

The novel opens in March of 1983 as Hubbard is driving up the icy coast roads of Maine to see Kittredge, his wife of ten years. She divorced Montague not long after their son Christopher died in a rock-climbing accident, one that left her husband confined to a wheelchair with a broken back. In a magnificent 90-page burst, Hubbard spins out in sharp flashbacks and reveries the central characters and events of the previous three decades. These backward glances, comprised of brief vignettes and brisk character sketches, alternate with his depiction of the spooky events on the night he arrives at the ancient, ghost-ridden, Hubbard family home, The Keep, on Doane Island in Blue Hill Bay. Shortly after Hubbard arrives, he learns of Harlot's possible death and confronts the ghost of Augustus Farr, a piratical sea captain, in ^{the vault} ~~The Vault~~ beneath the house, after which The Keep burns down and Kittredge flees with another agent, a muscular, bisexual masochist named Dix Butler with whom she is having an affair.

Harlot's hypothesis that the Watergate burglary was an attempt to tap the secrets of the Federal Reserve Bank, located on the next floor up, is also presented in this opening section, "Omega," (the last comes first), and we get our first taste of Kittredge's Alpha-Omega theory. X ✓ The deaths of J.F.K., ~~Marilyn~~ Monroe and Dorothy Hunt, Hubbard suggests, may be related, as well as Oswald's. There are also allusions to Castro and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Mailer was preparing to connect the dots between some of the most vexing mysteries of postwar American life, possibly by laying blame at the feet of Richard Nixon, whose crimes and resignation would have to be presented—in some fashion—in the second volume. We can't know a great deal about Mailer's plan for the sequel, but there is a clue in one of his notes, which states that the affair of Hubbard and Kittredge was "P[oly] M[orphous] perverse in its early stages, cut off by K after

x [Harlot's rock-climbing] accident." Given his druthers, it's likely that Mailer intended to present all the ~~details~~ ^{moist specifics} of their intimacies.

The opening of volume one provides glimpses of Hubbard's early life, his tours in Berlin, Uruguay, Miami and Vietnam, and we learn of his two writing projects, *The Imagination of the State* (an incomplete and abandoned study of the KGB), and a detailed memoir of his work in the agency since 1955. We never see the first study, but the second, *The Game*, comprises the rest of the novel. Hubbard also asks the questions that the reader will ponder for the next 1,000 pages: is Harlot dead? If so, by his own hand or another's? Was he a true-blue patriot and seeker of the Russian mole who has infiltrated the agency, or is he that selfsame mole?

Another agent, Reed Rosen, shows up at The Keep that stormy night, and over tots of Glenlivet, they discuss the situation. If Harlot was a suicide, that must mean that he had been "playing for large stakes and lost," Hubbard said,

'If, however, Harlot was murdered,' I said, and stopped again. Greater difficulties commenced here. I chose an old CIA saw: 'You don't lance a boil,' I told him, 'without having some idea where the drainage will go.'

'Of course,' Rosen said.

'Well, Reed, if Harlot suffered a hit, do the sluiceways point east or west?'

'I don't know. I don't know whether to look for the King Brothers or closer to home.'

The King Brothers is agency lingo for the KGB. If Harlot is not dead, but alive and happy and on his way to Moscow, Hubbard asks, could the KGB have located

some seventy-year-old Soviet prisoner and proceeded, after much dental work including possibly the extraction of all the other teeth on that half of the lower jaw, to go ahead and very carefully break the old fellow's spine in just the right place, and then mend him back to health, smuggle him onto this country, take him down to Harlot's boat, carefully shoot his head to leave no more than the two facsimile molars, and then consign him to Chesapeake Bay long enough to puff up the rest of the remains, while they hang around through it all to be able to nudge him back to shore?

Unspoken is another possibility: Harlot might have gone deeper into the wilderness of mirrors, switching sides and going to Moscow as a fake turncoat, or triple agent. Mailer's provisional plan in Volume II (to be titled *Harlot's Grave*) was for Hubbard to find Harlot in Russia where he has put himself in the hands of the King Brothers. He has gone there, according to Mailer's notes because the general degradation he feels "convinces him that his life, reputation, career, and sense of inner status can be redeemed only if he sacrifices himself," exactly how he does not say. But in another note he says, "Watergate operated by Harlot to fuck Nixon since he will make peace with Russians." Harlot, like Angleton, does not trust the Russians, does not want the Cold War to end, and does not want the CIA's power to shrivel. Many of the actions of the CIA's hierarchy are calculated to overestimate Russia's strength. Mailer later publically criticized President Reagan for such fear-mongering.

Kittredge's life on the run with Dix Butler, who has left the CIA, is uncertain, but Mailer's notes indicate that he intended both of them to play significant roles in the sequel.

"Kittredge," he notes,

On the edge of madness, begins to envisage war as a necessary element in human history, an expression of the needs or the outer world of souls and spirits and their exceptional needs for restructuring, that is, for example, it is necessary to the needs of the cosmos that certain people, large numbers, die abruptly. The cosmos must gorge on souls even as we do on food.

A friend who had read the manuscript in 1990 said that Dix Butler didn't seem to come into focus. Mailer replied that he was saving him for the second volume, which was going to be about Watergate and Vietnam. "Also about Russia; part of it takes place in Russia. And it will deal with the marriage of Kittredge and Hubbard." But at this point *Harlot's Grave* was just a pious hope. Although he had 2000 pages of manuscript by the end of May, 1990, he was nowhere near the end of the first volume.

Random House had given him an extension until the end of June, and when he missed this deadline, it was moved to the end of July. When dates are proposed, he said, "I nod my head and agree." He knew his ~~pile of~~ manuscript would have to grow much higher. One of his models was Thomas Wolfe, who "qualified as great on several counts, and one of them was the great length of his novel. You knew you were reading something important when you picked up 'Of Time and the River.'" Nowadays, he continued, mass booksellers want authors to write 80-page books so "everyone can make more money, sell more product." Wolfe's manuscript, it should be noted, while enormous, was cut severely by Maxwell Perkins. Mailer dismissed most of the

suggestions made by Epstein on major excisions, but was always attentive to his editing.

Harlot's Ghost is dedicated to him.

✓ If he could reach ³⁵⁰⁰2500 pages, Mailer wrote to Alex Hicks, "we can nail half the book to the mast and call it a flag." Then, Random House, he assumed, would give him two more years for volume two. He worked through the summer in Provincetown where he went on the assumption that with fewer interruptions, he could "write ten to twenty percent faster." There were few family excursions, and no trip to Maine—he would never summer there again. Deadlines came and went as pages piled up in Provincetown and, in the fall, back in New York. Mailer did not socialize. Around mid-December, he was done, and announced the completion in several letters. In one he called it "a fairly ambitious book—it may, in fact, be my most ambitious." For the next three months, Mailer worked with Epstein, his secretary, Judith (a doughty grammarian), and the Random House copy editor on the manuscript, which came in at

✓ ³2700 pages.

Veronica Windholz, Mailer's copy editor on several of Mailer's subsequent books, described her first meeting with him. She was expecting to meet an "egomaniac" but, instead, "met a curious, gregarious, deeply intelligent, knowledgeable, jocular, voluble man," who was "generous and big-hearted, but he was also all business." Mailer hated semicolons, she soon learned, and would rewrite an entire paragraph to avoid using one. "He wrote with ease, fast, fluently, and with a smile of satisfaction when he was finished. He loved to write—he loved the challenge of expressing himself just so."

Especially in the beginning, before he was familiar with my work, any query or small change I had made would cause him to reread the entire passage—and

sometimes, if he found something in his own writing that he didn't like, a whole page. He'd take the paper in both his hands, lean back in his chair, and recite the prose to himself, rocking back and forth as he said the words out loud. He listened to—and for—the rhythms of his language as if he were composing music. If something was off by even a fraction of a beat, he knew it immediately.

Everything in his prose, Windholz said, “was subservient to style.” Mailer was not a grammarian of note, and had his own rules about punctuation—insisting, for example, that “So” at the beginning of a sentence be followed by a comma. “The heavy lifting” in his prose was handled by cadence, she said. Mailer couldn't carry a tune, but he was a master of English prose rhythms.

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Bound galleys were sent to reviewers in May, and October 2, 1991 was set as the formal publication date, giving reviewers the summer months to digest Mailer's behemoth—a couple of reviewers quoted what Hollywood mogul Jack Warner said when asked if he had read Hervey Allen's 1224-page novel, *Anthony Adverse*: “Read it? I can't even lift it.” Waiting for the reviews, Mailer wrote a review of Bret Easton Ellis' novel of contemporary consumerism and sadism, *American Psycho*. It was his first assignment as Writer-in-Residence at *Vanity Fair*, where Tina Brown had been editor-in-chief since 1984. Mailer had developed a warm relationship with her after she published two long excerpts from *Tough Guys* in the magazine, and helped him raise funds for the 1985 P.E.N. ^{Conference} ~~conference~~. They had become good enough friends for her to request a letter endorsing her application for a green card. He said she had lifted *Vanity Fair* out of a “bog-ridden beginning,” making it a magazine of “distinction and high

style." He would write four more essays for the magazine over the next year, and continue his relationship with her when she became editor of the *New Yorker* in 1992.

Mailer did not review many books over his career; they can be counted on two hands. Some special circumstance had to entice him. In Ellis' case, it was the outcry from editorial writers and women's groups over the detailed descriptions of mutilation, torture and dismemberment of innocents committed by the novel's protagonist, Patrick Bateman, a serial murderer and obsessive consumer of state-of-the art commodities. Ellis received a \$300,000 advance from Simon and Schuster, but the firm cancelled the book two months before publication after editorials condemning the 20 to 30 scenes of "unmitigated torture" in the novel—in one, a half-starved rat is introduced into a the vagina of a half-slaughtered woman. Bateman, Mailer wrote, "kills man, woman, child, or dog, and disposes of the body by any variety of casual means." Ellis' goal: "to shock the unshockable." The novel was picked up by Vintage and published on "a tidal wave of bad cess" that made it a paperback best seller.

Mailer found the novel's violence, after the first few shudders, to be repetitive and boring. "Murder is now a lumbermill where humans can be treated with the same lack of respect as trees." After torturing women, Bateman enjoys some yuppie delicacy—"swordfish meatloaf with kiwi mustard"—and then admires his girlfriend's "silk satin D'Orsay pumps from Manolo Blahnik." Is there any good reason, Mailer asks, for readers to tolerate the novel's endless catalogues of luxury goods and its many "acts of machicolated butchery"? His answer is that art will tolerate almost any extreme if something new and valuable is learned.

Fiction can serve as our reconnaissance into all those jungles and up those precipices of human behavior that psychology, history, theology, and sociology

are too intellectually encumbered to try. Fiction is indeed supposed to bring it back alive—all that forbidden and/or unavailable experience. Fiction can conceive of a woman's or a man's last thoughts where medicine would offer a terminal sedative.

Ellis intimates that Bateman resembles Raskolnikov sufficiently to use an epigraph from Dostoyevsky, but Mailer concludes that the snobbish yuppie is a cipher. "Bateman is driven, we gather, but we never learn from what." If Ellis hoped to reveal something new about the links between gratuitous violence and American materialism, then he had "to have something new to say about the outer limits of the deranged" in his chief character. "In the wake of the Holocaust," Mailer says, it is legitimate for a novelist to seek an understanding of extreme acts of violence, but when we have finished with *American Psycho* "we know no more about Bateman's need to dismember others than we know about the inner workings in the mind of a wooden-faced actor who swings a broadax in an exploitation film. It's grunts all the way down." He ends by saying he cannot forgive Ellis for forcing the reader to go unnecessarily through his chamber of horrors.

The reviews of *Harlot's Ghost* were better than any Mailer had received since *The Executioner's Song*, but there was little sympathy for its length and a division of opinion about the words he placed at the end: "TO BE CONTINUED." Some said the sequel could not come too quickly; others felt enough was enough, and that the sequel would not be missed any more than the unwritten parts of other gargantuan works—Spenser's *The Fairie Queene* comes to mind. The tersest summation of the reviews is captured by Don DeLillo's later comment: "extremely impressive if only he'd forgotten Uruguay." Except for Kittredge, Mailer's

characters, both historical and fictional, were generally praised, especially Montague and Harvey, with Hunt and Modene Murphy not far behind. Christopher Lehman-Haupt, like most reviewers, found Kittredge to be "unbelievable and inconceivable as a character until one begins to think of her as Norman Mailer." She acts so much like him, Lehmann-Haupt argues, and is so obviously a mouthpiece for his ideas that her effectiveness is sorely diminished. When she speaks, we hear her creator's characteristic locutions: "Vanity is the abominable conceit that one could run the world if only one weren't so weak."

X ✓ The portrait of William Harvey got the most favorable comments. Gross, obscene, paranoiac and alcoholic, he is so obsessively dedicated ^{SB} and comically blunt, and so unencumbered by the clouds of intellection surrounding grantees like Montague and Angleton, that he is almost lovable. A Midwesterner and former FBI agent fired by Hoover, Harvey refuses to learn foreign languages, disdains patriotic pieties, and is bored by geopolitical theory. But his tactical acumen is unparalleled. Apparently fearless, he collects odd facts, is a weapons expert, and has the callous bluster of Sam Spade. Montague (and, in real, life, Angleton) was deceived by Kim Philby, but the Brit's Cambridge éclat cut no ice with Harvey, who identified him as a double agent. Philby defected and died in Moscow with full Soviet honors, including his portrait on a postage stamp. Harvey got a plum job. Assigned to Berlin at the height of the Cold War, ✓ Harvey pressed his superiors to construct ^{a 1500-foot} the eavesdropping tunnel into East Berlin. It took a year and cost millions, but working with British M16 technicians, Harvey's team was able to tap into the main trunk line carrying Russian telephone calls to Moscow. For a year, banks of tape recorders captured the calls. Maintaining the secrecy of the tunnel (code-named CATHETER) was crucial, and Harvey guarded it like Cerberus.

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The song Mailer wrote in his sophomore year at Harvard, "The Bodily Function Blues," could be used as a gloss on Harvey's condition, as described in "Berlin," Part Two of the novel.

20 / Like the persona in the song, he has issues with ~~his~~ perspiration, alimentation, regurgitation, defecation, somnambulation and so on. Not his copulation, however. He tells Hubbard, his new aide, "If I ever went to a psychiatrist, he'd discover that I want to fuck an elephant. I have fucked, parenthetically speaking, everything else. Female, that is." Hubbard is awed: "He was God, if God was not too tall, thick in the middle, and had goggle eyes. For that matter, God drank like a fish and hardly slept." Fueled by adrenalin, nicotine and gin, his bowels are a mess. He vomits once a day, and says it keeps the doctor away. Hubbard observes several of his bodily functions, including expectoration: "Once again phlegm revolved in his throat. Despite myself, I thought of the taffy you see in an amusement-park mixing machine. When it was up to texture, he hawked it neatly in a handkerchief and lit a cigarette." Sometimes he is less delicate. He cleans his nails with the sheath knife strapped to his leg, burps ostentatiously, and dozes off without warning.

Only a few clicks away from being a psychopathic lush, he is nevertheless perfectly suited to his job, and imbibes precisely the amount of gin necessary to keep his paranoia and cynicism in equilibrium. His instincts are superb. After quickly sizing Hubbard up, he decides to take him on his nightly travels around Berlin in the black Cadillac, planning to tutor him in the sometimes sordid exigencies of agency work. He tells Hubbard to drop all his other duties and spend the next few days sharpening his skill with a pistol. "Get in some hours before Monday," Harvey said. "He stood up to shake hands with me, then lifted his leg and farted. 'The French got a word for it,' he said," although it is not one that Harvey knows, or cares to know. He is one of

Mailer's great characters, another in the long line of crusty male mentors from McLeod and Eitel to Menenhetet and Doughy Madden. Montague is another, but he is a mandarin professor of counter-espionage history and theory, while Harvey is a frontline warrior, tenacious, foul-mouthed and wily. Mailer compares him to Gen. Patton, the tank commander who was largely responsible for defeating the Germans at the Battle of the Bulge.

Before Hubbard was sent to Berlin, he worked in technical services in Washington. One day, he flubbed a request from Harvey, and a few weeks later when he arrives in Berlin, Harvey orders him to track down the snotty clerk who rebuffed him. Hubbard is ordered to ferret out the identity of KU/CLOAKROOM, his own former code-name. It is "a truly ingenious plot device," John Simon notes in his review, "a variation on one of the great detective plots, from 'Oedipus Rex' to that remarkable Elio Petri film, 'Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion.'" Harvey is relentless, believing that KU/CLOAKROOM is probably a rookie who is protected by "a rabbi," who is probably the leader of the agency's "Let's-Give-the-Shaft-to-Bill-Harvey gang," which is probably led by Harlot. He is correct on all counts. Harvey tells Hubbard that he hates Harlot, and Hubbard, trying to maintain his boss' confidence, says he hates him too, adding that he has gone to bed with Harlot's wife, which he has not, but will.

Harlot calls Hubbard from Washington and orders him to ask Harvey's wife about her husband's relations with J. Edgar Buddha, and secretly tape her words. When Hubbard says he has qualms, Harlot tells him to "cease whimpering. Your conscience led you to this profession. Now you are discovering that your profession will oblige your conscience to see itself all too often as deplorably used, contemptible." Hubbard agrees to "anneal" his conscience, and soon learns "how easily I could succumb to large acts of lying, and outrageous expressions of

excessive emotion." He tapes the conversation for Harlot; Harvey discovers the betrayal; Harlot rescues Hubbard and flies him to Washington and a new assignment. "I was born to do this," Hubbard says. "Being a double agent is natural for me."

We last see Harvey in the spring of 1966 in Rome, where he is Chief of Station. He has bungled relations with Italian intelligence, and Hubbard has been sent to tell him that he is being recalled. By this time Harvey is a dead-end alcoholic, and is recovering from a heart attack. Drawing on David C. Martin's account in *Wilderness of Errors*, Mailer ends "The Game" with his version of Hubbard's all-night meeting with Harvey over two bottles of bourbon. Still wearing his pearl-handled revolvers, Harvey tells Hubbard, "I am ready to return in the first body-bag that can be passed through a pig's asshole." As they get drunk, Harvey keeps taking out his pistol and pointing it at Hubbard's forehead. He complains that he has been refused access to the Italian agents that Montague cultivated in World War II, and calls him his worst enemy, one he would shoot if he were in the room. After hours of fascinating rambling about J.F.K.'s assassination, ^{Oswald and} Castro and ~~Lee Harvey Oswald~~ (Mailer is looking forward to *Harlot's Grave*), Harvey tells Hubbard that when he fingered Philby, he suspected that the Russians blew the Brit's cover to protect someone else, "*Someone larger*." He doesn't name the person, but he doesn't have to: "One part of my brain," Hubbard said, "was singed forever with the fear that it was Harlot." As he is departing with Harvey's promise to resign, Harvey head-butts Hubbard, Mailer-style, an unmistakable tap of approval from the author.

After a brief coda situating Hubbard in his Moscow hotel room in March 1984, the novel ends with the three words of Mailer's now-famous broken promise. It is worth noting that March 1984 was when Mailer first arrived in Moscow, and checked into a hotel not far from Lubyanka

Prison. If Hubbard's suspicion is correct, it would be the likely residence of the defector, Hugh "Harlot" Montague.

The generally positive response Mailer received from reviewers about his portraits of Harvey and Harlot was matched by equally warm comments about Parts Four and Five of the novel, which cover the years 1960 to 1963, from the preparations for the Bay of Pigs debacle in Cuba and the ensuing missile crisis, through the unsuccessful assassination attempts on Fidel Castro (under Harvey and Gen. Lansdale, with Hunt, Sinatra, and Gianaca as players), to the successful assassination of J.F.K. John Simon, writing in the *Sunday Times Book Review*, said that "Mailer really comes into his own and vividly evokes the internecine intrigues among the C.I.A., the F.B.I., the Pentagon and the State Department" in these adventures, a view echoed in other reviews. He has special praise for Mailer's depiction of the invasion—"a clandestine nocturnal operation by sea and land against Cuba is a gem any novelist could be proud of"—but goes on to rail against the novel's "lopsided" shape and the many exfoliations of the Alpha-Omega theory. He was not alone in making complaints about the novel's shape and size. Both John Aldridge and Christopher Hitchens found fault with the Uruguay section (as does almost every other reviewer), although they did not see the novel's defects to be as serious as Simon. Aldridge says that the South American operation moves "at the pace of a paraplegic snail," but calls the novel Mailer's "best written," an accomplishment showing that "he possesses the largest mind and imagination at work in American literature today" (Mailer circled the passage for use in ads for the novel). Hitchens sees merit in the "continuous emphasis [. . .] placed on the concept of 'doubling' and division," and says he has personally known and read of many CIA men who had the same "bipolar mentality" of Mailer's agents.

Simon's review infuriated Mailer—not what he had said, but that he had said it at all. Not only had Simon panned *Marilyn*, he had been one of only a very few critics who gave a negative review to *The Armies of the Night*, calling it “a demented Waring blender churning away at sexual, political, and literary power fantasies, sadomasochistic day-dreams.” Given these reviews, why did the *Book Review* editor, Rebecca Sinkler, give Simon the job of reviewing Mailer's *magnum opus*? Mailer ^{contacted} ~~called~~ *Times* Publisher Arthur Ochs “Punch” Sulzberger, whom he knew slightly, to ask for a meeting with Sinkler. He got it, and asked her for space to write a rebuttal to the review. Sinkler, now in a somewhat defensive position in that she had not dug out the negative review of *Armies*, only the slam of *Marilyn*, told Mailer that Simon had read both advance excerpts from *Harlot's Ghost* in *Rolling Stone*. He liked them, she said. Simon's approval of the excerpts, coupled with his assurance that he could write a fair review, convinced Sinkler to give him the assignment, one that four others had turned down. The last thing Mailer laid on the table at the meeting was Simon's disapproval of Kate Mailer's 1988 performance in *The Cherry Orchard*. After he had read it in *New York* magazine, where Simon was the drama critic, Mailer put out the word to everyone who knew Simon: “Tell him, went the message, not to get into the same room with me.”

