—of our age," as Arthur Schlesinger said in the official Academy citation. He began it by noting that Mailer had "a career of living dangerously." There would be more risk-taking over the remaining 23 years of his life, but Mailer was on the brink of being a senior citizen. His knees were sore, and his breath

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getting short. He said that during his first trip to Russia, while crossing Red Square, he saw that everyone was passing him, yet he was walking as fast as he could.

Mailer's oldest children—Susan, Danielle, Betsy and Kate—had all finished college, Michael was a sophomore and Stephen was in prep school; Maggie and Matt were in high school, and John Buffalo, the youngest, was in first grade. For the first time in 20 years, there were no babies crawling around the floor of 142 Columbia Heights—except when the grandchildren from Chile were visiting. Susan and Marco had their second child, Alejandro, in 1985. Norris now had more time and was doing a lot of painting, including several commissioned portraits. She had several shows, including her first in Little Rock. She introduced Mailer to Hillary and Bill Clinton—now Governor of Arkansas—and they got a private tour of the Governor's mansion. Dotson Rader and Pat Lawford Kennedy flew in for Norris' show and like everyone else was impressed when the Clintons attended the reception at the gallery. Lawford and Mailer saw Clinton as a potential presidential candidate. Hillary also impressed him. Later, he said, "That might be the brightest woman I ever met."

X / Through the spring of 1985, Mailer worked on fundraising for the P.E.N. Congress, *January 1986 Congress*
X / ~~scheduled for January 1985~~. Over 200 distinguished writers from 85 countries were invited, plus
X / 800 writers from the U.S. Paying for the travel and hotel expenses of the foreign writers was the largest item on the budget. Mailer came up with the idea for a series of readings to be held in the fall of 1985, two writers a week at a Broadway theater that was "dark" on Sunday evenings. A series ticket would sell for \$1,000, and if 1000 people subscribed, the gross would be \$1 million.
X / Even after expenses, the budget for the Congress would be covered. Selecting and pairing the

writers, all from the U.S., would require diplomatic skills of a high order. Mailer began writing letters and making calls.

There was no way not to include Vidal, whose literary reputation was at its peak. His masterful novel, *Lincoln*, the second volume of a heptalogy covering American history from the founding of the Republic through the 1950s, was ~~critically acclaimed~~ and a best seller for the latter half of 1984. Mailer had not seen Vidal since their fight at Lally Weymouth's party seven years earlier, and knew that inviting him would require a sensitive *rapprochement*. Instead of making direct contact, he asked Knox to speak with him during one of Vidal's visits to Rome from his home in Rapallo. Find out, he told Knox, "whether his hatred for me is still essentially one of his first passions." Mailer now shared an editor, Jason Epstein, with Vidal, and Mailer thought Epstein "for his own self-interest, if nothing other, would like the feud to end." He asked him to float the idea to Vidal about appearing at one of the fundraisers. A month later, Mailer wrote to Vidal. "Our feud, whatever its roots for each of us, has become a luxury," he said. "It's possible in years to come that we'll both have to be manning the same sinking boat at the same time. Apart from that, I'd still like to make up. An element in me, absolutely immune to weather and tides, runs independently fond of you." Mailer gave him the roster of eleven writers who had already agreed to appear: Jean Didion, Susan Sontag, Kurt Vonnegut, William Styron, John Updike, Isaac Bashevis Singer, John Irving, Tom Wolfe, William Buckley, Arthur Miller and *himself*. ~~Norman Mailer~~. He offered Vidal a solo night, or a joint appearance. "We won't have a full roster without you," he closed. Vidal accepted.

Mailer turned next to the notoriously prickly, Saul Bellow. Mailer's sharp criticisms of *his* Bellow's work had not been forgotten, as he learned the last time he had seen him in 1975. Bob

Cromie was interviewing them, back to back, on his Chicago radio show, and raved to Mailer about Bellow's new novel, *Humboldt's Gift*. Mailer recalled how he had tried to compliment the immaculately dressed Bellow when he bumped into him in the hallway. "Well, Saul," he said, "I hear you've written a terrific novel." Bellow looked at the rumpled Mailer up and down, paused two beats, and said, "Well, Norman, why not?" Then he strode off, Mailer said, "looking like an Italian count." Mailer wrote to Bellow about the purposes of the upcoming Congress, and offered him a solo evening, if he preferred. Bellow wrote back to say that the invitation, and the urging of Vonnegut, had made him decide, reluctantly, to give a reading, even though, he was "not strong on civility." Mailer was pleased, as he wrote back to Bellow, but because of theater costs he could no longer give him an evening to himself. Four more writers had been added—Woody Allen, Alice Walker, Vidal and Eudora Welty—and "I shudder to think of the matchmaking maneuvers that will ensue, but rush to offer you, esteemed colleague, your private pick of stablemate" from the list of fifteen.

Mailer gave Vidal the same "perk" of choosing his partner. Vidal had told him that he didn't think the audience would like what he had to say. Mailer replied, "Fine. Be lugubrious, be scalding and appalling, be larger than Jeremiah." Mailer also gave Vidal a choice of dates, and Vidal selected November 17, and for a partner, Mailer. The "PEN Celebrations" would take place on eight Sunday evenings from September 22 to December 15, 1985. Bellow and Welty would open, Allen and Updike would close, and Mailer and Vidal would appear in the middle. The 16 writers were, arguably, the most impressive assemblage of literary talent ever assembled in the U.S. Mailer did not pull it off singlehandedly, of course. Many others were involved—Sontag, Styron, Talese and Vonnegut, in particular—but Mailer did have good enough relations

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 ✓ with most of the roster, save Miller (still unhappy with him about *Marilyn*), Welty and Walker, neither of whom he knew) to get everyone he wanted. Mailer said that the pressure to raise \$500,000 over the next year left him feeling "brusque and jagged." He compared his situation, in a letter to Don Carpenter, to "playing catch-up football when you're behind 28-13, and the third quarter is going nowhere."

He had continued writing to Abbott, and encouraged several people to write to him, including Malaquais. Abbott didn't like Mailer's recent books and wrote him a ten-page letter, which ended, "Do you want to end our friendship?" It was clearly falling apart, as was Abbott's relationship with Malaquais. In Mailer's reply he said that Abbott, like Malaquais, didn't like to lose an argument. "I would just as soon lose a discussion as win it," he said, because

it's the ones you lose that teach you more, and change your ideas, and I don't like living with the same idea too long because it gives me the feeling I'm inhabiting a subway. Anyway, I did my best to ponder it more and more, and finally could come to only one conclusion: guys who hate to lose arguments as much as you and Jean Malaquais must have some deep, unconscious conviction that their karma will be permanently altered if they do. Jack, if anyone wants to end our friendship it's you. That's your right. You can end it anytime you want. But don't put the onus on me.

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 It must be added that few individuals who argued with Mailer felt that he welcomed rejoinders. Sometimes he did; sometimes he sought them, but he could also be immodestly self-assured and dismissive. Endlessly curious, he was also terribly opinionated. Susan, his eldest, commented on this trait a few years after he died:

I couldn't have a real conversation, a discussion, with him. I mean if I had a problem and needed to talk with him about my kids or personal life, he was always ready to listen. But if I wanted to have an intellectual discussion with him it was impossible because he didn't want to listen. He'd just want to talk himself. So, he would ask a question and then go on; he'd just put his foot on me. I remember him doing that to John, I saw it. He did it to John, to Michael, to everybody. So I lost interest and I'm very sorry about that. If you ask me what is it that I regret, that's one of the things I regret most.

If Mailer could hear these words, he might respond by saying he came on strong with his children and friends to keep the dialectic supple, to encourage a strong response. "It's through opposition that creative possibilities rise," he maintained. A tension between being open-minded and being overbearing was characteristic of Mailer from his mid-to-late thirties on. He knew it, and explained it in a letter to a writer friend, Peter Arthurs:

We're all divided between the moralists in ourselves and the novelist. The moralist is full of platitudes and mother's milk, always telling others how to live. The novelist, who always has an eye like a pair of tweezers, never fails to pick up a detail. The novelist is amoral, witty, private, and there to be followed in each of us. What I mean is if one relaxes the moral, authoritative side of one's nature and gets over the idea that one has to say something with one's novel, and merely allows one's characters to take their turns, and is, indeed, even surprised by the turns these characters take, as if they do in some fashion have life of their own, then marvelous things can come out of it.

During 1985, Mailer's correspondence burgeoned, as it usually did when he was not writing on deadline. He kept up with all his regular correspondents—Abbott, Stratton, Knox, Carpenter, Farbar (like Stratton, still incarcerated), and Bruce Dexter, as well as to people unknown to him who wrote with questions. To the editor of *American Spectator*, R. Emmett Tyrrell, who had inquired about his current reading, Mailer said that John Cheever's collected stories was "the discovery" of the year, and that he regretted that he had never had a good discussion with him when he was alive—Cheever died in 1982. The other book he named was M.R. James' *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*. He made no comment on it, but it clearly influenced the opening of *Harlot's Ghost*, which he would soon begin. In his letter to Dexter, he repeated something that he had announced to friends more than once: "I am a phenomenon to myself." He told Dexter that "no one to my knowledge has ever had the same aperçu about me that you had." Dexter had seen clearly that

I always was my own experiment, and that is such a simple way to live, and no one could ever comprehend it. I don't even think it took great guts, just my intense scientific curiosity about one's subject, myself and the bizarre phenomenon of myself. At any rate, those years are behind me now. I'm tempted to say alas. Once you lose the power to experiment on yourself, you lose half your ideas as well.



Fan Mailer, now in her nineties and failing, spent the summer of 1985 with her family. Barbara and Al were renting an apartment in Provincetown, and all of the children came to town as well. Fan spent most of her time in bed in the front bedroom overlooking Commercial Street.

X The local tour bus came by daily, and Fan could hear the driver pointing out "the home of the famous writer, Norman Mailer." Norris recalled that she and all five of Mailer's daughters, as well as Barbara, took turns sitting by her bed to keep her company. A woman named Eva, hired by the family, was almost always there. In late August, Fan and Eva ^ewre back in Brooklyn.

X When Barbara visited, she was disturbed when she saw that Fan was having difficulty swallowing. "The motor of the family," as Mailer called her, was shutting down. The next day, August 28, Susan's birthday, Fan died. Eva called Provincetown. Mailer was out for a swim when the call came. Stephen recalled that he and Michael swam out to where he was snorkeling and to give him the news. "The three of us then, solemnly, walked back to the house with weighty, unspoken remorse." Fan was buried in the family plot in Long Branch next to Barney. Born (probably) ~~in~~ the same year, 1891, she outlived him by almost 13 years.

X In a letter to Stratton ~~a few weeks later~~, Mailer told him how at the end, his mother "could no longer see, she could barely walk, she was bent over from arthritis, the forefront of her memory was gone, so that conversations with her consisted of her asking you the time, like clockwork, every twelve and a half seconds." But she was still feisty on occasion.

Once, maybe a month before the end, she was complaining to her companion, a Jamaican lady [Eva] who took care of her, about how miserable she felt, and said, "I just wish I was dead," whereupon the Jamaican lady, who was probably fed up with her—she was not the world's greatest fun to take care of—said to her, "Would you like me to help you?" At that point, my mother drew herself up as well as she could with her bent back, and glaring at the woman with her sightless eyes said, 'Drop dead.' That was my mom.

