

Finally, the Mailers decided to hire someone, and settled on a waiter from a local restaurant, Dwayne Raymond, who they found to be both congenial and bright. He would work as cook, personal assistant, and a bit later, typist and researcher. Raymond would also become one of Norris' confidantes. He stayed with the family until Norman died four years later.



The reception given to *The Spooky Art* was surprisingly warm, given the fact that it is an omnium-gatherum containing little original writing. Perhaps some slack was given to the old lion on his 80th birthday. There was some debate about how skillfully Mailer had cobbled together cuttings from over two hundred different sources, including material written or uttered in interviews decades earlier, but most reviewers found the book to be a thoughtful analysis of the psychological aspects of the writing life. Michiko Kakutani, again reviewing the book before almost everyone else, praised the sections on craft—point of view choices and the struggle to create a style—and his “keenly perceptive” comments on the weaknesses of his own books, but found the book overall to be “startlingly” uneven. She compared the book to the blather of a “garrulous raconteur” sitting next to you on a long bus ride, sometimes compelling but also benumbing in his “self-absorption, his defensiveness, his capacity for wacky mumbo jumbo.” Her summation: “Such ridiculous, self-indulgent nattering is just the sort of thing that won Mr. Mailer a reputation as a ‘criminally egomaniacal’ writer in his heyday, and distracted attention from his better work.” For Kakutani, self-effacement stands near the summit of writerly virtues.

Mailer, characteristically, was of two minds about the merits of detachment. Kakutani quotes approvingly his negative stance on the question: “Writers aren’t taken seriously anymore, and a large part of the blame must go to the writers of my generation, most certainly including

myself. We haven't written the books that should have been written. We've spent too much time exploring ourselves. We haven't done the imaginative work that could have helped define America, and as a result, our average citizen does not grow in self-understanding."

Other reviews found merit in Mailer's self-spelunking. Both James Campbell (*Times Book Review*) and Ron Rosenbaum (*New York Observer*) found introspection to be one of the collection's virtues. Echoing the judgments of Harold Bloom and Alfred Kazin, Campbell says that readers go to Mailer's books chiefly "for his alertness to 'every intimation about himself,' which he has expressed with greater vivacity than any contemporary." Rosenbaum says that in *Advertisements for Myself* Mailer "broke ground for every memoirist who's put pen to paper since," and lauds him for "finding a way—in *Armies of the Night* to write about the personal and the metaphysical, the personal and the ideological, and even the personal and the *theological*." Whenever Kakutani cast a backward glance over Mailer's work, she moved briskly when she came to *Armies*. In this review, she limits herself to calling it, rather blandly, "ground-breaking journalism." One might ask if she was cognizant of a point made by Kazin in his review of *Armies*: Whitman was just as "outrageous an egoist and actor as Mailer." Like Whitman, Mailer had bouts of narcissism, but then got bored with himself. Then the cycle repeated. The salutary effects of this alternation, which runs through Mailer's work from the late 1950s on, is often overlooked. His self-promotion and his self-effacement, his blather and his brilliance, cannot be separated. As Walter Goodman, a colleague of Ms. Kakutani's, once said of Mailer, "At his most engaging, he manages to be off the wall and on the mark at the same time."

Mailer wrote another letter to the publisher of the *Times*, with copies to Kakutani and fourteen other *Times* writers and editors, complaining about her consistently early reviews. He

asked for a meeting with her. He also pointed out that she was in error in her review when she said that dates for items in the book were not supplied, since the main text is followed by ten closely printed pages of source notes. The *Times* acknowledged this error in its corrections column, but Kakutani neither acknowledged her mistake nor replied to Mailer's request for a meeting. A few weeks later, he said in an interview that he had a female literary enemy at the *Times* who he described as "a posterior aperture." He would continue to up the ante.

In the same February 20, 2003 interview, Mailer named his other enemy: President George W. Bush. As the world knew, the invasion of Iraq was imminent, and Mailer got stoked up in opposition in a way not seen in the previous decade, a period when "I really didn't have anything to say about America." His uncertainties disappeared with the 9/11 attacks. The nation's guilt over what he called "economic gluttony," and its growing imperial ambitions had been smoldering for years; the 9/11 attacks set off a conflagration. Mailer put aside the Hitler novel, and began giving speeches and interviews and writing a series of anti-war, anti-Bush essays. "I know I'm going to have to pay for it," he said, "but if you don't use freedom of speech, it's like an unused dick. It tends to dwindle."

Invited to address the Commonwealth Club of California, Mailer ^{carefully} ~~did~~ something he rarely ^{did} prepared a speech in advance. He ^{said} ~~say~~ the occasion ^{was} ~~as~~ a great opportunity to give a rousing speech. He drew on some of the rhetoric of *Cannibals and Christians* for his address, titled "Only in America," and also displayed the same empathy for the poor described in *The Gospel*. It opened with an indictment of the "manic money-grab" of the 1990s, something that God did not approve of, he surmised.

For certain, Jesus did not. You weren't supposed to pile up a mountain of moolah. You were obligated to spend your life in altruistic acts. That was one half of the good American psyche. The other half, pure American, was, as always: beat everybody. One can offer a cruel, but conceivably accurate remark: To be a mainstream American is to live as an oxymoron.

Despite the contrived evidence of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, and lack of proof of his collusion with Osama bin Laden, the fears generated by 9/11 were powerful enough for Bush to launch a major war. The attacks gave him license to go to war against evil, a word he used "as a narcotic for that part of the American public which feels most distressed," Mailer said. To flag-waving conservatives, war is the perfect medicine for the nation's ills, Mailer said. Saddam Hussein was an excuse, he argued, for establishing an overwhelming American military presence in the oil-rich Middle East, which was an essential first step in the inevitable struggle for world dominance. "Flag conservatives truly believe America is not only fit to run the world, but we must. Without a commitment to Empire, the country will go down the drain." Mailer was by no means alone in his analysis. Vidal wrote his own little book on American imperialism, and a numerous foreign affairs commentators issued the same warnings. Mailer quoted one of them, Paul Brookman, who said that after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1992, a document came out of the Defense Department that "envisioned the United States as 'a Colossus astride the world, imposing its will and keeping world peace though military and economic power.'"

With a few refinements, "Only in America," was reprinted in the *NYRB* at the end of March and, combined with excerpts from his interview with Dotson Rader on 9/11, and another

interview on the dangers of empire from *American Conservative*, appeared as a 111-page paperback in April 2003. *Why Are We at War?* was reviewed along with Vidal's collection of essays, *Dreaming War: Blood For Oil and the Cheney-Bush Junta*, which came out a few months earlier, and makes many of the same arguments. Both were well-received, at least on the left-liberal side, and Mailer's made the paperback best seller list. After witnessing the President's triumphant arrival via Navy jet on the deck of an aircraft carrier where he announced, prematurely, the end of major combat operations in Iraq, Mailer shifted from a geopolitical to a psycho-political stance in his attacks on Bush.

In a *NYRB* essay titled "The White Man Unburdened" (nod to "The White Negro"), Mailer points to white male insecurity as one of the buttresses of Bush's war. A successful effort in Iraq would provide "psychic rejuvenation" to those white males who were "spiritually wounded" by 9/11, Mailer wrote. White males had been taking "a daily drubbing over the last thirty years. For better or worse, the women's movement has had its breakthrough successes and the old, easy white male ego has withered in the glare." Rooting for white sports heroes was no longer the same, unless you were a fan of tennis, ice hockey, skiing, golf and a few other sports. "Black genius now prevailed" in football, basketball, boxing and a lot of baseball, "and the Hispanics were coming up fast; even the Asians were beginning to make their mark." But white American could still root for "an extraordinarily good, if essentially untested, group of armed forces, a skilled, disciplined, well-motivated military." The military could prove to be "quintessential morale-builders to a core element of American life"—the average American male who "had very little to nourish his morale since the job market had gone bad." If watching your

favorite sports teams was not what it used to be, then tune in to the war—"sanitized but terrific." Mailer's invective had not been as good since he went after L.B.J.

"I'm still trying to keep on working on a big novel," Mailer wrote in August 2003. "The worse thing about Bush at times—from my point of view—is how much time he consumes writing about him and his gang." Giving interviews, writing op-ed essays and letters to the editor kept Mailer occupied through much of 2003. He and Norris also did a third benefit for the Provincetown Theater, a staged reading of excerpts from *Long Day's Journey into Night* at the Provincetown Town Hall. Mailer was James Tyrone, a noted actor famous for playing the leading role in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, an adaptation of Dumas' novel. Mailer enjoyed being the overbearing father who spoke with "a touch of the very edge of an Irish accent." He was joined by Norris as Tyrone's wife, Mary, a morphine addict, with Stephen and John Buffalo as the Tyrone brothers, Jamie and Edmund, and Kate as the maid Cathleen. The one-night performance on August 15 went off flawlessly—although Stephen, an accomplished actor, had some boisterous disagreements with his father about the way Mailer cut the play—and the Mailers raised another slug of money for the theater. Norris resigned as artistic director after the performance in order to work on *Cheap Diamonds*, the sequel to *Windchill Summer*, in which her heroine moves to New York City and begins a modeling career.

Another project was a collection of approximately 100 captioned head drawings, "droons," which were interspersed with poems from his 1962 collection, *Deaths for the Ladies*, and a few new ones. Mailer kept Raymond busy for three months printing out various page layouts and cover designs for the softbound volume of 276 pages, titled *Modest Gifts: Poems and Drawings*. The cover consisted of the title and a five-stroke sketch of Norris' features which also

could be seen as birds in flight. Mailer often studied the formation flying of a flock of pigeons that swooped around his house and over the harbor. He remarked more than once that the flock's movements were so acrobatically precise that the pigeons must be inhabited by the spirits of departed Army Air Force pilots. Mailer insisted that there be no publicity campaign for the collection, published on October 23, and it was hardly noticed.

✓ Mailer also agreed to a series of conversations with Lennon about his theological ideas and beliefs, and over the last half of 2003, they taped three of them. His only proviso was that he not be given questions beforehand so that his answers could be spontaneous. "Improvisational," he said, "is still my favorite word." The interviews would continue every few months until mid-2005 when they had exhausted the subject. Mailer thought it might be a good book to appear after he "got on the bus," the euphemism used by family and friends to refer to his demise. But he would change his mind ~~about this later~~, as boarding time neared.

In September two men that Mailer admired, Elia Kazan and George Plimpton died.