This last complaint added no luster to Mailer's request for a rebuttal, but the overlooked review of *Armies* did, apparently, and Sinkler gave Mailer space for his piece. In it, Mailer repeated every bad thing Simon had said about him, and suggested that the bad review of Kate's performance was really a barb at him. Simon was given space for a counter-rebuttal, and pointed out that Mailer made no attempt to refute anything in his review, so what was the big deal? His chief complaint about the novel, he repeated, was its “prolixity.” In her concluding note, Sinkler

said that in her judgment Simon had written "a fair and balanced review that met the standards of this newspaper," but also admitted that the editors had not been aware of the negative review of *Armies*, a tentative *mea culpa*.

Letters taking sides poured in over the next few weeks and the *Times* published 20 of them, about evenly divided. Sinkler wrote later that she took satisfaction in the fact that "in the long run readers got the last word." She said she still stood behind Simon's review, while adding that Mailer had been a "pussycat" at the meeting and after the episode "has never been rude or unpleasant." She and her colleagues "often chuckled," she said, "about how we got 1,600 words out of Norman Mailer without paying a cent." The dust-up kept the novel in the public eye through the end of the year. Despite its high price—it was the first trade edition of an American novel to sell for \$30—and ~~its~~ weight of four pounds, it made the best seller list for four weeks, his ninth book to do so.

One other review of the novel requires mention, that of Howard Hunt. He recalled meeting Mailer and Jeanne Campbell at a dinner party given by ~~William~~ Buckley (a former CIA man recruited by Hunt), but says that the meeting was "what in espionage jargon is called a 'brush contact.'" Being included as a major character was an "unwanted distinction," he says, although he found no fault with his portrait. Hunt's generally favorable review ends the speculation that Mailer, once properly trained, might have joined the ranks of the CIA-backed Congress of Cultural Freedom back in 1949-50, an organization, it will be remembered, that sent its members—including Robert Lowell, Mary McCarthy and Arthur Schlesinger—to challenge Mailer when he spoke at the 1949 Waldorf Peace Conference. It is, therefore, unlikely that Mailer would have joined the agency. But he would have been tempted.

In the novel, Hunt proposes another qualification for a good CIA man, and he passes it on to Hubbard: "I will suggest that if anyone ever inquires why you think you're qualified to be in espionage, the only proper response is to look them in the eye, and say, 'Any man who has ever cheated on his wife and gotten away with it, is qualified.'" Mailer certainly had this qualification, and believed it was indispensable to his novelistic understanding of the CIA. His working principle, as stated by Lenny Bruce (when Hubbard, Harlot and Kittredge see ~~him~~ ^{her} perform) at a night club, was this: "Never tell your wife the truth. Because biologically it has been proven. Women's ears are not constructed to hear the truth. They will slaughter you if you tell it like it is. So, lie your ass off."

Mailer did. He continued his affairs for the length of time it had taken to write *Harlot's Ghost*. Not long after it was published, Norris confronted him, and he faced the third great crisis of his life.

Chapter 14

A Merry Life and a Married One

In the seven years after *Harlot's Ghost*, Mailer published four books—three varieties of biography and a mammoth anthology of his work—and more political commentary and journalism than in any period since the 1963-72 outpouring. He covered the political campaigns and conventions of 1992 and 1996, travelling around the country with other political reporters on buses and planes. The oldest reporter on the campaign trail, he was referred to as "the Dean." He

took pleasure in his ability to keep up with the younger reporters, and to write books on figures as disparate as Lee Harvey Oswald, ~~Pablo~~ Picasso and Jesus Christ. But he was deeply unhappy with his inability to begin the sequel to *Harlot's Ghost*. This failure in the creative realm was matched if not eclipsed by a near-disaster in the domestic one.

In the fall of 1991, Mailer's secret life all but ended. He was forced to break off, or drastically alter, relationships with several women in order to save his marriage. The crisis in his relationship with Norris continued for over a year, and for a time they separated. It was a private struggle, and few people outside the immediate family realized how close the marriage had come to foundering. In public, they went through the motions, in private they fought. After much pain, they reaffirmed their commitment to each other, although Norris did not trust him completely for several years, if ever. His work was affected for a time, especially after Norris learned the full extent of his infidelity. But "he was still able to compartmentalize," she wrote in her memoir, and kept working all through this period

As the situation unfolded, he took on a variety of small tasks. Some of these were related to the novel—the selection of excerpts from *Harlot's Ghost* for several different publications, including three long ones in *Rolling Stone*, a U.S. book tour (35 interviews over two weeks), and another in England—and some were more enjoyable activities. Gov. Mario Cuomo, upon the recommendation of a committee chaired by Albany novelist William Kennedy, appointed Mailer to a two-year term as New York State Author, an honor that came with a \$10,000 stipend and few duties. Mailer also began organizing a dramatic reading of George Bernard Shaw's "Don Juan in Hell" with Gay Talese, Susan Sontag and Gore Vidal, a benefit for the Actors Studio, where he was still involved. At the request of John Updike, he agreed to write a chapter in the

official history of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Letters, *A Century of Arts & Letters*. After it was clear that Bill Clinton had the Democratic presidential nomination wrapped up, Mailer wrote Hillary a long letter recommending that Bill focus on racial tensions in his acceptance speech at the 1992 convention, hoping that it might gain him some sort of role as an unofficial advisor. Continuing as *Vanity Fair's* Writer-in-Residence, he published several more pieces. His report on the GOP convention of 1992 was published in the *New Republic*. The companion piece on the Democratic convention was written but never published. Mailer felt it that it was too obviously approving of Bill Clinton.

He continued to state in interviews and letters that he was on the cusp of beginning "Harlot's Grave," and many of his efforts during this period were connected to J.F.K.'s assassination, which he had handled obliquely and briefly in the novel. He planned to ^{thus} remedy its scant treatment in the sequel. For example, when Updike proposed that Mailer write the chapter on the 1960s for the history of the American Academy, Mailer accepted immediately, seizing an opportunity to revisit his favorite decade. For a *Vanity Fair* piece, he tried to arrange an interview with Fidel Castro, who was coming to New York for a U.N. meeting. Mailer sent his request to Castro via the Cuban U.N. delegation, and also asked Gabriel Garcia Márquez, a close friend of the Cuban dictator, to intercede. "I can promise," he wrote to Castro, "that your ideas will receive an honest display" in Tina Brown's fast-growing magazine, and gain reflected attention in other media. Castro's reflections on the assassination, presumably, would have been an asset for the sequel.

If Castro responded to Mailer's request, no record of it has surfaced. But Mailer was able to speculate on the assassination in two of his published *Vanity Fair* essays. One was a review of

Oliver Stone's 1991 film, *JFK*. Mailer praised the film, which won two Oscars, for embodying a controversial hypothesis about the assassination, one that opposed the conclusion of the Warren Commission that Oswald was the sole assassin. Mailer called it "the worst of the great movies," and applauded Stone for stirring the pot in an imaginative way. The other piece was a one act-play, "Earl and Lyndon: An Imaginary Conversation," which depicts, quite humorously, the arm-twisting techniques—lofty, carnal and threatening—employed by a manipulative Lyndon *President* Johnson to convince Chief Justice Earl Warren to head up the commission investigating J.F.K.'s death.

Mailer also continued to meet with a group of writers who called themselves, with false bluster, the Dynamite Club. It came into being in 1989 as a forum for the examination of various conspiracy speculations about the assassinations of the 1960s, Watergate and other mysteries. The group met in Washington, D.C. and New York, often at Mailer's apartment. It included Jim Hougan, a novelist and nonfiction writer, Dick Russell, a freelance investigative writer, and Edward J. Epstein, author of a shelf-full of books about J.F. K's assassination, Oswald, and the CIA. ~~Don~~ DeLillo also attended a few meetings, and recalls learning at one of them that Mailer had met and head-butted one of the Watergate burglars, although he could not recall which one. Finally, Mailer wrote a short preface to *The JFK Assassination: The Facts and the Theories*, written by Carl Oglesby, one of the founders of the Assassination Information Bureau. Mailer lauded the book for clarifying his thinking, and praised Oglesby's efforts to keep the mysteries surrounding the assassination before the public eye and on the agenda of Congress.

The crisis in the Mailers' marriage, long simmering, came to a boil in August of 1991. His appetite for "a merry life and a married one," as he once described it, had become too blatant to ignore. Norris had been suspicious for some time, but whenever she asked questions about his hastily scheduled, unaccompanied trips, he got angry, and when he did try to explain, his excuses were flimsy. But now she had evidence: long distance phone call bills and motel and restaurant credit card charges. "It all made sense now," Norris said. "I had been a complete and total fool. For years." One afternoon in Provincetown, she confronted him in front of his sister, as Barbara recalled:

I remember I was sitting with Norman in the bar and Norris came down in a fury. She presented him with some stuff she found, I think, on the computer or something. I don't know where she found it because he'd been denying it. And then she left. I remember looking at him and asking him, 'Why did you do it?' And he said, 'Life was getting too safe.'

Later, Mailer admitted to Norris that he had spent a night in Chicago with "an old girlfriend," Eileen Fredrickson, but swore it was the only time, and promised it would never happen again. Norris was devastated and incredulous, especially when he kept changing the details of his account. For the next two weeks she peppered him with accusations, getting so angry that "I physically attacked him a time or two, hitting him with my fists like a child, him promising again and again that it was a one-time thing that was over." In late August, she returned to New York with John, 13, and Matt, 19, who was beginning college at NYU. Mailer stayed behind to do some writing.

Before she left, he gave her the keys to his studio and asked if she would drop off a small box of books there. She found this odd, because she had ventured up the three flights of stairs to the studio only once before. He called it his *querencia*, his lair or retreat. When she entered, she saw that it had never been swept and trash was piled in corners. Mailer had a high tolerance for mess. She went to his desk and found a collection of love letters. He had always said that women pursued him for his celebrity, and that's why he received cards and letters with endearments and lipstick on them. This was certainly true. As anyone who spent much time with him in public can testify, women never stopped buzzing around him, even when he was over 80. He had told Norris that she was the love of his life, which was also true, but it was hard for her to believe after digging through a desk crammed with *billets-doux*, photographs and mementos. It seemed to her that he wanted his secrets to be found. "This other life," Norris wrote, "as he said over and over, willing me to understand, had nothing to do with me. Except, of course, it did." She went home and wrote him a long letter.

In it, she tells what she had found, including a signed note from Carole Mallory, dated December 1, 1989, in which she promises not to ask Mailer for any money for three months. Then, Norris got to the nub: "Are you in a dilemma as to whether or not you will risk our marriage to feed the beast?"

After more than sixteen years I feel like I'm living with a stranger. Incredibly, insanely, the sex has been better with you these last two weeks than it has ever been, and I'm remembering the early years. You are all consuming to me now. I only want, more than anything, to go on with you in the life we have. I want us to continue to love our children and have the home life we perhaps have taken for

granted all these years. But if you are truly dissatisfied—even a small part of you—and you really need other women in your life to make you complete, then I won't stay with you. I don't want to end up a bitter wife, searching phone bills and Visa receipts for clues of infidelity, dying inside when you take a trip; not believing you when you say in that flat voice, 'I love you.' I deserve better than that.

Mailer returned to Brooklyn the day he received the letter in the mail.

Norris had a small studio on Hicks Street, and they walked there to have it out. "I'm going to tell you everything," he said, "but there will be no divorce. I don't want this to break us up. You are my life, and I won't let you leave me." Norris said she was making no promises. He opened up, detailing affairs, naming women, on and on, "like he was vomiting up a bad meal, and had to get it all out." Norris listened, wept, and then attacked him, hitting and scratching. He buttoned up, deflecting what blows he could and absorbing the rest, using an old club fighter's defensive skills. When he had told everything, Norris wrote, "We went back to the apartment, where we went to bed, totally exhausted, fell into each other's arms, and had wild sex. Go figure."

Norris confided in her close friends, and Danielle, Betsy and Kate. Danielle recalls talking with her on the telephone. "

I was concerned that she was sharing all this with me, and I felt divided. On the one hand, I was angry with my father, and felt empathy for Norris, but I also felt loyal to my dad, and didn't want to get caught in the middle. So, I was very

careful about what I said. I listened and was sympathetic, but I didn't want to be disloyal to my father. Another part of me was weary: Here we go again, dad is changing partners. My intuition was that Norris would not leave him.

The confessions continued, as Mailer recalled brief affairs and one-night stands from years before, spitting out memories whenever they came to him—once in the back of a taxi. Norris told the driver to pull over and got out, and he chased after her. In front of others, they smiled and pretended, and somehow continued with work, family events and black-tie social affairs. When they were alone, she said, their conversations were blunt, scathing and brutal. When *Harlot's Ghost* was published, there were several book events in New York. At the Random House party at the 21 Club (scene of Cal and Harry Hubbard's memorable lunch in the novel), hosted by Publisher Harry Evans on October 31, Carole Mallory showed up. She was "shockingly brazen," Norris said, and kept bringing photographers over to take her picture with Mailer. She seemed to be taunting Norris, or seeking to create a scene or a physical altercation. Norris ignored her, and then told her quietly that she might as well enjoy herself because "she had gotten the last nickel she was going to get out of Norman."

Norris was correct: Mallory lost her sugar daddy. In fact, Mailer had already broken with her. Their last tryst had been in June 1991 at the Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles. In mid-September, shortly after his confession in Norris' studio, Mailer called Mallory on the telephone, and told her he was severing relations. She threatened to go to the media with the story of their eight-year affair. According to Mallory, Mailer said that if she went public, her pain would be far worse than his. When she brought up his conscience, he said, "My conscience is my business. And so is my marriage. I love Norris." After a few recriminations, the call was over and except

for the book party at the 21 Club, and one chance meeting a few years later, they never saw each other again. In her 2009 memoir Mallory said she finally realized that Mailer needed Norris “to feel whole.”

Lois Wilson had a far different relationship with Mailer, and a longer one. They met at a Stanford University party in 1949. She was an unusual woman, as her daughter and only child, Erin Cressida Wilson, explained. Growing up very poor in Kentucky, Montana and Ohio, she was “desperate to upwardly mobilize and get out.” At 19, she graduated from college, and received her Ph.D. from Stanford only a few years later. Married at 24 to another English professor, Graham Wilson, she had a long, happy and complex marriage. He died in 2005 at the age of 89. Their relationship, according to their daughter, “was deep and mysterious—but also, open.” Recalling her mother, she said:

Lois had many lovers. Norman was her first, and the relationship lasted the longest. The rest of the men largely and eventually became good friends. One of them was Alberto Moravia [Mailer introduced them] who fell madly in love with Lois and begged her to come live with him in Rome. She did come to him for over a year on a Fulbright at the University of Rome (without leaving the relationship with Graham), but was never willing to leave Graham—or her life as a professor at San Francisco State—for Alberto. She desired freedom, even from her lovers.

The relationship with Norman was almost the same length as the marriage—Graham and Norman died around the same time. Thus, the marriage with Graham and the relationship with Norman were both sixty years. There were

many instances in which Norman socialized with Lois and Graham at the same time. Norman and Lois were sexually compatible—yes—but they were also good friends who didn't ask one another to hand over money, power, prestige or family in return. They had somewhat of a pure relationship—one of fun, sex, secrecy, and endless talks into the night, lying next to one another. Lois was married to one man the entire time, and only had one child. Norman had many wives and many children during this time. They both knew that they had mates and other lovers, and there doesn't seem to have ever been an ounce of jealousy or possession.

Lois Wilson and Mailer got together in hotel rooms two or three times a year for an intense day or two, not unlike the way the two lovers meet in Robert Mulligan's play, *Same Time, Next Year*. But while their meetings continued after he met Norris, their sexual intimacy ceased. Wilson recalled:

Everything changed when he met Norris. I could see that she was a good person for him. And that he loved her and that she loved him. And I thought I'd better lay off. She has a right to her own *modus operandi*. So, I would hear quite a bit about her because he liked to talk about her; he truly was very much taken with her and she made a life for him that he couldn't have made otherwise.

Wilson believes that she and Norris would have liked each other if they had met. But Mailer never brought them together, fearing Norris' jealousy. "Yes, she was jealous," Wilson said. "But she had no reason to be with me after a certain point. I was on her side."

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X / Eileen Fredrickson's relationship with Mailer began 30 years after Wilson's, but in some ways it was the same. An avid reader who spoke fluent Japanese, acted in commercials, ~~and~~
X / ~~acted in several~~ films and television programs, she had a number of careers, including modeling, bartending, and hosting her own news radio program. Like Wilson, she sought nothing from Mailer except his presence, and saw him only when he was in Chicago. He called her weekly for many years, and sent her inscribed copies of his books. In early October 1991, just before he went on the book tour for *Harlot's Ghost*, Mailer called her to tell her that Norris had found her letters. Fredrickson recalled the conversation:

Judith got suspicious about the bills from Chicago, and she told Norris that there was something going on. Norris, at that time, knew about Carol Mallory, and she put her foot down and said she was going to divorce him if he didn't vow, on his children, not to see me anymore. So he called me and told me that Norris had found out. He asked me to sit down, and then told me he had to take a vow on his children not to see me again. So from about 1991 or 92 he wasn't supposed to see me, but he called me all the time, and he did come to see me a couple of times.

Asked why he was involved with so many women, she said, "He just couldn't help himself."
"He should have been a Mormon."

Norris had stopped going on book tours with Mailer in the mid-1980s. She was tired of being ignored and disrespected by pushy fans and photographers. But she went along with him on the book tour for *Harlot's Ghost*, traveling with him to Boston, Chicago, the West Coast and Washington, D.C. He wanted her to accompany him, insisted on it, she said. Her chief motive was to keep an eye on him. His was to reassure her that he was a changed man, as several of his

comments indicate. For example, when asked if there was anything he wanted to do that he hadn't, he said: "I'm too happily married to answer that." Reporters referred to him as "a mellower Mailer" and "a softer Mailer," and noted his "attestedly happy 11 years of marriage to Norris Church." With Norris sitting next to him in an ABC studio where he was waiting to be interviewed, he said he was "a more content man" than in the past. "I think you have to round out or round off after a certain age or you'll go crazy. You have to give up certain ideas of yourself. I gave up some of my crazier ambitions." He said he had followed "his inner voice" all his life, "sometimes as a clown or a fool."

X Mailer's longest interview during the book tour was with David Frost. He led off by asking Mailer about the humorous piece he had written in 1979, a comic obituary, which began with a report that he had passed away after his fifteenth divorce and sixteenth wedding. Frost wondered how he'd begin such a piece today.

Mailer: Oh, I wouldn't dare. I'm married to a young, lively, proud and slightly—as she grows into imperiousness every year—woman. So, she wouldn't, she'd not look lightly on that.

Frost: That's right. No fifteen divorces. No sixteen weddings. Number six looks as though it's going to last forever.

Mailer: Oh, I think so. I think so.

He had no desire to see marriage number six end, but he wasn't sure that Norris felt the same. She held the cards.

In Chicago, the Mailers' driver and guide was none other than Eileen Fredrickson, who Mailer had helped get a job driving visiting writers around town. Norris was astonished, and thought Mailer was being cruel. As they drove, Norris saw that Fredrickson "obviously adored him." Fredrickson said that while it was a terribly awkward situation, Norris was "very gracious." He invited her to a reception for him that night, and she attended, but was the first person to leave. "Even though I was an adulteress," she said, "I was still a lady." The situation repeated itself in Los Angeles, where Mailer pointed out another old girlfriend (possibly Lois Wilson) in the audience. The fact that they were much older than ^{she} Norris, gave ^{Norris} her no solace. "These women took over my life, I couldn't think of anything else; we couldn't seem to talk about anything else." Norris wasn't sure what to do; she prayed at night. It was the worst of times.

When they returned, Sam Donaldson and an ABC television crew came to their apartment for an interview with both Mailers about *Harlot's Ghost*. It was not her favorite book, especially after she learned that Mallory was the model for the ^{slutty} lubricious Maine waitress, Chloe. Norris liked Donaldson's "devilish air," and they got on well. With the camera rolling, he asked what it was like to live with Norman Mailer." She shot back her answer: "Well, Sam, it's kind of like living in the zoo. One day Norman is a lion; the next he's a monkey. Occasionally he's a lamb, and a large part of the time he's a jackass." Donaldson laughed; Mailer looked shocked. When the segment aired, Norris' answer was retained.

An old boyfriend, a bachelor surgeon in Atlanta, called her with concern after he saw the show, and she told him that she was thinking of leaving Mailer. The doctor invited her to visit. She declined, and decided instead to go to Arkansas and see her parents and best friend Aurora

Huston. It was now late in the year, and Norman went skiing with Stephen and John. Norris enjoyed seeing her family, and then she and Aurora and her husband Phil drove to Florida where they met Jean, another old friend. "I was on the brink of totally changing my life and was giddy with possibilities," she said. But she was also worried. She had a comfortable life, loved all of Mailer's family, enjoyed their two homes and many friends, and the freedom she had to write and paint and act. She and Aurora and Jean talked over the situation at length.