Stratton was now in a federal prison in Petersburg, Virginia, and Mailer told him he would visit him in late November, after his appearance with Vidal. He also wanted to visit Buzz Farbar at another federal prison in Loretto, Pennsylvania, but at that time their relations had soured over some financial matters. "Buzz has been through a hideous period," he wrote to Knox. Unlike Stratton, who was keeping in shape, writing a novel and a legal brief, one that eventually reduced his sentence, and handling his situation well, Farbar, Mailer said, "hasn't gone through any metamorphoses because of his suffering. He just stands there and wails within like Job." It would be another year before their relations improved.

✓ The fall of the year was given over to fundraising and arrangements for the eight ^{PEN Coldwater} Sunday nights of P.E.N. readings. Richard Snyder, the head of Simon and Schuster, Tina Brown, editor of *Vanity Fair*, Gay Talese, and "takeover baron" Saul Steinberg and his wife Gayfryd were some of the key people who worked with Mailer to secure contributions from publishers and philanthropists for the Congress. Talese was instrumental in convincing Donald Trump to donate 200 hotel rooms for visiting writers. Added to the income from the "PEN Celebrations," the total from major givers was more than sufficient to meet the budget. Talese, who headed the planning committee for the Congress, said that without Mailer "and his fund-raising efforts, we would not be having an international congress." Mailer's eagerly anticipated evening with Vidal on November 17 drew a sell-out crowd, but the event was a dud. Both men criticized American imperial ambitions, but with no special insights or revealing disagreements. Mailer's sister was recalled that Vidal was the better speaker that night. Before introducing Woody Allen and John Updike at the final Sunday event in December, Mailer apologized for his appearance with Vidal, ^{calling it} which he called "a meeting of two toothless tigers." As best he could during this hectic period,

Mailer kept working on the new novel, and by the end of 1985 had 400 pages of manuscript that he was privately calling "a spy novel."

In the midst of the P.E.N. events, Mailer learned from his doctor, as he told Jeff Michelson in early October, ~~that~~ "I don't have a bad heart, but I don't have a good one either." Boxing was over for him he said, because of his wind. "It got to be sheer, simple hell just to get through a round," he said. "My chest used to feel like it was going to explode." He said he planned to eat a more healthy diet, and asked Michelson to keep his condition confidential.

The news about his health came about the same time that he was selected by *McCall's* magazine as one of the ten sexiest American men over 60, along with Paul Newman, Cary Grant, Joe DiMaggio and President Reagan. Meredith was asked for comment on Mailer and declined. When told, Mailer said that he would have given a quote: "At long last, love." He told Knox, "It's all such marvelous crap." Confirming his confused status in the public eye, a few months later the Feminist Writers' Guild made him the "Guest of Dishonor" at their ninth annual meeting where those present played a game called "Pin the tail on Norman Mailer," a protest against "his antifeminist writings." Mailer had no comment. He received one other award, on November 20, the Lord & Taylor Rose Award made annually to "a person of public accomplishment." Previous recipients included Lillian Hellman, Walter Cronkite and Ella Fitzgerald. Michael Mailer was the master of ceremonies, and Liz Smith, Plimpton, William Buckley, Jr. and Miloš Forman spoke. Mailer was among friends. When he got to the lectern, he said ^{just} ~~that~~ that morning he had been talking to his wife about the award. "I said to her how nice it was that Lord & Taylor is honoring me on my 60th birthday. She smiled at me and said, 'You're 62 and it's not your birthday.'"

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X ✓ The 48th International P.E.N. Congress opened on January 12, 1986 at the New York Public Library with welcoming remarks by ~~P.E.N. officials~~ and U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz. The majority of the conferees from the U.S. and foreign countries were left-leaning, and Shultz was not received warmly, even though he condemned censorship. Mailer had invited him, at the suggestion of John Kenneth Galbraith, without consulting the Executive Board—a blunder that he later apologized for—and there was significant opposition, given the unpopularity of the Reagan administration among liberals. Mailer said he thought it was appropriate to have the nation's top diplomat welcome the international delegates. Doctorow wrote an op-ed piece saying that Mailer's action had put P.E.N. "at the feet of the most ideologically right-wing Administration this country has seen," and 65 of the 700-plus delegates signed a petition opposing it. Things improved slightly after the opening day furor, but the sour mood never went away. One commentator described the conference as "a week of petitions and statements and strategy meetings, of walkouts and protests and confrontations." Aesthetics withered in the ideological heat.

The theme of the conference, the brainchild of novelist Donald Barthelme and poet and translator Richard Howard, was "The Imagination of the State," intended to generate a discussion of two kinds of imagination, artistic and governmental. But many argued that states don't have imaginations, just the opposite; states have agendas, narrow sets of self-serving goals rarely lubricated by literature. Shultz, many believed, was the servant of an administration that had no imagination, or even a brain. It was Mailer, after all, who said later that the first precept

of President Reagan was: "Be as shallow as spit on a rock and you will prevail." The conference theme was echoed in many of the titles of the panels: "How Does the State Imagine?"

"Censorship in the U.S.," and "Alienation in the State." Susan Sontag chaired one of these and led off by stating that she didn't understand the theme to be discussed. Mailer, who was in the audience, reminded Sontag that the panel themes "had been around for six months," and said, "Couldn't you have picked up the phone and asked?" Sontag, it was later revealed, was a member of P.E.N.'s program committee. "I was livid," Mailer said.

On the fifth day of the conference, Mailer was attacked again, this time for the underrepresentation of women. A petition was presented to Mailer noting disproportions in the number of women involved in the Congress. ~~Only four of the 16 writers who took part in the~~ ^{the were} PEN Celebrations were women, and there were ~~only 20-odd women out of 140 on conference~~ ^{on the issues} panels. Earlier, when Betty Friedan confronted Mailer about the number of women, he answered, "Oh, who's counting?" Friedan, joined by Grace Paley, Erica Jong, Margaret Atwood and several others, were counting, and they wanted an explanation and a public apology. Mailer pointed that at least two dozen important women writers had declined invitations, including Mary McCarthy, Iris Murdoch, Diana Trilling, Joan Didion, Barbara Tuchman, Mavis Gallant, Ann Beattie, Nathalie Sarraute and Marguerite Yourcenar. His answer did not mollify the protestors, and the atmosphere got strident, especially after Mailer said it was a bad idea to construct literary panels based on gender balance, adding that in many countries "there are no good women writers" because of the ingrained sexism of the culture that feminists deplored. Mailer started to dig himself into a deeper rut with comments about the mistake of stirring affirmative action into the literary pot, and some in the audience wondered if Mailer would

escape with his skin. Only after Gay Talese whispered some words of advice in Mailer's ears, did he promise that the petitions would be addressed, and shortly afterwards closed down the discussion. An ad-hoc committee, headed by Grace Paley, was established afterwards to examine the demands of the protestors. Vonnegut, another P.E.N. official, said at the time that if he had been in the president's position he would have constituted the panels almost exactly the way Mailer had, given the roster of conferees from which to choose.

In point of fact, Mailer had little to do with selecting panel members, as he explained to novelist Mary Lee Settle, who wondered why she hadn't been chosen for one. "I stayed away from that," he wrote to her. "If I had started picking too many people, charges of nepotism, or whatever the word is, would damage us all." Most of his effort had gone into fundraising. The participation petition called for P.E.N. to "include women in the decision-making roles." In a postmortem with the *Times*, Mailer said that the issue had not received much previous attention because "we have so many women in positions of such power." At the time of the Congress, women headed six of the eight permanent committees and occupied three of the six vice presidencies. Half of the 700-plus individuals that attended the conference were women. "What are people who are calling for change going to change?" Mailer asked. But given the paucity of women panelists, Friedan's credentials, the backing of major figures such as Grace Paley, Erica Jong and Nadine Gordimer, not to mention the feminist bull's-eye on Mailer's back, the protest could have been foreseen. The "brilliant end run," as *Time* called it, of inviting Shultz didn't help him, and continuing anger over the final defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment a few years earlier may also have contributed, although Mailer was on record supporting the amendment. He continued with P.E.N. until mid-1986 when his term was up, and stayed on the board for a time,

but felt bruised by his treatment at the Congress. When asked in later years about P.E.N., all he could say was “cannibals.”

The Congress was not given over entirely to squabbling. There were lively receptions in the Egyptian wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; at Gracie Mansion, hosted by Mayor Koch; at the New York Times Building, hosted by Publisher Arthur “Punch” Sulzberger, Sr. Nearby coffee shops and restaurants, and the bars of the two hotels where most of the panels and readings took place, the St. Moritz (Trump’s hotel) and the Essex House, were crowded with writers in conversation. Mailer enjoyed the many dinners and cocktail parties, although the presence of Carole Mallory in the same room as Norris gave him no happiness. According to Lennon and Lucid, former Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau, who was one of the moderators, said that he had an amorous entanglement with Mallory. “Now she won’t leave me alone,” Trudeau said wearily over a drink in the St. Moritz bar.

Two months before the Congress, Mailer asked Thomas Pynchon to take part, and offered to have a drink with him. Pynchon wrote back with thanks and an apology, saying he would be away when the Congress took place. “With luck, however, we may surface together in the same piece of space/time,” he said, making it sound as if some sort of psychic rendezvous was in the cards. He said he would enjoy having a drink with Mailer, although his would have to be “something like Ovaltine.” Mailer wrote back and gave Pynchon his telephone number for the next time he was in New York. The call never came, however. *The Crying of Lot 49* was the only Pynchon novel that Mailer ever read, and he deplored it as an extended shaggy dog story. What might have been said if the entropist and the existentialist had clinked mugs of Ovaltine across the table, across the abyss?

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 Mailer's feelings about postmodern fiction surfaced in a letter he wrote to Gordon Lish a few months before the Congress. Lish had edited some of Mailer's *Esquire* essays in the 1970s, and stayed in touch with him, sending him the books he was editing at Knopf, and his own. One of these was *Peru*, an "obsessively circular novel," as one reviewer put it. The novel (which might be a memoir, or so it hints) is about the memories the narrator, Gordon, has of a boy he killed in a sandbox by gashing his skull with a toy hoe. The boys are six. Little by little, memory byte by memory byte, Gordon remembers the moist specifics, ^{gory details,} but does so with no emotion. M/ Mailer liked Lish, but detested his book.

Lish admired the work of Gertrude Stein, but this earned him no points with Mailer. "I whisper to you that I don't really care in my secret heart whether Gertrude Stein lives forever or perishes tomorrow in Parnassus," he wrote. "You have the perfect right to go in your direction"—Stein's direction—"just as I have to go in mine, but the directions are profoundly opposed."

What your work catches is everything I detest about modern life. The entropy first, the breakdown of syntax, of concentration, mobility, all the murky tides that wash at our sensibilities. You capture that perfectly until my teeth are ready to grind. I feel as if literature is beleaguered, and that we must no longer study the disease but erect baroque monuments to stand against it, even if they're no more meaningful than sand castles against the filthy dull polluted tide. I want literature that has more syntax, more concentration, more in the way of symbols, and not that damned torturous undertow [words garbled] deterioration of forms, pervasive indefinable dread, and anomie.

He ends his condemnation of postmodernism by saying that he hesitated to write this kind of letter, but remaining silent would only "subject us both to the dirty and mucky tide." The letter was written just at the point when he was about to break from his spy novel and take up his rain-making chores at P.E.N., and it is fair to surmise that his comments to Lish reminded him of the kind of novel he had begun, one that he would devote himself to for the next five years. It would be his longest stretch of uninterrupted novel-writing in 40 years of professional writing—almost interrupted, that is.