✓ Mailer wrote a statement for Kazan's memorial but did not attend. He did attend the one for Plimpton at St. John the Divine in Manhattan. Philip Roth also attended. He later transferred his memory of Mailer's appearance to a character in his novel, *Exit Ghost*:

Guy's eighty now, both knees shot, walks with two canes, can't take a stride of more than six inches alone, but he refuses help going up to the pulpit, won't even use one of the canes. Climbs this tall pulpit all by himself. Everybody pulling for him step by step. The conquistador is here and the high drama begins. The Twilight of the Gods. He surveys the assemblage. Looks down the length of the

nave and out to Amsterdam Avenue and across the U.S. to the Pacific. Reminds me of Father Mapple in *Moby-Dick*. I expected him to begin 'Shipmates!' and preach upon the lesson Jonah teaches. But no, he too speaks very simply about George. This is no longer Mailer in quest of a quarrel, yet his thumbprint is on every word. He speaks about a friendship with George that flourished only in recent years—tells us how the two of them and their wives had traveled together to wherever they were performing a play they'd written together, and of how close the two couples had become, and I'm thinking, Well, it's been a long time coming, America, but there on the pulpit is Norman Mailer speaking as a husband in praise of coupledness. Fundamentalists creep, you have met your match.

After the service, Mailer headed for the men's room. "Urination had become one of my preoccupations," he said. As he was cranking along on his canes he saw Roth, with whom he'd had "an edgy relationship for thirty of forty years." Roth asked him where he was going in such a hurry. Mailer told him, and added, "Let me warn you, when you get to my age, you're going to be looking around for telephone booths in which you can relieve yourself." That time had already arrived, Roth informed him. "Well, Phil," he said, "you always were precocious." It was the only time they had ever laughed together, Mailer said. He attributed the warm moment to Plimpton's spirit. He had liked George enormously, admiring the way he moved with ease through such a range of projects and pursuits—bird watching, an oral biography of Capote, acting in films, fireworks consultant, comic essays—while managing to edit a leading literary quarterly for a half-century. After the memorial Mailer wondered aloud about how much time he still had, considering all his ailments, if someone with George's vigor could go at 76.

Ψ Ψ Ψ

Every year, the Mailers spent less time in New York and more in Provincetown, and the children, grandchildren and friends visited there in all seasons, not just the summer as in earlier years. By the summer of 2003 five of Mailer's children had married (Susan, Danielle, Betsy, Kate and Stephen), and produced eight grandchildren. They all visited regularly, as did Al and Barbara, her son Peter, and other members of the extended family. The increase in visits was prompted to some extent by the fact that Mailer was 80 and had a weakening heart. Susan recalled her father during this period:

✓ He was in dire need of care, felt lonely, but was too proud to acknowledge it. During that period he made more phone calls than he ever had, he who hated speaking on the phone! He actually asked us to visit him, two or three times, when he called us in Chile. As I write this I'm sad Marco and I didn't visit more often. Those last four years, his overall mood changed, he had more time for his children, and especially, was more in need of us, something he'd kept well hidden before. We, his older children, have commented among us how he finally became the gentle, accessible dad we had wanted in our childhood. He told me many times during this period that he now enjoyed being with his kids and having family dinners almost more than anything else.

↓ his friends in
The Mailers also opened their home to the Norman Mailer Society, formed in 2003, which met every fall in Provincetown with 100-plus people attending every year from 2004-2007. They invited the keynote speaker for lunch every year. Neil Abercrombie, a Democratic congressman from Hawaii (now governor of that state), spoke in 2004. He had written his Ph.D.

thesis on Mailer, and they had been friends for decades. Ed Doctorow, who was one of the editors of *An American Dream*, was the 2005 speaker, and William Kennedy spoke in 2006. Mailer thought it would be gauche to listen to speeches and panels about him and his work, so he had never attended any of the conference events, save the closing party. Kennedy had met Mailer in 1968 when he was editing *Maidstone*, and written a warm review of *Beyond the Law*. They saw each other many times in the '80s—at P.E.N. meetings, fundraisers at the New York Public Library, and at the Actors Studio. Mailer introduced him to Paul Newman who wanted to play Francis Phelan in the film version of Kennedy's Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *Ironweed*, but Jack Nicholson had already had sewn up the role. Newman was a bit too cerebral for the role, Kennedy said, "and he didn't look like a bum. Jack had a magical way of transforming himself into the slouch of a bum." Nicholson was nominated for an Oscar for his portrayal, which Mailer admired. The two couples enjoyed each other's company.

X / For his keynote, Kennedy wrote a half-comic, half-serious dialogue ^{among} between him, his uncle 'Billy,' an unnamed interviewer and Mailer. When he learned that the Mailers didn't plan to be at the luncheon where he would read it, he quickly cajoled them into attending. Mailer said it would be like Huck Finn listening to the eulogies at his own funeral, but Kennedy told him he would regret missing the jokes. The Mailers came and laughed as hard as everyone else did at Kennedy's piece, "Norman Mailer as Occasional Commentator in a Self-Interview and Memoir." Toward the end of the dialogue, Mailer notes that American novelists have failed to do the imaginative work of defining America, and Kennedy responds, using Mailer's published words:

Kennedy: I soon realized I wasn't up to the task and throttled down to the individual, for instance in a novel about a pool hustler very like my favorite uncle.

I called him Billy Phelan and he comes to a crisis during a political kidnapping when he refuses to be an informer. If I may, I'd like to invite Billy into this conversation, buy him a drink. Will you have a drink, Billy?

Billy Phelan: The last time I refused a drink I didn't understand the question.

Interviewer: I think we should get back to the serious novel.

Norman: The serious novel begins from a fixed philosophical point—the desire to discover reality—and it goes to search for that reality in society, or else must embark on a trip up the upper Amazon of the inner eye.

Kennedy: What I take home from that remark is that the novel's choices are scope versus self. Norman also says Hemingway and Faulkner both gave up scope.

Norman: their vision was partial, determinedly so; they saw that as the first condition for trying to be great—that one must not try to save. Not souls, and not the nation. The desire for majesty was the bitch that licked at the literary loins of Hemingway and Faulkner: The country could be damned. Let it take care of itself.

Kennedy: I remember a critic panning a self-absorbed novelist and saying rather neatly that literature wasn't about the self, but what came home to the self through experience. Norman has written extensively about the *self*, about *writing*, about the self, and *against* writing about the self. Norman seems to have written about every choice a human being can make. [. . .]

Interviewer: Norman has Hitler as a character in his new novel. No narcissism there.

A year later, at the Institute for Writers at SUNY-Albany, Mailer read from *The Castle in the Forest*, and engaged in a dialogue with the audience. During the visit, the Kennedys hosted a reception for Mailer, as described in the "Mailer Log":

Kennedy was a great host and hosted a cocktail party at his city house, the Albany row house where Legs Diamond was shot in 1931. NM talked about the problems of writing the sequel to Castle, the largest being the vast amount of material to be covered. He wants to write about Hitler as a struggling student-artist in Vienna, about his affair with his cousin and her mysterious death, about the events after the 1932 seizure of power when Hitler outmaneuvered all the experienced politicians of Europe, and of course the war, the concentration camps and his suicide in the bunker. He offered one possibility for handling all this and more: move to Russia and Rasputin, using Dieter's time there as a way of being able to avoid chronicling every major milestone in Hitler's life. He explained that he thought of doing something like this with Montague in the un-written sequel to Harlot's Ghost.

Mailer was reading biographies of Grigory Efimovich Rasputin, Czarina Alexandra's confidante, and had become fascinated with the divisions in his psyche. Asked what the good-evil split was in the Mad Monk, he said, "Fifty-fifty, and that is why he is so interesting to me."

✓ Dick and Doris Kearns Goodwin were also regular visitors to Provincetown. Whenever either of the Mailers had to go to Boston for medical work, they invariably stayed at the Goodwin's home in Concord, 20 miles outside of Boston. Dick and Doris were dinner

conversationalists of some repute, and the Mailers loved to hear Dick talk about the Kennedy White House, Castro and Che Guevara, and Doris' tales of interviewing L.B.J. at his Texas ranch in his final years. Mailer's opinion of Johnson improved after reading her book, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, based on her extensive interviews with the former president. Mailer relished her account of how L.B.J. carried on long conversations with "delicate Kennedyites" while sitting on the toilet. Her book, Mailer said, "was very densely written, sort of like Dreiser," which pleased her as Dreiser was one of her favorite authors.

Goodwin said she loved talking to Mailer. "I felt he respected women. One time he gave me the nicest compliment in the world. He said, 'You're not the smartest person I ever met; you're not the nicest person I ever met, but you're the smartest nicest person I ever met.' I thought it was great." She likes to tell the story of one memorable Mailer visit. In the morning when they sat down for breakfast, after an enjoyable dinner the night before, Mailer informed his hosts that there was a problem with the toilet in the guest suite. When Goodwin asked what it was, he said "The water level is high, and when you get old, your balls hang low." If she wanted him to return, she'd have to get it adjusted. The story always brought laughter, even when she told it at Mailer's funeral in Provincetown. "He genuinely liked women," she said. "And he was also a sensual guy. You felt a physical strain that came from him." As for his numerous affairs:

All these women he had the affairs with still care. I think the answer is, perhaps serially, the fact that he loved them. You can't fake that. Women know if you're just using them and I think he never did. He had to fall for someone to be really interested in them. Maybe I'm being too overly positive toward him, but my guess would be it's one thing to have a whole series of love affairs, whether it's three

days or sixty years, versus just using women for sex. I don't think he did that; at least that would not be the man I knew. He might have done that earlier. He just loved women and that's what is so bad about the rap he got from some of the writing that he did. I felt to the contrary that he totally respected my opinions and feelings on things. He would ask me, often at dinner, what I thought about this or that. There was never a sense of, a moment of, condescension.

Mailer was a fan of Doris' latest book about Lincoln and his cabinet:

NM and NCM have both read Doris' book about Lincoln, Team of Rivals. He told me how much he likes the language, written and spoken, of the time. When I asked if he liked he Abe's homespun metaphors, he said no, not particularly. It is the high rhetoric of statesmanship and congressional debate, the speeches and passionate letters about abolitionism that he enjoys. This made me remember that many years ago I asked him what he thought of the Elizabethan Age, with its cast of daring, dashing players: Essex, Raleigh, Marlowe and so on. He said that he much preferred the Victorian Age with ladies in layers of petticoats and corsets, and men in vests and cravats, and went on with glee about the efforts needed to undress and possess the beauties of that time. NM relishes formal (if humorous) rhetoric, long, rolling, Melvillean sentences. He does admire Carlyle and has been compared to him, as well as Spengler, Emerson, Edmund Burke. This love of slightly pompous, slightly humorous, somewhat ponderous prose is just one side of his linguistic identity, but it is perhaps the dominant one.