While Norris was away, Mailer called up a friend, filmmaker Jim Toback, and asked him to meet him for dinner at Nicola's. They enjoyed one-on-one dinners, and shared what Toback called "extremely intense personal conversations" of the kind not to be repeated. He had witnessed Mailer's complicated relationships with several wives and mistresses, and watched him move from one to another. "There was never any notion, certainly in my observation, and I think in his, that he would ever find someone who would be the last." But when he listened to the way Mailer talked about Norris, he saw that the "endless cycle" had come to an end. Mailer told him why he had asked him to dinner:

'Listen, the real reason I had to see you tonight is that I have a hole at the center of my being. I've never felt anything like it.' I said, 'Why is that?' And he said, 'Well, Norris has left and I don't know if she's going to come back.' He went on saying, 'I did certain things and she confronted me and I confessed. Part of me wanted to lie. I felt if I lied I could get away with it, but I just couldn't get myself to lie, so I confessed. And that was it and she left.' He said, 'I don't regret having told the truth, but I don't know what to do with this feeling; it's the worst feeling I've ever had.'

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So I volunteered, because I felt that's what he was looking for me to do. I said, 'I've had that feeling on many occasions and I call it a bad abscessed tooth ache of the soul.' And he said, 'You can come up with something better than that.'

X ✓ Toback tried, detailing romantic disasters in his life going back to the age of 12 when a girl named Lucy had broken his heart. A short time later, Mailer called Toback and said. "Well, she's back and I'm not going to do anything to cause her to leave again."

Norris had a brief encounter with the Atlanta surgeon but it "felt desperately wrong," she said, and when she returned to Brooklyn she told Mailer about her one-night stand, although more to hurt him than be forgiven. The one-night stand had enhanced her sense of self, and made her ask herself: "Why had I been consumed by this old, fat, bombastic, lying little dynamo," she asked herself. They ordered pizza for Matt and John and went to dinner at a local restaurant. Norris told him about the surgeon, and then announced that she was leaving him. Calmly, without tears, she began to discuss living arrangements after the marriage ended. He'd been through this with his other wives; it was an old routine for him. But he recoiled, and slapped the table, his invariable reflex: "No, no, no, no, no," he barked. "We are not breaking up." Everyone in the restaurant was watching.

Norris realized that she didn't want it to end. "I loved our life, I even loved him," she wrote, and she didn't want the family, especially John, the only one of his children who had lived continuously with his father past six, to suffer. But there had to be trust; it was the *sine qua non* ^a *fa* to continue the marriage. Milder started talking, using "all his talents and abilities, which were considerable," and before the meal was finished, he had convinced her of his love; she would be

the last Mrs. Norman Mailer. The family was relieved that the crisis was over; they all loved Norris. But the confessions and fights had taken a toll. "I somehow had taken a step away from him in my heart," she said. It was a necessary step, flowing from her clear-eyed recognition that it might be impossible for him to control his roving eye and promiscuous penis. But he was slowing down, and she hoped he was ready to try monogamy again. He was; he did try, and would be notably, if not perfectly, successful, at least by his own standards. He still had love for several women—Carol Stevens, certainly, and Lois Wilson and Eileen Fredrickson. Perhaps a few more. Norris was philosophical: "It was better to be that little bit less in love and not care quite as much," she wrote.

In an interview two months after Norris died on November 10, 2011, Aurora Huston said that she believed that her best friend and Mailer "were both naïve, in their own ways. There was always an innocence about Norris, always." Aurora and Norris called or emailed almost every day. They were utterly frank with each other. Aurora recalled her first meeting with Mailer, and gave her views on their marriage:

The first time I saw them together, I knew they were real partners. Not just in a physical sense or even as a unified public entity. More than anything they were bound together in some deeply rooted corpus that they created together.

Unfortunately, the very thing they created and loved was made from bits and pieces of their very souls. Norman was a hard man to love. His genius was also his folly. He thought himself right in every thought, word and action. Norris, however much she loved him, was not going to let him get away with his foolishness. I do believe they loved each other until the very end, but they tore at

the flesh of their relationship. Norris, in my opinion, humanized Norman and made him see the damage caused by his reckless behavior. Norman had too large an ego to look into the mirror and accept his reflection. He needed to be adored; he needed to be lustfully adventurous with careless bravado. The very traits that made her fall madly in love with him, made him alarmingly, ferociously, untamable. Nothing happened to their love, in truth, though both will swear differently. Life happened along the way. Disappointment, waves of illness and old age. Wherever they are, the undisputed truth is that they loved each other.

Norris also had a brief affair with someone she had known for years, and it confirmed her belief that she could also be happy with someone else. But her life, she wrote, was bound up with Norman, "that crazy wild man," and the affair, her last, was short-lived. "I knew that if I left him I would wonder the rest of my life what he was up to, and be sorry I wasn't with him." Slowly, as Mailer was covering the political conventions in the summer of 1992, their marriage began to heal.

The inscription on Norris' copy of *Harlot's Ghost*, dated October 1991, reflects the tensions of their marriage at that moment:

To my baby wife alias the wise woman who is my dear lady and a hoyden heart
mean as piss on rare occasions and lovely as a forest clearing when all is still,
namely princess, I adore you Norman

In 1995, after their marriage had settled back into an easy groove, he dedicated *Oswald's Tale* to her:

To Norris, my wife, for this book and for the other seven that have been written through these warm years, these warm twenty years we have been together.

Ψ Ψ Ψ

In early 1992, Mailer began work on a short biography of Picasso. Even in the most trying times of the crisis, he went to his studio almost every day to write. His plan was to knock it off in six months, and then turn to *Harlot's Grave*. Whatever might happen to his marriage, his literary activities would move along. He had first gotten interested in Picasso's work in his senior year at Harvard when he had taken a modern art course, which he said was the most enjoyable course he had in all four years—he got an A. He had always been interested in the way that his style kept changing, much as his own did. "I could've written under several different names," he said, "and gotten away with it." In the spring of 1962, he signed a contract with Macmillan to do the biography, and spent "eight happy weeks" at the Museum of Modern Art leafing through fifteen thousand reproductions of the great artist's work. "I think if you have a sensibility and you spend two intense months with Picasso the way I did, it just sits inside of you like a time bomb." But he shelved the project.

✓ Thirty years later, he tried again. He worked steadily all through the first half of 1992 on what would eventually be called *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man*, completing it in September. The biography is 125,000 words in length, contains two or three hundred illustrations, and takes Picasso from his birth, through the Cubist period, ending in the early years of World War I. It is not a scholarly biography, but an interpretive one that tries to explain the complexities of Picasso's character. Mailer borrowed freely and heavily from the work of a score of biographers, memoirists and art critics. His most important borrowings are from the

memoir of Picasso's mistress, Fernande Olivier, and from the first volume of the authorized biography by John Richardson. "Nothing, of course, can equal the scholarship of John Richardson's book," Mailer said, "but I think mine may give a closer sense of what it would have been like if one had known Picasso personally as a young man." The book is dedicated to Judith, who did invaluable research for him.

Jeanne Campbell had introduced Mailer to Richardson and his partner, Douglas Cooper, in the summer of 1962 in the south of France. Mailer recalled getting drunk with them. He had hoped that Richardson would introduce him to Picasso, but for whatever reason, this did not occur. In 1991, Richardson published the first volume of his biography, covering the years 1881-1906, just before Mailer began work on his. Mailer read it, and quoted extensively from it, some 8,000 words; there was a good deal of paraphrasing as well. Jason Epstein, also Richardson's editor, found himself in a difficult situation. Richardson's second volume, *The Painter of Modern Life*, which would take Picasso up to 1916, was well underway, and the prospect of two Random House biographies covering the same period and being published at the same time gave him no happiness. "I was apprehensive," Epstein said, "and told Mailer there might be a problem." But in the late summer of 1992, before the problem came to a head, Mailer got a call from Larry Schiller.

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Schiller had been in Russia all through the early 1980s working on a mini-series, *Peter the Great*, and had developed extensive contacts with high officials, including members of the

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KGB. His translator, Ludmilla Peresvetova, introduced him to the head of the KGB, Vadim Bakatin, and through him he was introduced to the top KGB official in Minsk, Alexander Sharkovsky. Schiller was informed that the KGB was interested in exploring the possibility of giving him access to its file on Lee Harvey Oswald, who had lived in Minsk for two-and-half years, 1960-62. This file had been sealed since 1963, and everyone who had known Oswald was warned to remain silent. But under *glasnost* ^{life} everything had changed, and the KGB realized that it possessed a property, that could be monetized. Schiller explained the situation to Mailer, who he wanted as a collaborator, and found him to be "very interested, eager." Next, Schiller went to see ~~James~~ Epstein, who agreed to fund additional trips to Moscow and Minsk. Epstein did not reveal, according to Schiller, that investigative reporter Gerald Posner was working on a book for Random House on the assassination, which later on would affect the reception of *Oswald's Tale*. To be fair to Epstein, in 1992 the two books didn't seem to have much in common, much less, in fact, than the biographies of Richardson and Mailer.

✓

Mailer loved to drop everything, mobilize his energies, and launch in a new direction. Metaphorically speaking, he always kept a bag packed on the chance he would hear the train whistle of new opportunity, which could lead to new energy, new success. At this point in his life, the Oswald-KGB project had immense appeal. "I had a double motive," he said. First, he wanted to learn about the KGB's exhaustive scrutiny of Oswald for ^{the} a new nonfiction book. He and Schiller would be in the front rank of what he called "the virtual Oklahoma land grab" for long-sealed record. Second, the KGB, he surmised, might have much to tell him about J.F.K.'s assassination, even if Oswald was not involved. Information on how the agency functioned in the old Soviet Union, and how it responded to the assassination, would "get me beefed up for the

second volume of *Harlot's Ghost*." There was a further incentive: the project would take him out of temptation's way, and allow the recriminatory air between him and his wife to further clear.

He had no idea of the shape of the book he would write, but that didn't concern him. "Oswald's Years in Russia" was the working title that Schiller had given ~~Jason~~ Epstein. Beyond that, it was all guesswork. Like Holmes and Watson, if you will, Mailer and Schiller were going on a long journey to solve a mystery.

From September of 1992 through the spring of 1993, Mailer spent the bulk of his time in Minsk and Moscow, even celebrating, quietly, his seventieth birthday in the Russian capital. Schiller, recently divorced from his second wife, was in one or the other city almost continuously through this period. Mailer flew back and forth several times for various reasons, including a trip to Dallas to meet Oswald's widow Marina, arranged by William Majeski, the New York City Detective responsible for Abbott's arrest. They also traced Oswald's footsteps around Dallas after the shooting, and made a one-day trip to New Orleans, where Oswald had also lived. Mailer also came back for his appearance in "Don Juan in Hell" at Carnegie Hall on February 15. But for most of this eight-month period, he was in Minsk. Norris was worried that he might be "schtupping fat, old, ugly Russian women in babushkas," but her almost fully forgiven husband was faithful, and focused on Oswald.

Living conditions in Minsk were uncomfortable, especially after winter arrived. It was bitter cold. The sun, rarely visible through the endless snow, set in mid-afternoon. "I doubt if there were 10 sunny days," Mailer recalled. "Nothing to do but work. No night life." Mailer wrote to Knox about the food:

[I]t doesn't matter how rich you are, you cannot buy yourself a decent restaurant meal in Minsk, so the biggest gastronomic sensations in the last five months while living there are the scrambled eggs I make myself, or the borscht, or once or twice, the tuna with cabbage. It's a sad place, and I'll tell you about it when I see you, for it made me realize how Russian I am, even though Minsk is in Belarus (White Russia rather than Russia itself, and a separate country now) but it doesn't matter—one gets a sense of what life was like in the old Soviet Union.

He was exaggerating a bit, because Schiller, ever the dealmaker, soon came up with a way to get good food. After they had established relations with the KGB, he gave various officials (including Marina Oswald's aunt, Valya Prusakova, whose late husband had been a colonel in counterintelligence) cash to buy food on the black market. Then, the two overweight Americans were invited for lunch or dinner a few times a week; if they had borscht for lunch, they might have lamb for dinner, and some caviar. When Norris came for a two-week visit, she scrounged through the markets, buying beets and carrots, chunks of gristly beef rolled in newspaper, and "small hard eggs that came in a plastic sack of twenty, eggs squeezed from the butts of sturdy little chickens that continually pecked the frozen ground in search of an insect or a worm, scratching out a living like everybody else." Schiller didn't cook, and Mailer had a limited repertoire (including some decent pasta), so they ate better during Norris' stay. The visit was good for the marriage. After Norris returned, she told her ^{last} lover that she was ending their affair, and staying with Mailer. "I'm not sorry we had our little fling," she told him. "It made me see that I really loved Norman, for better or worse."

The early trips were to get acquainted. Mailer and Schiller were shown the tiny apartment where Oswald and Marina lived, and the one above that the KGB used as a listening post. They met the Soviet rifle expert who attempted to duplicate Oswald's marksmanship, and they had several desultory meetings with Sharkovsky and his staff. All that they had been told of any consequence was that the Soviet Union had no hand in the murder of J.F.K. The officials were leery about receiving cash payments, but there was one thing they ardently desired: shoes. Schiller was given a list of sizes and types and arranged for a truckload of expensive footwear to be driven in from Austria and unloaded at KGB headquarters. He was also busy making arrangements for food and gifts—for example, getting Aunt Valya's television set fixed by a black market repairman—and getting his technology set up. He brought in expensive optical scanning and duplicating equipment (plus toner and paper), and made arrangements to send material out daily via Sprint satellite data transfer. When he wasn't doing interviews with Schiller—they interviewed 50 or 60 people, all told—Mailer spent his time reading the *Warren Commission Report*. His eyesight wasn't good, so Schiller arranged to have excerpts from the 26 volumes blown up to double size. The price was good: three cents a page.

One night in his overheated apartment, Mailer was cooking pasta for Schiller. Just the two of them were there, Schiller recalled. Mailer, standing over the stove in a sleeveless undershirt, pointed out that something Schiller had just said or written was jumbled up, ~~dates or word order~~ Schiller disagreed, and Mailer then insisted that Schiller was wrong. As they discussed the matter, Mailer said, lowering his voice a little, "Larry, I think you may be dyslexic," and then explained that he knew about dyslexia from one of his children. Schiller had heard of the disorder, but had never thought of applying it to himself. Mailer was always patient

with him when he made spelling and grammar mistakes, Schiller said, defining words and giving him short grammar lessons now and then. There was never any condescension. When Schiller flew home for Thanksgiving—as did Mailer—he went to a doctor, was tested, and found that Mailer was correct. Schiller was 56 years old at the time, and until then had not been diagnosed with this disability. Mailer's hunch helped Schiller understand and deal with his long-standing insecurities about reading and writing.

In their first months in Minsk, they spoke to people who had known Oswald and Marina: relatives and former friends of Marina, Oswald's co-workers at the radio factory, neighbors and acquaintances. They had also been given access to the KGB library and some relatively unimportant files. But they still had not been shown the Oswald file. Finally, Schiller's instincts told him that it was time to force the situation, and he told Ludmilla to set up a luncheon meeting with Sharkovsky and his top staff at KGB headquarters. He pondered what he would say, but wrote nothing down, trusting his spontaneity. Mailer had no speaking role; he was to play the great writer, and sit in august silence. In a brief biography written for the KGB by Schiller and Ludmilla, he was described as the American equivalent of Tolstoy.

After the elaborate lunch, Schiller began to speak, with Ludmilla translating. He said that if the Oswald file was given to the media, it would be disputed or forgotten. "But," he continued, "if you give it to a writer, such as Mr. Mailer, whose works are on the shelves of every library in the world, including your own KGB library, you are giving the information to history. You're preserving it with an independent voice that will establish the credibility of the fact that the Soviet Union was not involved in President Kennedy's assassination." He had their attention, and went on to say that Mailer ranked with Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn. Ludmilla, "being as

✓ brilliant as she was," Schiller said, did not repeat this comparison, but substituted this: "You give it to a writer who, under his photograph in the Soviet encyclopedia, says Mr. Mailer, is 'a writer who dares write what he thinks.'" After he concluded, Sharkovsky said no, he would not give them the files outright. He would, however, rent them an office in the KGB building, "and every time you ask a question, we'll bring you that part of the files that answers your question. If you stay long enough, and if you're smart enough to ask the right questions, you will learn much." They rented the office for a \$1,000 a week, and went to work. It was a laborious process, and much time was spent in discussions about the wording and sequencing of questions. For weeks they spent five hours a day copying material in Russian from the Oswald file, which consisted of numerous bound volumes kept in potato sacks. Then it was translated into English and sent out daily by satellite.

They worked on through the darkest days in winter, accumulating more and more material. They learned that not long after Oswald arrived, the KGB suspected that Oswald had been sent to blow up a new hotel in Minsk where Premier Khrushchev was about to visit. They followed him from store to store as he purchased what looked like the parts for a wireless radio, but it turned out to be a toy he was making for a friend's child. Another possibility the Soviets considered was that he was a new kind of mole, one who would lie low for decades and then be activated at some critical time in history. The Soviets had sent similar moles to the U.S.; ten were arrested in 2010 after living in the U.S. for several years. After five months they had accumulated 11,000 pages, including their transcripts of the interviews with people who knew Oswald and Marina.

On several occasions, Mailer and Schiller had major disagreements on how to pursue a line of questioning. One of the biggest fights was about Marina's virginity when ~~she~~ ^{she got} married ~~she~~ ^{she} Oswald. Was he faking it when he brought a piece of bloody sheet into the radio factory after his wedding night, the traditional Russian proof of virginity and deflowering? Some of Marina's former friends intimated that she had lost her virginity in Leningrad a few years earlier, after which, to get her away from the night life, she was exiled to Minsk to live with Aunt Valya. There would be other arguments when Schiller, the lead interviewer (as he had been for *The Executioner's Song*) would ask a question, and Mailer would object and want to ask something different. As Schiller recalled:

Of course, the subject being interviewed didn't know what we were saying, because they didn't speak English, and sometimes he [Mailer] would get up and walk out of the room, saying, 'You go finish the goddam interview yourself then.' Or sometimes we would both go outside, sometimes Ludmilla would turn around and scream at us, saying, 'What are you guys doing? Why are you fighting in front of somebody?'

Towards the end of their stay, Schiller came to the conclusion that they would need copies of large portions of the Oswald material in order to have credibility with the media in the U.S. Without such copies, Schiller asked himself, how can we prove that we're quoting from actual KGB reports? He concluded that they could not leave Minsk without copies of all the bugging reports.

✓ Mailer wasn't worried in the least about credibility, Schiller said. He felt that his own ^{sufficient} name and voice carried enough weight. When Schiller told him he planned to give Sharkovsky's

assistant \$10,000 for three sets of copies of the reports. "Norman went ballistic," He was worried that they would be arrested for bribing high officials. Shoes were one thing; \$10,000 in American money was another. They got into a loud argument in the stairwell outside Mailer's apartment, wrestling and pushing each other down the steps. "It was really an altercation," Schiller said. "He finally understood that I was not going to retreat." For a few weeks they weren't speaking, and then Schiller told him that he had paid the bribe. Now Mailer had to listen. Schiller's plan was for Mailer and Ludmilla to leave from different airports; he would leave from a third. Each would have a set of the reports. "If one of us was arrested," he said, "that made the drama, made the book, more important because we would be taking out something that the West was unable to get their hands on. And that was my final argument to him: that if we were stopped at customs, we would actually be promoting the book. Mailer's answer was, fine, as long as I am not the one who is arrested. Schiller told him that the most desirable person to be caught with the bugging files would be the world-famous author, Norman Mailer. It would be a major story in the media world-wide, which could only help the book. Mailer ^{saw his point} relented."

Schiller would leave from Moscow, Ludmilla (now married to Schiller) from Leningrad, and Mailer from Minsk. "We were worried," Schiller said. I remember the night before I left I had bad cramps in my legs and I had to lie in the bathtub in the hotel." But their fears were unfounded. They were working with the KGB, paying them rent every week, and no one paid any attention to them at the airports. Their suitcases weren't even opened. The fix was in.

Back in the U.S. in the spring of 1993, Mailer answered a letter from Jack Aldridge, ^{to Mailer} noted in passing that Judith was not terribly forthcoming when he asked for information on the

telephone. Mailer, who had ceded a great deal of control over his public life—and some of his private—to his assistant, responded by noting that “Judith still treats me like an undergraduate and, for the record, whatever my talents, they do not include training Judith. Like Gore Vidal, she’s untrainable; comes to you fully developed and you thank god for what you’ve got and put up with what you’re not going to get.” Mailer dictated this letter, and as usual Judith typed it, which added to the comic dimensions of their relationship. She could hold her own in repartee with him, and never hesitated to point out, wryly, the dangers of various rash ideas he had. Mailer valued her verbal skills, research abilities, and wit. They spoke on the telephone daily, sometimes several times, and when Mailer was in Provincetown, he faxed whatever he had written to her for typing. A lot of material passed between them in this way. The fax machine is one of the few pieces of recent technology that Mailer deigned to use. Even so, he was ham-handed, and broke several of them.

Mailer also told Aldridge about his research for “a book on Oswald in Minsk,” one of his few comments on it in a letter. “Oswald,” he said, “is a man of parts,” and he hoped to depict “a character who’s worthy, to some little degree, of the size that history has given him. At least he won’t be a stick figure in a CIA/KGB set of scenarios.” One of the ways he hoped to demonstrate that Oswald was worthy of a full-scale portrait was through the memories and insights of his widow, now remarried and living in Texas. Schiller had interviewed Marina earlier for an ABC-TV docu-drama on Oswald. For the new project, he offered her \$15,000 for five days of interviews in June of 1993.