Chapter 13

An Unfinished Cathedral: *Harlot's Ghost*

"You can no longer write an all-encompassing novel about America," Mailer said after *Ancient Evenings* was published. "It can't be done." For the eight years following its publication, Mailer published nothing but a few short pieces and a collection of his interviews. The period of focused effort, the longest of his writing careers, ended with the publication of *Harlot's Ghost* in the fall of 1991. Mailer's tenth novel cannot justly be called all-encompassing, yet it does provide a privileged perspective on some of the most cataclysmic events and fabled figures of American life in the twenty years after World War II. Like a long freight train, Mailer's story of

WASP intelligence agents in war and peace snakes through upper-class American life (Mt. Desert, Yale, the 21 Club), picks up speed as it moves through international intrigues in Europe, slows to a crawl in Uruguay, and then accelerates rapidly as it moves through the CIA's attempts to poison Castro, its failed invasion at the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban missile crisis. Some of J.F.K.'s extramarital love affairs comprise another strand of the novel's loosely braided narrative of deception, loyalty, betrayal and heroism. Mailer says more than once that this was a period in the American Century when individuals were willing to die for an idea, and in *Harlot's Ghost* many get their chance.

Shortly before it was published, a friend pointed out to him that the book's length could be a record in American publishing, surpassing James Jones' *Some Came Running* (1266 pages). Mailer, a long-time communicant in the church of organic form, shrugged. The bound galleys of his novel came in at 1334 pages. He said that Random House would add one line to every page, reducing the published volume to 1310 pages. Longer and more detailed than any of Mailer's other fictions, the novel's several lines of action never coalesce. *Harlot's Ghost* cannot be said to have a plot. It has plot parcels and plot scaffoldings everywhere—scenes and vignettes, preludes and interludes, and endless expositions of intelligence techniques and mores—but only the ghost of a fully articulated story. In one sense, it resembles the cluttered studio of a brilliant artist filled with works at various stages of completion. It could also be likened to a magnificent, half-finished cathedral, to borrow a metaphor that Mailer used to suggest the dimensions of his personality in *The Armies of the Night*. "Plot is the enemy of the great novel," he said. "I'm interested in plots that do not have a resolution. Life is like that." *Harlot's Ghost* ends with these words: "TO BE CONTINUED"—a promise he would break. His greatest regret, he said the year

before he died, was "the memory of the books I promised to write and didn't." Even as it stands, unfinished and abandoned, it is his finest novelistic achievement, one of the last high peaks of his writing life, and the *summa* of his knowledge of postwar America, as seen through the eyes of two generations of CIA agents.

After 40-odd years of trying, Mailer finally found a narrative field suitable to the full deployment of his historical imagination, his biographical predilections and his psychological theories. As Salman Rushdie said in his review, *Harlot's Ghost* is "a perfect coming together of author and subject." The novel has great geopolitical sweep, looking back to World War II and forward to the Vietnam War, and is full of vivid portraits, divided between historical and fictional figures—he liked the idea of mixing them up in the same way E.L. Doctorow did in *Ragtime*, a novel he admired. Of the former, the most notable are J.F.K. and his brother Robert, their in-house nemesis, J. Edgar Buddha (as everyone in the novel calls FBI Director Hoover), CIA director Allen Dulles, Uruguay station chief, Howard Hunt (of later Watergate infamy), British double agent Kim Philby, General Edward Lansdale (a model for a character in Burdick and Lederer's *The Ugly American*), Frank Sinatra, Mafia chieftain Sam Giancana, Fidel Castro and William King "Bill" Harvey, Berlin base chief. Harvey is the most memorably drawn historical figure, matched only by the fictional Hugh Tremont Montague, a high CIA counter-intelligence official, code name, Harlot. The narrator is Herrick "Harry" Hubbard, a young agent who goes into intelligence work in 1955 after graduation from Yale, following his father "Cal" Hubbard, an OSS officer in World War II, and also a senior CIA operative. Cal's best friend is Harlot, who is also Harry's godfather and mentor. There are two major women characters: Harlot's wife, Hadley Kittredge Gardiner Montague, who is part of the agency's brain-trust, and

Modene Murphy, a fictional stand-in for Judith Campbell Exner, the lover of J.F.K., Giancana, Sinatra and young Hubbard.

The broad contours of the CIA's history, and many of the actual and rumored particulars of its chicanery gave Mailer the time-space amplitudes he needed, and the details of duplicity that he relished. It is no wonder that he gave up his plan to chronicle the voyage of the spaceship-ark in favor of a novel of sharply etched character studies, none more so than Montague's, a master spy modeled on the legendary counter-intelligence chief, James Jesus Angleton (himself a minor character), a poet who corresponded with Pound and Eliot, collaborated during World War II with cardinals, ex-fascists, Mafia *capodecimas* and Kim Philby, and worked for seven successive CIA directors, General Walter Bedell Smith to Richard M. Helms. It was Angleton who came up with the "wilderness of mirrors" theory to explain how Soviet intelligence might be manipulating the agency. Mailer's Montague is just as fiercely determined to root out Russian moles as his model, or so it seems—with Montague, there is always a deeper layer, and his deepest loyalties are a mystery.

The novel begins in 1983 just before his body is found near his boat in Chesapeake Bay with most of the head blown off by a shotgun (Hemingway is one of the novel's presiding spirits), and the finger tips nibbled off by fish. A filling in one of the remaining two teeth corresponds "astonishingly well," to the X-rays in Harlot's dental file. Is it Harlot, or a corpse of similar dimensions, tricked up to deceive? Harry disappears himself and goes to Russia to find the answer. He carries with him the "Alpha manuscript," subtitled "The Game," a 1,000-page memoir of his life in the CIA from 1955 to the mid-1960s. As he reads his microfilm copy of the memoir with a flashlight on the wall of his room in the Hotel Metropole, we read along with him.

Down the street is Lubyanka Square, dominated by a gigantic statue of "Iron" Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Russian secret police, and one of the most dazzling twentieth-century practitioners of counter-intelligence. Harlot gives seminars on his techniques.



Ancient Evenings took eleven years to complete, but Mailer left it for years at a time, and wrote a half dozen other books in the interstices of its composition. Measured by clock hours, *Harlot's Ghost* took longer to write than any of his other works. He departed from it only twice, once, briefly, to direct "Strawhead" and a second, longer, period to write a screenplay based on *Tough Guys*, and then direct the film. He was prepared to postpone the novel if either of these projects were successful. But the play never got beyond short runs at Actors Studio and the film, while not without its virtues, did not lead to a career change. There was a short-lived third project, a film version of *King Lear*, based on Mailer's "Don Learo" screenplay, and directed by ~~one of the greatest directors of all time~~, Jean-Luc Godard. Mailer said that "writing a screenplay for Godard is like putting a message in a bottle and sending it out to sea," but he completed it and sent it on for consideration. He was also supposed to play Lear and Kate was to play Cordelia. Goddard, however, wasn't the least interested in Mailer's screenplay, or Shakespeare's play, and appears in the film as a nutty professor. Godard wanted Mailer to play Mailer and utter lines such as: "Ah! At last I am done. What joy!" The experience was "a true horror tale," he said. After only one day on the set, he and Kate left Switzerland and flew home. *King Lear*, called "a late Godardian practical joke" by critic Vincent Canby, also starred Woody Allen (as ~~The Fool~~), and American director Peter Sellers as a descendant of Shakespeare. Molly Ringwald

played Cordelia and Burgess Meredith took over as Lear. Released in 1987 by Cannon Films, it baffled its small audiences.

Several months before going to Switzerland with her father, in January 1986, Kate played Marilyn Monroe in "Strawhead" at Actors Studio, and got excellent reviews. Working with her father "brought me closer to him," she said, adding that she was not particularly awed working with him. "You're doing the work," she said. "It's a play." Bert Stern, the fashion photographer who photographed Marilyn for his book, *The Last Sitting*, six weeks before her death, took pictures of Kate for an April 1986 *Vanity Fair* article on the play. "No one has played Marilyn better, except Marilyn," Stern said, adding that he had seen many people imitate Monroe, "but only Kate has caught her vulnerability and sensitivity." Mailer told a friend, half-seriously, that he sometimes wondered if Monroe had been reincarnated in Kate. James Atlas described Kate's performance in the *Vanity Fair* story, performing before "a select audience" that included Dustin Hoffman, Tina Brown, Al Pacino, Robert De Niro and Elia Kazan. "Young Kate Mailer," he wrote, "who had acted in college and had a minor part in an amateur repertory production of *Hair*, amazingly became Monroe. She whimpered and flirted, was seductive and coy; she babbled to herself in a nervous, breathy, voice; she emanated sex.

Kate was "incredible" in the production, Mailer told Malaquais, and added,

Perhaps in a year we will actually do the play Off-Broadway. I tell you, Jean, I was startled with her talent. She created a Marilyn who was lovely and vulnerable and sensitive and totally fucked-up, but restrained with instinctive taste to protect herself from her own ignorance. It was a lovely creation. People who know

Marilyn came back to me afterward shaking their heads, telling me it was spooky, no one in the family can believe it. We all go around saying, 'Our little Kate...?'

Remembering the excitement surrounding *The Deer Park*'s four-month run in 1967, Mailer looked forward to returning to Off Broadway. But when the time came to continue as Marilyn, Kate declined. Norris recalled the situation: "It was just a little complicated because of her dad directing her, and she didn't want anyone to know for a long time that she was his daughter, and [initially] called herself Kate Cailean, which is her middle name. And people didn't know for a long time that this actress was Norman's daughter. But, it was problematic for her. It's too complicated for me to talk about, but she just didn't want to make her career as being Marilyn Monroe, with her dad." Kate has continued to act, and after "Strawhead" had roles in several productions, including Peter Brook's production of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, and the film, *A Matter of Degrees*.

With the exception of Susan, who is a practicing psychoanalyst and faculty member of the Chilean Institute for Psychoanalysis, all of the Mailer siblings are in the arts. Danielle is a visual artist whose work has been given many shows, and is the chair of the art department at a private school in Connecticut. Betsy is a writer, currently working on a novel and a memoir. Michael is a writer and independent film producer with more than twenty films to his credit. Stephen Mailer, a veteran stage and screen actor with credits going back to the 1980's, has also appeared in television, including an appearance on *The Gilmore Girls* with his father. Maggie Mailer, like her older sister, is a successful visual artist and the founder of the Storefront Artist Project in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Matthew Mailer is a director and screenwriter who made his directorial debut in 1998 with a film he made with his brother Michael, *The Money Shot*. John

Buffalo, the youngest of the nine siblings, is a playwright, actor, producer and journalist. In 2006, he co-authored a book of conversations with his father, *The Big Empty*.

Mailer was not the easiest of fathers. He lectured his children vociferously, harangued P. 585 them with the line "the good is the enemy of the great," and fought with them. He and Stephen had several memorable clashes, some in public, but they always reconciled. Mailer was stalwart, however, in encouraging them in their careers. In addition to directing Kate in "Strawhead," he worked with and advised Michael on several film projects; read and praised Betsy's novel-in-progress; debated with Susan about psychoanalysis, and took pride in the elaborate, life-size horror figures that Matthew (informally adopted by Mailer) constructed, as well as his screenplay for "The Greatest Thing in the World." Stephen, whom Mailer praised for his "physical agility on stage and his sensitivity to character," said that his father "was very supportive because he is an artist." Maggie compared the houses where they summered in Maine and Provincetown to an artists' colony. "I think we were lucky," she said,

I felt encouraged and I think if Dad had not been always trying to impart the importance of being an artist, perhaps we would have rebelled and become bankers. But I always felt that he was interested in what I was doing, and sometimes too interested. I mean, his standards were so much higher than anything I could conceive of. You know, when I was a teenager, it was laughable. He once said something like 'Once you've become recognized as a leader in your community and in your college, then you'll understand what I'm talking about.' He just took it for granted that that would happen. So I think he expected all the kids to be artists. I remember at one point saying I didn't think I was up for that

life, and he said, 'Look, you have to do whatever you want, you know, and my love for you is there regardless.'