In 2004 and early 2005, working in Provincetown, Mailer made steady progress on *The Castle in the Forest*. He had no desire to travel, but he needed the speaking fees to supplement the monthly payments from Random House. Norris was not strong enough to travel with him, and so either one of his sons or Lennon accompanied him to gigs at the University of South Florida, Southern Illinois University, the 92nd Street Y in New York, Harvard (where he spoke to the Neiman Fellows), Weber State University, and Wilkes University. At this last school, he accepted the position of Chair of the Advisory Board for a new graduate creative writing program, met with students, and had a few discussions with the director, Bonnie Culver, about the program. He was still fuming about Bush and the Iraq War, now in its second year, and wrote a number of additional pieces on American arrogance and greed. Three of them, one each in *Playboy*, *New York* and *Stop Smiling*, were conversations with John Buffalo, who came up with the idea of enlarging them into a book that would look at a range of topics: politics, sex, God, boxing, morality, poker, George Bush and the war.

John Buffalo and Michael accompanied their father to Toronto where he went in the summer of 2004 as a boxing consultant on the film *Cinderella Man*, based on the career of James Braddock, the heavyweight champ in the mid-1930s. Before the trip Mailer read up on Braddock, and watched old footage of his fights. Ron Howard, the film's producer, sat down with Mailer and listened to his analysis of Braddock's bout with Max Baer, whom he defeated for the championship in June 1935 at Madison Square Garden. A 10-1 underdog, Braddock won in a unanimous decision. He was able to take several hard blows from the younger champion and keep coming. "Baer got spoiled," Mailer said, "he wasn't used to getting hit."

For the film, Crowe trained hard for a year at his training camp in Australia, boxing and weight-lifting, to get ready for the role. He and Mailer, according to Michael, got along well. After one scene was shot, Crowe was sweating and took off a black fleece vest he was wearing, one with the name of Crowe's training camp in Australia stenciled on it. He gave it to Mailer, who brought it home. He wore it with dark sweatpants and Uggs, Australian sheepskin boots with fleece on the inside that were comfortable and required no socks—one less time-waster, he remarked—and yet magically muffled foot odor.

Mailer was well paid—\$100,000—for his advice on the boxing sequences, but his name is not in the credits. When Raymond mentioned this to him, he said that it didn't matter as long as it was on the check. Asked what he contributed to the film, he said he thought he provided some nuances, although the film was edited in such a way as to make the fight scenes all “slam-bang, blood and socko punches.” Mailer liked Crowe, who reminded him of Brando. “He’s suspicious and mercurial, but genuine,” he said. For the next three years, he wore the vest that Crowe gave him nearly every day, parting with it reluctantly for washing

The money came at a good time, but it was a stopgap. Mailer was still locked in what he called “the bowels of cash flow,” and needed a new paying project every few months. In the fall of 2004, he agreed to appear with his Stephen on an episode of “The Gilmore Girls,” a long-running comedy series about a single mother and her daughter living in Connecticut. Stephen was cast as a reporter, and his father played “Norman Mailer.” Both were paid well. A few years earlier, he and Stephen appeared in the pilot for a series called “Street Time,” directed by his friend Richard Stratton. Mailer was “Saul (Two Canes) Cahan,” a Jewish mobster just released from 27 years in prison who has to report regularly to his parole officer, played by Stephen. One

cast member said that Mailer was convincing because "he has a certain rough kind of look about him—his voice, his mannerisms." Mailer loved playing an old wise guy, and lapsed into the role easily. He would put on his sunglasses, look you up and down slowly, and say in a leathery voice, "Who the fug are you?"

Financial relief arrived in the spring of 2005 when the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas-Austin agreed to purchase Mailer's archive. The deal was brokered by Glenn Horowitz, a New York rare book dealer who had sold other large collections—for example, Don DeLillo's and the Watergate notebooks of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein—to Texas. Self-described as a "combination of a scholar and grifter," Horowitz got \$2.5 million for Mailer's papers to be paid over six years. The delivered archive contained 500 cubic feet of material, including manuscripts and personal papers from Mailer's childhood through the early 2000s, and approximately 50,000 letters. It is the largest author collection in the Center's extensive holdings. Mailer became friendly with the center's long-time director, Tom Staley, and made two trips to Austin in connection with the transfer. In addition to the price, Mailer said he liked the idea of his papers being in Texas because of his wartime service with the 112th R.C.T. ~~R.C.T.~~

As the deal sending his papers to the Ransom Center was nearing completion, the Mailers had a visitor. John Hemingway, grandson of Ernest Hemingway, and son of Gregory, whom Mailer had met on several occasions, visited him in Provincetown, to talk about a book he was writing about his family. Mailer had given a blurb to Valerie Hemingway, John's step-mother, for her book, *Running with the Bulls: My Years with the Hemingways*, calling it "one of the best books on Hemingway that I have read." Valerie had been Ernest's secretary, and later had been

X married to Gregory for 20 years. Mailer and John got along famously, and the wine flowed that evening. In a letter to Anne Barry about the evening, he said, "The sad truth is I'm still at my best when half loaded." He said he over-served himself with Grappa, a very strong Italian brandy that they drank "in honor of Hemingway."

I said to Norris the next day, 'If you ever see me go near Grappa again, just pick up the nearest heavy object and knock me out with it because the effect will be the same and at least it will save my digestion from having to deal with Senor Grappa again.' Anyway, my sense of the ridiculous as you can see remains firm and complete. Only an eighty-two year old would tell drinking stories about his own drinking.

John Hemingway tried the Grappa too, and his hangover was so severe, Raymond said, that he had to be helped into the cab that took him to the Provincetown airport.

He ended his letter to Barry, by noting that after nearly five years of work, he had completed 700 pages of *The Castle in the Forest*. He had interrupted work on it several times, but he also wrote much more slowly than in the past. "I used to pride myself on the white heat of my first drafts," he said. But now they took more time ^{as he} and trimmed and polished. "I work them over in return for losing that early speed and smoke and flash and dash. The moment a sentence disappoints me slightly I start looking at what's wrong with it." He was also working with John X / on *The Big Empty*, ~~putting out redundancies and adding new material~~, and continuing the theology interviews.

X

During his first visit to the University of Texas in late April 2005, Mailer met Douglas Brinkley, a prolific young historian who was interested in both politics and literature. He wrote a story in the *New York Times* about the sale of Mailer's papers, and followed up a few months later with a long profile in *Rolling Stone*, "The Last Buccaneer." Brinkley uses the occasion of Mailer's April speech at the University attacking Bush and the Iraq War—a "steppingstone to taking over the rest of the world"—as the launching pad for a brisk overview of Mailer's career. The day after Mailer's speech they went to lunch and Mailer went at Bush again, criticizing his use of American English. "He has dumbed himself down," he told Brinkley.

After disposing of Bush, Mailer talked about literature. He said that Kerouac's *On the Road* was a classic that "captured something hard about late adolescence—the thing about being free enough to travel and take your adventures where they come." And he talked about his old anti-war comrade, the late Allen Ginsberg. In 1979, Mailer was at a National Arts Club event where Ginsberg was the speaker. "He was a little nutty," Mailer said. "You never knew when Allen the Hun would take over."

A number of old ladies were running the club, and they were very sweet. So what did Allen do? He came to the club and gave a loud, absolutely wild homosexual rant—chanting over and over again, 'Oh, the cocks I've sucked!' And the head Arts club woman, I'm sitting next to her. And she was making small screaming sounds, like gasping for air. I don't know if Allen gave her two years of life or took five off. For a humanist, he sure had a gift for being inhumane.

✓ A discussion followed of *The Gospel According to the Son* and Kakutani's review of it, which led Mailer, in a moment of metaphorical ineptitude, to call her "a one-woman kamikaze."

to call her,

Except for calling the *Times* critic “a posterior aperture,” Mailer had previously confined himself to writing letters to the publisher of her paper. But his 15-year burn over her harsh reviews (and the putative damage to his book sales), coupled with his own never-to-be-quenched impetuosity, led to the emergence of Norman the Hun; The Beast was back: “She disdains white male writers, and I’m her number-one favorite target. One of her cheap tricks is to bring out your review two weeks in advance of publication.” And, he continues, she can’t be fired because “she’s a threefer.” Brinkley asked him to clarify. “Asiatic, feminist and, ah, what’s the third? Well . . . let’s just call her a twofer. They get two for one. She is a token. And deep down, she probably knows it.” Brinkley is amazed. “Why make a quasi-racist remark about the most powerful book critic in America?” Mailer says that one benefit of being over 80 is that “you can say what you think.”

Kakutani and the *Times* made no comment. But Esther Wu, the president of the Asian-American Journalists Association, wrote a letter of protest to Jann Wenner, publisher and editor of *Rolling Stone* after Brinkley’s profile appeared. She noted that “Asiatic” and “Oriental” were offensive terms to describe Asians and Asian-Americans. And she lambasted Mailer for referring to Kakutani as a “two-fer” on the grounds that it “diminishes the accomplishments of all women and journalists of color.” The tabloids jumped into the dispute, and Mailer obliged them, telling the *New York Daily News* that Wu’s letter was “an excellent example of high-octane political correctness.” Wu countered by saying, “Perhaps if Mr. Mailer were a little more politically correct, he would not be making such racist remarks. Mailer persisted, and tried to shift the argument to Kakutani’s early and “heinously bad” reviews of his books, and WU came back hard on his “character assassination.” Mailer might have folded his tents at this point, but he

continued, telling "Page Six" at the *New York Post* that he felt compelled to remark that "political correctness is toxic to American freedom."

To friends at dinner over the Fourth of July weekend, Mailer said that he had "walked right into it" with his remarks, and acknowledged that his words were poorly chosen. At the time, he said, he had lain in bed writhing in anger at himself, and Kakutani. He wanted her to wake up at three a.m., just as he had, saying "Kill, kill, kill!" He said this with some humor in his voice, but the depth of his anger was clear. Mailer was a good hater. He said that Steve Earlinger, the *Times* Cultural Editor, had given him a commitment that Kakutani would not rush her next review of one of his books into print, but he still intended to keep the pressure on. She may be a power unto herself, he said, but "the *Times* must choose," he said, "between reining her in and pissing off Norman Mailer."