During his earlier visit with Majeski, Mailer had interviewed Marina for a few hours. But, now, with the Minsk interviews in hand, he and Schiller had many more questions and

needed to conduct extended interviews with her. Schiller had a friendly relationship with her, but nevertheless had to use all his resources to convince her. Mailer, who once noted that "Larry Schiller makes Baron Von Munchausen look like George Washington," described his collaborator's methods, "Larry can be utterly unscrupulous," she said, "so he went around telling everyone with whom we wanted to do interviews, I was the American Tolstoy, and they owed it to history to be interviewed by us. He also succeeded in getting Marina Oswald to sit down with us for a few days and talk." She came with a friend, to the sessions in a Dallas hotel, but for the interviews—three hours in the morning, three in the afternoon, and two in the evening—Marina would be alone with Mailer, Schiller, and a Russian-English dictionary.

The interviews started off well with questions about non-controversial matters—the date she moved to Minsk, relationships with Aunt Valya and Uncle Ilya, where she worked and so forth. They also asked more general questions: did she and Oswald live as a couple in the U.S. about the same way as in Minsk? Had she understood that he would not be guaranteed a job in the U.S. as he had in the Soviet Union? What did she remember about the time, before the assassination, when Oswald tried to shoot General Walker? She had gone over this ground before with FBI; much of this material was in the *Warren Commission Report*. Mailer and Schiller also had a wealth of information from people in Leningrad and Minsk, so when they moved into more difficult territory, they could cross-check her replies.

On the third day, the questioning got tougher. As Schiller put it, "We started with Vaseline, but we knew we were going to end up with vinegar." They began asking about the time her uncle locked the door when she was out late with a boyfriend, and she had to sleep on the landing. "She looked at me with real hatred in her eyes," and began screaming: "You're worse

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/ that the Secret Service; you're worse than the FBI." Schiller used the same tactic he had used on Nicole Baker for the interviews in *The Executioner's Song*. "What do you have to hide?" he asked. Marina could have walked out at any time; Schiller had given her a cashier's check on the first day. "That is my modus operandi," he said. "I always want to take a little bit of the high road. I don't know if it produces something good or not, but you know she showed up every day." Mailer was interested in her early sexuality, and particularly eager to learn how the blood got on the sheet that Oswald displayed to his co-workers. Eventually, she opened up and told them that she was not a virgin when she married Oswald, but she never explained how she deceived him on their wedding night. She called Schiller a liar when he brought up the story of the bloody sheet. "You can't use your capitalistic tricks on me," she screamed.

Marina felt betrayed, Schiller said, because she had assumed their relationship was personal, not adversarial. Her awe of Mailer had evaporated. On the final day, relations soured entirely. "Every single word out of her mouth was said with venom," said Schiller. They had pressed her hard, and all bridges were burned. The next morning, she and her friend drove away. No goodbyes, no hugs. Two years later Schiller sent an advance excerpt from the first part of the book to Marina. "We had a moral obligation, not a legal obligation, to let her know beforehand what Norman Mailer thought and was writing of her," Schiller said. She wrote back an angry letter to Schiller criticizing Mailer. "Tolstoy, he's not!" she said.

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Mailer began writing ~~the Oswald book~~ in Provincetown in the summer of 1993, planning, as usual, to be done long before he was. He told one friend that he would be done by the end of the year "or my publishers will be in misery." Most of his correspondents got Xerox copies of one of his drawings, doodles and cartoons, and faces made up of numbers, an idea he says he got

from Picasso, who as a boy thought the number seven was an upside down nose. He would continue to send out these drawings—most had captions—to the end of his life, often with a handwritten note. One of the few letters he did write in the second half of the year was to Peter Balbert, a professor at Trinity University who had hosted Mailer when he spoke there.

I hope eventually this book will have offshoots that prove interesting for the second volume of Harlot's Ghost. For now it's been an experience of some interest. I can tell you that I never disliked Ronald Reagan more than when I was in Russia and Belarus (Minsk) for whatever the old Soviet Union was, you can't call it an evil empire. A depressed, oppressive third-world country but an evil empire that would take over the world? Never.

He ended by noting that his Picasso book, which was "not at all a major effort," was almost done. Picasso "comes alive" in it, he said, and he had "more honest things to say about Cubism than the artistic establishmentarians."

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The reason that the Picasso book had not gone to press was the opposition of these establishmentarians, none more so than Picasso's authorized biographer, John Richardson. Earlier in the year, ~~Jason~~ Epstein had sent a manuscript copy of Mailer's book to Richardson. He wrote back, called it a "scissors-and-paste job," and turned down Mailer's request to quote from his biography. He and Mailer, hitherto friendly, began sniping at each other in the media. When Richardson read about a Provincetown exhibit of Mailer's drawings, "Guys and Droons," Richardson told the *New York Observer*, "He's not just writing about Picasso now, he's even

trying to draw like Picasso.” Mailer said that while he had no artistic ability, he had merely “let my hand, in a sense, lead me—that is, draw without preconception. There must have been some wholly unconscious message I’d gotten from Picasso.” Told of Richardson’s disdain for his drawings, Mailer said “I hope the poor boy is not too disappointed,” and quoted the André Gide epigraph in *The Deer Park*: “Please do not understand me too quickly.” Richardson went further, accusing Mailer of writing the book as a way of funding his alimony and child-care payments.

Another Picasso scholar, William Rubin, sided with Richardson. Director Emeritus of Painting and Sculpture at MoMA, Rubin had recently published a major study, *Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism*, on which Mailer had drawn extensively. Rubin refused permission. “Obviously, Richardson sicced him on me,” Mailer said. He was now in an unhappy situation, one which would interfere with his work on the Oswald book. Lacking the ability to quote from Richardson and Rubin, and possibly from the memoirs of Olivier (whose heirs were initially unresponsive), he would have to rewrite the book. And he would have to find another publisher. His first thought was Nan Talese, wife of his good friend Gay, who had her own imprint, at Doubleday. He had known her socially for years.

“As I understood it,” she recalled, “Norman said to Jason, ‘Would it be helpful if I go find another publisher just for the book?’ And I think Jason said yes because it took the pressure off him. So Norman asked me to read it and publish it. And I said, ‘Sure I’ll publish it.’ And he said, ‘No, no, I think you should read it first.’” She read the book and was impressed. “I loved the book because I felt if there was anyone who could get inside Picasso’s spirit and sense of self-importance, it was Norman.” She saw this ability in his descriptions of the young Picasso, which seemed “as if he was associating his own feelings as a young writer with Picasso as a

young artist.” She had some editorial suggestions, and Mailer sat down with her and the manuscript. “What was wonderful was when I asked him a question either about motive or meaning or something like that, he immediately addressed it. He didn’t say let me think about it; he had a pencil and would go over it.”

Richardson said he would sue if Talese published Mailer’s book. “Well, this is just my guess,” she said, but his “underlying motive” might be that Mailer’s discussion of Cubism. “That was going to be in Richardson’s next book.” She said, “Norman had a theory of why Picasso was attracted to Cubism, and I think he was jumping the tracks” on Richardson’s second volume, which was forthcoming. At this point she was still determined to publish, and called Random House President Harry Evans. “I said, ‘Harry, could you get John to just pull back so we can go ahead with this book?’ And he did.” Richardson relented and gave permission to quote, although William Rubin did not. But by this time the imbroglio had been bruited about in the media, and Talese’s president at Doubleday, Stephen Rubin, told her they were not going to do the book. When she asked why, he said, “Because John Richardson has spoiled everything, and this book is going to be trashed, and we’re not going to make our money back on it.” Mailer had yet to sign a contract with Doubleday.

When she called Mailer with the bad news, he was understanding. He asked if she could not go ahead on her own and publish it, and she explained that she could, but she wouldn’t get any marketing money, and “it’s not fair to the book.” She recommended that he go to an independent publisher, and Mailer did. It was published by Grove/Atlantic.

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Gerald Posner's *Case Closed* was published just a few weeks before Mailer was the keynote speaker at the third annual Assassination Symposium on John F. Kennedy (ASK) in Dallas, November 18-22, 1993. Posner, after extensive research, concluded that Oswald had acted alone. His view ~~was~~ generally embraced by the media, and cast a slight pall on the conference. Mailer, long a supporter of conspiracy theories, did not mention Posner's book, but he had read it, and in his speech seemed to be moving closer to Posner's position, a stance not appreciated by the symposiasts, the great majority of whom were ferocious opponents of the single assassin interpretation. Mailer said that we want to believe that Oswald was a tool of some intelligence agency because we don't like to be lied to, and neither the CIA nor the FBI were willing to open their Oswald files. This stonewalling encouraged conspiracy proponents. But Mailer was now uncertain and told the audience that they had become intoxicated by the "vertigo and fog that accompanies study of the conspiracy."

By the time of the symposium, Mailer had been working for several months on the story of Oswald and Marina in Minsk, but before he was done he decided that he did not want the book to end there. He was more and more intrigued by Oswald's personality, which he felt had not been understood, and less and less convinced that Oswald was either a tool of the KGB, or a scapegoat for Mafia dons who had J.F.K. murdered. These theories, and countless others, were dissected at the symposium, and Mailer was growing weary of them. Like DeLillo (who remains a conspiratorialist), he wanted to dissect Oswald with the tools of a novelist, demonstrate that Oswald was not a monstrous nobody, but an understandable character with grandiose ambitions

and courage. "The sudden death of a man as large in his possibilities as John Fitzgerald Kennedy," he wrote, "is more tolerable if we can perceive his killer as tragic rather than absurd."

Another motive was his desire to write about the assassination, which he called "the largest mountain of mystery in the Twentieth Century." Yet until *Oswald's Tale*, he had never dealt with it head-on, only obliquely via its endless reverberations in the nation's psyche. In book after book, essay after essay, he alluded to it, adding rings of scaffolding around it, as if it could only be approached but not addressed. He planned to make the assassination the opening episode of "Harlot's Grave." Reading chunks of the *Warren Commission Report* through the long Russian winter was the precipitating event. He likened the report to "a dead whale decomposing on the beach," fascinating, pungent, and mysterious. "Every morning I'd read these juicy testimonies, and every afternoon and evening we'd have these interviews, and soon I was struck by how desperate Oswald was, how focused he was on a belief in himself, however delusional."

Back home in the spring of 1993, he went to work on "Oswald and Marina in Minsk." As he was completing it, he decided to add a 100-page epilogue about Oswald in America. He told his publishers, and they said, "Oh, don't make it too long," and he replied, "Of course not." But when he completed the epilogue, it had become the biggest part of the book, 444 pages, compared to 347 for the Minsk portion. "I started with one book and ended with another," he said. After 30 years, he had finally found a way to write about that dark day in Dallas, "a huge and hideous event, in which the gods warred and a god fell," as he described it. At Random House, no one was happy. "You've got a rose," Harry Evans told him, "why put all that greenery around it." ~~Jason~~ Epstein felt the same way.

X ✓ ~~Barry~~ Schiller thought Mailer was "out of his mind," and told him so. "We haven't done any research in the U.S.," ^{he} Schiller said. "There's no new information. I told him it was total insanity." But Mailer had been reading the *Warren Commission Report*, and saw a wealth of material. "All you're doing is a cut-and-paste job," Schiller said. "There isn't anything new in what you're doing." Mailer's old friend was making the same accusation that Richardson had about Mailer's Picasso biography. "He got real mad at me, you know, really mad," Schiller said. "I was treading on his creativity." Mailer deferred to Schiller when it came to information collection, but deferred to no one when it came to information interpretation. He believed he could extract the same kind of compelling story out of the vast corpus of inert material assembled by the Warren Commission, as he had out of the trove of interviews and documents on Gary Gilmore that Schiller had presented. The second half of *Oswald's Tale*, essentially, is a much-abbreviated, greatly reordered, and brilliantly parsed redaction of the *Warren Commission Report*.

X ✓ Posner's *Case Closed* was another factor. If it had not been published, Schiller said, "I would have insisted that we go out and do research for the second part of the book." But Posner had already picked the bones ^{fairly} pretty clean, and Mailer was leaning toward the conclusion that Oswald had acted alone. Schiller said it made no difference to him what side of the controversy Mailer came down on. His concern was the freshness of the material. In Gilmore's case, the material he and Mailer had collected was pristine, and the same was true of the Minsk material. This was not the case with the assassination. Whatever the Warren Commission had missed had been located by Posner, Edward J. Epstein, and other investigators, including Priscilla Johnson McMillan, the author of *Marina and Lee*, one of the best studies of Oswald's psychology. Mailer

cited all three in his bibliography, and relied heavily on McMillan, although the *Warren Commission Report* was his chief source.

Schiller wanted Mailer to write a book that made news, something he had always strived for, and continued with books about O.J. Simpson, JonBenét Ramsey and the Russian spy, Robert Hanssen. He valued Mailer's interpretive acumen and story-telling skills, but he wanted his projects to be the first draft of history, and the second half of *Oswald's Tale* is a twice or thrice-told tale, however intelligently deployed. Getting a story on the front page of newspapers, or on network news, was always Schiller's primary goal. As he said in an interview on the making of *Oswald's Tale*, "We can talk about a book that's well written and we can talk about a book that's well written that's going to sell well. Norman had long passed the point of caring whether his books sold or not. I believe that (he said) Mailer didn't want "the commercial aspect" to get in the way of what he was trying to accomplish. (Schiller recalls) Mailer telling him that he wrote *Ancient Evenings* for people who had not been born, readers a century hence. He concedes, however, that there is "brilliance" in parts of "Oswald in America," and the concluding section on Oswald's wife and mother "stands alone. No question."

Marina had put Oswald off when he wanted to make love the night before the assassination, Mailer wrote. She was angry with him for lying to her, and wanted to "discipline him":

Afterward, she had to think, What if he really wanted to be close to me? What if I put him in a bad mood? It torments her. What if they had made love that last night? But she is the wrong person to talk about this, she would say, because she is not a sexual person. Sensuous but not sensual. She didn't like sex, she would

say. She was not expert, nor could she tell you how grandiose something had been, because she had never experienced that. No Beethoven or Tchaikovsky for her, not in bed, no grand finale.

Remarried after Oswald's murder, Marina was smoking four packs a day. She didn't want to die, although her suffering was palpable:

She sits in a chair, a tiny woman in her early fifties, her thin shoulders hunched forward in such pain of spirit under such a mass of guilt that one would comfort her as one would hug a child. What is left of what was once her beauty are her extraordinary eyes, blue as diamonds, and they blaze with light as if, in divine compensation for the dead weight of all that will not cease to haunt her, she has been granted a spark from the hour of an apocalypse others have not seen. Perhaps it is the light offered to victims who have suffered like the gods.

Marina's mother-in-law has her own burden, and it is "difficult not to feel some guarded sympathy for Marguerite Claverie Oswald. As with Lee, the internal workings of her psyche were always condemned to hard labor, and so much of what she tried, and with the best intentions, would fail." Asked by the interviewers of the Warren Commission if she had any family with her, she answered: "I have no family, period. I brought three children into the world, and I have sisters, I have nieces, I have nephews. I have grandchildren, and I'm all alone. That answers that question and I don't want to hear another word about it." She would die alone, riddled with cancer and guilt. Mailer imagines that when Mrs. Oswald reached the Bureau of Karmic Reassignment, she probably argued with the bureaucrats, "dissatisfied with the low

station, by her lights, of her next placement. 'I gave birth to one of the most famous and important Americans who ever lived!' she will tell the clerk-angel who is recording her story."

There she stands with her outrageous ego, and her self-deceit, her bold loneliness, and cold bones, those endless humiliations that burn like sores. Yet, she is worthy of Dickens. Marguerite Oswald can stand for literary office with Micawber and Uriah Heep. No word she utters will be false to her character; her stamp will be on every phrase. Few people without a literary motive would seek her company for long, but a novelist can esteem Marguerite. She does all his work for him.



In late spring 1994, as the Oswald book was nearing completion, he accepted an assignment from *Esquire* to do a profile of Madonna. It came in the wake of her appearance on the *Late Show with David Letterman*. She had said "fuck" several times on the live show, and "the results," Mailer wrote, "produced a two-day Kristallnacht in the media." She was called sick, sordid, outrageous and stupid for using the F-word, which CBS had adroitly bleeped every time. But Letterman had, of course, encouraged her, and Mailer was on Madonna's side. "Letterman," he said, "would not be caught dead offering one indication of how to conduct your life. Keep it meaningless and we'll all get along." Mailer mentioned his support to Liz Smith, the gossip columnist, and she wrote about it. This led to a call to Mailer's new agent, Andrew Wylie (Scott Meredith died in 1991) from the editor of *Esquire*. The offer was made more attractive by the challenge of writing about someone with "an ego even larger than his own." He opens the piece by describing her as "a pint-size Italian American with a heart she hopes is built out of the cast-iron balls of the *paisans* in generations before her." Mailer reverted to the third person

personal in "Norman Mailer on Madonna: Like a Lady," which is half conversation and half profile.

✓ *territory:*
The piece covers predictable ground: obscenity, sexuality, censorship, the women's movement, AIDS, birth control, the loneliness of celebrity and the sensuality of Catholicism.

✓ Mailer brings in Warren Beatty, Marilyn Monroe and ~~Andy~~ Warhol as points of reference. He praises Madonna's ability "to take her kinks to the public":

She offers no balm to sweet, sore places; she is the stern instructor who shows us how difficult it all is, especially sex in its consummation. Yet she gives us something Marilyn never could, something less attractive but equally valuable: she dramatizes for us how dangerous is any human's truth once we dare to explore it; she reminds us that the joys of life bed down on broken glass.

He ends this reverie with a line used by Dougy Madden in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, one Mailer had taken to repeating whenever he was confronted by any depiction of humanity out of touch with the brute facts of existence, the answer, so to speak, of Caliban to Ariel: "*Inter faeces et urinam, nascimur*, she is always telling us, even if she never heard of Saint Odo of Cluny, but indeed it is true. 'Between piss and shit are we born.'" The piece holds interest, but it never soars. Madonna presents the same frank, quirky persona that can be seen in her music videos, and Mailer deals from his existential-excremental deck of cards. He does, however, make a comment that tells us a bit more about his dalliances, and another that reveals the state of his relationship with Norris. The first is made to encourage Madonna to open up more.

"Confessions—in good society—breed confessions," so he tells her that:

Certain people cannot live without promiscuity. There have been years of my life when I was young when that was absolutely true. I had this feeling that something was near death in me . . . that something was trapped, and it was symbolized by the word *cancer*. To break out of this trap, I had to take on many roles, because every time you make love with someone else, you are in a new role, you are a new person.

Promiscuity for the young Mailer was health; like Rousseau he equated the satisfying of his sexual urges with both health and freedom, although unlike the Enlightenment *philosophes*, there was always a guilty edge to his adventures. The older Mailer is ready for limits and *quid pro quos*, as his second comment shows. The assigned photographer attempted to get a shot of Madonna sitting on Mailer's lap. Madonna was willing, but Mailer, at five-foot-seven, 200 pounds, wearing a black dinner jacket that made him resemble "a barrel wrapped in velvet," said no.

He had a mate who was all too proficient at bringing up old scores for the thrice-weekly bickertest. So he certainly didn't want a photograph of himself sitting in a chair, girded in his black dinner jacket, while Madonna in a green gown was perched on his lap, one breast exposed. It is interesting to note that ten years ago, Mailer would have said to himself, 'Damn the torpedoes; full speed ahead—Madonna on my lap!' What we are witnessing is the action of the female mind upon male flesh, otherwise known as the cumulative effect of being pussy-whipped over the course of twenty years by a strong, beautiful, redheaded wife.

A couple of months later, at the end of August, Mailer said that he had “finally met a woman who knows how to dominate me, a fate I’ve been trying to avoid all my life. Of course, like all girls she squeaks and squeals and claims it’s I who dominate her. How smart they are!”



By September he had a complete manuscript of 1700 pages, or a book of 1,000 pages, more or less. Two months later he had it down to 1400 manuscript pages, which resulted in the final published book of 828 pages. The *New Yorker*, now edited by Tina Brown, published a 45-page excerpt, including six pages of striking photos of Oswald in Minsk. It was Mailer’s first (and last) major piece in the magazine, and he was pleased. Another excerpt in *Parade*, builds to Mailer’s conclusion: “Every insight we have gained of him suggests the solitary nature of his act. Besides, it is too difficult, no matter how one searches for a viable scenario, to believe that others could have chosen him to be the rifleman in a conspiracy.” Mailer said he was 75 percent certain that Oswald acted alone.

Oswald’s Tale was published on May 12, 1995. The American reviews were generally positive, the best he had received since *The Executioner’s Song*. Among the major reviewers, only Michiko Kakutani, writing in the *New York Times* three weeks before the book’s publication date, was dismissive, calling the book “boring and presumptuous, derivative and solipsistic.” The British reviews were even better (it was published in England on September 7) than the American. A quartet of major literary figures—Martin Amis, Christopher Hitchens, Allan Massie and Andrew O’Hagan—were enthusiastic in their praise of how Mailer, as O’Hagan put it, recognized “Oswald’s struggle to become a man—to become an important and effective male character—as the foundation of much of his adult distress.” Massie found the

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portrait of Oswald to be "utterly convincing, partly because it contains so many contradictions." He was an idealist and a liar, "fiercely independent and emotionally dependent; this one day and the opposite the next. His Oswald is both likable and repulsive; to be pitied and feared. He is in many ways, as Mailer insists, like the young Hitler revealed in *Mein Kampf*."