He hung the paintings of his two artist daughters on the walls of his two homes, and was pleased and proud when they had a joint show with Norris in Provincetown in 2007. Danielle, who describes her work as being "part autobiographical, part mythological and spiritual," painted a subtle self-portrait titled "The Good Daughter." She is asleep in a chair holding a copy of *Ancient Evenings*, recognizable by the color drawing on the back jacket of an Egyptian head. She finished the painting, a tribute from one artist to another, the day before her father died.

Mailer was aware of the pitfalls surrounding parental advice. He and Knox discussed the matter several times in their correspondence. In 1992, Mailer wrote:

I agree with you: forget about giving advice to your children. It can't be done unless you have a special relation to them, and unless they have a true need for your knowledge from their own point of view. Otherwise, it's just a power trip to them and they are trying to establish their own power center, and won't accept anything from a parent. [. . .] So who the fuck am I to steer someone else's life? I would say just assume they'll mellow out toward you as they get older. In the meantime, give them a little of the green and stop complaining. What else do we have to spend it on, after all?

As far as money went, Mailer was generous with his children. The same is true with his friends. He made many loans and gifts, and few people who dined out with him ever beat him to the check.



The deal that called for Mailer to write "Don Lears" grew out of a luncheon meeting between Godard and Israeli film producer Menahem Golan at the Cannes film Festival in May 1985. Golan, who ran Cannon Films with his cousin Yoram Globus, offered Godard \$1 million for a film based on *King Lear*. They signed the deal on a napkin, which Golan framed and hung in his office. Working with Godard was a departure for Cannon, which heretofore had mainly churned out low-budget, high-violence films. During its peak year, 1986, Cannon made 43 films. But Golan and Globus also aspired to produce high art films, which helps explain the deal with Godard. Tom Luddy, a producer at American Zoetrope Films, which for over thirty years has made films of the caliber of *The Godfather II*, *Mishima* and the restored version of Abel Gance's 1927 classic, *Napoleon*, had close ties with Godard. Golan wanted "a normal American movie," Luddy recalled, and therefore put in writing that Godard must use a screenplay approved by Cannon Films. Mailer's name was suggested by Godard as the screenwriter, and added to the napkin-contract as "pre-approved" to write it. Golan tracked Luddy down at the festival, and asked him to enlist Mailer.

Mailer said no. "I knew I would have 30,000 Shakespearians out to slaughter me," he said. But Luddy knew that Mailer wanted to see *Tough Guys* made into a film, and direct it. At a September 1985 meeting at a mid-town New York restaurant, Luddy sold him on the idea of a two-picture deal. "Tell Golan," Mailer said, "that if he'll do *Tough Guys*, I'll do *Lear*." Luddy called Golan in Los Angeles and put him on with Mailer. "Mr. Mailer, I'm happy to agree with you on a two-picture contract," Golan said. Luddy agreed to be the film's executive producer. When the P.E.N. Congress was over four months later, Mailer began working on both

screenplays. *Tough Guys* had taken him two months to write; the screenplay went through five drafts and took six months. Work on *Harlot's Ghost* all but ceased.

The biggest hurdle that Mailer faced with the *Tough Guys* screenplay was that much of the novel takes place in Madden's head, and this interiority had to be translated into action. A second problem was that the plot depended on actions and situations that took place months and years, even decades earlier. Somehow, this backstory had to be presented, or adroitly deleted. He eliminated some minor characters, enlarged the roles of others, wrote several flashback scenes, and flashbacks within flashbacks—one of them showed Madden in prison talking to his cellmate, played by his Provincetown friend, Eddie Bonetti. He also planned to intimate Madden's half-crazy, tremulous state by using music and "subtly sinister" images of Outer Cape Cod in late fall. The sum of all these changes streamlined the story somewhat, but problems remained. He wrote most of it in Provincetown, living alone until the summer when Matt and John were out of school and joined him there with their mother. Mailer wrote to Bruce Dexter and in late April about the translation process. Being a screenwriter, he told Dexter,

for a particular novel is, if it is not your own work, very much like being a first year medical student, and doing a long, detailed autopsy where you get to know the inside of the body you're studying conceivably better than God, who might have less time. I did a screenplay once of *The Rosy Crucifixion* and it's possible that I ended up knowing in a few small ways more of the work than Henry Miller. In working with *Tough Guys*, I can see the book on the table, all its virtues, all the places where it is not so virtuous, and it is the oddest book. The people, reduced to the tight net of a screenplay, are by the measure of anyone looking for a little

cheer about human nature, a negative lot. All the while I was writing the book I was in love with them for their charms—monsters with charm have always appealed to me—and something of that, I hope, is still in the screenplay.

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In a letter to Abbott, Mailer said he would like to send him the "Don Learo" screenplay to get his reaction to the Mafia characters, "where you think it's real, where you think it's phony." Abbott had written a new book, *My Return*, in collaboration with Naomi Zack, a young woman who had taken up his cause. Zack, who had earned a Ph.D. in philosophy at Columbia, was convinced at the time that Abbott "was unfairly convicted by an outraged public opinion inflamed by sensational treatment in the media." *My Return* consists of a play, "The Death of Tragedy," depicting the murder of Adan with diagrams of the killing knife thrust, several appendices on the trial and the legal issues, and philosophical-polemical letters to Mailer, Styron, *Silvers*, *X* ✓ ~~Jerry~~ Kosinski, Mailer's friend Mashey Bernstein, ~~Robert Silvers~~ and several others. Abbott maintains his innocence throughout, and uses as an epigraph the last words of Melville's Billy Budd before he is hanged—"God bless Cap'n Vere"—the implication being that Abbott stabbed Adan just as Budd had killed Claggart, out of instinct not malice, which may have been true.

Zack, who had begun a documentary film on Abbott, moved in 1985 to Plattsburg, New York, near the Fishkill Correctional Facility where Abbott was confined. For a nine-month period in 1985-86 she visited him every day. She was "bringing him books, conveying his

messages, typing his writing. Of her relationship, she said: 'All I can say is my main purpose is Jack needs and wants a new trial. As for his intellectual work, I take it very seriously.'" At the time, Abbott was trying, he said, "to behave like a 'real' intellectual." Zack wrote to Mailer asking if he would write an afterword to their book. Mailer replied to Abbott: "You are so associated with me and people are so pissed off at me now after the P.E.N. Congress that it would result in your being taken less seriously." He offered to write a blurb for *My Return*—"if I like it." Abbott was convinced that a cabal was persecuting him, and Mailer was tired of his paranoia. "There are not legions lying awake every night trying to figure out how to thwart you," he told him. Ultimately, Mailer declined to write the afterword, and their correspondence ended.

Abbott was 37 when she met him, Zack recalled, and "he was still quite good looking. He had delicate and somewhat 'exotic' features (his mother was half-Chinese), spoke very softly in a Southwestern drawl, and one-on-one had a friendly, almost intimate manner. Combined with the background of personal suffering, this was charismatic for women." She married him in 1990. Her involvement with him over a seven-year period was "emotional pathology on my part. I never focused properly on the issue of Jack's violence, except toward the end of the years I knew him." When this happened, she realized that "he was incapable of really seeing his situation—the murder." She was afraid of Abbott, and "would lie awake at night thinking about how to get out of this situation; it was terrible. My friends edged away from me." After two years of marriage they divorced. "I am lucky to have survived it," she said. "I began to see that there was something wrong with all these women visiting prisoners." Even after she broke off contact with Abbott, she continued to send him \$50 to \$100 a month until his death. "Jack had no remorse," she said; adding that he "was proud of having been told by Mailer about [the birth of] his son,

John Buffalo. I also think that he was well aware of the value of the world Mailer had taken him into, however briefly. Without Mailer, Jack would not have been a literary figure."



As his relationship with Abbott was winding down in the late spring of 1986, Mailer was working on three screenplays—"Don Lero" for Godard, "Havana" for Martin Starger at Universal Studios, and "Tough Guys." He continued to work on the novel, but with no real energy. He finished "Havana" and "Don Lero" before he and Kate went to Switzerland in August, and the final draft of "Tough Guys" shortly before filming began in Provincetown on October 27. In between, there were consultations about the cast and locations for the film with Tom Luddy, cinematographer John Bailey and casting director Bonnie Timmermann. Even the 350th anniversary of the founding of Harvard in September didn't pull Mailer away. He was asked to be "an official representative" at the commemorative celebration, but does not seem to have responded to the formal invitation, even after he was depicted with 15 other outstanding "Sons of Harvard" in a painting on the cover of the July 20 *New York Times Magazine*. The sixteen men, grouped as if for a photo on the lawn of Harvard Yard, included five U.S. presidents—John Adams, John Quincy Adams, Teddy Roosevelt, F.D.R. and J.F.K. Mailer, in his pinstripe suit and loosened red tie, is pictured with Leonard Bernstein on either side of a seated T.S. Eliot, the two Jews crouching on either side of the ultimate WASP, as if ready to go into the game.

There were a total of 65 locales used in the film, most of them in Provincetown but several in Truro and other nearby towns. Some of Mailer's favorite places—The Old Colony Tap, Pepe's, The Red Inn and Front Street Restaurant—were used, and the Mailer's home at 627

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Commercial became the novel's waterfront house. It was given a complete makeover to demonstrate Patty Lareine's gaudy idea of wealth. The wood floors were bleached and all the furniture, including a piano and Persian rugs, were white or pastel. There were several low couches, brass chandeliers and a massive circular glass coffee table with a large, half-opened shell sitting on it. The walls were peach. This décor remained for more than a decade, and then Norris redecorated the first floor in darker, richer colors, getting rid of the piano, and exiling the long chrome-and-beveled-glass dining room table to the bayside deck where it rusted for a few years. P g12

X J In ~~October~~ ^B, before filming began, there was a casting call held at one of the local art galleries. Over 200 locals showed up to try out for walk-ons and extra roles. Some extras came from Boston, but about fifteen were from Provincetown, including Chris Busa, the publisher of *Provincetown Arts* magazine, several local artists and two retired firemen in their 80s. "I wanted to use townspeople for extras," Mailer said, "because the making of the movie had much more to do with Provincetown than the final results will. We were in the town using the town's facilities, and we had great working relations with a great many townspeople." Seeing Farrah Fawcett, who came along with O'Neal, in the local A & P, or Lawrence Tierney, who played Dougy Madden, walking along the town's narrow lanes, was the topic of conversation in the town, where little happens after Halloween. O'Neal was accessible and ready to meet Mailer's friends and family when they visited the set, as was Debra Sandlund (Patty Lareine in the film), but Isabella ^e Rossellini (Madeleine) kept to herself, eating her meals in her trailer. Mailer admired ^{her} Rossellini's acting in David's Lynch's dark mystery, *Blue Velvet*, and sought the same mood for his film. Angelo Badalamenti, who scored the music for Lynch's film, was hired for Mailer's.

Being asked to approve the hairstyles of the female actors was a pleasure for Mailer, as was working with production designer Armin Ganz on Patty Lareine's home, and with Badalamenti on the lyrics to "You'll Come Back (You Always Do)," the film's theme song. He also worked with sound designer Leslie Shatz to capture the sound of a punch to the face, as Shatz recalled at a twenty-year reunion of the cast and crew. According to Mailer, "the sounds of punches in movies are all phony." So he began hitting himself "at least twenty times in the face and the chest-until we got it right." Shatz recorded the sound and used it in many movies afterward. "I always tell the other directors, 'You hear that? That's Norman Mailer punching himself. He's in your movie.'" Mailer's professionalism was something that Menahem Golan had taken for granted, but before the start of filming he did some checking, and got a different picture of his director. Luddy recalled getting a five a.m. call from the Israeli, who said, "Tom, my knife is at your throat. Tom, you've given me Norman Mailer as a director. I've been talking to people in Hollywood, and they tell me he's crazy. ⁷⁷ You've given me a crazy man for a director." But Mailer proved himself to be completely disciplined, and was "adored" by the cast and crew. They all agreed that working on *Tough Guys* had been "a great adventure." Working with a \$5 million budget and a crew of 97, Mailer brought the film in under budget and ahead of schedule, completing it in 40 days.