He decided to begin compiling Kakutani's reviews of other white male authors, looking for a pattern. Asked if he would include reviews of some younger writers—Dave Eggers and David Foster Wallace, for example, he said, "WR," which meant "waiting room." In his mind, their literary stature remained to be determined. Over the next several months, he assembled "The Kakutani File," a collection of 39 Kakutani reviews of books by 10 writers (Bellow, DeLillo, Doctorow, Irving, Mailer, McCarthy, Roth, Stone, Updike and Wolfe) over a 12-year period, 1994-2006. By his estimate, 22 of the reviews had been published four days or more before their respective publication days, and ten ^{were} came out 15-30 days early. His books got the worst reviews, with Wolfe, Stone, Irving and Updike doing only slightly better. Bellow, DeLillo, McCarthy and Roth got the best reviews. There was no correlation between the warmth of the review and the date of a book's publication—early reviews were just as likely to be negative as

later ones. But it was clear that Kakutani did like to be out there first. Mailer was uncertain if he should use this survey, and how.

Ψ Ψ Ψ

After a regular heart test on July 13 at Mass General, Mailer was told he needed an operation. His response: "After I finish the novel." He detested the thought of dying on the operating table, and believed that his status in the Hereafter might be enhanced if he was lucid and sharp when he got on the bus. Asked why ^{one's} the state of mind at death was so important, he said, "[I]t's our point of departure, our angle of flight, if you will."

I think at the moment we die, we are the sum of all the good and bad we've done, all the courage and cowardice we've exercised. And so, for example, if we die with a desire to be reborn, I think it means a great deal to God. If you will, it's like reaching into a litter to select a pup, and there's one who catches our eye because he wants us. He is the one we choose to take home. Using that crude analogy, I would say it's important to be ready. After all, that is the one situation we can't simulate, can't preempt.

After a month of nagging by Norris and his family, he agreed to by-pass surgery, and it was scheduled for September 8, ²⁰⁰⁵ The decision to have the operation, he said, made him "automatically five years older" because his ongoing efforts "to stave off old age" were now moot.

John Buffalo was around for most of the summer and he and his father finished work on *The Big Empty*, and turned in the manuscript to Nation Books for publication in February 2006.

John challenged his father in their exchanges, gently but firmly, and this gave the book a modicum of narrative tension as they worked their way through issues of dissent, politics, and the psychology of boxing and poker. Norris wanted to take some photographs of father and son for possible use on the cover, but Mailer had had some dental work done in late August and wasn't ready for the camera yet.

*He has a new set of uppers that don't fit and he is gumming his food with gusto. He looks like an old Irish stevedore out for fish and chowder on Friday night. On the night of September 2 [2005], he got a piece of pot roast in his throat and Marco Colodro had to give him the Heimlich Maneuver. It popped out. The incident made him recall Fig Gwaltney's death by choking, he told me today. Fig, he said, was a flammable mixture of boldness and caution, and was regularly angry with his wife's overweening caution—NM thinks this might have led to the choking. In turn, this made him remember the scene in Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* in which Tallulah Bankhead, playing Regina, lets her husband die by refusing to give him his heart medicine. NM said he saw this from the 55-cent balcony seats in NYC when he was in college. He said he was lucky to see this play, and to see Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Lee J. Cobb in *Death of a Salesman*, back in the late 40s. I asked him if he went backstage to meet Bankhead and he said no, that he was only a young student at the time.*

The whole clan sat on the back porch this morning and talked about Bush and the suffering caused by Katrina and whether it would help or hurt the Democrats. NM was, as usual, quite pessimistic, feeling that the citizenry would not really hearken to the plight of poor blacks, or be willing to criticize the President. The feeling that we are in a watershed period was palpable though. Apparently, NCM sent \$500 to the Red Cross for the victims and NM doesn't like the

Red Cross. A couple of others criticized it too. NM gave a humorous rant in a brogue like James Tyrone in Long Day's Journey. Then NM and NCM did their usual funny faux fight for us with NCM saying what I have heard her say 50 times: "We never fight when others aren't around; Norman just likes to put on a show." With a big toothless laugh showing his eyeteeth, he agreed. Laughter all around.

Before the surgery, he said he had written "three-fourths of a novel," enough of *The Castle in the Forest* for it to be published if he died. He had about 800 pages of manuscript. In the month before the operation, he wrote about 100 pages of notes outlining the so-called "emergency ending" ^{if} in case he didn't make it through surgery, ^{it} They could be appended in edited form to what he had completed. He wanted the novel to end shortly after the death of Hitler's father in 1903, with some additional material on Russia and the dislocations there during WWI. He had already written about the 1896 coronation of Czar Nicholas II at some length, which moved the narrative away from the Hitler family for several chapters. This was done in preparation for Rasputin becoming a major figure in the next volume of what he hoped would be a series of three novels. He said that Rasputin had considerable presence and was loved by many for his healing powers. Indeed, Rasputin is the perfect Mailer character: charismatic and drunken, soulful and carnal, a demonic-saintly figure who moved easily from Gypsy debauch to the Tsar's court.

Mailer had been taking two nitro tablets a day, and recognizing that he could not keep increasing the dosage, ^{had} he agreed to the operation. But he still had reservations. "Having my blood pumped out of me and sloshing around in a machine, running through loops of plastic is an unhappy prospect," he said. The plastic, he continued, might be the reason that Tom Wolfe and Larry McMurtry had become depressed after by-pass surgery. Told that surgery depression

X
 X
 passes after a time, he said, "Yes, but when you're 83 you don't want to lose six months; it's not worth it." The operation would force him to cancel several speaking engagements and turn down a free trip to Russia.

Initially, Mailer was told that he was having a single by-pass operation, but his coronary arteries were more clogged than supposed and he ended up having a quadruple by-pass. The operation was successful and the doctor reported that he had the heart of a 40-year-old—strong muscle. After two weeks in the ICU, he was moved to a rehabilitation facility in Sandwich on Cape Cod. From there he was able to talk to people on the telephone, and made a number of calls. Speaking in a hoarse, excited voice, he said that a tremendous number of new ideas had come to him, especially about spiritual matters. "I'd like to talk about them now," he said, "but talking gets me too excited. I'd only be scraping the rim of the can." The experience had brought him closer to Norris, he said, and he was troubled by how much she worried about him. Two days later, he said that he had gotten into too many bad habits and wanted to eliminate them. "I feel like Scrooge, all my previous life revealed in a flash, along with a desire to change." He was happy to go home in September. His favorite journey used to be the sight of the Brooklyn Bridge after dinner in Manhattan, but now it was "the sight of Provincetown as one rides up over the last rise and there is the Pilgrim Monument in all its subtle presence." From the top of the rise he could also see, to the left, the harbor fronted by beach houses and tourist cabins, with fishing boats at the pier in the distance; to the right salt marshes and lagoons and the peaked sand dunes partly covered with cordgrass, pitch pine and scrub oak. The vista always gave him a lift. Still short of breath, he had to suck on some sort of plastic device—which he loathed—to test his wind. He was counting on the salt air to strengthen his breathing and energize his psyche.

X He told friends who were visiting him in mid-October that while recovering in the hospital, he got into conversations with the staff, especially the nurses. He liked one Irish-American nurse in particular because she didn't keep telling him he was looking better. She said that his recovery was "on the slow side." She was also the nurse who asked if he was married. He told her that he had been married to Norris for 30 years, and the nurse replied that it was probably high time for a "treaty" with his wife, or as she explained it, an agreement to avoid certain sore subjects so as to save time and energy and make life less antagonistic. "When we fight," he said, "it gets personal right away." Norris liked the idea of not discussing certain matters. For example, if he would not make any comments about Women's Lib, then she would not challenge his literary judgments. At some point they "signed" such a pact. As he was discussing the treaty with friends, he said, "Look at me, proud, semi-helpless and opinionated." And then he laughed. His self-depictions were often sardonic.

X ✓ While he was still in rehab, he learned that the National Book Foundation would award him the 2005 Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters on November 16. He said it was coming at the appropriate time, that is, ~~he said~~ after Bellow, Roth and Updike, who in his mind were less controversial. His acceptance speech would be the first thing he would write after he had recovered. For the rest of the year, he intended to rest and read, and did not expect to get back to *The Castle in the Forest* until 2006.

X Recovery was slow at first. He spent a lot of time on his back porch napping and watching the pigeons and gulls maneuver over the low tide flats. In early October, he read a piece in the *Atlantic* by Bernard-Henri Lévy the French writer and public intellectual. Lévy had spent a year travelling around the country, following the footsteps of Tocqueville, who spent two years in America in the 1830s. Shortly before he returned to France, Lévy visited Provincetown

and interviewed Mailer. In the profile, he made several errors, the most important of which was calling Mailer "the most secular of American novelists." When this and other errors were pointed out to Mailer, he was unfazed. It wasn't important, he said, and "Lévy did catch something about me: that I have my mind on eternity." His friend said that the old Mailer would have snapped out a letter to the editor pointing out his long-standing theological interests. Mailer waved it off. "I'm thinking of eternity," he repeated.

But a few weeks later he felt strong enough to give a reading from his work at the Mailer Society conference, along with Norris, Stephen and John. He was pleased that Judith attended the conference, her first visit ever to Provincetown. And on November 11, he and Norris celebrated 25 years of marriage with a dinner with John Buffalo at Front Street, one of their favorite Provincetown restaurants. His breathing had improved somewhat, and he began talking about getting back to the ^{work} ~~novel~~. On November 16, he went to New York to receive the NBA medal from Toni Morrison and give a short speech on the decline of interest in serious novels. "Rarely are good novels good page-turners," he said.

His new editor, David Ebershoff, came to Provincetown around this time to discuss *Castle*. Random House wanted him to extend it at least to 1903, bringing Hitler up to his late teens. Ebershoff recalled that Mailer wanted very much to see the book published, but showed "a little bit of uneasiness about whether he could finish. He didn't say that, but I sensed it." Mailer had long planned to do what Ebershoff wanted, but said to him with false indignation, "You realize what you've just told me is going to give me nine to twelve more months of work?" Ebershoff laughed and said, "Yeah, I do." A more delicate issue was the Russian section.