When he went to Minsk, Mailer said, "I hoped there would be a smoking gun." Hitchens observes that Mailer's "natural writerly prejudice in favour of meaning and pattern over sordid random coincidence," his desire to find incontrovertible evidence of a conspiracy, made it difficult for him "to come to a conclusion that lies athwart his prejudices." Amis makes essentially the same point: "Everything in Mailer rebels against" the view that J.F.K. "had his brains blown out by a malevolent Charlie Chaplin with a wonky rifle and a couple of Big Ideas." If Oswald was a lone wolf, Amis says, "All we are left with is absurdity, more garbage, more randomness and rot." There were only two ways for Mailer to get out of the dilemma: "Either Oswald wasn't acting alone—or he wasn't a nonentity." Confronted by what he learned in Minsk, reinforced by all that he had read, Mailer chose the latter course: no conspiracy, and a complex Oswald; a man dealt a bad hand, in no way heroic, but bold, idealistic in a twisted way, and sympathetic. "What is never taken seriously enough in Oswald," Mailer said, "is the force of his confidence that he has the makings of a great leader."

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✓ Jason Epstein faxed another British review to Mailer, an unsigned one that appeared in the *Economist*. It seems in hindsight that Epstein was correct to call it "the most sensible review yet." The reviewer said that Mailer, writing thirty years after the event, faced "a doubly ungrateful audience: those who no longer care, and those whose minds are already made up."

Nevertheless, those who could suspend their judgment would see that "Mr. Mailer has produced a masterpiece." She or he notes his touch in providing "tiny novelistic details":

Thus Oswald sits lovingly polishing his rifle for hours; on the evening before the assassination, out in the garden, he tried to catch a butterfly with his baby daughter; when he goes off to work the next morning at the Book Depository in Dallas, he leaves behind a residue of instant coffee in a paper cup and, in a delicate flowered cup on the dresser, his wedding ring.

The details are historically accurate, but in his anatomy of Oswald's character, the reviewer says, Mailer is unable to resist making Oswald more likable, more tortured and more substantial than he was. "What Mr. Mailer forgets is that he has told us so much about Oswald that we know just how thin any layer of nobility must be." In his laudatory review in the *New York Times Book Review*, Thomas Powers echoes the *Economist* reviewer—as do a majority of the others. "I admire Mailer for his effort to understand Oswald, but at some level I feel invited to place a sympathetic arm around the killer's shoulder," Powers wrote, and "I'm not about to do it." The Tolstoyan compassion Mailer sought to create for wretches like Oswald—Powers calls him "an insect" who "brought pain to many and happiness to none"—was unpalatable in 1995 and remains so. *Oswald's Tale*, like *Ancient Evenings*, is another of Mailer's books for readers a century hence, readers removed from the pain of one of the greatest tragedies of twentieth-century American life.



Portrait of Picasso finally appeared on October 15, about three years after it was completed. The fact that it was Mailer's second book appearing in five months probably hurt sales. Morgan Entrekin, the publisher, was quoted as saying he was cutting the first printing from 100,000 to 50,000 for this reason. He also said that he hoped review editors would assign "literary types, rather than more exacting art critics to assess Mailer's view of another eminence." His hope was dashed; most of the major reviews were by professionals in the art world, some of whom had written extensively about Picasso. Writing in the *New York Times* (Michael Kimmelman), the *Nation* (Eunice Hilton), and the *New York Review of Books* (Roger Shattuck), three art critics were unanimous in their opinion that Mailer was "poaching on the turf of taste makers and scholars," as Robert Taylor (*Boston Globe*) put it, "~~stalking Picasso without a license~~." Kimmelman called the book "clumsy and disappointing" and chided Mailer for missing the influence of the large, robust women in the works of Renoir and Maillol. Shattuck, an old acquaintance of Mailer's lectured him on a variety of sins. Mailer's "most grievous failure" was failing to explain how "Kandinsky in Munich, Malevich in Russia, Mondrian in Holland, and Kupka and Delaunay in Paris crossed the line into non-figurative or 'abstract' painting" in his discussion of Cubism. Lipton criticized Mailer for leaving out the estimable views of William Rubin, unaware that he refused to be quoted. Mailer's speculations on Picassos's inner life were passed over, the most part.

Mailer is no art critic; his descriptions of Picasso's work are solid but unexceptional. He does make a contribution by translating and then quoting copiously from the memoir of Fernande Olivier, the woman who lived with Picasso from his years of obscurity to his early successes. Mailer's commentary on their relationship—both were narcissists—is one of the best things in

the biography, and an addition to Picasso scholarship. But art criticism was not Mailer's purpose. His announced goal was "to make Picasso as real as any good character in life or in art." To show the agonies and ecstasies of Picasso's early years, he drew on his own. Despite the usual denials, Mailer in more than one interview admitted to traits he shared with Picasso. "At a much higher level," he told Pete Hamill, "he had the same sort of restlessness in his mind that I have in mine." Both were short, stocky men possessed of huge energy, large libido, vast ambition, and an unshakable belief in the importance of their artistic missions.

Both tried on a variety of masks as they moved from wife to wife, lover to lover. "I don't mean to compare myself to him," Mailer said, "but there are certain large similarities":

He grew up in a family filled with women; my mother had a number of sisters too. He was a spoiled darling. There are people who would say the same about me. Everything that went on in his life seemed to add up for me. Not that I was writing about myself—we're enormously different. What's fun is to find someone you understand very well in one way, and have to explore in another.

In an interview with Barbara Probst Solomon, Mailer repeats his comment about Picasso being spoiled: "He was the center of the family. He was king. King at home. Then he would go out in the street. And he was little. And kids would push him around." It is obvious that he believed the experience of Norman Kingsley Mailer was similar to that of Pablo Picasso. He continued: "Well, my mother and aunts did adore me. And I was short. Yes, I can imagine what he was feeling."

Picasso's life before 30, when he "gambled on his ability to reach into mysteries of existence that no one else had even perceived," corresponds most closely to Mailer's. After that, their experiences diverge. Mailer said he had no desire to write about Picasso's later life. "After Cubism," he said, "he lost his navigator; there's no narrative thread to his life after 1917." He does comment briefly on Picasso's final years, however, when their experiences are again similar. His insights into Picasso in his seventies and eighties vibrate with fellow-feeling. He was "doomed," Mailer wrote, "to relive his obsessions through all ninety-one years of life," to continue painting until the end "as if work itself could hold death off." Mailer wrote furiously until just before his own death, and never gave up believing that he had more to accomplish. His comradely biography is summed up nicely by an unnamed reviewer in *Atlantic Monthly*: "This is a biography constructed with a fiction writer's liberty of psychological insight and a fascinated observer's freedom of personal opinion." It is not one of Mailer's most important books, but it is one of his most readable, and most autobiographical.

✓ The reviews, Mailer said, were "the worst I've ever gotten for a book"—^{a slight} an accurate ^{exaggeration's almost} statement; they are as negative as those given to *Barbary Shore*. Kakutani again was in the lead, publishing her review two weeks before the book's publication date. Echoing John Richardson, she called it "an old-fashioned cut-and-paste job," and criticized Mailer for seeing the artist as a [✓] hero, and for promoting "the notion that art redeems, that the sins of a great artist can be rationalized, excused or glossed over." Mailer does find heroic qualities in Picasso, but saying that he overlooks his faults reveals a cursory reading of the biography. Mailer takes pains to criticize Picasso for his betrayals of friends and mistresses. Two days after her review appeared,

Mailer fired off a letter to the editor of the *Times*, complaining that she had rushed her negative review into print:

That does the job. If the first notice we see on anyone's work is atrocious, it usually takes more than one good review to change a potential reader's mind. Since Ms. Kakutani's pieces are nationally syndicated, the damage is increased—and particularly for those small-city newspapers where she is the only reviewer some people will see. [. . .] Enough is enough. I would not wish to think that Ms. Kakutani has become personally if negatively addicted to my work, but there are signs.

Mailer's hunch was correct. Kakutani's record on Mailer's books is consistent. She panned his next three books, making it five consecutive negative reviews, most published before their publication dates. Mailer was riled.



In November 1994 He flew to London for meetings with his publisher, and then went on to Paris to meet with the French publisher of *Portrait of Picasso*. Another commitment was an appearance with Jean Malaquais on ARTE, a French-German cultural television network. Their conversation, broadcast soon after, led to a serious breach between them. Malaquais sternly accused him of abandoning his ambition to be a history-changing writer, and becoming "just a commodity," a television celebrity. Seven months after the program aired all over Europe, Mailer's oldest friend wrote to him dismissing the program as "poor," but not apologizing for or

retracting his comments. Mailer replied in June 1995, calling Malaquais' letter "incomprehensible."

[Y]ou know perfectly well there's unfinished business between you and me concerning that occasion. It's one thing to say something insulting as you said in private. Then we can argue between us man to man. To announce it to the world, however, which in this case is somewhere between 100,000 to a few million people you've never met, who don't know you and who don't know me, and to do it at large in what was virtually a temper tantrum, I find damaging to the idea of friendship itself.

The comments Malaquais had made on the program were especially searing coming, as they did, just after Mailer acknowledged his debt to his mentor. He described Malaquais as "the last of his species," and said he had "learned more from him than anybody I know." We have been friends for 47 years, he said, "and love each other dearly." He referred to Malaquais, warmly, as "an old goat," and said that at their meetings "we argue back and forth but get nowhere, but have a fine time doing it." Then it was Malaquais' turn.

"You wanted to be a literary hero. What did you mean by hero?" Mailer replied that he was one of a group of writers who wanted to emulate engaged artists such as André Malraux. "We wanted to change the nature of American life," he said, but "none of us ended up as heroes; we ended up as celebrities." People know who I am, he said, mainly through television.

Malaquais: Being a celebrity is your infantile malady.

Mailer: I would say that your insistence on keeping to a point that has no particular relevance to the discussion is a sign of your premature senility.

Malaquais: There are no heroes in American life, just celebrities, and they are immediately transferred to television.

Mailer: You ask why do I go on television. The answer is it's the only game in town.

Malaquais: Television is unchristian, untrue, distorting, de-celebrating. You participate in this de-celebration of people.

Mailer tried to change the subject, but Malaquais would not be sidetracked, and resumed the attack:

Malaquais: There was a time when intellectuals were, so to speak, in opposition, in ideological opposition. Some of them were revolutionaries. All of them, you included, sold out.

Mailer: We didn't sell out, sold out to what?

Malaquais: To the establishment. You belong to the establishment. In France, all the former extreme leftists, the Maoists, all of them became pillars of society.

Mailer: Well, I'd hardly call myself a pillar of American society. To this day I'm seen in America as a bizarre creature who doesn't fit categories comfortably. But when you say I sold out, that's personally very insulting. I could

say that you have sold out by being relatively inactive all these years and never doing anything but complain, but I'm not going to get into this. But saying one has sold out is the single most insulting thing you can say to someone.

Malaquais: But I wanted to be insulting.

This thrust went deep. It all but ended the conversation, which sputtered along for a few minutes to its conclusion.

Mailer wrote to two friends of Malaquais, Michael Seiler and Jean-Pierre Catherine, who had set up the ARTE conversation and told them his assessment of the program. "The general tone is somewhat unpleasant—fat, 72-year-old bully shuts up 86-year-old man for 45 minutes whereupon battered old fellow (whom I must say looks very good on the TV) strikes back and they have an unhappy exchange in which each denigrates the other. I was essentially charmless throughout." The experience made him conclude, he wrote, that the long documentary Seiler and Catherine had proposed was a bad idea. After countless television appearances over a 40-year span, he wrote, "There's no desire to have still one more film made about me." Seiler and Catherine were persistent, however, and two years later, Mailer agreed to the documentary.

Malaquais' second wife, Elisabeth, who had known Mailer since the 1960s, rebuked her husband for his public chastisement of Mailer during their television *entretien*. "To this day," she said in 2010, "the ARTE show gives me goose pimples." She felt that her husband was entitled to comment on "Norman's confusion between heroism and celebrity," but not publically. Malaquais told her that he was sorry for the pain he had "apparently" caused, but was not ready to apologize. "Was it not the truth?" he asked. Realizing her husband's "inflexibility," she wrote

to Mailer seeking a *rapprochement*. She argued that Mailer's letter had hurt Malaquais, and Jean's comments had hurt Mailer, and the two injuries, therefore, canceled each other out. "There's no equality in the deeds," Mailer said in his reply. "Mine was a personal letter to my oldest friend, chilly as could be, with intent to wound, but finally, it was personal." Malaquais' "denunciation" was seen by a million people. He concluded his letter to Elisabeth:

Finally, for Jean's own health (if I may presume to be a physician, and after all, why not? Do physicians know more than old friends?) he's going, for the sake of his soul, which I believe he has even if he doesn't, he's going to have to apologize to someone or something or just once in his life say: I did something stupid and wrong and bad and I'm sorry. If he can't do that, I really don't want to see him anymore.

After Mailer's death, Elisabeth provided a shrewd analysis of the relationship of Mailer and her husband, who died in 1998. Mailer, she said,

Norman had become a celebrity, feted and listened to, maligned also, all too often. Jean, who stayed in the shadows, then provided him with a mainstay: no competition to fear from him, a foreign writer, save of an intellectual kind (though Norman never was one to like losing an argument!), no underhand meanness, above all total frankness, especially when it came to the overall passion of them both: writing. The years passed. Norman never missed an opportunity to remind the public of his own existence; his "stunts" often irked Jean and, at times, amused him, when they did not cause him considerable anguish (the Adele episode) or downright anger (the political posturing), for instance. I cannot recall

any sign ever of indifference on Jean's part. Jean thought of Norman as genuinely warm and kind man, demonstrably generous (not only vis-à-vis his friends) and incredibly attuned to the life of his country, intellectually of course, but emotionally in particular.

The two old friends resolved their differences less than a year after their public fight. Mailer "overcame his anger," she said, and "was generous and to the end showed Jean much affection." He and Norris visited Elisabeth and Jean in Geneva, where they were living, in 1996 and in 1997. A short time after Malaquais' passing, his novel, *Planet Without Visa*, was reissued and Mailer attended the book party. "I was extremely touched by the public homage he paid to his friend posthumously at the party given by Jean's publisher Phébus on the occasion," she said.

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As his relationship with Malaquais sank to its nadir, Mailer saw the sales of *Oswald's Tale* trail off badly. He had hoped for a modestly strong showing, but the book failed to reach the lowest rung on the best-seller list. He attributed its weak sales to its \$30 price, its length, dislike of the "insect" Oswald, and the recently concluded trial of O.J. Simpson. Mailer said that the trial and Simpson's not-guilty verdict had "sated America's interest in forensic matters." He assumed that *Picasso's* sales would be worse, and this proved to be the case. Added to these disappointments was the anxiety produced by the protracted contract negotiations with Random House, conducted by Andrew Wylie. At this inopportune time, Carole Mallory nudged her way back into Mailer's life.

In the summer of 1995, she contacted the "Page Six" gossip columnists of the *New York Post* to announce that she was almost done with a memoir of her affair with Mailer. At Norris' insistence, Mailer called a ~~score~~^{score} of close friends and family members to tell them about the *Post* story before they heard about it. After summarizing the item, he intoned gravely, "You pay for your sins; you pay for your sins." He then explained that his affair with Mallory had been over for several years—his family knew this, but not all his friends—and that he and Norris were thoroughly and happily reconciled. His merry life was over, he said.

The situation at Random House was complicated. Mailer owed the firm over \$3 million, and the sequel to *Harlot's Ghost*. For the first time in his career, he said, his fate was mainly in the hands of "suits," corporate people who didn't see him as a writer but as an asset, a commodity. Jason Epstein and ~~Harry~~^{Harry} Evans could put in a good word for him, but they had no real say in the matter. Alberto Vitale, a former banker who was then CEO at Random House, had the final say on major author contracts. If, Mailer explained, ~~Andrew~~^{Andrew} Wylie was only able to get him a one-book deal (nullifying the contract negotiated by the late Scott Meredith), he would leave Random House and the firm would lose the possibly large returns from the books he wrote after the sequel. The possibilities included an anthology made up of excerpts from many of his books and some uncollected essays, two volumes of autobiography, and another novel. But signing him to a multi-book contract was also a gamble, given his age and health. By this time, he said, Random House had sunk over \$1 million into *Oswald's Tale*, \$30,000 a month for over three years. In some years, he earned \$750,000, but after paying his agent, alimony, college tuitions (at one point six of his children were in college), mortgages on two homes and rent for

two studios, to name the major expenses, he needed every penny of it. He had no retirement fund.

According to ~~Harry~~ Evans, it was S.I. Newhouse, the chairman of Advance Publications (which included Random House and the Condé Nast magazines, *New Yorker*, *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*), who ultimately approved the deal struck with ~~Andrew~~ Wylie and his associates. Mailer later described them as "my keen and formidable agents." ~~Harry~~ Evans said that Newhouse, believed that it was important to keep Random House's major writers happy. The new contract called for Mailer to receive \$30,000 a month for the rest of his life, in return for which all of his royalties from all of his publishers would go to Random House until the monthly payments had been covered. If, at his death, the monthly stipends totaled more than the grand total of his royalty income, the debt would be canceled. But to maintain his household, he needed another \$300,000 a year. For each of the next twelve years he would earn approximately that amount from a combination of fees for magazine pieces, consultations, speeches and screenplays.

The new contract meant that Mailer needed to clear the decks and focus on the sequel to *Harlot's Ghost*. But the enormity of the task and the reception of *Picasso*, and *Oswald's Tale*, weighed on him, dulling his resolve. He was also dubious about the literary choices he had made over the past four years. ~~John~~ Aldridge, one of his most stalwart supporters, had written a middling review of the *Oswald* book, and Mailer wrote back saying it was obvious that Aldridge thought it was not the sort of book he should have written at this point in his life. "And in truth," he said, "and this is between us, I don't know that I disagree with you." In a letter to his daughter Susan, he said he was "angry and bruised" by the reception of *Picasso*. "What irks the hell out of me is that it's really a nice book and I really think it will last, at least if any of my books do.

When you read it, let me know what you think. If your reaction is negative, dare to tell me so," adding that this was a "safe offer" because he recalled that she had liked the book in manuscript.

The only other thing he had to report was that he was

for trying to build up the intellectual capital and the energy to start the second volume of Harlot's Ghost, and in the meantime I look for distractions, do a piece about

this, do a piece about that, whatever comes through. I truly know how old fighters feel when they want to avoid championship bouts. *no violent* *✓* The money and the glory are

✓ still attractive to a degree, but, oh, the punishment that body will take, and writing a novel is harder on one's nerves than almost any other activity, the novel being far tougher than a work of nonfiction.

He ended this gloomy dispatch by sending love, and noting that "all is relatively OK here." But it wasn't. He would be 73 in two months, and needed a victory.

he took on *✓* One of the pieces that came his way was a conversation with his son Michael about the recently concluded murder trial of O.J. Simpson, sometimes described as "the trial of the century." On October 3, 1995 Simpson was found not guilty of the murders of his wife Nicole Brown, and her friend Ronald Goldman. Two weeks later, the conversation, titled "Black and White Justice," appeared in *New York* magazine. Mailer's conclusions centered on the anger felt about the verdict. Many believed that the jury (9 blacks, 1 Hispanic, 2 whites) ignored the evidence presented, but whites, Mailer said, "are not taking account of the attitude of most blacks toward American justice. Blacks see it as white justice; therefore it's not justice. It's a game waged by players, sometimes very skillful players." Blacks are usually represented by court-

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✓ appointed defenders. "So they see it as a game they usually lose." O.J. had top talent, and he won, and blacks generally approved.

In a commencement address several weeks later, on May 27, 1995, Mailer was more upbeat. Speaking at Wilkes University in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, he spoke of the end of the Cold War. "Looking back on it, we were like magnetic filings in the power of a huge electromagnet, the Cold War, and almost all of us pointed in the same direction." But when Communism collapsed, "the great switch on this great electromagnet was released and now all the fragments went in all directions." Those who built their lives under the overhang of the Cold War "are now superannuated; myself among the others," and many Americans "don't have a clear sense of the future." But this dislocation had an upside, he told the graduates. "You will go forth in the rare position of being—in the spiritual sense—of being pioneers because you are going into a new and undiscovered frontier," a place where "all the guide rules of the 19th and 20th century have been used up." Perhaps, he concluded, you can regain the dream on which the nation was founded. "If you believe that there is more good than evil in the sum of humanity, then democracy can prevail," a sentiment that could be traced back a half-century to "The White Negro." For the future, he said, "exciting and fearful and incredible days and years await you." Mailer had already begun thinking about a book that would speak to the new millennium.

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During the week in Paris when Mailer had his unhappy conversation with Malaquais, he stayed at the George V, one of his favorite hotels. Norris was not with him, and one night, unable to sleep, he found a Gideon Bible, in English, in the night table and began to read the New Testament. It was the first time he had looked at it for many years, although he had read parts of

it in college. "I couldn't make head or tail of it," he said, adding that he was "a stranger to Christianity." This was not a result of overt anti-Semitism of the kind faced by his mother, who was called "sheeny" and "Christ-killer" by Irish kids in Long Branch (an experience that made her wonder how her son could have so many Irish friends). Rather, he felt "subtly excluded":

Christmas is not for you, and you don't know anything about Jesus Christ. You haven't grown up with him. When I was a kid, it was almost as if Christ was the enemy, the renegade Jew, the one who brought all the trouble down on the Jews. At least that was the mentality of the immigrant first-generation and second-generation Jews I grew up with. And then, of course, later in life one became sophisticated about it; Christ was certainly not the enemy, but he was still very much a stranger.