There was some friction during the filming. O'Neal thought some of Mailer's dialogue "was way over the top and would come off as laughable," Tom Luddy recalled, and Tierney, a notoriously difficult actor, did things his own way, ignoring Mailer's direction at certain points. As producer, Luddy said, I had "a lot of back and forth with him about the screenplay, which I thought had a lot of problems." He sent Mailer a memo listing eleven problems in the script, and

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 J Mailer agreed with most of them. But he ~~only~~^{only} had solutions for a few, and ignored the rest. If he could relive the entire project, Luddy said, "I would get another writer to adapt the book and convince Norman to focus on directing it." Mailer hoped to solve his plot problems in the editing process.

In a letter written to Stratton shortly after the production was completed in mid-December, Mailer described the experience of directing:

I always felt as if I were in jail when I was writing a novel. A perfectly pleasant but subtly deadening spiritual jail. And directing the movie I found out why. Suddenly I could use my real talents: more superficial, perhaps than my developed talent as a writer, but with me all my life and dying to be honed: to wit, my practical side. Directing a movie, you contemplate 40 different categories of problem in a day, and you get an appetite for it. It becomes the best life you can have. I've been feeling logy for the last few years but on the film where we're working 15 hours a day, 6 days a week, and I had more energy, or let's say, as much energy as I've ever had.

Over and over in interviews, Mailer compared writing and directing, in every instance grumbling about the former and exalting the latter. "*Anything's* easier than writing," and novel writing is the hardest, he said. It is "an excruciating activity; when I'm in the middle of one I often feel like a monk in the wrong monastery." But directing, he said, made him feel like a general in "an ideal war" ^{with no blood.} in which "there's no blood." "It is like a campaign: you eat outside standing up; everybody starts the day having breakfast together; it's a communal exercise. You move to different places

every day; the campaign moves here, moves there; it's going to be over in forty-two days. It's like hunting with a camera in Africa."

When filming was done, Mailer wrote to his two imprisoned friends, and made plans to visit. He promised to visit Farbar in late January when he was in Pittsburgh to see Stephen in a play. After telling Stratton that he would definitely visit him in early spring, he went on to say that he had been relaxed during filming, but was now feeling nervous because he owed Random House "a million dollars in advance royalties they've already paid me over the last three years for a book which is only half done." His plan was to edit the film half-time and write half-time, and this is what he did, more or less, for all of 1987. At this point, he had high hopes for the film. John Bailey's imaginative cinematography captured the bleakness of Cape Cod in the late fall, and the dailies that Mailer had seen, he told Knox, were exceptional. He apologized for not finding a role for him in the film, but "if this picture hits, then I think I'll command larger budgets," and then Knox could be given roles. "At that time," he said, "I won't have to listen to you saying, 'But, Norman, you know nothing about directing a movie.'" One commercial film, he said, means that you're a director. "Indeed, I'm even a member of the Directors' Guild. How's that for news?" Mailer remained a member for the rest of his life, but never got another chance to direct, to his great regret.

Editing began in early January, and Mailer enjoyed working with a team. He told Dexter, "It's a peculiar art, probably closer to cutting away at a poem so only the essential is left, than it is to novel writing." The goal of the process "is to have one's cuts appear seamless," but if the film has interesting, quirky material, he said, then more patience and imagination are required.

When Lucid and Lennon visited him ~~while he was working~~ in an editing suite in the Brill

Building at 49th Street and Broadway, ~~and~~ he was sitting in front of a Moviola. He talked enthusiastically about the film coming into shape, and never seemed happier. Cutting the film was difficult, he said, because "it's not a river but a clock, a two-and-half hour clock." But plot was bedeviling him.

After enjoying Stephen's performance in Pittsburg with Norris and John, Mailer went on alone to Altoona where Farbar was incarcerated. They spent an hour-and-a-half together catching up, and discussing what kind of work he might do after his release. Mailer knew his friend might have trouble decompressing when he got out, and tried to buck him up. "I respect the psychological work you've done on yourself," he said. But Farbar seemed bitter and depressed. A year after his release he committed suicide.

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In the spring of 1987 Mailer asked Carol Stevens to meet him for a few days in San Francisco where he was doing post-production sound work at Russian Hill Recording studios. He recorded her doing the voice of one of the two witches who laugh and gibber at the end of the film, another attempt to give the film a haunted quality. He spent a month there in April, and had a romantic reunion with her for a few days while working on the sound track of the film. It is likely that he also saw Lois Wilson. Cannon had given Mailer control over the final cut of the film, and he was trying to find a way to clarify the plot.

Earlier he had decided that "there ~~would be no voiceover.~~ There would be no inner voice," he said, "because it would be so inviting every step of the way to put that book in. And the movie has to stand on its own terms." But once he had begun editing, the dimensions of the

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problem began to emerge, as he wrote to Farbar. "The story is unhappily murky," he said, "and I am looking for ways to simplify it, mainly narration. I showed it to Golan, who half likes it and thinks it can make a lot of money here but also thought it too long and too confused. At one point he said, "Definitely not narration—that's old fashioned"—I said to him, "Well, fine, Menahem, I'll shoot some new scenes but that'll cost a quarter of a million dollars. He came around to the side of narration." In the end, Mailer had no choice but to use voiceovers to explain the tangle of relationships and reveal who killed who. His screenplay departed somewhat from the novel, but ultimately was too respectful of it.

Mailer finished editing in time for the 40th annual Cannes Film Festival in early May. He was asked to serve on the nine-member jury, headed by Yves Montand. Godard was there with ~~...ing Lear~~, but he and Mailer don't seem to have met. Because he was a jurist, *Tough Guys* was screened out of competition. Mailer watched 24 films in 12 days, and met with other jurors to compare notes and vote. *Tough Guys* was shown twice, once for the press and once for a general audience. The somewhat stilted dialogue, which sounded "as if everyone in the film had learned everything they knew from watching old crime movies," as ~~Roger Ebert put it~~ ^{as Roger Ebert put it}, went over well with the press for the most part, although it got a sprinkling of boos. Vincent Canby, who liked Mailer's "Beyond the Law," praised *Tough Guys* in his ~~Times~~ ^{NY Times} article on the festival, calling it "a wonderfully exaggerated film noir story." Menahem Golan had several films in competition, and threw a large dinner to honor Mailer. *Tough Guys* was screened after dinner, and got a standing ovation.

Upon his return Mailer made some final changes to the film, and then got to work on the novel, breaking away only to see rehearsals of Norris' play at the Actors Studio in June. For

some time, she had been a member of the Actors Studio, writing both plays and screenplays, and directing. "Go See," a two-character, two-act play about an erotic dancer and an anthropology professor, was staged there in May or June of 1987, with Norris and Rip Torn acting the roles. Mailer was enthusiastic about her abilities and wrote to Farbar with praise. "All my life, as you know, I've wanted to be a successful playwright and simply don't have the knack for it," he said. Watching her staged reading, he said to himself, "My God, she's a better playwright than I am." He was always impressed with the effortless way his wife moved from one pursuit to another—model, actress (she played a drug dealer for six months on the television soap opera, *All My Children*), playwright, and novelist, all the while running the Mailer household. The Mailers were also leading a busy social life now that most of the children were adults. "Norman and Norris," she wrote "became almost one word in the social columns." They dined at Elaine's, Nicola's, and Indochine, but Mortimer's, at Lexington Avenue and East 75th Street, where they met with Arthur and Alexandra Schlesinger, Diane and Ivan Fishers, and other friends, was their favorite Manhattan restaurant in the late 1980s.

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The eldest six of nine Mailer siblings had finished school by the late 1980s, and embarked on careers. Several of them were involved in the theater. "They used to say," Norris wrote, "that while other kids went to church, they went to Actors Studio." All of them "had the dreaded twenty-fifth birthday to pass," dreaded because

that was the age Dad had been when *The Naked and the Dead* was published, and it hung over all their heads. Rational or not, they felt that they, too, were expected to be famous young, but Norman just wanted them to be happy, and in fact he

always said that becoming famous so young was the worst thing that could have happened to him. He wasn't ready, and he didn't know how to handle fame. It was why he'd gotten into so much trouble in his early years. With the exception of Sue, who became a psychoanalyst, all the kids found careers in the arts one way or another. I used to laugh and say that if one of them had come to us and said they wanted to become a dentist, we would have looked at them in horror and said, 'What are you thinking?'

x / After a month in Provincetown, ^{July} ~~in August~~ ^{he and Norris} they went to Maine, and he and the family climbed mile-high Mount Katahdin, which stands at the northern end of the Appalachian Trail. The most well-known and difficult path to the summit lies across The Knife Edge. Several people have died in falls from this path, which is a mile long, but in places only three feet wide. In the afternoon, descending the north slope, one is left in deep shadow. Mailer made the climb—six hours each way—three or four times. Kate recalled one of these at her father's memorial. When they reached The Knife Edge, she announced she was going back down the mountain. Mailer answered by saying that crossing it would enable her to grow and change in unforeseen ways. "It will be good for your karma," he said. She hollered back:

My karma, my karma? I don't care about my karma. You might care about your karma. You're fifty-five years old. You have lived! You've written thirty books, You've had six wives and soon to be nine children, I am sixteen years old and I have never even been kissed! I have never even had a boyfriend! I DON'T WANT TO DIE. I WANT TO HAVE SEX!

Mailer told her that she would have an even better boyfriend if she crossed. "The man's will and charm were no match for mine," she said, and she made the transit. She felt better, but did not admit it. Looking back, she said that eventually she got "the best boyfriend who then became the best husband anyone could ever dream of, and I think sometimes it had something to do with Dad and the mountain, courage, and will."

Mailer was producing 90 pages a month that summer, and feeling good enough about his progress to say that the novel was "about the CIA." But his publisher was unhappy; he was a year past his due date. He had produced a best seller, *Tough Guys*, in 61 days, and Random House hoped that he would repeat this every year or so. By the end of the summer he had 800 ~~pages~~, and had completed the Berlin section in which the Americans and the British dig a 1500-
~~foot spy tunnel into Russian-controlled East Berlin.~~ ^{sections} One of the finest episodes of the novel, it centers on the swashbuckling gambits of "Bill" Harvey, who carries pearl-handled revolvers and drinks martinis all the livelong day, moving around Berlin in his armored black Cadillac. Friends and family members who read the Berlin chapters were full of praise and Mailer was feeling confident. He thought the novel would be published in the spring of 1989.