Ebershoff and everyone who had read the manuscript found the long description of the courtship of Nicholas and Alexandra, and other events leading up to Nicholas' coronation, to be problematic. The narrator, a fallen angel named Dieter, or D.T., leaves young Hitler and spends 100 book pages fomenting confusion in the imperial Russian court. Norris, Lucid and others compared the Russian excursion to the bloated Uruguayan episode in *Harlot's Ghost*. Mailer seemed to be repeating his mistake. Ebershoff also felt that the section wasn't as well-written as the rest of the manuscript. "I didn't feel he had digested his material as well," he said. He seemed to be relying on only "a few sources, rather than a library of sources," which was true. Ebershoff also found it to be "incredibly digressive." He made this point to Mailer in Provincetown and, in early 2006, in New York. Gina Centrello, the president and publisher of Random House, agreed with Ebershoff on the need to cut back the Russian section.

At one meeting with Mailer, she and Ebershoff listed all the qualities of the novel that they admired. Then they told him that there was a section that needed "a little work," which she explained, was "a publisher's euphemism for, 'This section needs to be cut.'"

I barely got the sentence out before Norman jumped in, 'You don't like the Nicholas II section, do you? I know the critics will hate it,' he said.

I nodded sheepishly.

'If I delete it, the book will be more of a page-turner,' said Norman.

X
Feeling encouraged, I responded, 'That's right, Norman, it would be much more of a page-turner.'

Then, with a twinkle in his blue eyes, he announced, 'Gina, I hate page-turners.'

Mailer did trim the section, including many of the love notes exchanged between Nicholas and Alexandra during their courtship. But when he turned in the final manuscript in the spring of 2006, the heart of the Russian material was still there. He thought it was critical to show how Dieter, a major minion of the Evil One, creates the disaster after the coronation at Khodynskoye Pole, a meadow where celebrating peasants were gathered to receive gifts from the Tsar. Over 1,300 people were trampled to death, which ~~cast a pall~~ ^{destroyed} over the festivities. Ebershoff recalled that Centrello still felt strongly that the entire Russian material had to go. She joined him for a final editorial meeting with Mailer. "We went to see him in Brooklyn Heights, for lunch," Ebershoff recalled

and we were talking about the book's publication, but also the Russian section in particular. He said that he had been hearing this, obviously, from me and from you and Norris, and it's been going on for a while, and he knew what we were saying had some merit. And right at the table he said, 'I know what I'm going to do. I'll dare the reader to skip over it. I'll just tell them just turn to page X,' and he said, 'Make sure the copy editor figures out what the page numbers will be, and Adolph Hitler's story will pick up again right there.' It was brilliant. I saw that he

immediately understood what he was doing, not only in terms of the narrative, but the way people might talk about it, and that it could be controversial, and some people would love it because it's kind of a wink. Other people would be infuriated. I thought it was so clever.

Mailer also extended the novel to 1905, two years after the death of Alois, making it a 477-page book, a relatively modest length for him. Publication was set for January 31, 2007, his 84th birthday. He dedicated it to his grandchildren, his grandniece, and his godchildren.



The Big Empty was published on January 24, and while not reviewed widely, it received generally warm notices with a few complaints about some of the conversations being recycled. It also got kudos for the range of topics covered, and the easy back-and-forth between *père et fils*. One of the themes undergirding their conversations is the comparisons, elicited by John, between the post-World-War-Two *Zeitgeist* and that of the period after 9/11. Mailer contrasts the altruism of the earlier generation who created the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe with the greed of global capitalists who are blind to "the real spirit of Jesus." John rarely clashes with his father, except about marijuana, but he does nudge him deftly to expatiate on various matters, including the merits of civil protest.

Another theme woven through the dialogues is a contrast Mailer made in his 2004 Nieman Fellows lecture at Harvard, titled "Myth Versus Hypothesis." The lecture is a careful demolition of the premises for the Iraq War, and the myths that sustained it. President Bush and Vice President Cheney enunciated the myths: "We must war against the invisible kingdom of

Satan,” now manifested in Islamic monsters opposed to all that America, God’s favored nation, holds sacred. Therefore, “Good will overcome a dark enemy.” Opposed to the simplisms of American exceptionalism is the art of hypothesis employed by novelists: “A good novel,” Mailer says, is “an attack on the nature of reality,” a reality that is always changing: “The honor, the value, of a serious novel rests on the assumption that the explanations our culture has given us on profound questions are not profound. Working on a novel, one feels oneself getting closer to new questions, better ones, questions that are harder to answer.” There is no question of novelists actually capturing reality completely—“unless you are Charles Dickens and are writing *A Christmas Carol*.” Novelists *approach* reality; certainties are few and surmises abound. Mailer placed the lecture near the beginning of *The Big Empty*, and the dialectic it endorses sets the tone for the conversations.

In an interview after publication, Mailer spoke of his relationship with John: “As a father of nine, I’ve tried not to have a favorite, but John endangers that position. I’m close to all of my children, but the two of us are extra-close.” Because of his age—more than six years younger than Matthew—John had “the insularity of the single child,” but also had the advantages of a big family. John made the same point in 2012, but went further:

Since the folks have passed, it has become clearer to me that being both an only child, and being the youngest of nine have each played an equal role in my understanding of what the word ‘family’ means. In my estimate, I easily got the best of my dad because he had mellowed some by the time I came around. He was more interested than ever in dedicating time to being a parent. Not that I think he wasn’t a great parent to all nine of us, although some of my siblings may disagree

with me. It's undeniable that he had something different with my mother than he had with his previous wives, and I think it boils down to stability.

Spending more time with his parents than his siblings, right through his 20s, John said, gave him a feeling of security that came from growing up with both parents living with you, something none of his siblings had for as long as he did. "Before mom got sick and dad got really old, but even right up to the very end, you just couldn't ask for better parents than I had." John also spoke of memorable family dinners and the colorful friends who joined them:

Every couple of months Bill Majeski, who was then a P.I., Ivan Fisher the lawyer, Richard Stratton, the former pot smuggler turned writer/magazine editor/TV producer, would all come over for dinner. On these days, my brother Matt would take me aside and say, "Hey Bubba, you know what night it is?" And we both would scream, "CRIME TIME!" Those conversations were amazing. I think that's where a lot of my sense of social justice comes from—hearing about how the penal system works and about how not all cops are good guys and not all criminals are bad guys. In-depth conversations on the moral complexity of the universe. But those evenings were stereotypical of a lot of dinner-time conversations at Norman's table. He would raise philosophical questions and the age you were didn't matter. You had to have your metaphors in good working order and your ideas had to be concise and tight and well phrased or else you got trounced—whether you were seven years old or twenty-seven.

Dinners were "a unique version of dinner theater, where you're not only eating the meal, you're also the show," and everyone at the table felt somewhat elevated, he said. "Their game would be

✕

better than ever before. And one of the reasons why it's so hard living in this world without Norman Mailer is because I never feel as intelligent as I did when I was around him." He could lead you to a conclusion that you were already bound for, but couldn't quite see, John said.

Ψ Ψ Ψ

On May 4, shortly after the final manuscript of *Castle* was in the hands of Mailer's editor, Judith died. A heavy smoker who resisted all entreaties to quit, she had not felt well for a few months. Although she was an extraordinarily intelligent person, she persisted in the belief that smoke killed germs, and was good for her plants. When her friend took her cat from her apartment after her death, it went into ~~nicotine~~ withdrawal outside, and the vet had to put on a nicotine patch. Mailer wrote to Ed McAlice, whose manuscripts Judith had read and critiqued for years, about her passing. McAlice himself was ill with emphysema, and becoming depressed. Mailer commiserated:

Growing old without cracking may be the subtlest of the art forms. Incidentally, while we're on these sad and sour subjects, let me tell you that Judith McNally died over a month ago. We never knew quite of what, she hid her illnesses, but I believe she had cancer of the lungs and cancer of the liver. As you can imagine she left quite a gap behind her. Indeed we had a memorial service for her at my apartment in Brooklyn. I still find it hard to believe. She, like me, despite her intense and often harsh criticisms of your work, had a very high opinion of your talent and thought the real stuff was there. So do I.

Besides most of the Mailer family, many friends also attended Judith's June 8 memorial service, including Bob Lucid. He lauded her Irish wit and unflappable demeanor, describing her as a cross between Thelma Ritter and Bette Davis.

Norris was in and out of the hospital during this period. Mailer wrote to a cousin about her, and said, "She has lost so much weight she looks again as she did many years ago when she was a model and is, if a touch weak, strikingly elegant and fun to look at." Sometimes she and Mailer would drive to Boston together for their medical appointments. Stephen became ill, and had surgery for a bleeding colon just before the Mailers went to New York for Judith's memorial. He came through all right, but his father and Norris were very worried. The night before the surgery, Mailer called Stephen in the hospital. He was in too much pain to talk much, so Mailer just said, "I love you." When he got off, he told Norris that Steve had said the same thing to him. Their relationship was strained at times but the love was always there. The exchange led to a discussion of the way the Hitler family interacted.

Castle is his first family novel, and he said that he planned to hit on this point in pre-publication interviews. The interstices of family life, the grudges and anxieties and hidden agendas, all that nitty-gritty, are delineated beautifully in the novel. The death—euthanasia, really—of the household dog, Luther, brings out a rich cluster of cross-currents in the family, and Klara's mistaken belief that Alois is part Jewish is even richer in its presentation and implications. All this gives NM some hopes of good reviews, and it may do very well. But every Mailer book is tested against his announced aspirations and accomplishments over a half-century. Many reviewers want notches on their guns, want to nail NM in print. The question of how the novel

will be received in Germany was discussed—NM can't decide if they will read it "for exculpation," or see it (and ignore it) as one more finger pointing at the German psyche.

He didn't like any of the initial dust jacket designs, and sketched out a new one. It showed the entrance to a gloomy castle and on the stone lintel was a swastika. He colored it in, and it became the basis for the final jacket. For the German edition, and those in other European countries, the swastika was removed, as it violated the EU law.

With the novel put to bed, Mailer immersed himself in poker. There was a game three or four nights a week, and during the day he read the pile of poker books he had collected. Two of his favorites were Doyle Brunson's *Super System: A Course in Power Poker*, and David Sklansky's *Hold 'em Poker*. He believed that Texas Hold 'em was so popular because it enabled players to put in play buried paranoiac and anti-paranoiac tendencies. When a player surmises that another is bluffing, the former trait is put into play; the latter is a counter-force, akin to cold sober reasoning. He saw the game as a way of toning underused psychic muscles. Asked if Alpha and Omega were also a factor, he said it was too complicated to contemplate because A and O could have both paranoiac and counter-paranoiac tendencies.