A few years earlier, he and Norris were visiting her family in Atkins, Arkansas. On this occasion, Norris' father, James Davis, a deacon at the local Freewill Baptist Church, invited Mailer to attend the adult Sunday School. "I was the first Jew they'd ever met," he recalled, adding that he was also the first Jew that Norris had ever met. "They were excited," he said, "because they'd been reading about Jesus the Jew for thirty, forty, fifty years. They'd been living with it. And they'd never seen a Jew. And now there was one among them. So they approached me with the most curious kind of respect." Mailer felt the welcome was particularly warm. As he learned, they assumed that he might be better equipped to interpret some difficult lines in the Old Testament concerning Abraham and his son Isaac, whom God ordered Abraham to sacrifice, and then relented. Mailer did his best, and afterward kept pondering "this odd moment, where they

felt that being Jewish gave me an authority in relation to the Bible." Perhaps, he thought, he might also have something to say about the New Testament.

Another experience that heightened his interest in the Bible came in 1994 when he read *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* by Pope John Paul II. Written in the form of an interview, it deals with a range of topics, including the relationship of Christianity to other faiths. He read it because he remembered John Paul's 1987 encyclical, *On Social Concerns*, which had impressed him enough to recommend that the American Chapter of P.E.N. offer the Pope an honorary membership (opposed by Sontag, who succeeded Mailer as president), although it was never voted on. Mailer admired its analysis of the Cold War and the two superpowers, America and Russia (the former representing, as Mailer put it, "the power of greed," and the latter "the power of oppression"), and the poor in the Third World, as well as the underprivileged in the superpowers. The Pope kept mentioning the Gospel of John, and this prompted Mailer to read it. "I was curious now," he said, and after reading John he read the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, first in Paris, and then several times in the U.S.

He immediately realized "how good a story it was," and called it "the spiritual or psychological keel of Western civilization." But while Jesus' unique voice and profound sayings are "at the least worthy of Shakespeare," he found the story as a whole "not well written." The prophetic voice of John is memorable, but the narratives of the other three evangelists, who carry the burden of linking the early life of Jesus with his death and resurrection, are filled with clumsy transitions and vague descriptions. "I wanted to retell it the way all writers want to retell a classic story," Mailer said. "There are a hundred writers who could do a better job, and I'm one of them." Ignoring his promises to Random House about "Harlot's Grave," and telling no one save

X ✓ ~~Jason~~ Epstein, Norris and Judith, in early 1995 he began working on his version of the New Testament, told in the first person by Jesus, speaking long after the events he describes.

Asked what motivated him to write it, Mailer said, "If suddenly I had picked up a copy of *The Iliad* and said I wanted to do a new version of it, people would have understood." But this was not the case with the New Testament; people "have stronger feelings about it," and a Jew rewriting the central story of Christianity was likely to be seen as a poacher, as he had been with Picasso. When he told Norris his intention "to write a book that her father would read," she told him he was crazy. Initially, Epstein was also against the idea. "I remember arguing with him at length about his book about Jesus," he recalled, "which I thought was simply not for him, and probably not for me either." Mailer was not moved. He described his attraction as "almost animal-like—the way an animal knows it's time to come out of hibernation, so it digs its way up to the surface whether or not it has a clear take on what the weather might be."

X ✓ He did some research, most notably two books by Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* and *The Origin of Satan*. Mainly, however, he relied on various versions of the New Testament, and his own sense of Jesus' inner life. "Celebrities," Mailer told Charlie Rose, "are used to living with two personalities." The first is the "at-home personality; when you're brushing your teeth you're like everyone else." The other personality "has power in the world," and "people virtually p-e-e in their pants when they meet you." He said he felt he had "a small insight into what it was like to have a double nature since I've lived with it all my life since I was 25." He hastened to add that being a celebrity was far, far different from being a half-divine person. Mailer was confident that he could make reasonable surmises about Jesus' dual nature by reference to his

own. He continued working on it off and on through the first half of 1996, and then put it aside during the summer so he could attend the political conventions.

Preceding his two pieces on the political campaigns for *George*, a new political magazine, was a piece he wrote for *Esquire* on Patrick Buchanan, a conservative political commentator and advisor to Republican presidents. Like his 1994 Madonna piece, it is half profile, half interview. He had discovered that Buchanan, who had just been defeated in the GOP presidential primaries by Senator Bob Dole, had qualities that he admired. And political positions: Buchanan, a Reagan Republican, was critical of American corporations, angry that they loved their profit margins enough to send American jobs overseas. Mailer had thought that he was the only left-conservative in the country, but now recognized that Buchanan had the credentials to join him. His growing admiration for Buchanan was based, in part, on his growing disillusion with the President. Mailer had met Clinton a few times, and he and Norris had visited him in the White House, but he had never gotten beyond pleasantries, and he had little hope of becoming a Clinton counselor or intimate. Still, he tried. In late 1994, he had asked for an interview. Clinton wrote back and asked for a list of the topics to be explored. Mailer declined to be specific (except for promising to bring up a matter on which they would disagree—the Cuban situation), and instead proposed that Clinton give him carte blanche to poke around in the presidential psyche: “I think you owe it to yourself to have one of our best American writers—myself humbly nominated—to take a shot at interpreting your presidency and yourself. My feeling, and it’s paramount, is that the public needs a fresh look.” Let us discuss, he continued, “your more intense concerns, your preferences, your biases.” Mailer offered his piece on Madonna as proof of his ability “to see you as a human being rather than as a public servant

and/or politician.” His letter was not as thoughtless as his 1961 letter to Mrs. Kennedy in which he spoke of the “odd strong honor” of the Marquis de Sade, but it was high-handed enough to earn the same response: silence.

Mailer was unhappy with Clinton for not making civil rights a larger theme of his presidency, and for practicing what he called “boutique politics”—providing a morsel for every interest group, but not being willing to risk political death for any large idea or policy. Mailer was so angry with what was going on in the country that he actually, seriously, thought about running in the primaries against Clinton. At one point, he said that he was thinking of running as Eugene McCarthy’s second, and had spoken to him about it, but this gambit went nowhere. He knew he would lose, but his campaign might introduce intriguing ideas that would irritate Clinton. When Norris got wind of this quixotic venture, she replied in “the quiet tones he had come to know all too well—the steel in the voice of a soft-spoken southern woman is as palpable as the cutting edge of a Damascene blade”—that she would leave him if he dared to declare. She was particularly scornful of the speech he planned to give to the media: “I’ve been married six times. I committed a felonious assault against my second wife. I’ve been untrue to every woman I’ve cared about. Gentlemen and ladies of the press: Do your worst! I’ve broken through the media barrier. There’s nothing to ransack in the closet.” His wife, he concluded, was right again: “he was no recognizable grade of presidential timber.” It would be a disaster. “It was the American presidency, after all. As soon could the Marquis de Sade have proposed himself for the papacy.” Yet, at the time, Mailer had been dead serious.

The two *George* reports—the first on the conventions, and the second on the subsequent campaigns—skirt all deep waters. They provide overviews and samples of the speeches,

platforms and debates, and juicy details of political scandals. Dole is compared to various movie stars: "Seen up close, Dole looked tall and spare like a movie man, a leading man. Cowboy roles. Not Randolph Scott, exactly, not Gary Cooper or Clint Eastwood, but a casting director would put him in the file that said: HUMPHREY BOGART ON A HORSE." Clinton is held up to a range of movie stars and athletes, from Muhammad Ali to Warren Beatty, as well as to Ramses II and J.R. Ewing, the lead character in the television program, *Dallas*. Both pieces are competent, as is the Buchanan profile-interview, but they are devoid of the drama and surprises of Mailer's earlier political narratives. He was temporizing, running in place, instead of writing the sequel he had put off for over five years. He had long planned to begin it with the assassination of J.F.K., a fact he could not have failed to recall when he sat down to discuss his articles with the editor of *George*, the only son and namesake of the slain president.



With the Jesus novel completed Mailer was happy to be given the opportunity to direct another feature film. His son Michael, who had launched a successful career as a movie producer, enlisted him for a proposed movie about an Irish-American boxer, "Ringside," which Michael and two colleagues had written. "It's the story of a street fighter who finds redemption through his relationships in and outside the ring," the younger Mailer said. Filming was scheduled to begin in April 1997. "The only trouble," Mailer said to a friend, "is I also want to get back to Harlot's Ghost, second volume, and so am suffering from the best dilemma of them all; there are two good things I want to do."

He was excited about the script. "Boxing," he said, "is a wonderful culture, a genre with edges that are rarely explored, and I would like to try my hand at directing one more time. He

told Michael his only condition was that Mickey Knox be given a role. But shortly after preproduction work got underway, the backers pulled the plug. "*Tough Guys Don't Dance* was an interesting film, but not a commercially viable one," Michael recalled, and the backers were "nervous" about Mailer directing the new film. Another factor was that the two leading actors—Halle Berry and Brendan Fraser—were still relatively unknown. "My dad had the reputation of a man who was untested in the arena of Hollywood," Michael said.

Michael told his father that the money, \$3.5 million, had been raised, the actors signed up, but then, for no announced reason, the backers stopped taking his phone calls. "Either they had found another property they wanted to work with more, or they simply didn't have the funds and couldn't face us," the elder Mailer said in a letter. Michael said that he was trying to find new backers. "Lord, I hope he succeeds," his father said. None of this was true. Michael had decided not to tell his father that the backers had insisted that he find another director, and he had shown them his middle finger. "To this day," Michael said, "it's my most heartbreaking experience in the filmmaking business." Mailer's directorial career was over.

Salving Mailer's disappointment over the cancellation of "Ringside," was the reception of the long-delayed documentary about the 1974 Ali-Foreman championship bout, *When We Were Kings*. Along with George Plimpton and Spike Lee, Mailer was recruited to give retrospective commentary on "The Rumble in the Jungle." He focused on the way Ali used the rope-a-dope to confuse and tire Foreman, recalling both the nuances and psychology of Ali's ringmanship. ~~The film~~ ^{the film} released in February 1997, won a special award at the Sundance Festival and went on to win the Academy Award for best documentary, and several others, including an Independent Spirit Award. It is generally thought to be the finest documentary ever made on

boxing, and is linked forever with *The Fight*, often named as the best nonfiction narrative on a prizefight. Both Ali and Foreman attended the Academy Award ceremony, and were cheered by an enthusiastic audience.

With the exception of a review in *Publishers Weekly* on March 31, Kakutani was again the first major reviewer to comment on *The Gospel*. Her negative review, which appeared April 14, drums on the theme of celebrity. Mailer is fascinated by it, she says, because he is one. His book, therefore, is "a sort of novelized 'Jesus Christ Superstar' starring Jesus as an ambivalent pop star and guru: a silly, self-important and inadvertently comical book that reads like a combination of 'Godspell,' Nikos Kazantzakis' 'Last Temptation of Christ' and one of those dumbed-down Bible translations, all seasoned with Mr. Mailer's eccentric views on God." Saving graces: None. The anonymous *Publishers Weekly* reviewer also criticized the novel for having Jesus mouth Mailer's theology of "an anthropomorphic God at war with other Powers," but also found much to praise. "Mailer is brilliant in depicting the human side of Jesus—his confusion and pride as he comes to understand who he is; his love for sinners and hatred of the pious; his terror at his impending fate and above all, his grapplings with the limits of his powers." The reviewer says *The Gospel* is "partially a failure," but "also a triumph. Its penetration into Jesus' human heart rivals Dostoyevsky for depth and insight." Pleased with the review, Mailer had it reproduced on the back jacket of subsequent printings.. The novel was Mailer's tenth best seller, and reached number seven on the list.

Besides his novelistic abilities, Mailer pointed to two assets he had for writing the novel. His celebrity had been of some help, as he noted in his conversation with Charlie Rose. But his Jewishness, he said, was "an inestimable advantage, because I tend to believe there is virtually a

Jewish psychology." Jesus was "extremely Jewish. He worries all the time, he anticipates, he broods upon what's going on, there's an immense sense of responsibility." In writing the novel, "I began to realize for the first time in many, many years how Jewish I am." Another trait he shared with Jesus was the notion that you pay a price for everything you get. "That conviction," he said,

is at the very center of Jewish belief, as opposed to Christian belief, where God takes mercy on you, and you're lifted and you're saved." The Jews tend to believe that you never get it without paying something in return. So it is delightful to contemplate these miracles once you recognize that you can use yourself up—indeed the angels whisper to Jesus at a certain point, and say in effect, 'Don't overdo it.'

✓ Frank Kermode, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, praises the subtle way Mailer demonstrates how "God-given power in a man can be wasted or exhausted." The drain of healing power is "a major theme" in the novel, Kermode says, even if it meant that Mailer was "infusing Jesus with a strong dose of Mailer."

Kermode finds Mailer's book to be daring, a "clever" addition to the apocrypha surrounding the Jesus story, and "the first, so far as I know, to be attributed to Jesus himself, a ✓ gospel-autobiography, no less, of the son of God." Mailer's midrash, his extensions of the story ✓ (Jesus brooding on Herod's slaughter of the innocents, ^{for example,} or feeling his loins quicken when he ^{Gospels} meets Mary Magdalene), and his theological speculations are not what interest Kermode. "The writer's powerful mind works in a specialized way, not by theological argumentation, but by telling or retelling story." This was what Mailer set himself to do, Kermode concludes, and

having "accepted the dare, Mailer can make a fair claim to have come honorably close to winning it."

Jesus' voice is the novel's largest achievement. He relished the opportunity to present both the spoken words of Jesus, and his thoughts. It was a gamble, but as ~~John~~ Epstein noted, "Norman's more of a risk-taker than most of his contemporaries. Two novelists who reviewed the book, Reynolds Price and ~~John~~ Updike, commented favorably on Jesus' voice. Mailer's decision to provide access to "not only His mental weather, but the motives that underlay His titanic claims and actions," Price says, gives Mailer "powerful moments of invention," allowing him to "speculate with a welcome freshness on the secrets of Jesus' nature." Updike praises "the quiet ghostly voice of Jesus," rendered in "direct, rather relaxed English that has yet an eerie, neo-Biblical dignity." In its first draft, the locutions of Jesus were closer to those of the King James Bible, but Epstein objected to the overuse of words like "didst" and "mayhap," "penny" instead of "coin," and Mailer dialed it back a few degrees to its final, more modernized level. Mailer was pleased when his father-in-law told him that he enjoyed the passages that presented the language of Jesus' thoughts.

Overall, *The Gospel*'s reviews were better than those of *Picasso*, worse than those given to *Oswald's Tale*. The harshest review was in *The New Republic*. The reviewer, James Wood, followed Kakutani in lashing Mailer for saying that his experience of celebrity aided him in understanding Jesus. But Wood's chief criticism was the first-person perspective, which he found to be absurd, and the language, which he called "a spastic simulacrum of biblical style." However unhappy Mailer may have been with the review by Woods, an important critic, he was furious about the magazine's cover, which carried a cartoon portrait of Mailer with a crown of

thorns on his head under the title of Wood's review, "He Is Finished." A few months after the review appeared, in the summer of 1997, Mailer ran into the magazine's publisher, Martin Pertz, outside a Provincetown restaurant. He had known Pertz since the mid-1960s when he invited Mailer to speak at a Harvard rally against the Vietnam War. "If he'd just said, 'Hello Norman,' it would have been all right," Mailer said. "But he had this huge smile on his face. So I punched him." Then Pertz went in and told everyone that Mailer had hit him twice. "I guess it was a kind of badge of honor," Mailer said. Later, Pertz said that Mailer's punches were "flabby." Mailer told friends he had hit him "hard, but not hard"

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In many of the interviews Mailer gave when doing publicity for *The Gospel*, he was asked when he would fulfill his ~~to be continued~~ promise about the sequel to *Harlot's Ghost*. It was a fair question; he had made the promise six years earlier. He often brought the issue up himself. But the 50th anniversary of *The Naked and the Dead* was less than a year away, and he had promised to write a new introduction for the anniversary edition. It occurred to him that the date, May 6, 1998, would also be a good time for a retrospective anthology. He would turn 75 a few months earlier, and the two celebrations could be combined. The editing job would not be particularly difficult, he assumed, and completing a new book only a year after the last would buy him will from Random House, vital if he were to finish the sequel. Such a collection had been on his mind ever since Vidal had published his own retrospective collection in 1993. *United States: Essays, 1952-1992* is 1295 pages long, and contains the great majority of Vidal's literary

and political-historical essays, but none of his fiction. Mailer decided that his book would also be oversized, and would include excerpts from virtually all his works, ~~even his poetry~~.

As he worked through the spring and summer on the anthology, Mailer wrote a series of commiserative letters to Bruce Dexter who was depressed about not getting published. He also tried, unsuccessfully, to get various agents and editors interested in their work. An excerpt from one to Dexter, who was recovering from a stroke, gives a sense of his own mood. He recalled the lecture he had heard in 1947 about the catastrophic theory of history: "Suddenly a catastrophe occurred and that was a form of history that the Jews knew all too well."

I expect on the personal level a stroke has that quality, and I know I have an uneasiness about it that probably causes me more slight but actual psychic or spiritual discomfort than the thought of death itself. Death is as large and as final a transmogrification as one could ever find, but we spend our lives thinking about death, or trying to, whereas a stroke shunts us off to a siding. So from the above you can understand that I commiserate with you.

Reading, in his 75th year, almost everything that he had published in book form over the previous half century produced contrary emotions. He enjoyed passages of his writing that he had forgotten, but he also realized how much his powers had diminished. The net result was melancholy. Another cause for gloom was his eyesight. He had cataracts, but the doctor told him he should wait until the fall to have them removed. "It's a little like Vaseline has been rubbed over the lens," he told McAlice. Lennon who was helping Mailer assemble the collection sent him over two thousand pages culled from his books, all of them blown up 100 percent, from

each piece according to the date of the events depicted. "Boxing with Hemingway," the opening piece (a review of Morley Callaghan's *That Summer in Paris*) was published in 1963, but it depicts a 1929 event. The exceptions were excerpts from *Ancient Evenings* and *The Gospel*, which were tacked on at the end.

World War II is the collection's armature. The great majority of the episodes demonstrate its direct or indirect influence, from the founding of the CIA, the Cold War, rocket technology, Cuba, the Vietnam War, and the assassination of J.F.K. Commenting on similarities between the film *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer said, "The Second World War was a watershed. Everything is of it, before it or after it. It's a point of reference. It's still my point of reference." Dos Passos' point of reference, of course, was the First World War. Mailer's unspoken intention was for *The Time of Our Time* to continue the narrative begun by Dos Passos, employing many of the narrative tactics, and doing for the second half of the twentieth century what his predecessor did for the first. In his Foreword, Mailer says, "There is little in this book, even when it comes under the formal category of non-fiction or argument, that has not derived, then, from my understanding of how one writes fiction." While Mailer did not go so far as to call his anthology a novel, it is in scope, structure, variety, voice and "feel" congruent with Dos Passos' three-volume masterpiece.

✓ The two books are of a size: Mailer's at 1286 pages and Dos Passos' at 1449. Both use many story-telling modes, and handle equally well rapid shifts of narrative focus. Film and journalistic techniques are adapted by both writers, from the "camera eye" of movies to interpolated newspaper articles and headlines, as well as capsule biographies of the great figures of the age. Dos Passos includes profiles of J.P. Morgan, John Reed and F.D.R., and Mailer gives

sketches of Marilyn Monroe, Abbie Hoffman and J.F.K. A variety of points of view are used, and both books have several touchstone characters. When an interviewer pointed out to Mailer that his collection reminded her of *U.S.A.*, he said he was following Dos Passos' lead with "the idea of certain characters reappearing in somewhat different circumstances, 30, 40, 200 pages down the road. For example, Gene McCarthy reappears three or four times. Nixon does, Castro does. And some of the fictional characters reappear and reappear. And what I like about it was the nearness of fictional characters to real characters. Of course, Dos Passos was doing that." Between them, Dos Passos and Mailer can lay fair claim to being the chief novelistic chroniclers of what Henry Luce called "the American Century."

The reception of *TOOT* was better than for any of his books going back to *The Executioner's Song*. Even Kakutani had some kind words, and her review appeared two days after the publication date, perhaps a response to Mailer's letter of complaint. She praised his "quick, observant eye, his gift for the cameo portrait, his radar for atmosphere and mood" in his nonfiction, and called *The Executioner's Song*, a "masterpiece." His novels she summed up as "jerry-built constructions" festooned with obsessive ideas that are "adolescent, irresponsible or just plain flaky." She concludes that "in the end, he remains his own most intriguing creation." Harold Bloom made precisely the same point in his warm review of *TOOT*, saying that Mailer "is above all the author of 'Norman Mailer,' his most persuasive fiction." His remarks about the collection are warmer, however, than Kakutani's. Very few other writers of the previous fifty years, Bloom states, have been "so endlessly sensitive to the phantasmagoria that is American reality," an achievement based on Mailer's love of country, "passionate sincerity" and an ability to fuse "acute sensibility and intensity with his public concerns."

One of the most perceptive reviews of the collection is entwined with a profile, which also records a visit to Provincetown and a conversation with Mailer in his third-floor study. David Denby had read all or most of Mailer's books, and it is clear that he enjoyed the man and admired the writer, but this side idolatry. Near the beginning of his 12-page piece in the *New Yorker*, he gives a sketch of ^{in 1955} ~~Maler~~ Mailer at 75:

Maler is looking well. His hearing has faded slightly, and he has some arthritic trouble with his knees. Using a cane, he sways on Provincetown's streets like a retired sea captain. But he's lost weight—he's down to about a hundred and eighty pounds from the rotund two hundred of a few years ago; the loss is partly the result of a complicated diet that commences with a nearly indigestible cabbage soup. ('The elements fight against one another so hard,' he tells me, 'that the cells exhaust themselves, and you lose weight.' Mailer is a vitalist in all things, even in weight reduction.) His hair is thinning but snowy white, his forearms are strong, his voice is full; all in all, he still has the look of a barrel-chested elder Jewish sage which he achieved about fifteen years ago. David Ben-Gurion striding through some brave kibbutz gave off a similar robust glow.