The film premiered on September 16, 1987 at Loew's Twin Bill on Second Avenue and East 66th Street. It was a warm, lovely evening, and a big crowd mingled on the sidewalk before the doors were opened. The guest list shows that many of the Mailers' friends attended—the Fishers, Pat Lawford Kennedy, ~~Bob~~ Lucid, Legs McNeil, ~~Jeffrey~~ Michelson, the Schlesingers, Gay and Nan Talese, Jimmy and Rosemary Breslin, Mashey Bernstein, ~~Mailer's editor~~, Jason Epstein and Paul Newman. ^{of the} ~~Most family members were there, of course.~~ ^{was there.} Judith McNally, his assistant, and Myrtle Bennet, the nanny for the younger children, both of whom rarely went to

✓ Mailer social events, also came. Tom Luddy, John Bailey and most of the crew came, and
 ✓ several of the actors. Carole Holmes, Mailer's former girlfriend, and Carole Mallory, his current
 ✓ one, were invited and showed up. Mailer had recommended Mallory for a small role in the film,
 but the casting director, Bonnie Timmermann, and producer Tom Luddy turned her down. Luddy
 recalled that Mallory had visited the set in Provincetown and interviewed Mailer

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In an interview with Roger Ebert during filming, Mailer explained that as
 he had changed his ways. "I stopped drinking for a year and a half," he said, and "when I went
 back, I didn't enjoy the hangovers so much, so now I drink in moderation, of all damn things."
 He went on to say that "a man who says he is happily married is a fool, but I will take a chance
 and say that I am. I stopped getting into trouble years ago." In fact, Mailer's liaison with Ma
 continued, as did his relationships with several other women. Lois Wilson, Eileen Fredrickson and Carol Stevens
 among others. Despite some occasional suspicions, Norris was not to learn the extent of his
 infidelities until he had completed *Harlot's Ghost* in 1991. He continued to insist that she was
 the love of his life, and valued the way she had become a second mother to his oldest seven
 children. When he did finally explain the root cause of his infidelities, he said that they really
 intensified about the time he began work on *Harlot's Ghost*, as Norris wrote in her memoir.

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He said his double life started when he began researching that book, and I
 suppose it could even be true. The timing was about right. All the clandestine
 talking on pay phones, making secret plans, hiding and sneaking around, were
 perfect spy maneuvers. He said he needed to live that kind of double life to know
 what his characters were going through. (It was an imaginative excuse. I do give
 him credit for that.)

He said he had been totally true to me, except for one or two tiny one-night stands with old girlfriends when he was on lecture tours, for eight years after we got together, which might even been mostly true. It was his grand experiment in monogamy, and I had believed him. While it could hardly be said the experiment was a total success, it was the longest he had been true (more or less) to a woman in his life. His nature was to be a philanderer.

Mailer did attempt to be faithful to Norris during the early years of his marriage. If, in his confession to her, he smudged the facts about how many times he had fallen off the monogamy wagon, he was being entirely truthful about his motive for being unfaithful, or motives. By his own lights, he had two, one narcissistic, selfish and sensual, the other bold, experiential and necessary. His incessant affairs gave him purchase on the duplicity of intelligence agents. That it took a thief to catch a thief was an article of faith.

related reasons
and fed his narcissism

Before and after the premiere, Mailer spent 20 days doing interviews for the film, and said it had received enough publicity "to float the Queen Mary." But the reviews, with a few exceptions, were mixed, and the box office figures paltry (the film eventually broke even). After looking at all the early reviews, which were with few exceptions either mixed or negative, Luddy told Mailer that, overall, they were not going to help him. "It's as if you opened a restaurant," he said, "and got two reviews. One said, 'This food is crazy, wild, and interesting,' and the other one said, 'Three people I know got food poisoning after our meal.'" The restaurant was doomed, Luddy said. So was the film. Mailer accepted this analysis, reluctantly, sadly.

He had told Susan that after the satisfaction he got from directing the only way he would go back to writing "with any real happiness" was if it was the only way he could make a living.

Cannon had hinted that he would give him another film to direct, but this was no longer in the cards, especially after the film was nominated for Golden Raspberry Awards in seven categories: worst picture, director, screenplay, actor and actress, supporting actress and new star. Mailer tied for worst director with Elaine May, who had directed the monumental flop, *Ishtar*. Conversely, the film was nominated for the Independent Spirit Award in four categories: best film, cinematography, female lead and supporting male role. The fact that the film was nominated for best and worst film of the year confirmed Mailer's belief that his works would continue to receive ^S polar reception. Eventually, *Tough Guys* became a minor cult classic, praised for its "amusing vagueness" about its fundamental genre: mystery thriller or black comedy, horror film or comedy of manners. Luddy summed up the film as "Tarantino before its time," which he described as "long florid dialogue punctuated by grotesque violence." Whatever the case, it was clear that Mailer's film career was over. As he said in another letter, "Writing is the farm and movie-making is Paree." He was going home.

Ψ Ψ Ψ

Danielle got married at the end of 1986 to Michael Moschen, a professional juggler. Mailer invited them to live in Provincetown during their first year of marriage. For the greater part of 1987, Danielle painted in Norris' studio, Moschen practiced his routines in the basement, and Mailer wrote in the attic studio. Norris was in New York with Matt and John, and only came up every other weekend. Danielle, her husband and father shared the chores, and enjoyed long quiet meals and discussions. "It was one of the best years I spent with my father," she said. But after a time, Mailer yearned for the city. In January 1988, Mailer wrote to Farbar to say he was getting tired of working in Provincetown and planned to move back to Brooklyn for a stretch. He

was still following his usual country-city alternation, moving whenever one or the other became

✓ "a species of spiritual incarceration," as he wrote to Farbar about P-Town. ~~Much~~ of their correspondence was given over to Farbar's various attempts to get his sentence commuted.

✓ Mailer was paying some of his friend's legal bills, *and much*

✓ ^{His} ~~Mailer's~~ correspondence with Stratton was more literary. In his letters and visits, he encouraged him to complete his novel, *Smack Goddess*. Mailer read drafts of it, made suggestions, and with Meredith's help it was published in 1990. Mailer and Dick Goodwin gave it blurbs. Mailer was impressed with how Stratton had used his prison time to "look for some needed dimension of my character." His comment on Stratton's "moral grit" revealed something about his own ideas of moral growth:

That you're physically strong is one thing; that can be a gift. But the other side of you built out of yourself. But the other side of anyone, moral strength that is, is a construction. For if that were given by God there'd be no logic to anything. We would all be dealt unequal hands, and that doesn't feel right to accept. (Before we get too far in this, I don't mean the real stark ends of the scale, morally speaking, but I believe we all have the same ability to improve or coarsen our spiritual nature.)

This letter, like almost all of Mailer's letters since the late 1950s, was dictated, and he was sometimes slightly opaque. What he seems to be endorsing is the principle of spiritual growth and/or decay, while holding out for the possibility that saints and monsters have been shaped, at least in part, by divine or demonic intervention. This idea would be further developed in his final novel, *A Castle in the Forest*.

In the 80 or 90 letters that he wrote in mid-January, Mailer's ^{tone is} vaedictory ~~tone is bell-~~
~~clear~~. He admits that his commercial film career is over, and that his experimental films are a
 footnote. In a letter to Luke Breit, he said he was pleased that Jonas Mekas, a leading light in the
 world of experimental cinema, was showing *Beyond the Law* and *Maidstone* at the Anthology
 Film Archive in Manhattan. He was satisfied to be considered "a distinguished minor artist" in
 cinema history. He reacquainted himself with his novel, settling down for a long stretch writing.
 "It's like going back to a wife," he told Stratton, and not particularly easy, "but oh, what fun
 when you begin to hold hands again."

Harlot's Ghost, Mailer said in his appended "Author's Note," was his attempt to present
 "a large and detailed mural of a social organism moving through some real historical events," as
 well as through imagined ones, his claim being that novelists "can create superior histories out of
 an enhancement of the real." To accomplish this, massive research was needed. His bibliography
 lists 130 books, ~~34 of which are starred as being of special importance~~. When it got to the point
 that an easily consulted overview was needed, he turned to Judith, who was reading the source
 materials right along with him. Using three 28" x 22" inch pieces of heavy stock, Judith created
 an event timeline, running from 1940 to 1980. Across the top, she listed 17 different people
 (Angleton, Harvey, Hoover, Hunt, Philby, Allen Dulles and other top CIA operatives, Lee
 Harvey Oswald, Marilyn Monroe, Giancana and his colleagues, and several Russian spies and/or
 counter spies), and five event categories (Watergate, Cuba, Vietnam, CIA Mind Control and
 World Events). Mailer's scrawled additions, corrections and notes on the charts are easily
 distinguished from her elegant script. Later, a further consolidation was made on a fourth chart,

clustering some of the key events of the novel. Characteristically, Mailer saw the novel more in terms of the characters and their actions, fair and foul, than from the perspective of events.

The timeline charts, which were taped together and propped up near Mailer's desk for easy reference, show that he planned the novel to cover the four decades from the beginning of World War II—the first events noted are the assassination of Leon Trotsky in August 1940 and the start of German bombing of London a few weeks later—to the beginning of the end of the Cold War—the last event noted is the signing the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty II by President Carter in June 1979. But Mailer never reached the later events on his timelines, and the novel effectively ends after the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962-63. The ~~November 1963~~ assassination of J.F.K. takes place offstage, as it were, and while the novel continues to 1966, it barely does so.

He worked deliberately all through 1988 and by the end of the year had 1300 pages of manuscript. His routine was to work at his New York studio four to six days, pack up the car with books and the timelines, drive to Provincetown for a week, and then return. One of the few breaks he took was for the ecumenical wedding ceremony of his daughter Betsy, who married Frank Nastasi, ~~an accountant~~, in New York on February 14, and the large reception they hosted at 142 Columbia Heights. He also found time to go to two big fights. After Muhammad Ali's retirement, Mike Tyson was arguably the most impressive heavyweight boxer, and in 1988 was the undisputed world champion at the peak of his career. Tyson's first match was against former champion Larry Holmes, who came out of retirement for the bout. Mailer and Norris flew from ~~West 30th Street~~ *West Side of* Manhattan to Atlantic City on one of Donald Trump's black helicopters.

Mailer sat in the back row with Jack Nicholson where they discussed *Prizzi's Honor*, a film

about a hit man and hit woman who fall in love. Mailer told Nicholson that "if two people are equally murderous, they could really be in love." Tyson demolished Holmes and won the fight with a TKO in the fourth. In June, Mailer took his son Michael with him to Atlantic City to watch Tyson knock out Michael Spinks in the first round. He wrote about Tyson's amazing punching power in a September essay in *Spin* magazine, his last report on a professional bout.

Except for two advance excerpts from *Harlot's Ghost*, one in *Esquire* and the other in *Playboy*, the only other piece Mailer published in 1988 was an endorsement of Rev. Jesse Jackson for the Democratic nomination for president. It was Jackson's second run for the nomination and, for a short period, he led the eventual candidate, Gov. Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts, in delegates. Mailer's endorsement appeared on the *Times* op-ed page the day before the April 19 primary. New York Mayor Ed Koch had said that any Jew who voted for Jackson is "crazy." Mailer took exception, and deplored Koch's statement as an example of small-minded political self-interest.

Although centuries of ghetto life had engendered in the Jews "a noble spirit alive in enough of us to permit the feeling that we were the first children of the Enlightenment," Mailer wrote, the "fearful curse" of Nazism was "still there to poison one's finer moral substance." The destruction of half the Jews in the world had created "an imperative to survive at all costs." The Holocaust "left us smaller, greedier, narrower, preternaturally touchy, and self-seeking." Politics for the Jews, he argued, too often boiled down to the question: "Is this good for the Jews?"

It takes no great insight to recognize that oppression of the spirit is the meanest poverty of them all. We have descended from Shakespeare's parlous defense of the Jew as being able to bleed to Ed Koch's inaccurate assumption—I hope it is

inaccurate—that we are, by now, conditioned reflexes—that is, machines, buttons for a politician to press. If any Jew who votes for Jackson is crazy proves to be a useful political button, then I say we Jews have become machines and can no longer look at serious matters by their true merits, or face up to fundamental problems.