When she wasn't too tired, Norris liked to sit in, as did his sister and ^{the} Donna and Mike Lennon. Neighbors like Astrid Berg, Chris Busa and Marty Michaelson also played, as did a local journalist, Anne Wood, and a retired telephone operator, Pat Doyle, whose wry wit Mailer enjoyed. Most of his children played when they were visiting, and some of their spouses. All guests were encouraged to play. It was an open game with a \$20 buy-in so it was rare when someone lost or won \$100. When Mailer's nephew Peter, who played professionally and wrote a

book about being in the World Series of Poker, *Take Me to the River*, showed up for a game, some players groaned. A superb player, he usually walked out as a winner.

In July, a magazine editor heard about Mailer's interest in poker—probably from the chapter on it in *The Big Empty*—and contacted him about doing a piece on the World Series of Poker, a long essay depicting tournament highlights and characters, and presenting his ideas about the lure of the game. "I feel that there is a big poker novel to be written," he said, and was sorely tempted to put off volume two of the Hitler trilogy. His memories of Las Vegas in the 1960s were there to be drawn on, as well his psychological hypotheses. The decision will work itself out over the next three months, he said. He could feel himself declining, and if he had been younger and healthier, there is little doubt that he would have gone west. When someone said that it would be a shame if he dropped the Hitler series, he nodded his head in agreement. "I've been abandoning novels like wives for many years, and I'd like to continue this one."

✓ If *the Castle in the Forest* was successful, he would have another reason to begin the second volume. Kakutani, therefore, was on his mind. He was certain that she would review the novel. He criticized her again in *The Big Empty*, but agreed with John that calling her a kamikaze was a stupid mistake. He noted that she had recently given "hideous" reviews to three authors whose work he admired—Michael Cunningham, John Irving and Cormac McCarthy—and appeared "to have taken a vow to reduce the reputations of the best male American authors." When Douglas Brinkley's book about Hurricane Katrina, *The Great Deluge*, came out in mid-2006, Mailer assumed that Kakutani's review would be negative. But it was a rave. Mailer sent a note to Brinkley congratulating him on the book's reception and noting his amazement: "Kakutani didn't seem to bear a grudge which is hard to believe and it brings out my ultra CIA sense of buried scenarios." Could it be that she had no anti-white male agenda? He wondered.

Ψ Ψ Ψ

Mailer had gotten heavier in the early 2000s. Not much more than five-foot-six, he got up to about 220. But after the surgery, he began to shed pounds as his appetite waned. Even so, walking had become increasingly difficult, and traversing the quarter of a mile to Michael Shay's, his favorite restaurant in town, was hard going. He loved the oysters they served, and ate there several nights a week, especially when Norris was back in New York. Her two sons and most of her step-children were in New York and she wanted to move her mother there. It was a touchy subject with Mailer. Michael had gotten married in 2004, and Matthew and Peter the following year. The number of grandchildren continued to grow. Only John Buffalo and Maggie hadn't yet married. Norris loved spending time with the Mailer clan and her many New York friends, and took special delight in Mattie James, her new granddaughter, but felt guilty about being away from her husband, who much preferred Provincetown. She drove back and forth, six hours each way.

the daughters of Matthew and Salma Sains

The loss of one's upper teeth, Mailer said, was a blow to manhood. He made many trips to the dentist for complicated implant procedures, and for treatment of an infection. He received a huge bill from a New York orthodontist, but had to put off payment until the first check was received from the University of Texas. He didn't like to talk about his health problems in any detail, but couldn't resist occasionally dramatizing his situation, as in this letter to Jim Blake, an architect with whom he had struck up a long-distance friendship. He began with his metaphor of an old freighter trying to make the next port.

X

The feet can go, the knees, the hips—not that they're all gone yet, but they're going—the eyesight, the hearing, the sense of taste, the screwing. I take pleasure in announcing to friends that once I could boast of a seven and a half inch column of silver dollars, but now I'm down to half a roll of dimes. This, believe it or not, inspires my pleasure. It's a wan expression of audacity but it's still my own. Anyway, I tell you this not to feel sorry for me—I've had a reasonably interesting life—but to present this as preface to the one solid benefit of old age, which is you come to know at last who the hell you are. And so you are at peace with what you did and what you failed to do. And even the envy and competitiveness that kept one driving and working is moderated to the point where your heart does not turn black if a fellow novelist of high proportions has written a good book.

One of the things that cheered him up was a box of business-sized cards that a friend of John's had printed up. Each card carried a color photograph of a sailboat going before the wind beneath a bright sun, a greeting card scene. Three large letters were printed across the scene: G F Y. Mailer gave them out to everyone for months. He would pull one out of his shirt pocket, and hand it mysteriously to arriving guests. Most people got it immediately, but ^{for} to those who were slower he translated: "Go fuck yourself." Then he would slap the table (as Barney used to), and laugh. At one point he got the idea of copyrighting the card and making a few million on it, enough to buy a large ranch out west where all the Mailers would have their own houses, and follow their separate pursuits of writing, painting and so forth. He eventually saw the folly of all this, but as Norris wrote, "he got a million dollars' worth of fun" from the cards.

Old friends were another pleasure. Hans Janitschek, loud, funny and irrepressible, always buoyed him up. In early October, Mailer went to lunch with him and the Lennons at a seafood restaurant in nearby Wellfleet.

We got a table and ordered a drink as the rain came down on the saltwater lagoon outside. NM wanted oysters, the famous Wellfleet oysters; so did Hans. We got a table right in the middle of the room, which held about 25 other diners, mainly older Wellfleeters. While we waited for our meals, NM told a story about a dinner meeting with the British publisher, George Weidenfeld, in the late 1960s. Joining them was K, a beautiful blonde heiress who was attracted to him, he said, and who he lusted after. But after three hours together, she said, "Goodnight Norman," and went off with the publisher. Hans said that Weidenfeld was famously endowed, and that his member had a valuable twist. NM: "An S-shape?" Hans: "No, sort of a half moon." Hans went on in his blustery voice to explain—with most of the restaurant listening—that Americans mispronounce 'penis.' "They call it pee-NUS," he said loudly, and then repeated the mispronunciation three times for emphasis. NM laughed at this and his teeth loosened. He took them out, wiped them with his napkin, and then pulled out a tube of glue or paste and applied it. He said he usually does this in the restroom, but "what the hell." The Wellfleet locals, all of whom recognized NM, enjoyed the show. The sun came out and we enjoyed our shellfish and chowders. NM took home some of his dozen oyster shells and those of Hans too.

Whenever Mailer had oysters, which was often, he examined the shell, and half the time found a face there, in relief. The waitress at Michael Shay's with whom he flirted asked him at the end of every meal which pile he was bringing home, and boxed them up. He cleaned them

and then put them out on his deck to bleach. On each shell he saw the suggestion of one, a Greek warrior, or a long-dead beauty. He had Norris touch up the features with paint, and photograph them. He thought it might make an interesting book. The pile of shells kept growing.

Ψ Ψ Ψ

Advance review copies of *Castle* were in the hands of reviewers by late October 2006, and Mailer was scheduled for a round of interviews in New York the following month. He glanced through the Kakutani file, and read again her review of *Oswald's Tale*, which she had called "ultimately superfluous." In an upcoming *Esquire* interview he thought he might say something about her, and perhaps at a large meeting of book reviewers at a Manhattan restaurant. "I want the maximum of focus on her," he said, "so that when she picks up my book her hand is shaking with hate." He was also considering sending a copy of his analysis to the top editors at the *Times*, but did not. When anyone brought up the wisdom of questioning Kakutani's motives, he bristled.

He didn't mention her at the luncheon with twenty-odd book editors at Keen's Steakhouse on West 36th Street. He said it was "a tactical decision" based on the feel of the event. But in his interview with Tom Junod, the literary editor of *Esquire*, he did. He was going through the likely responses to the novel: from the Left (they will hate it because ^{they are} "essentially rationalistic" and don't want the Devil taken seriously); the Right (Mailer's God is not all-powerful, a sacrilegious idea); the Jews (unhappy to see German responsibility for Hitler undermined); and Kakutani, "Princess of the cookie cutter" because she eviscerates all my books. Why she has a "hair up her immortal Japanese ass is beyond me," he said.

Back in Provincetown in late November, Mailer was feeling more optimistic about the novel's chances. He said that he had three things going for him: 1) Hitler, about whom there is always interest; 2) the ten-year gap since his last novel, which would make readers curious; and 3) Dieter, his demonic first-person narrator, who is intermittently omniscient. The chief limitation on his power is ~~that~~ ^{who} the Cudgels, God's angels, can shield the consciousness of certain people—Nicolas II, for example—so that Dieter cannot get a clear view of the person's mind. But he can follow young Hitler's thoughts easily, and can also use "dream-etchings" to suggest nefarious actions to his charge. Using a celestial figure as narrator allowed Mailer to retain the intimacy of the first person voice while not being bound by its limitations, a perspectival sleight-of-hand that parallels the clairvoyance of ~~Menemhet II~~ ^{Meni} in *Ancient Evenings*.

With no interviews scheduled until the new year, he decided to do some reading and picked up Vidal's latest, *Point to Point Navigation*, a memoir that was getting good reviews. It seemed to be a list of all the famous people ~~he~~ ^{Vidal} had known, he said. "His celebrity is as important to him as his achievements as a novelist," and went on to note how handsome Vidal had been as a young man. "What's the word for someone who is totally self-absorbed?" he asked a friend—Mailer's memory was slipping a bit—who answered, "solipsist." "That's Vidal. I have been accused of it, but I'm not in his league," he said, punctuating his statement with a slap on the dining room table.

A larger project was a new dramatic version of *The Deer Park*. Michael had been visiting and talking with his father about filming a staged reading of the play. Stefan Morrow, who had played Stoodie in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, had directed and acted in a staged reading of the play the previous year, and Mailer saw it and liked it. He invited Morrow to co-direct, if the

money could be raised for the filming. Michael estimated that it would cost \$200,000 to do it at the Provincetown Theatre, with professional actors but without an audience. He thought he could sell it to cable television. As Mailer was working on a new version of the play, a work that had engaged him, off and on, for nearly a half-century, word came that Bob Lucid had died of a heart attack on December 12.