The portrait, and other glimpses he gives of Mailer at ease with family and friends, and giving a tour of the town, prepares us for an appraisal of the book that transcends the usual stuff of reviews.

Denby praises *TOOT*, saying that no one of Mailer's generation "could match the book's variety, its manic energy, its spiritual violence and striving." It is both "daunting," he says, and "eccentric," referring to the book's unusual organizational principle. He asked Mailer if using the

normal method—date of composition—might not have been a better strategy because it would present readers with “a clear spiritual autobiography of Norman Mailer.” Mailer answered with a sigh, “I’ve been waiting to write an autobiographical novel all these years, but I’ve been waiting to become the hero of my own life in order to write it. I have never become the hero of my own life.” A few weeks later, he said that he was “essentially dissatisfied” with himself. One clear reflection of Mailer’s answer to Denby’s question is the way Mailer limited his presence in *TOOT*. He excludes most of the self-portraits and personal asides that pepper his work, especially the nonfiction narratives of 1968–1975, *Armies* to *The Fight*. There is self-reference, but a reasonable quantity. “The main good motive behind this book was my desire to let people separate my work from myself,” he said.

Mailer becomes just another character in the American cavalcade he presents, taking his turn along with Sgt. Croft and McLeod, Monroe and DiMaggio, Herman Teppis and Lulu Meyers, Stephen Rojack and Ruta, John and Jacqueline Kennedy, the astronauts, Oswald, his mother and wife Marina, Gene McCarthy, Gary and Nicole, Harry Hubbard, Hugh and Kittredge Montague, Modene Murphy and Frank Sinatra, Nixon, Muhammad Ali and Madonna. The glue that holds *TOOT* together, as Denby points out, is “Mailer’s imagination of history,” and one of the great things about the book is that we “forget which realm we are in—nonfiction or fiction, reality or fantasy—or why any of these categories matter.” As James Campbell has noted, Mailer, like Jean Didion, Gore Vidal and James Baldwin, is a “two-hander,” that is, “adept at both fact and fiction.” His version of the history of the country from World War II to the century’s end, in Denby’s fine metaphor, is “a long, long night in which movie stars, Presidents, intelligence operatives, and gangsters meet in that ideal Mailer after-hours spot where only

grownups are allowed to gather and where the music is always insinuating and sweet." The endless critical discussion about primacy among Mailer's fiction, history, biography and journalism gets one-word answer from *TOOT*: moot.

Random House threw a large celebratory party at the Rainbow Room of Rockefeller Center on May 6, 1998. Most Mailer family members were in attendance, as well as a number of friends: Plimpton, Styron, Vonnegut, S.I. Newhouse, Lillian Ross (who wrote the party up in the *New Yorker*) Schiller, Toback, and Lucid. Some younger writers were there, Jay McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis, who said he came because "there will never be another Norman Mailer." The surprise guests were Muhammad and Lonnie Ali. A hush came over the room when Ali was spotted, and the waiters rushed to get his autograph. He and Mailer mugged for the camera and traded fake jabs. Ali did some magic tricks, and when introduced to people, leaned in and said with a smile, "You're not as dumb as you look."

For the summer, Mailer planned to see his family and do a lot of reading: Cormac McCarthy's novels, ~~Don~~ DeLillo's latest, *Underworld*, and as soon as it was available, Tom Wolfe's *A Man in Full*, which he had agreed to review for the *New York Review of Books*. He'd also been reading a lot of Jung, including Barbara Hannah's *C.G. Jung: His Life and Work, A Biographical Memoir*. He intended to stay on in Provincetown for the rest of the year. "In winter, it's wonderful to wake up and you don't feel sorry for yourself that you're missing anything, because nothing is happening," he said.

His major commitment, of course, was the sequel. "I've been waiting seven years to be visited by the muse for this second volume. She's been silent. I've been waiting. But now she's come back. What happened is that I got a major idea. So now, we'll see." The idea, he said later,

was to make Hugh Montague a Jungian, and open the sequel with him living secretly in Moscow. He was considering how he might use Jung's ideas as a way to avoid writing about the event-crammed 1960s and 1970s, especially the Vietnam War. But by the end of 1998, he had not written a word of "Harlot's Grave."

Chapter 15

Old Freighter, Uncertain Sea

The first years of the new millennium were a time of contraction for Mailer. He had a new right hip installed in February 2000, and his doctors told him that he should get knee replacements, but he kept putting off the operation. He wore dual hearing aids (and was forever losing them), and walked with two canes to make the dependencies equal, and for "the illusion that you are going in for cross country skiing and poling along." His waistline was expanding and his eyesight was dimming. After his cataract surgery, he learned that he had the beginnings of macular degeneration. He took nitroglycerin tablets for angina. The sum of these ailments "leaves me cheerful and chirpy, however," he wrote to Lois Wilson. "I figure the daily pains enable me to pay off my bad karma on the installment plan. Rest assured—you are a part of the good karma." He had taken to describing himself as an "old guy with slits in his sneakers," more of a geezer than a hipster. Even Norman Mailer could grow old.

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His health problems were age-related and par for the course; his wife's were more severe. In 1999 she had a hysterectomy, but the doctor removed only one of her Fallopian tubes, and several months later she learned that there were tumors on the one remaining, cancerous tumors. She had several operations, and both chemotherapy and radiation treatments. When she went on a book tour for her first novel in 2000, she wore a wig, having lost all her beautiful red hair. For the next ten years, as the tumors spread, Norris battled cascading illnesses, and did so with stoic grace and a dash of gallows humor.

Windchill Summer, her coming-of-age novel that is also a murder mystery, is set in a small town in Arkansas during the Vietnam War. Narrated in the first person by Cherry Marshall, a taller-than-average young woman with an adventurous streak, the novel's first draft was written before she met Mailer. She described it as "a story about boys going to Vietnam and the toll it took on them and everyone close to them." She began it at Arkansas Tech shortly after her husband, Larry Norris, shipped out for Vietnam. Mailer had not been complimentary about it when he took a look at the manuscript shortly after they began living together, but she had learned a good deal about the craft of novel-writing from going over drafts of his books for a quarter of century, and in the late 1990s began an entirely new version.

Norris had her own studio adjacent to his on the third floor of their Provincetown home. When friends or family members found it absolutely necessary to communicate with him, they would email her, and she would walk ten steps into his space and place the message on his desk. Otherwise, they worked separately, he writing, and she painting or handling the family finances. But after she began work on her novel, she approached him with a question about point of view, and asked him to read her unfinished manuscript. He said no. "I told her that if I read it, and she

didn't finish it she would never forgive me. And she nodded. She's fairly tough-minded." When the page proofs arrived, he said that perhaps it was time to take a look at it, and she agreed.

✓ After of readings
An hour or so later he handed her his edits. "You start putting in these changes and I'll work ahead of you," he said. Amazed to see that he was line-editing her novel, she bridled. "No. You can't edit this book. I have to be able to say that I wrote the whole thing myself. I don't want you to edit it," she said. "Our styles are too different." When asked, "Do we influence each other?" he said:

Not all that much. We are both very stubborn. She's got a whole set of attitudes and values that don't match with mine at all. When it comes to literature, particularly, we are very far apart. She wouldn't read Proust if I put a gun to her head! She loves bestsellers. And I hate bestsellers. My favorite writer is Tolstoy. I don't mind these differences. By now I know that you never get the woman of your dreams. Nor is there a dream man. But as long as there is a balance, it may work. Of course it's difficult to be married to a writer. Writers are as egocentric as any artists. Because the more talented the artist, the more he is in love with something else than the woman: his work.

✓ Norris' self-assessment in regard to literature matches Mailer's. She said more than once that she preferred *People* magazine to the *New York Review of Books*.
NYRB-
The primacy of his work was entirely obvious to her, and the entire family.

Mailer told her that if he couldn't edit her novel as he went along, then he couldn't read it. "Fine," she replied. "Then you'll either read it when it comes out or you won't read it." He

handed her back the proofs. "I never even looked at what he had done. I know there were a lot of people who would have given three years of their lives if Norman Mailer would have edited their manuscripts, but I was not one of them." When asked how he's have edited the novel, he said, "I could have made it about five percent better. That's all though. The book was essentially there." Norris had made her point. Her novel was a modest success, with generally warm reviews, good sales, and a paperback edition. It is dedicated to her husband and two sons.



About the same time that *Windchill Summer* appeared, Tom Wolfe's collection of essays, *Hooking Up*, was published. It included a full-throated attack on three novelists who had found fault with his 1998 novel, *A Man in Full*. Titled "My Three Stooges," the essay accuses Mailer, Updike and John Irving of wasting their careers by pursuing private obsessions instead of exploring "the rich material of an amazing country at a fabulous moment in history." Wolfe's essay was an extension of his long-held contention that the American novel had fallen into a "weak, pale, tabescent condition"—a view for which Mailer had some sympathy—that could only be remedied by sending "a brigade of Zolas" out to document the raw life of a fast-changing, unpredictable country. Wolfe was happy to present himself as the American Zola, and label the three stooges as "old lions" who had "retreated, shielding their eyes against the light, and turned inward." Years before he had made fun of Updike's clothes and his "thatchy medieval haircut." He had also panned Mailer's *An American Dream*, calling it "boring and logorrheic." But Wolfe didn't believe these old snipes had prompted these two "bags of bones" to give him such negative reviews, and he had never fought with Irving, who called his novel "journalistic hyperbole described as fiction." The unspoken, root cause of their criticisms, he

argued, was his success—*A Man in Full* was a number one best seller for ten weeks—and “our three old novelists” were “shaken,” fearful of becoming “effete and irrelevant.” Their attacks revealed what he called “the allergens of jealousy.” Mailer (^{NYRB}~~New York Review of Books~~) and Updike (*New Yorker*) had written longish reviews of Wolfe’s novel; Irving made his comments on a television talk show.

A master of the *ad hominem* slash, Wolfe bolstered his bag-of-bones descriptions by bringing up Updike’s bladder problems, Mailer’s “rusted-out hip,” and the way Irving’s “sexagenarian jowls shuddered.” At 68, he noted, he still looked trim in his double-breasted white suit, white homburg, white cane and gloves as seen on the all-white (*first time!* he bragged) cover of *Time*, advertising a story about “the novelist with the white stuff.” The media loved all this nastiness and there was a medley of clucking noises and bravos in the *New York Observer*, the *Times*, *Boston Globe* and Internet sites such as Salon.com, to name a few. Some commentators pointed out that Irving, Mailer and Updike were hardly uninterested in the riptides of American culture, as even a cursory look at their numerous and notably realistic books demonstrated, for example, Irving’s *The World According to Garp*, Updike’s Rabbit Angstrom tetralogy, and *The Executioner’s Song*. Wolfe’s demeaning of this last book seemed especially trumped up. Asked how he could call Mailer inward-looking in the face of the massive documentation supporting his Pulitzer-Prize winning narrative, Wolfe said that Mailer owed it all to “a remarkable Santa Claus named Lawrence Schiller,” and proceeded to infer that Mailer had sat at home while ^{his Grand} Schiller did all the research. Schiller did wear out a lot of shoe leather, but Mailer did his share of interviewing, before transforming 15,000 pages of research into an unforgettable thousand-page story. Wolfe conceded nothing, however.

The three old lions held hands on one aspect of Wolfe's novel: his characters. Irving said that Wolfe was a journalist who "can't create a character." Updike said that Wolfe's story is smothered by set pieces and subplots, "spreading like kudzu, sending eager tendrils everywhere." This ornamentation makes for laborious reading, a narrative too cluttered "for sustaining suspense and characters we can care about." The hero, a 60-year-old Atlanta multi-millionaire named Charlie Croker, "is a specimen under glass," and the novel is "a provincial curiosity." His verdict: *A Man in Full* "amounts to entertainment, not literature, even literature in a modest aspirant form." Mailer was no kinder.

Echoing Updike, he says that Wolfe's general strategy, whenever he reached an impasse, was "to cook up new ingredients and excursions for his plot." Some of it is excellent, he says, but his plots are a way of covering up "an endemic inability to look into the depth of his characters with more than a consummate journalist's eye." When he enters the minds of his chief characters, as he must to establish motivation, the interior monologues "are surprisingly routine and insist on telling us what we know already. There is almost no signature quality of mind." Wolfe, Mailer said, has the talent to write a major novel, but also possesses the ability to write a mega-best seller. In *A Man in Full*, he was unable to decide which he was writing. Consequently, good writing alternates with "cash-check writing." Mailer delivered the *coup de grâce* at the close of his review, calling Wolfe "certainly the most gifted best-seller writer to come along since Margaret Mitchell." This barb helps to explain Wolfe's piqued, 26-page-long rejoinder essay. Mailer punctuated the scrap when he responded to a British journalist's question about being called a jealous old bag of bones. "It's true that I'm a bag of bones," he said, "but if I'm going to be jealous, it will be of Tolstoy."

¶ ¶ ¶

One of the books Mailer read in the summer of 1998 was Ron Rosenbaum's *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil*. A novelist and journalist of wide experience and interests, Rosenbaum had spent ten years off and on interviewing Hitler experts in the U.S. and Europe. (Mailer said) "Long after the details had faded from my mind the feeling of the book remained." Several months later, just as he had finally settled on an overarching plan for the sequel to *Harlot's Ghost*, "this little muse appeared in an apse of the literary church," he recalled, "and wiggled her finger at me." Until then, he said, "I was absolutely intrigued with the idea of Montague as a Jungian," and intended to have him turn up in Russia with "some mad notion" of converting the nation to a polity based on Jungian principles. But then the idea of a Hitler book had seized him. Continuing through 1999, he read widely, eventually concluding that he wanted to write about Hitler's childhood. "There were only a few good books. Just three or four really counted, and none of them of course could do more than satisfy a little bit." In addition to Rosenbaum's study, Mailer drew heavily on August Kubizek's *The Young Hitler I Knew*, and Franz Jetzinger's *Hitler's Youth*. He also read several books on apiary science. Beekeeping would play an important art in the novel that he would write over the next seven years.

As he continued to read about Hitler, taking copious notes, he also began another project with Schiller, a teleplay based on a number one best seller that Schiller and James Willworth had written about the highly controversial O.J. Simpson trial. ~~Mailer always needed more income than the Random House stipend, and~~ Schiller paid him \$250,000 for reshaping *American Tragedy: The Uncensored Story of the Simpson Defense* into a four-hour miniseries. Initially,

Mailer had been uninterested in the trial, but he said that he thoroughly enjoyed the Schiller-Willworth book. "My old friend and colleague has come up with a book that is impossible to put down," he said. After several months of work, he finished the teleplay in July 2000, and it was broadcast in mid-November. Simpson went to court to try and block the miniseries, claiming that Schiller had violated an agreement with him, but his suit failed and the program was aired as scheduled. It was not a huge hit but received fairly strong ratings.

Reading and research for the new novel was done in secret, as Mailer explained to Morton Yanow:

I have not told anyone what the private idea of it is, not even my wife or Judith, both of whom, being excellent private detectives, are trying to find out but will not necessarily know until I begin the writing. The reason I don't want to talk about it is I think it would spook this work and would be even more dangerous than the usual pitfall of talking a book away. So I wrap silence around me and austerity, as if I were a grand old man, which for better and for worse, I am not.

Judith, of course, typed this letter up from her boss' dictation, and it would not take her long to learn the secret. She did, after all, order books for him, and soon figured out, as did Norris, what the novel would be about. The specifics of the novel—the portion of Hitler's life to be depicted, the narrative point of view, bee-keeping and life in rural Bavaria—were still evolving. Mailer ended his letter to Yanow with a metaphor about his condition, one which reveals his weakened health, his determination to continue writing, and his self-dramatizing imagination:

The pleasure of writing a long letter to an old friend is no longer mine, and I don't regret it since as you get older, the analogy of one's own mind and body, one's working corpus, comes closer and closer to the notion of a heavy old freighter, seriously overloaded, in an uncertain sea, and therefore, discarding ballast as it goes. You are at least 20 years from that, but I want to tell you, it's not a gloomy situation, since one is pleased with all the clarity of mind that is left and that takes care of one's mood.

With the help of a German-speaking friend, Elke Rosthal, Mailer began studying German, aided to a degree by his memory of the Yiddish his parents spoke at home. His reading was not limited to books about Hitler and World War II; he also read German philosophy (Herder, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche) and poetry—Goethe, Heine and Rilke). He particularly enjoyed *Conversations of Goethe with Johann Peter Eckermann*, and saw parallels between himself and the German polymath. Both he and Goethe, he said, essayed a variety of literary forms, were interested in science, politics, government, and led active social lives. The Faust myth was something else that connected them. "I'm raising the bar higher than ever before," he said about the new novel. "It will contain every idea I ever had." It would have "some of the magical aura" of the Egyptian novel, but it would also be more documentary, historical, objective—less so than *Oswald's Tale* and *The Executioner's Song*, however. His preparations intensified after he completed the Simpson script, and by the end of 2000, he was ready to begin.

He wanted a different location to begin writing, a place completely free of interruptions. A few years earlier, the Lennons had purchased a condo about half a mile from the Mailer home. Mailer knew the area well, and called it "the suburbs of P-Town," a place set back from the main

roads. On the top of a modest hill, it was away from the noise of the town's center. The condo was vacant except on some weekends, and its owners were happy to give Mailer a key. He liked the view of the monument and the harbor from the top floor. In mid-December 2000, Norris dropped him off there with his notes, a ream of paper and a fistful of pencils, and he began writing. If the weather was bad, she would drive him back and forth; otherwise he walked four or five days a week and, if the condo was free, also on weekends. He could do a mile with his canes, one-third of a mile without them. By the beginning of April he had written about 150 typescript pages. At that point, he returned to his study at home.

✓ Mailer's routine in his final years deserves ~~some~~ comment. The following description, taken from ^{henson} JML's "Mailer Log," describes his working day before his health went into precipitous decline in the summer of 2005.

NM's daily routine: it has changed over the years. When I first spent a lot of time with him, in the 80s, he had dinner at a reasonable hour—around 7:30. But then he began working later and later, often not coming down from his study until close to 9 p.m., while his family and guests waited and starved. But he has changed his pattern now and does not work much after 6 p.m. "It was just too hard," he told me a couple of months ago, "so I am working shorter periods." He normally gets up between eight and nine, but takes a long time to get downstairs. Then he has his breakfast, often two poached eggs and dry white toast, sometimes fruit and oatmeal. Hearty breakfast with o.j. and coffee. He reads the papers as he eats—the Boston Globe and the New York Times, and does the Times crossword puzzle every day, until they get really difficult on Friday. The Globe publishes a daily epigram by Dr. Johnson or Emerson, Montaigne, etc., and NM often writes a rejoinder to them (a collection of these is now in the hands of his agent). He

X goes to the loo around 11 and sits on the can reading for a long time. His last act before going up to his study is to play a couple of hands of solitaire—"combing my mind," he calls it. He plays his own special variety of the game with two full decks, and makes bets with himself how many full runs, 2 to ace, he can put together. Then, somewhere between 11 and 12, he climbs slowly up the two flights to his study and begins to work. He has a late lunch, around 2:30 or 3:00, and then takes a nap. As noted above, he used to work very hard from around 3:30-4:00 p.m. until eight-thirty, but of late has cut back. He has always pushed himself, and rarely broke routine unless he was traveling to promote a book, speak, or be on a panel, etc. When he isn't working, he told me, he gets ^{to} in trouble. True.

Downstairs, NM always sits in the same chair at the dining room table—the center of all activity at the Mailer home—with his back to the living room and facing a wall, not the glare from the sun and sea to his right. Visitors will often sit to his left at the head of the long wood table that seats ten. The table is full of the day's projects: piles of mail, manuscripts, books and magazine, photographs and piles of newspapers. When it gets too cluttered, the papers are thrown away and the rest moved to the bay window, which is fronted by a six-foot wide, three-foot deep window seat or shelf. When the shelf is packed a foot or two high, the stuff is shunted to the basement. It is fascinating to go through this stuff piled in the window seat; last week I saw the following: letters from other writers or editors seeking endorsements on a ms., books to be signed for fans, copies of newly published editions of NM's work from around the globe, contracts for film and literary work, letters and cards and drawings from old friends, Poetry magazine, Nation, Stop Smiling, American Conservative, New York Review of Books, Provincetown Arts, as well as the black box containing poker chips and cards for the nightly

Texas Hold 'em game. A green felt poker board, folded up into sections, leans on the wall near the window. A lot of this stuff spills into the bar, which adjoins the dining room. From the telephone there, NM speaks to Judith several times a day. In the afternoon after lunch, he goes through the mail, makes phone calls to Judith, his agent and friends, and usually a few of his nine kids. Hardly a day goes by without some of them calling.