Jackson was not perfect, Mailer said, but he felt the same way about the other leading candidates, Dukakis and Al Gore. What made him favor Jackson was his “cogent sense of sympathy for human suffering.” Mailer’s greatest concern was that the country would not be able to solve “any of our worst problems in organic fashion until a black man does become president.” Jackson, he concluded, was the best candidate to bring out “the potential love of black and white for each other.” Nationally, Jackson came in second to Dukakis, and lost to him in New York State, but in New York City Jackson defeated him by few thousand votes. Mailer’s endorsement may have been a factor, especially in Manhattan.

He expected and enjoyed the “marvelously opposed reactions” his endorsement brought out, he told Knox, and learned that some of his oldest friends were Jewish partisans who reacted to his piece “as if I were a Catholic and had defiled the Mass.” The flurry of responses was brief, however, and Mailer returned to *Harlot's Ghost* with few interruptions for the rest of the year. When Joyce Carol Oates sent him a story she had published, he said he would have to defer the “pleasure” of reading it, and gave an explanation he used on several occasions: “Reading good work when you’re writing something of your own is like watching a marvelous Ferrari drive by while you have the parts of your own car spread over the garage floor. So I don’t read good writers while I’m working.”

There were exceptions to this rule, however. Mailer was an admirer of Don DeLillo's works, and read his novel about Lee Harvey Oswald, *Libra*, when it was published in August 1988. They had met a few years earlier when Mailer invited him to come to a reading at the Actors Studio. DeLillo had no idea that Mailer knew of him and his work, and was surprised to receive the invitation. He recalled that in 1959 when he was a struggling young writer, he found a copy of *Advertisements for Myself* in a desk drawer at the advertising agency where he worked.

I found it and I started reading it. I don't think I owned a single hardcover book, and now I had one, except for old school textbooks. I thought it was terrific. I still have that copy. I just ingested it. I read it at home and every subject one might try to explore had been explored by Mailer in this book—speaking, writing, arguing.

Before the performance at the Actors Studio, the two novelists chatted a bit, DeLillo said, and “in my awkwardness I found myself saying something I would never have said under another circumstance. I told him I was writing a novel about Lee Harvey Oswald, and it had an effect on him. I saw this in his face, obviously.” After Mailer read *Libra*, he wrote to DeLillo with praise:

What a terrific book. I have to tell you that I read it against the grain. I've got an awfully long novel going on the CIA, and of course it overlapped just enough that I kept saying, 'this son of a bitch is playing my music,' but I was impressed, damned impressed, which I very rarely am. I think we keep ourselves writing by allowing the core of our vanity never to be scratched if we can help it, but I didn't get away scot-free this time. Wonderful virtuoso stuff all over the place, and, what is more, I think you're fulfilling the task we've just about all forgotten, which is that we're here to change the American obsessions—those black holes in space—

into mantras that we can live with. What you've given us [is] a comprehensible, believable, vision of what Oswald was like, and what Ruby was like, one that could conceivably have happened. Whether history will find you more wrong than right is hardly to the point: what counts is that you brought life back to a place in our imagination that has been surviving all these years like scorched earth, that is, just about. It's so rare when novel writing offers us this deep purpose and I swear, Don, I salute you for it.

A few years later, after he had finished *Harlot's Ghost*, Mailer told DeLillo that *Libra* had saved him 500 pages, presumably by allowing him to leave out any exploration of the motives and actions of Oswald. He had been given one more year to turn in the final manuscript. Random House, he said, "has been damn decent to me, and I'd like to return the favor," so he was stripping down his life to the "essentials of a fighter's camp" to meet the deadline.



For several years, Mailer had been corresponding with a writer from Providence, Rhode Island, an English professor named Edward McAlice who had an Irish flair for language. They only met a couple of times, but wrote regularly. He read his manuscripts for over twenty years, offering advice and encouragement, and also enlisted Judith to give him feedback. McAlice was one of scores of aspiring writers that he helped. Writing to him in early February 1989, Mailer lauded one of his phrases—"all the steaming shit and foul midden pools," noting that he had "said the same thing about this and that condition a hundred times, but never as well." He also praised his "power to characterize people in four or five lines," which he compared to that of Gabriel Garcia Márquez. "Me," he said, "I can't get someone through a door without blowing a

thousand words." Mailer was feeling bogged down. "The wind had better be breezing up," he told McAlice, because he was only half done with a novel that was due in a year.

At that time, Mailer was writing about Hubbard's intelligence work in Uruguay, where Howard Hunt was the CIA station chief. He could have sent Hubbard anywhere, but assigned him to this fairly obscure post for at least three good reasons: 1) to contrast intelligence work in this backwater with the fast-paced, dangerous work of Harvey and his associates in Berlin; 2) to establish Hunt as a character in preparation for using him when he got to Watergate; and 3) because relatively little had been written about CIA activity in Uruguay, he had the partially blank slate he preferred. He had assembled a good-sized trove of information about Uruguay, some of it based on a short trip he made there to get the feel of the place—he returned with dozens of photographs of Montevideo. Hubbard and Hunt's tour was relatively uneventful. Their chief task was to make friends with the country's top officials and elites in the hopes of using them to garner information from the Russian diplomatic staff (half of them, like the American delegation, spies). It was a cat-and-mouse game of a very low order, but one which demonstrated that intelligence work was generally, as Montague put it, like examining the contents of a vacuum cleaner: "There's an abundance of lint, but you can't ignore the chance that you'll find a cuff link." From his collection of CIA books, ^{research} he had more than sufficient material about Hunt, as well as Hunt's memoirs and spy novels. On Mailer's timeline charts, Hunt had his own column, with entries running from his OSS service in World War II, through Watergate and the suspicious death of his wife Dorothy (also a CIA agent), to Hunt's 1973 conviction. His plan, we can surmise, was to use Uruguay as a breathing space between the more dramatic events in Berlin in the early 1950s, and Cuba in the early 1960s.

But once Mailer got into the small-bore espionage of Hunt and Hubbard in Uruguay, he had difficulty extricating himself. Part Four of the novel, "Montevideo, 1956-1959," is the length of a good-sized novel, 266 pages, and while it has some bright spots, they are few. Hubbard could have described his time with Hunt in memoir fashion, but he chose to depict it in the correspondence between Hubbard and Montagu's wife, Kittredge, then living in Washington and recently a first-time mother. About half of Part Four consists of letters. Mailer wanted to keep Kittredge before us because Hubbard will marry her 16 years later. And he also wanted to create a major woman character who is an intellectual. Kittredge is a "characterological theoretician," and the originator of the Alpha-Omega personality theory, an elaboration of Mailer's belief that we house two separate personnalities. ~~Her letters are full of her evolving ideas on humankind's~~ double selves. Harry tells Kittredge about station work, "all its mediocre sleazy contacts and its tedium and frustration," and she shares early motherhood (a first in his published work) and Alpha-Omega with him. He also reveals his erotic life, "his nasty little vein of crotch-turpitude," but holds back or disguises much more so as not to impede the flow of endearments and secrets between them. He tells her one thing, and then gives another version to the reader. Deceit stains every relationship in the novel.

Kittredge's first exposition of the theory was in her senior thesis at Radcliffe. It came to the attention of Allen Dulles and, he put her on the CIA payroll and told her to flesh out her ideas in the hope that they could be used to unmask double agents. The first difficulty with understanding her theory, she tells Hubbard, is that everyone who has heard of schizophrenia or split personality assumes that Alpha and Omega are equivalent to two satchels in the psyche, one containing one's experiences, and the other one occupied by a sifting-sorting-deciphering

apparatus; one part lives, one part observes and interprets. Not so, she says, we are two people, both "as complex and wholly elaborated as what we usually think of a complete personality." Among exceptionally talented people, the selves are far apart; in dullards, close. Each self can be neurotic, psychotic, or even schizophrenic. Nevertheless, Alpha and Omega can be characterized: Omega "originates in the ovum and so knows more about mysteries":

Conception, birth, death, night, the moon, eternity, karma, ghosts, divinities, myths, magic, our primitive past, so on. The other, Alpha, creature of forward-swimming energies of sperm, ambitious, blind to all but its own purpose, tends of course, to be more oriented toward enterprise, technology, grinding the corn, repairing the mill building, building the bridges between money and power, *und so weiter*.

But these are the archetypical Alphas and Omegas. In reality, one Omega can be "night-dwelling, a seer," while another can be Omega in name only, "even as you can find a Sicilian, I suppose, with blue eyes, a cheerful manner and blonde hair." Each can borrow properties from the other, and do, because they are wed "like the corporal lobes of the brain." Marriage is one model for the relationship, she says, *another possibility is* other possibilities are Democrats and Republicans and Czarists and Bolsheviks.

A test Kittredge devises to expose Russian moles, based on the theory, proves useless because the best spies have an "ultra-ego" that coerces their Alpha and Omega. Dulles retains his belief in the *theory* possible utility of the *theory*, as does Harlot, but everyone else in the agency concludes that Alpha is merely another word for consciousness, and Omega is a surrogate for the unconscious. Discouraged, Kittredge tries LSD, hoping for a better understanding of her selves,

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but nearly cracks up. During her 32-month epistolary relationship with Hubbard, she drops ~~orts~~ and slabs of her theory into her letters, which he ~~struggles to~~ understand no more successfully than the CIA hierarchy. Kittredge's theory mirrors Mailer's ideas stretching back to "Lipton's" in the mid-1950s. ^{He} Mailer said that one of his chief interests in the novel was epistemological, how Hubbard and the other characters learn what they know, or think they know. Every fact has its counter-fact; every hypothesis has a competitor; every theory is potentially subsumed by another. At the end of "Montevideo," not much of consequence has happened, while doubts and dissimulations have piled up.

As one plows through the Uruguay years, an expectation is created that the Alpha-Omega scheme will somehow be integrated into the plot. This does not happen, and the disputed theory's only real value, as Kittredge puts it, is to suggest "how spies are able to live with the tension of their incredible life-situations." Mailer flogs the theory, reinforcing the criticism that his worst sin, as Jonathan Franzen has argued, is redundancy. This tendency, along with the unbelievable ways by which Hubbard and Kittredge carry on their plain language correspondence about all kinds of classified operations—by regular mail and by diplomatic pouch—seriously damages the novel. Norris, ^{Leeds} Jason Epstein, Walter Anderson, ~~Leeds~~ and other friends told him that the section was protracted past all good sense, but he made only minor cuts.

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As Mailer was working on "Montevideo," he was drawn into the controversy surrounding Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*, published in the fall of 1988. On February 14,

1989, the Supreme Leader of Iran and Shia scholar, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, issued a *fatwā*, or religious decree stating that Rushdie's novel was blasphemous and he and his publishers should be killed. A Radio Tehran announcer read Khomeini's words: "I call on all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, wherever they find them, so that no one will dare to insult the Islamic sanctions. Whoever is killed on this path will be regarded as a martyr, God willing." The next day an Iranian imam announced a \$2.6 million award for any Iranian who carried out the *fatwā*, and \$1 million for anyone else. These amounts were doubled shortly afterwards.

In a subsequent message, Khomeini branded Rushdie, as a *mahdūr ad-damm* (a person with unclean blood) who had given up his religious birthright and become an enemy of the faith. What troubled many Muslims were sections of the novel that suggested that the Prophet Muhammad had distorted some of the revelations—which comprise the Koran—given to him by Allah, and also scenes depicting the Prophet's wives in brothels. There were riots and book burnings all over the Muslim world, and in sections of England with large immigrant Muslim populations. Two of the novel's translators were stabbed to death, and many died in the rioting. What saddened Rushdie was the fact that the novel, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, was intended "to give voice and fictional flesh to the immigrant culture of which I am myself a member," yet opposition was fierce among these very people, especially in England. Rushdie, born a Muslim in Mumbai, was offered protection by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and went into hiding.