Mailer agreed to speak at the memorial service for his old friend at the University of Pennsylvania in April. He had also agreed to speak at the Boston memorial for Bill Styron, who had died a month earlier at the age of 81. On December 14 he made the two-and-a-half hour drive from Provincetown to Boston, making several pit stops, some on the shoulder of the busy highway—Mailer was unfazed about public urination. He slept through a lot of the trip, but talked about both Lucid and Styron. He said he generally hated funerals because “people say all the wrong things.” Mailer was one of the last speakers at the event, which was held at the Boston Public Library. Impatient and bored, he could hear little of what was said. But when he got behind the microphone, he was fully in charge, bantering with the audience, laughing at his own infirmities—he opened by saying, “On top of everything, I’m deaf”—and dominating the room. He told a funny story about playing croquet in Connecticut with Bill and Rose Styron and Howard Fertig. She was sitting in the front row and laughed heartily. Four months later, when the time came for Lucid’s memorial, he felt too weak to attend, and his remarks were read by Lennon.

It was Bob’s exceptional talent as a lecturer never to obscure the mystery of an explanation. A fine novel, as he would present it to his classes, was an opportunity to enter a little more deeply into the perplexities and complexities of

existence itself. Social enigmas and psychological discoveries were not to be understood in full, completely and masterfully, rather they were to be elucidated to a further degree, and thereby prepared for further interpretations.

Lucid had been working on Mailer's authorized biography for over twenty years, and Mailer was eager to see how much of it had been completed. The manuscript, located on Lucid's computer, stopped in 1951 with *Barbary Shore*. Lennon was the understudy, and Mailer asked him to take over the task. He agreed, but decided to make a fresh start as the style and approach of his mentor was not compatible.

To what extent Mailer's complaints registered at the *Times* is unknown, but Kakutani did not review *The Castle in the Forest*. The job went to Janet Maslin, long-time *Times* literary and film critic. Her review was negative, but not nearly as dismissive as he expected Kakutani's to be. Maslin's blows are glancing; her tone is respectful. She almost seems to like Mailer's extensive research on Hitler's incestuous heritage, but turns up her nose at the excremental and apiary investigations, the former seen as too exhaustive, and the latter too obvious. Two days later, Lee Siegal, in a 6,200- word essay in the *Times Book Review*, thoughtfully examines Mailer's entire career before giving high praise to the novel, which he calls "an utterly strange work of naked, wild empathy." Mailer, he said, is "an immensely disciplined craftsman and stylist who has spent the larger portion of his life at the writer's trade." The *Times* had not pissed Mailer off with this review. Nor was he displeased with J.M. Coetzee's conclusion in the *NYRB*: "Keeping the paradox *infernal-banal* alive in all its anguishing inscrutability may be the ultimate achievement of this very considerable contribution to historical fiction."

✓ *A majority*
 Most of the other reviews were positive, and praised the subtlety of Mailer's insights into Hitler's diseased psyche, and the story's singular provenance. Many reviewers found Alois, Hitler's father, to be a more compelling figure than his son, much as the father figures in his earlier novels were so judged. According to Ebershoff, early sales were very strong. Second and third printings were ordered, bringing the number of hardbacks in print to over 100,000. Mailer enjoyed following the novel's sales figures at Amazon and Barnes & Noble as they rose and fell with reviews and public appearances. After appearing on Charlie Rose's show on February 3, he saw the novel's ranking jump the next day. *Castle* made the best seller list for three weeks, reaching number five on February 11, 2007, just after his 84th birthday. It was his eleventh best seller, at least one in each of seven decades, 1948 to 2007.



During his west coast swing for *Castle*, Mailer, accompanied by John Buffalo, arranged to meet Lois Wilson for dinner at his hotel on the Embarcadero Waterfront in San Francisco. After John Buffalo was introduced, he left them sitting in a booth. "We had the end section of the restaurant," Wilson recalled in a conversation with her daughter. "It was very dark. And we talked and talked." They had trouble seeing the menu, she said. "They turned the lights way down, and we had sweeping curtains around, and he talked about how he was so sick."

They pulled all his teeth because they were afraid his mouth would get infected and that was something that wasn't necessary, but it made a big difference. He said, 'Did you ever know anybody who lost his teeth?' [Lois getting very emotional here, having trouble breathing and talking] And I said,

‘Yes,’ and he said, ‘What was their reaction?’ and I said, ‘Desolation.’ [Lois very upset and serious during this part of interview] That was my father. He was so proud of himself – handsome –and they pulled his teeth and they never fit and they moved around in his mouth, and so I said, ‘No, I know it’s terrible.’ And Norman said, ‘It sure is,’ and he’d had a lot of his vital parts operated on, I don’t know what’s what, and the same thing happened to Norris. So, then he said, ‘How would you characterize me?’ I didn’t say a word.

A little later, he asked her the same question, but she still couldn’t come up with anything. At the end of the meal he got up on his two canes and said, “Would you like to come up to the room?” She said, “If I come up, I’ll fall asleep.” He replied that he would too, and walked her to the lobby to get a cab. “Norman and I exchanged, at a distance, noisy kisses [smack noise], like one does with one’s husband.” She went home alone, “kind of drunk.”

The next day, February 5, she called him on his cell phone.

I got him at KQED about to be interviewed by Mike Krasny. And he said, ‘I’ll call you in an hour.’ And he did, exactly in an hour. And I said, ‘I’ll never see you again.’ I knew that that was it. And he said, ‘Yes, I’ll be here, I’ll be back here in a year. I will have finished the next book and I’ll be talking to Mike Krasny about it.’ And I said, ‘That’s good, I look forward to it.’ And that was that [long silence]. I’m not sure I have anything else to say about Norman. I tried to think of a way of characterizing him in a word or two, but you know, I can’t. That’s not how you go about Norman. He’s very—he’s magnificent and rare. Nothing else like him.

X

Shortly after Mailer returned from the west coast, Norris told him that she was going to move to Brooklyn. They had talked earlier about selling the Provincetown house and buying a place in Connecticut to be near family and New York doctors. But nothing came of it. By the spring of 2007, Mailer had lost over fifty pounds, and his breathing was just as bad as before the by-pass surgery, perhaps worse. His doctor prescribed asthma medicine, but Norris suspected it was something else. Mailer believed the sea air was sustaining him, and refused to go to the city unless he had to.

Norris was insistent about the move. She said she was tired of "rattling around in this big house while Norman rattles around in his head." She told Raymond, "People are going to think I'm just the worst," but eventually her absence would make him "understand how much more sensible it is for us to be in Brooklyn." On March 9, with the help of Christina Pabst, she packed her clothes, books, the manuscript of her new novel, her computer and scanner—a sign that the move was not temporary—and left for New York in a rental car, picking up her mother on the way. He made no fuss, but was clearly unhappy. She was tearful but firm. When ~~the~~ Lennon arrived ~~that evening~~ *the next evening* to take him to dinner, Mailer was sitting alone in the dark. At Michael Shay's, nearly deserted, he ate 16 oysters, and pondered the shell faces. Back at the house for a nightcap, he said that his eyes were going from macular degeneration, and that he could be blind in eighteen months. "I'm not worried about it," he said. Norris emailed friends that she was as happy as she had been for a long time. Mailer said he would like her to spend at least ten days a month with him.

Norris had left their Toyota sedan in case Mailer needed it, but Raymond or friends usually drove him wherever he needed to go. But on April 17, he announced to Raymond that he

was taking a day off from working on the revision of *The Deer Park—A Play*, and going to lunch at the Wicked Oyster in Wellfleet. Raymond was a bit worried about Mailer driving and offered to accompany him, but Mailer said he preferred to go alone. As soon as Mailer left, Raymond called Norris in Brooklyn, and she said there was nothing to be done, and he had his cell phone with him. Raymond drove by the house at 7:45, but the car wasn't there. He learned later, that Mailer had gotten home safely, after dinner at the Lobster Pot, the big tourist restaurant. He left the Toyota when he had trouble starting it, and took a cab home. Norris emailed Raymond that she was proud of Norman, "and you can tell him that for me."

The next day, Mailer told Raymond that he had lunch in Wellfleet, and then drove around the country roads in Truro before going to the Lobster Pot for dinner, and then a final drink at the Old Colony. Mailer had done all this, but not alone. He had been saying goodbye to another old friend. Eileen Fredrickson had flown in from Chicago for a two-day visit, and Mailer had picked her up at her motel and squired her around. After she returned to Chicago, Fredrickson recalled, Mailer called her and told her it was "a perfect visit." He called her again a few days later and told her that he loved her and talked of another visit in October. It was their last conversation.

Norris came to Provincetown regularly in the spring, and Mailer travelled to New York for a few events—to receive the Hadada Award from the *Paris Review* on April 23, presented by E.L. Doctorow, and on June 27 to appear in conversation with Günter Grass and Andrew O'Hagan at the New York Public Library. The first event was a fundraiser, and Mailer wore, for the last time, a tuxedo. For the event with Grass, with whom he had crossed swords at the 1986 P.E.N. ^{Congress} conference, he wore his Russell Crowe vest and his Uggs. He had lost more weight, and was subsisting on oysters, red wine mixed with orange juice and Dove bars. "He couldn't walk

more than a few steps, even with two canes, without resting," Norris wrote. "He could hardly breathe. The audience gasped when he walked out on stage." When Kate saw her father, looking like King Lear at the promised end, she said, "We shouldn't let Dad do this. We have to take him to the hospital right now." But when he got on stage and began talking, Norris said, "He was astounding in his clarity and scope of thought."

Grass had just published a memoir, *Peeling the Onion*, in which he revealed that as a teenager in wartime Germany he had been a member of the Waffen-SS. He had been criticized for hiding this affiliation for 60 years, and O'Hagan was pressing him on the matter. Mailer rose to his defense, saying "How many of us would have the courage at age seventeen to go against the reigning government and fight it alone? Especially one as brutal as the Nazis?" Grass' situation, he said, had caused him to reflect on something that "I have held on to for a long, long time, and never written about"—the stabbing of Adele. He said he now knew that he never would. "I'm happy to be here tonight with him, and I honor the man" Mailer said. Grass was visibly moved by Mailer's statement.

✕ J Mailer told the audience at the beginning of the program that this would probably be his last appearance. But he would travel back to New York for one more event, a showing of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* and *Maidstone* at Lincoln Center on July 22. In between the films there was a discussion on stage with film critic Michael Chaiken, Lincoln Center programmer Kent Jones and Lennon. The event was sold out. As at his appearance with Grass and O'Hagan, Mailer looked feeble until he began to answer questions, which he did for 45 minutes. In response to a question about working on Godard's film ~~Le~~ *King Lear*, he called the director the "second most evil person" he had ever known (Ronald Reagan is the first). "He spoke powerfully and

X

eloquently about his years directing," Chaiken recalled, "the pleasure it had brought him, and the seriousness in which he endeavored to make them." After the discussion, *Maidstone* was shown. Mailer said that the second half was "repetitive and self-indulgent," with too much histrionic foreshadowing. In the Green Room afterwards, a number of friends and admirers stopped by, including John Bedford Lloyd, who played Wardley in *Tough Guys*, actor-comedian Jerry Stiller, A.O. Scott from the *Times*, Lee Siegel, who had reviewed *Castle*, and Lana Jokel, one of his film editors. Mailer knew that it was his last public outing, and drew out his conversations.