The spat with Tom Wolfe brought Mailer into closer contact with John Irving. Mailer admired *The World According to Garp*, but had only met Irving a few times. In March 2001, Irving wrote to ask if he and Norris would do a benefit reading for a private school in Manchester, Vermont. He suggested that they do an old chestnut, A.R. Gurney's *Love Letters*, in which a man and a woman read aloud their fifty-year correspondence. Mailer didn't think it was a role he could do well, and Norris thought perhaps that George Plimpton might substitute. When Mailer called him, Plimpton came up with a different play, "Zelda, Scott & Ernest," which he and Tom Quinn had written, based on the letters of the Fitzgeralds and Hemingway, as well as excerpts from Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* and Zelda's novel, *Save Me the Waltz*. "Norris can be Zelda," Plimpton said. "She's an actress and from the South." Mailer, who would of course play Hemingway, read the script and liked it. Over the next eighteen months, Plimpton and the Mailers would perform the play more than a dozen times, beginning in Vermont, and then in Easthampton, New York, Provincetown, New York City, Washington, D.C., and St. Paul, Minnesota. In the summer and fall of 2002, the trio performed it in seven European cities, beginning in Paris and ending in London.

All of their performances drew sell-out crowds. After the first performance in Vermont, a man in the audience yelled out, "This should be in every high school and college in the country." Mailer wore khaki pants and a safari shirt reminiscent of Hemingway's; Plimpton wore a sport coat and a Princeton tie, and Norris wore a flapper headscarf. The play could have been commercially successful, but the estates of the writers would only permit it to be done as a fundraiser for not-for-profits. "In other words," Mailer said, "I'm safe from becoming James Tyrone," referring to the character in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, an old trouper (based on O'Neill's father) who has played the same role thousands of times. Mailer relished his role. "It's damn interesting. As I'm doing it I'm thinking of the ways that Hemingway is Hemingway and I am not, and the ways in which there are similarities." Physically, he said, "we each have spindly legs and we're barrel-chested." Mailer said Papa was a writer who

changed the ways in which we perceived things, and he changed the way in which we write. That's two pretty powerful jobs. Either one is enough to make you a great writer. What he lacks—all great writers lack something—is a certain charity of mind. He was very narrow-minded, and that shows in his work. But on the other hand, it also gives that intensity, that luster, that patina that you think of when you read Hemingway's prose. So it's a delight to read him. In George's play, the speeches are all terrific. You can't go wrong.

Norris was slightly less enthusiastic about her role. She had the fewest lines, and she interacts only with Scott, not Hemingway. She was also miffed about being given less comment in reviews of the play, and in joint interviews with Mailer. "I'm not much like Zelda in

temperament or mind or anything else, but our situation is the same," she said. "I'm married to a famous writer, and I'm trying to be a writer herself." By now, she had begun work on a sequel to *Windchill Summer*. Mailer interrupted the conversation at this point. "So far I haven't stolen any of your stuff," he said. "No, you haven't stolen my stuff," she answered. "Scott lifted Zelda's diary. He lifted whole passages of her work and put it in his work and didn't attribute it to her." This was an exaggeration, Mailer said, adding that since Zelda was in a mental hospital when he took the passages, and Fitzgerald "was thinking she's never going to do it, so I might as well use it." Norris pushed back: "Well, you'd be above stealing my work?" His reply: "Well, I hope I would be." Ever since the crisis in their marriage, and especially after the publication of her first novel, Norris was less willing to ^{act} merely as the dutiful domestic manager of the Mailer household, and more eager to present herself as a writer. The Mailers now jostled more often in public. ~~In private, their banter was an order of magnitude sharper.~~

One thing was clear, Norris said, her husband had "always made me feel terribly important." She told Larry Shainberg, a Cape Cod friend who accompanied them on part of the European tour, that some of the dialogue between Scott and Zelda "makes you want to cry. Part of it, of course, is the era. Women didn't have the vote. They were totally subjugated to men." For the last eighteen years of her life Zelda was in and out of mental hospitals, and then died when a fire burned down the institution where she was confined. Norris said that Zelda told Scott that being in a mental hospital was better than being with him because at least they allowed her to write. "It was as if she had no right to her own life," she told Shainberg. "Their life together was Scott's material. 'I'm the writer,' he said. 'How dare you use the name Fitzgerald?'" Her own life was nothing like this, Norris said. "Norman has been completely supportive. He's never

held me back at all. He's not that kind of person." She agreed that he had made some dumb statements about feminists, but also felt that feminists had made him into a punching bag. "He's no enemy of women," she said.

Shainberg spent many evenings with the Mailers in Provincetown, especially during the gray, soggy winter months, and observed their exchanges which he said were "sometimes nasty, sometimes playful, often both, as if testing each other's tolerance and patience and, together, how near they can get to the edge of the cliff without going over." Norris said, "He wins a few, I win a few." Mailer said, "Marriage is an excrementitious relationship. One can take all that's bad in oneself and throw it at one's mate. She throws it back at you and you both shake hands and go on with your business—you can't do that when you're out in the world." Mailer often said that people overlooked his playfulness, missed his wink, and Shainberg noted that "even when he's angry, it's not clear how much he means to be taken seriously."

Riding in a limo in Vienna with the Mailers for some sightseeing before the play's performance, Shainberg heard Mailer serve up another metaphor for their verbal tussles: "Norris and I are like two old gym rats. Fighting is our hobby." He paused a moment, and then gave a demonstration:

When you're my age and you've been married as long as I have, your wife can have half your IQ and twice your rage and you still argue like equals.

Did you say half?

Well, maybe 55%

Fuck you, Norman.

Fuck you too, baby. You act like my older sister. Christ, I've got to be the only 80-year-old in the world who's treated like a six-year old. When I leave you, I'll say it's 'cause you have frustrated my late adolescence.

If you leave me, who'll arrange for your wheelchair at the airport?

Shainberg became concerned, but then an expression, half-grin, half-sowl, appeared on Mailer's face.

What happened to wild man Mailer, the gent who butted heads in bars and got into boisterous scrapes on television? "Well," Mailer said, "he finally ran into a woman who was exactly his equal, which I think is very important. People only get domesticated when they meet their equals."

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Juggling projects was by now habitual for Mailer, and between performances of the play, he continued working on the Hitler novel, as well as working on still another Schiller project. In February 2001 Robert Hanssen, a longtime FBI agent with an unblemished record, was arrested for passing classified information to the Russians in exchange for cash and jewels. He was only the third FBI agent ever to be accused of spying. Hanssen was a devout Catholic and member of Opus Dei, a conservative institution founded in 1928 on the principle that rank-and-file members of the Church could attain holiness while leading humdrum lives. The father of six who brought his family to Mass every Sunday at the same church attended by FBI Director Louis Freeh, Hanssen had been passing secrets to the Russians for 15 years. What made the situation of larger interest was the fact that Hanssen's job at the FBI was counterintelligence, and one of his

responsibilities was to design a plan to ensnare a mole inside the FBI—himself. Mailer could hardly ignore the story of a man who gave the following description of his secret life to his Russian handlers: “I am either insanely brave or quite insane. I’d answer neither. I’d say, insanely loyal. Take your pick. There is insanity in all the answers.”

✓ ^{asked} Schiller-enlisted Mailer to write the script for a miniseries on the case, but unlike the O.J. Simpson teleplay where Mailer worked from Schiller’s book, the Hanssen project required travel and research. In the months following the arrest, Mailer and Schiller again took to the road, this time to interview people associated with the man responsible for what former FBI Director William Webster described as “possibly the worst intelligence disaster in U.S. history.” They traveled around the U.S. and to London and Moscow to speak with family members, Russian and U.S. intelligence agents who had worked with Hanssen (including his first Russian handler), his closest friends, Catholic priests and one of the psychiatrists who interviewed him after his arrest. The two people they most wanted to interview were Hanssen and his wife Bonnie. Mailer wrote to her in April:

No one can understand what you have had to contend with these past days, and I recognize that this letter is one more imposition. Nonetheless, I believe I have acquired some understanding of the complexity of the human spirit over the years, and I have learned not to sit in quick judgment. As matters stand now, I will be writing a screenplay for CBS. It will not be cheap or sensational. By all the accounts of the people to whom we have spoken already, your husband possesses a mind that is complicated and second in intelligence to few others. That is the way I will present him in the teleplay.

He ended by saying that he would do his best to protect her privacy, and would not "go at the story like a journalist who has a deadline to meet and so lives with the temptation to distort the material in order to excite his reader's attention." Because the Hanssens later signed plea-bargain agreements with the Justice Department, Mailer and Schiller were unable to interview them.

✓ Mailer was in Provincetown working on the teleplay on September 11, 2001 when ^{he learned that} ~~the~~ first plane crashed into the first tower. ^{his daughter} His daughter Maggie, who was staying at the Brooklyn apartment directly across ~~the East River~~ ^{across} from the World Trade Center, called him. She was ^{the disaster} "terribly affected" by it, he said. Like millions of others, he watched television constantly for a couple of days. "That only happens a few times in your life," he said. "Jack Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy. Martin Luther King. Maybe ten times." His first reaction was to feel left out: "Being up in Provincetown, 300 miles away, the bit of blood that's still journalistic felt wistful."

Right after the disaster, Mailer called the WTC "an architectural monstrosity," and offered the opinion that if no one had been killed "a lot of people would have cheered to see the towers destroyed." He went on to say that the terrorists who carried out the attack were "brilliant." To do such a thing required courage, but most Americans were convinced that the act was carried out by "blind, mad fanatics who didn't know what they were doing." It was time to "take a calm look" in order to understand what motivated a mission of such horrific destruction. In a second telephone interview, he said that most Americans didn't understand that in many countries, Americans were seen as "cultural oppressors," who bring in restaurants like McDonald's. "We put up our high rise buildings until the meanest, scummiest capital in the world will nonetheless have a ring of high-rise hotels and buildings around their airports. A lot of

people resent it profoundly." If the U.S. did not recognize the damage caused by its "huge, profit-making way of life," he concluded, "We are going to be the most hated nation on earth."

✓ Mailer's remarks were thought to be unpatriotic by some conservative bloggers and commentators, but an upsurge of flag-waving after 9/11 was precisely what he feared, seeing it, as always, as the harbinger of some mutation of fascism. A year later in a long interview with Dotson Rader, he expanded on his comments. He recalled that at the recent Fourth of July parade in Provincetown a young man tried to give him a small American flag. Mailer shook his head and the man walked away. "But I was furious with myself afterwards for not saying, 'You don't have to wave a flag to be a patriot.'" In the U.S., he said, "[I]t's as if we're playing musical chairs, and don't get caught without a flag or you're out. Why do we need all this reaffirmation? It's as if we're a 300 lb. man who's 7 ft. tall, superbly shaped, absolutely powerful, and every three minutes he's got to reaffirm that his armpits have a wonderful odor."

A few months later when Mailer was in Vienna for the play, he was awarded the Honorary Cross for Science and Art, First Class, the highest honor Austria can give to an artist. The speaker on the occasion, Günter Nenning, one of the founders of Austria's Green Party, pointed to the merits of Mailer's brand of patriotism:

We small Austrians have a very clear position towards your great America. We are always for America and always against America. Always for America because we want to be protected and because, in the global clash of civilizations, we belong after all to the West. Always against America because in our central European souls, there is a lot of arrogance coupled with anger and envy. It is therefore a great relief when Mailer shoulders our anti-American burden because

you can't be more anti-American than this great American. Norman Mailer has a European concept of patriotism: he loves his country not how it is but how it should be.

The 9/11 attack, followed by President Bush's decision to launch the Iraq War, revitalized Mailer's energies as a Jeremiah after his interest in national issues had flagged somewhat during the Clinton years. He would publish two polemical books focused on the arrogance of American wealth and imperialistic ambitions: *Why Are We at War?* in 2003, and *The Big Empty* (with his son John Buffalo) in 2006.

The Hanssen teleplay was completed by November 2001, at which time Schiller decided to write a nonfiction narrative based on Mailer's script, adding more information from other sources. It was published the following May as *Into the Mirror: The Life of Master Spy Robert P. Hanssen*, and was another best seller for Schiller. The miniseries, which was well-received, was broadcast on CBS in two parts on November 10 and 17, with William Hurt as Hanssen and Mary-Louise Parker as his wife.

✓ Mailer was paid \$250,000 for the teleplay, and the income enabled him to keep up with his huge monthly nut, approximately \$50,000. The Hitler novel was years away and Mailer felt obliged to come up with a book for Random House—it had been four years since *The Time of Our Time*—and in early 2002, he began to think seriously about a project Lennon suggested to him. ✓ Mailer's insights and anecdotes about the craft of writing were scattered in several of his books, in prefaces and introductions to the books of others, in uncollected interviews, recordings of television programs, and in master classes and talks he had given. "Presented with the cache," Mailer wrote in the acknowledgements to the resulting book, "I began to see that the form of a

legitimate work was present, barely visible, but with the unmistakable heft of a book." In early February 2002, he began to delineate the contents of what would be *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing*.

On February 10, just as he was beginning, he received word that Jack Abbott, who had been denied parole in 2001, had committed suicide. Michael Kuzma, who had advised Abbott in a lawsuit against the State of New York about a beating he had received in prison two years earlier, said that he was not satisfied that he had killed himself. A few weeks earlier, Abbott had told him that he was worried about his safety. Abbott was discovered hanging from a sheet and a shoelace in his cell. Bill Majeski questioned whether it was suicide. "Everyone hated him," he said. His sister, Frances Amador, was also dubious about whether he killed himself. "But it's not something you can prove," she said. Abbott's ex-wife, Naomi Zack, noted that Abbott had an eye disease and dental problems, which may have been factors. He tried to kill himself at least twice before he died, she said.

The widow of Richard Adan, when informed of Abbott's death said, "I am happy he will not kill again." In a 1990 court suit, Mrs. Adan was awarded \$7.5 million in damages, to be paid out of Abbott's royalties from his two books, although the actual amount she received was approximately \$115,000. Mailer, who had not corresponded with Abbott since 1986, issued a statement: "His life was tragic from beginning to end. I never knew a man who had a worse life. What made it doubly awful is that he brought a deadly tragedy down on one young man full of promise and left a bomb-crater of lost possibilities for many, including most especially himself." Abbott left a suicide note, but its contents have never been disclosed.



Norris' father had a heart condition, and in the spring of 2002 began to decline. She flew to Arkansas several times to help her mother, usually accompanied by either Matt or John. On July 21, after a long hospital stay, James Davis died. After the funeral, Norris tried to convince her 83-year-old mother to move to Provincetown, but Gaynell refused. She had diabetes and didn't drive; she had never written a check, and was afraid to be alone at night. Norris looked after her long distance. After Gaynell broke her ankle four months later Norris got her to agree, after considerable cajoling, to come to Provincetown. Norris was now driving her husband, her mother and herself to doctor's appointments in Boston and Hyannis, as well as shopping, cooking and running the house. Mailer, who would be 80 in a few months, rarely drove any more. Gaynell was miserable, and wanted to return to Arkansas. She and Mailer were usually cordial, but it was "like they were from different planets," Norris said. Depressed and lonely, Norris' mother, a devout Baptist, found almost everything on television to be sinful and repugnant, and "did nothing all day except sit and read in a chair tucked into a small room off the living room, the black ink of her mood seeping out all around her."

Norris wanted to write, but was overwhelmed. "A part of me," she wrote, "sometimes wished I could just give in and become mad rather than have to be the stable force in everyone's life, the one who was always taking care of people, the one who everyone turned to in a crisis. I just wanted to cry and scream sometimes and have someone take care of me, but there was no one who could." Added to her load was a non-paying position as artistic director of the Provincetown Repertory Theater, which she enjoyed but was only able to handle with the help of her production manager, David Fortuna. Mailer, remembering the successful reading of "Don

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 Juan in Hell" he had done with nine years earlier, proposed a benefit performance to aid the always-needy theater. He contacted Vidal to ask him to reprise his role as the Devil. Norris would take the part of Doña Ana, Don Juan's former paramour, Lennon would play the role of her father, the Commodore, and Mailer would be Don Juan, and direct. Vidal accepted immediately and flew in from his home in Rapallo, Italy for rehearsals. Norris thought that Vidal got involved as a way of making up for ^{linking} ~~the review in which he compared~~ Mailer to Charles Manson.

Vidal stayed down the street at a guesthouse, but came to the Mailer's every morning for breakfast. Norris recalled the "wild and wooly week" in her memoir: "Rehearsal all day, some kind of lunch, and dinner, ending with a late night of drinking and verbal sparring between Norman and Gore in our bar. I didn't for the life of me see how Gore was making it so well. He had more energy that all of us combined. We were all exhausted." Lennon recalls dropping Vidal off at the White Horse, watching him pour himself a Scotch nightcap, and then returning in the morning to find him lying fully dressed on his bed with the glass still in his hand. The 77-year-old Vidal popped up and went right back to work.

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 "Don Juan in Hell" is a 90-minute dream sequence in the third act of Shaw's *Man and Superman*. It is often cut from productions of the play, one of Shaw's ^{greatest} ~~finest~~, and performed separately. Mailer trimmed "Don Juan" to 60 minutes, and made further refinements during rehearsal. Vidal knew his part almost by heart, and while he listened politely to Mailer's suggestions, played the role his own way. On the night of the performance, October 12, Vidal, wearing a jacket with a deep-red lining, told Mailer, "Norman, when I walk on that stage, you are going to hear a roar of applause the likes of which you have never heard." The applause was

indeed loud and “the reading flowed and had sparks of brilliance” especially in the Devil’s arguments for the superiority of his abode over the dull place above. The four dissect with every weapon of wit and rhetoric the great philosophical questions, culminating in a masterful set of exchanges between Don Juan and the Devil on the merits of the Life Force. It is brilliant dialogue, perhaps Shaw’s finest. “If you were scoring the bout, it would go to Vidal,” said one reviewer, who called Vidal’s portrayal “flawless.” Mailer agreed that Vidal was terrific, “almost as good as Charles Laughton in playing that role.”

About the same time as the “Don Juan” performance, Mailer submitted the final manuscript of *The Spooky Art*. A party was planned for publication day, and invitations went out to over 200 friends.

You are invited to a party that Norris and Norman Mailer are giving on Friday night, January 31, 2003, to celebrate their joint birthday. (Let it be stated that they were born on the same morning separated by one minute—separated by 26 years.)

The evening will be ready by nine p.m. at the Brooklyn apartment, 142 Columbia Heights, and ought to go for a number of hours. Bring no booze or presents. Prepare no speeches. Dress as you will. Be splendid, surprising, or casual.

On this night, January 31, Norman will be eighty years old. Congratulations and commiserations are in order. His new book, *The Spooky Art* (about writing itself), will be coming out the same day. There are reasonably favorable odds that this will be a good night. Please come.

"The portals of eternity," to use Mailer's phrase, were on his mind, and he spoke more and more about his grave, his will, his epitaph and his physical deterioration. In a letter to his boxing pal, Sal Cetrano, he brought up the question of organ transplants. If modern science could provide us with a new liver, he wrote, "after we'd corrupted the juice out of the old one, then who was going to benefit? Some of the worst and lousiest and richest people on earth, tyrants, tycoons and so forth." There would be no opportunity, to "look forward to some horrible old bastard dying." One's approaching death should lead to "the most serious meditation one could ever engage in," a process that would be disrupted by the possibility of "popping in new organs."

I tell you Sal, I get nervous about the possibilities of human nature even making it through the next century. We're just too fucked up, too determined to take over the savvy, the realm of genius of the Creator. I expect it's because we're prodigiously dissatisfied after the 20th Century with His or Her inability to come to our aid in times of terrible historic stress, but then, none of these liberals out there ever seem to recognize that the Devil may be just as powerful as God, and you can't lay blame on the first party who is probably doing the best He or She can do under these dreadfully parlous circumstances.

Showing the powers of the Evil One, as the Devil is referred to in *The Castle in the Forest*, as he and other evil spirits wander through the world seeking the ruin of souls—Hitler's ^{first in line} in particular—would be one of the chief preoccupations of the novel, and Mailer was perfectly willing to believe that organ transplants were a demonic activity. He was making good progress on the novel, losing only a few months to assemble *The Spooky Art*. In between performances of "Zelda, Scott and Ernest," in the fall of 2002, he and Norris had driven across Germany to

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 Vienna, accompanied by their Austrian friends, Hans and Freidl Janitschek, stopping to see the
 concentration camp at ^{Dachau} ~~Dachau~~, Hitler's ^{retreat} ~~mountain retreat~~, Berchtesgarden, and locales in Upper
 Austria where he had lived as a boy, which would be the main setting of the novel.

Several weeks after they returned Norris went for a checkup, and found that her cancer
 had returned. The birthday party was canceled. She had the new tumors removed surgically, and
 a port was implanted in her abdomen. A strong drug was dripped into the port and she rolled
 over ^{and over} in her bed so that it would bathe her intestines. This went on for several weeks and
 exhausted her. Her sons and friends helped her, but her husband, she said, "pretty much left me
 to myself."

Cancer had always been Norman's metaphor for evil, and now here was his wife,
 suffused with it. Was it his fault? Had he given it to me? It weighed on him,
 tormented him, and caused him to stay away from me. He moved into the
 bedroom down the hall, which hurt me at first, but the luxury of having my own
 bathroom and my own TV compensated.

Her weight dropped to 103, and for a time she had to wear a colostomy bag. She joked about it,
 telling her friends that she was going to "design a 'Bag Bag,' in all different colors and fabrics,
 so people could wear them outside their clothing," instead of hiding them. Mailer helped by
 doing some of the cooking, but he was too far removed from the family's finances to aid there.
 He was having chest pains, but refused to see his doctor in Boston, and began "popping
 nitroglycerine tablets like they were candy." Gaynell was still in a slough of despond, especially
 when she realized that she would not be returning to Arkansas. Aurora Huston came for a week,
 as did Christina Pabst, a friend from Actors Studio, and the children filled in as they could.