A week later, the P.E.N. American Center organized a rally of support for Rushdie, who had many friends in the U.S. Talese was one of the principal organizers, along with Mailer,

Sontag, Doctorow and Robert Stone. The rally took place in downtown Manhattan at the White Column building, co-sponsored by the Authors Guild and Article 19, an international anti-censorship organization. Joining these writers at the rally were ~~Don~~ ^{Pulson} DeLillo, Edward Said, Robert K. Massie (president of the Authors Guild), ~~Jean Didion~~, Robert Caro, Christopher Hitchens, Diana Trilling, Frances Fitzgerald and Larry McMurtry, among others. Hitchens was applauded loudly when he borrowed Shelley's description of King George III to describe Khomeini: an "old, mad, blind, despised and dying king." The rally came shortly after bookstores pulled the novel from its shelves, citing fear of violence. DeLillo recalled that there was an anti-Rushdie demonstration going on outside the building when he and the other writers "took our seats" and wanted to be called to the rostrum—all except Mailer. He entered at some later point, dramatically, and spoke with Maileresque heat." He blasted the booksellers, and said that Ayatollah Khomeini "wished to show the great length of the whip he can crack, the whip whose secret name is found in our bottomless pit of terrorism." The *fatwā* will make writers learn if they are willing "to die for the idea that serious literature, in a world of dwindling uncertainties and choked-up ecologies, is the absolute we have to defend." He called on other writers to join him in a vow to open up "all literary meetings with a reading of the critical pages of *The Satanic Verses*."

Rushdie was still in hiding three years later when Article 19 published a collection of letters to him from 27 writers. In his letter, Mailer said that he had begun writing as a young man "with the inner temerity" that if he kept on eventually he would "outrage something fundamental in the world" and endanger his life. Rushdie had done just this and now was in "a living prison of contained paranoia."

It is hard enough to write at one's best without bearing a hundred pounds on one's back each day, but such is your condition, and if I were a man who believed that prayer was productive of results, I might wish to send some sort of vigour and encouragement to you, for if you can transcend this situation, more difficult than any of us have ever known, if you can come up with a major piece of literary work, then you will rejuvenate all of us, and literature to that degree, will flower. So my best to you, old man, wherever you are ensconced, and may the muses embrace you.



Just before the controversy, Mailer wrote to congratulate Styron on receiving the MacDowell Medal. Mailer, a past winner, had been on the committee that selected him, and wrote to say it was "great fun" the day he was voted in. "I think I can whisper to you that the finalists were Styron and Bellow and you won out." Styron sent Mailer an article about the ceremony, which included a George Plimpton speech in which he described a trip Styron had made:

A number of years ago, on a trip up the Amazon, Bill persuaded a group of tribal youths that the English word for 'good morning' was 'Norman Mailer,' intoned in a curious sing-song rhythm, and to be delivered with a bright smile. He got them doing this in unison—fifteen or twenty of them 'Nor-man Mai-ler!' My mother, who is 87, is thinking of taking a trip up the Amazon, and I have warned her about this—so that she can take it in stride if a row of semi-clad, spear-carrying tribesmen appear at the water's edge and call across the water: 'Norman Mailer!'

Mailer told Styron that the Amazon story had given him a good laugh, one he needed because *Harlot's Ghost* was "in the doldrums."

In April he wrote to Kate, who was touring with *The Cherry Orchard* in Russia, to say the novel was "now approaching the 1500 page mark in manuscript, and God knows who will ever read it other than scattered members in the family, which is not large enough, I fear, to support me." He wrote a few more letters, and then shut down his correspondence completely for the next six months in an attempt to wrestle with what he called "a 300-lb greased beast." He used a more carnal metaphor in a letter to Knox, one which provides a glimpse of his struggle to escape from Uruguay: "I'm still staggering along with the novel. I tell anyone who's willing to listen that it's like fucking an elephant. Sometimes I believe I'm really in and working away, only to discover to my horror I'm out—I'm not in at all, I've merely been screwing a wrinkle in the hide." He worked steadily for the rest of 1989, taking some time off for July and August in Provincetown when the family came in shifts, but taking no trips and publishing nothing until the end of the year.

Esquire published a two-page restatement of his theological ideas in November of that year. It is notable for its discussion of God's gender: "It has occurred to me, despite my reputation as a male chauvinist, that God may be referred to as 'She' as legitimately (for all we know) as 'He,' or, even better, as 'They,' if one can conceive of divinity as marriage between a godlike Male and Female." It seems likely that the piece might have been intended for the novel, which is rife with theological speculation. Harlot, like Angleton, is a profoundly religious Cold War warrior who believes that "Communism is the entropy of Christ." He repeats Mailer's belief that when Christ said, "Forgive the sons for the sins of the fathers," sanction for the scientific

method was given, that is, once fathers knew that their children would not suffer, they were free to experiment, probe nature's secrets. "That," Harlot, says, "was the beginning of the technological sleigh ride which may destroy us yet." Harlot also repeats a thought from Milton's *Paradise Lost* that Mailer learned from his Chicago friend, Paul Carroll: "The Devil, you must never forget, is the most beautiful creature God ever made." Mailer would repeat it several years later when he depicted Satan in *The Gospel according to the Son*. All though the fall he wrote rapidly, and nothing interfered with his routine.

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In the quiet months of the off-season as he labored ^{on} the novel, the Mailers occasionally dined with a local contractor, Fred Ambrose, and his wife Nancy. John Buffalo was the same age as their oldest son, David, and the two six-year olds enjoyed each other's company, and became lifelong friends. Ambrose was first invited to the Commercial Street house in the early 1980s to discuss various renovation projects, and he and Mailer hit it off immediately. Ambrose had spent a year in his twenties as secretary to Alan Dugan, the Pulitzer-Prize winning poet who lived in nearby Truro, and knew his way around literature. He had read and admired several of Mailer's books, but his relationship to Mailer was not a literary one. "We never really talked literature," Ambrose said. "Norman, from what I could gather—and maybe this is a broad statement—Norman liked people who were involved in real time and liked what they did, whether they were plumbers, or politicians."

I stayed with current events and, you know, I'd read, so Norman and I were able to really banter for 25 years over current topics, and if I disagreed with him I was usually able to support my position with a point and he'd get upset, so I knew I was gaining some footage. I'd never win, of course, but it was sort of like a boxing match. Norman liked to punch hard on an idea. He didn't want just a fluffy answer, he liked facts. He wanted the foundation of your argument, your premise, what your premise was. Norman was the grand inquisitor.

Ambrose was hired to replace a large window, the defining feature of the dining room where Mailer spent most of his time when away from his study. It was an important job, Ambrose said, because views were important to Mailer. Besides the window in the dining room, there was a similar one in his third-floor studio:

It spanned the width of his oak desk, which was very plain; there was nothing up there. I was designing upstairs and I was very intimate with his workspace, and it was very sparse. There was a yellow pad, and pencils, a couple of Hemingway books, a dictionary, and a few odds and ends, and that was pretty much what I witnessed of the writing room. There was a cot on one side. The big window looked out to the west of Provincetown and down through the harbor. If you look at his apartment in Brooklyn, again Norman had these views. Norman always had to have a big pane of glass, and he had to have something really intricate to look at, whether it was Lower Manhattan, or he looked out at the stark view out of the dining room; it just went way out on the Bay. The window upstairs in the study

was much more complicated and it looked out onto the Pier, and then some houses to the right, and then the boats in the harbor.

The 6' x 6' multi-paned dining room window had caught the spindrift for years, and was falling apart. When Ambrose redesigned it, he eliminated the small panes. "Norman had a fit," Ambrose said. "We had this heated conversation. I said, 'Norman, you got a world-class view out there. You live here because of your view. Live with it for 30 days. If you're not happy, we'll put the panes in.' Norman was really mumbling to himself and not happy." Mailer's tastes, Ambrose said, were Edwardian and neoclassical. "After about three months, Norman warmed up to the window and we never heard anything more about it. To this day the window is there."

Ambrose is also an inventor and holds a number of patents. Mailer was fascinated, he said, with the idea of inventing things. He came up with an idea for a hat that would shield his weak eyes. He had always been quite nearsighted, and in his late 60s developed cataracts. Driving in bright sunlight was difficult. "He wanted me to get involved in producing this bright orange baseball cap. He had taken brass wire and bent it and shaped it and put it under the brim of the hat. And he built this elaborate sliding mechanism under the bill. You could move it left and right and block the sun without impairing your vision. He just loved his invention." With his ^{Ambrose's} friends' help, Mailer built a working model. "In the marketplace, I don't think it would've gone far," Ambrose said. "I never told him to stick to his writing and stay out of the invention business. The amount of work he put into that hat was a testimony." Ambrose still has the model.

When he was fed up with work, Mailer liked to go with Ambrose to local bars where he knew many of the patrons. "There was a lot of respect for Norman," he said.

The thing that Norman liked about Provincetown is that it's a very visceral town. People wear their hearts on their sleeves, and they think with their emotions. Whereas in the city people are calculating; they're guarded. In Provincetown people are either carpenters, or fishermen, or people very close to the trades, and they didn't have great secrets to keep so they were very open, and the recourse against them for speaking publicly was virtually nil. So Norman went out and talked to people and if they wanted to chew his ear off—and Norman liked to talk and sit with people—fine, it was always an open, candid conversation. People knew who they were talking with, but that would fade very quickly, and that's about it. Norman was just a regular person on the street. You have to understand, Provincetown's a walking town. You don't drive much. You can get pretty shitfaced in the center of town, and the golden rule was you didn't get flagged unless you fell off your stool. So you could do a lot of serious drinking and, you know, if you wanted to crawl home that was your business. There was a lot of freedom in Provincetown, and a lot of acceptance. I think it was the freedom that Norman liked in Provincetown.

Chris Busa grew up in Provincetown where his father, Peter, a major modernist painter, lived for many years. Father and son were both friendly with Mailer, who rented a studio from Peter. The younger Busa gave tennis lessons to Mailer's sister, Norris, and some of Mailer's children, and later sat in on Mailer's Texas Hold 'em games. Mailer was featured twice on the cover of the annual, *Provincetown Arts*, which Busa published and edited, and sometimes Mailer attended the annual July publication ^{parties} parties. A year-round resident, Busa wrote that he "took

comfort in walking by Mailer's house and seeing his light burning in the window of the attic, knowing he was working. He was some kind of power in the neighborhood, an engine that seemed to move the leaves as I walked down the street." Busa recalled an exchange Mailer had with Eddie Bonetti, one that characterizes the kind of P-town frankness that Ambrose described:

Norman and Eddie were at a cocktail party one summer afternoon in August.

They were standing at the bar, enjoying the company and laughter and stuff, and

Eddie says, 'You know, Norman, I like you in spite of your celebrity.' And

Norman said, 'Eddie, how would you like it if I said I liked you in spite of your obscurity?' You know, that's the kind of verbal play Mailer could always use to equalize the playing field.

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When he took a break in mid-March 1990 to address the stack of mail that had accumulated ~~over the previous eleven months~~, the manuscript was only 300 pages longer than it had been the previous April. Mailer had been backtracking, trying to bring coherence to his sprawling manuscript. That spring, he dictated over 130 letters, most of them notes. He told Mashey Bernstein, that he now had "a novel of 1800 pages with four or five or six hundred to go." In a longer letter to Knox, he said "my elephant" will be "two-thirds as long as 'Remembrance of Things Past' and half as good." Mailer's math is accurate: if he had written a sequel of equal length, the total would be a million words, a half-million less than Proust's seven-volume work.