Siegel ✓
J

Back in Provincetown, Mailer was up and down, weak and dispirited one day, feisty and grumpy the next. There was talk of him getting an electroshock treatment. He said that if it didn't help, "I will be an invalid for the rest of my life." He continued to work. The success of Christopher Hitchens' *Why God Is Not Great* made him decide not to postpone the theology conversations book. Random House was eager to publish it as soon as it was edited. After much discussion, he approved the title: *On God: An Uncommon Conversation*. It was scheduled for publication on October 16.

NM's appetite has diminished. He can eat a plate of oysters and some soup, but cannot eat the big meals he consumed just a couple of years ago. He is trying to eat just the things he really enjoys, like Mary Kitchen's Roast Beef Hash (which Dwayne ordered on the Internet), and an omelet with raspberry jelly in it. But yesterday, he took only one bite of the omelet and one spoonful of cereal. He is getting very thin and complains about his short breath all the time. He went for more tests yesterday. NCM thinks he may have a heart problem.

J Norris returned to Provincetown for the summer, and all the children sensing this was the last summer, came for visit after visits. On August 1, she left on a three-week promotional tour

J

for her new novel, traveling to Atlanta, Chicago and the west coast. She was excited about the tour and hoped that the book would be a smash. She planned to return in time for the September wedding of Maggie and John Wendling on the low-tide flats behind the house. For an hour or two a day, Mailer went over the final changes and jacket design for *On God*.

NM read and was impressed with Andrew O'Hagan's review of Don DeLillo's new novel about 9/11, Man Falling. He said that perhaps it would be DeLillo who replaced him as the writer who takes on all the big themes and events in American life. He went on to say, "There was a time when I felt completely secure in tackling all the big topics. I was totally confident." Much of his table talk now is elegiac; he is summing up his record and trying to see around time's corner to learn his place in literary history. He recently proposed the "30-year rule": a place in the canon is dependent on being read 30 years after one's death.

On Norris' instructions, Mailer's three upcoming speaking engagements were cancelled. He was angry when he learned, but admitted that he wasn't up to long trips anymore. He still planned, however, to go ahead with the filming of *The Deer Park—A Play* in November. Michael hadn't yet raised the necessary production money, so Mailer planned to use the next big check from Texas. Norris didn't know of his plan, and he knew she would be furious when she did. One obvious reason that he continued to take on new projects was to keep the adrenalin flowing. But he was realistic enough to know that he probably wouldn't be able to write the next Hitler novel. "I'm too weak," he said.

He wrote his last letter on August 3, to help honor an old friend. "James Jones is one of the few major American novelists to emerge here since the Second World War. He was

immensely talented and I think it is a splendid idea to endow a chair in his name at Eastern Illinois University. He would have grumbled, but I think it would have given him true pleasure.” In mid-August, he stopped climbing to his study, and worked at the dining room table.

NM said he wished he could begin the sequel to Castle. “It’s all there,” he said, pointing to his head, “a helluva novel. Hitler was so human, and I’d love to cook him to a turn.” He desperately wants to work, but he is only functioning five or six hours a day, sleeping 16 or 17. He ate an omelet cooked by his sister, drank his orange juice and a half a cup of coffee and did the crossword puzzle while I cleaned up the kitchen. When I went back in to have him sign a book for my son Stephen, he said he was ready to take a nap. He is sleeping his life away.

Mailer’s breathing continued to get worse and he went to Mass General for an exam. One lung was partially collapsed and there was fluid in the other. There were other problems, including some sort of lesion on his pancreas. The doctors thought it might be best to keep him in Boston, which means he’d miss Maggie’s wedding on September 8. Norris asked the doctors to tell Mailer the seriousness of his condition so he wouldn’t blame missing it on her. She said, “He is going down; it’s just a question of when.” Against medical advice, he came home two days before the wedding, after eight days in the hospital. The afternoon he arrived he got into a conversation with Susan about the way elderly Eskimos and Indians wandered into the woods so they would not be a burden.

Mailer asked, “But how would they die?”

"By not eating or drinking," someone answered.

"Or eaten by a wild beast," Susan said.

"That would be the way to go," he said, "fighting a wild animal. I am whipped by Time."

Norris was sad and worried. She wanted to bring him to Brooklyn where he would be near a hospital, but knew he'd resist.

Carol Stevens, the bride's mother and Mailer's fifth wife, was at the wedding, with about 100 others. Norris and Carol had become good friends and emailed each other almost every day, but Mailer had only seen her a few times in the past few years. He spent a few minutes in a quiet conversation with her. Mailer's sons got him down to the beach for the brief ceremony. He looked wretched sitting in the brisk wind on the flats with a flower in his lapel. Afterwards, he had a glass of champagne, had some photos taken with the newly married couple, and then went upstairs to lie down.

On the 18th when I stopped by, NM said he had an epiphany at three a.m. and almost called me. He wants to do another conversation book with me, this one on cancer. He has written and spoken about it for many years, but now wants to explore the idea that besides stress, trauma, repression and guilt, cancer is caused by boredom. He wants someone to read the obituaries of corporate leaders in the Times over a one-year period to see how many died of cancer, his idea being that it kills a disproportionate number. Challenged over long, busy lives, they get bored

after retirement and succumb to cancer. He wanted me to assemble all the references to cancer in his interviews and writings on the topic right away. I told him it would take some time. He spoke for 45 minutes and then said he wanted to sleep, which he did. Before he lay down, he said that his doctor told him that if he didn't start eating he would die. This hit him and he is trying hard, eating steak and eggs in the morning, soup, more chocolate and ice cream and fish at night.

Bill and Dana Kennedy visited him, as did Gene and Sarah Kennedy, his Chicago friends, and many others. On September 19, Bill Majeski came, and there was poker for two nights running, Mailer's last games. On the 22nd, Danielle and her husband Peter McEachern drove him to Brooklyn. Norris had finally convinced him. They made numerous pit stops on the six-hour drive. He now weighed less than 120, and Peter was able to carry him up the four flights of stairs to the apartment. His plan was to return to Provincetown in a month for the Mailer Society meeting.

Matthew recalled seeing his father in Brooklyn:

I was in denial as to how bad off he was. He was losing weight and didn't look good. I brought Salina and Mattie over for a visit. He'd just gotten up from his nap, he was sleeping a lot at that time. Got to the table and I learned he was planning on going to the hospital. It dawned on me that this could be it. I asked him, 'Are you afraid? Do you think this is going to be it?' And he said, 'Look, I've had a great life, I just don't want a bad end. I finished my novel, I'd like to

write another book but I don't have that burning desire to write another one, it's just not there.' There was this dark cloud over him. Mom took a picture of us sitting there – I think it was the last picture ever taken, come to think of it.

On October 3, Mailer checked into Mt. Sinai Hospital. Copies of *On God* arrived that day, and he signed a few. Surgery was scheduled for 7:30 the next morning. At 1:00 p.m., the surgeon told those waiting that the operation was successful. Larry Schiller and his wife Kathy Amerman had just flown in from the West Coast, and joined everyone in the waiting area. The doctor said that she had drained and inflated Mailer's lung, and that his heart was strong through the operation. Family and friends were allowed in a few at a time to see him later in the afternoon. When friends went in, they saw right away that Mailer was still feeling the pain killers. He was ranting. He said he had a dream and ~~Larry~~ Schiller was the Devil and he was God and they made a pact to rid the world of technology. He flirted with the nurse, a 29-year old woman, who took it with good humor. He told her that she should write a novel, and use her meeting with a famous author as the first chapter. Later, he had her write a vignette about a weekend with her boyfriend and promised to critique it.

The next day, more family members and friends arrived. The doctors said that the lack of oxygen in his blood had all but destroyed his appetite. Now, the prognosis was good. He was in a private room where the lights could be lowered and he had a full-time nurse. Everyone was optimistic. Norris was feeling wonderful. She gave a bravura reading from her novel at a Barnes & Noble in Manhattan on the day after the surgery, and answered questions about her book and her husband's health.

A few days later, everything changed. On September 9, he came down with pneumonia, and the doctors found that he had lymphoma of the stomach, cancer, and this had been at the root of his weight loss. These problems could be treated with drugs, but Mailer was pessimistic. He told Norris to get him transferred to the Hyannis hospital and from there he could sneak home. He thinks he is dying, she said, and ~~he~~ ^{he} wants to die." Norris was worn down by the long daily trip to see him ~~every day~~, as well as visiting her mother.

The media was eager for information, and emailed and called friends and family. So many people, some of them crazy, were trying to visit him in the hospital that finally a guard had to be posted to screen visitors. He looked somewhat better toward the end of the month, but he still wanted to pull out all the tubes and wires. For obscure reasons, he had a tracheotomy, and so could only mouth words, and write notes, most of them illegible. He wrote a note to Donna Lennon, and then pointed to the word "P-Town," and then to himself, indicating that he wanted to go there. The family discussed getting him there, but the risks were too great. On October 29, he was operated on for an infection in a vein in his groin. He told his nephew Peter, "My ass feels like Iraq."

John Buffalo had a serious talk with the docs and they do believe he will be able to speak and eat and write again. Roller coaster is the simile everyone has been using to describe the emotional state of family and friends over the past three weeks. Seeing one of the most ferocious, intense communicators of the last 100 years, the man who has written 40 books and been interviewed a thousand times, locked into silence by his ailments is heart-breaking. The look in his eyes is woeful. He is angry and very frustrated that we can't read his chicken scratching.

He was cheered a bit when *New York* published excerpts from *On God*. The cover of the magazine had a head shot of him, white hair flowing, with clouds behind him as if he were a celestial being. He nodded his head in approval, and enjoyed the sections Norris read to him. Earlier when he could still talk, he saw Norris crying and said, "You must really love me." She answered, "Of course I love you, you silly old coot! Why else do you think I've stuck around all this time?" Peter McEachern, knowing that Mailer missed the ocean, drove to Provincetown and taped the sound of waves from the master bedroom window, complete with an occasional groan from the Long Point fog horn. He played the tape, on a loop, in Mailer's room.

Mailer began sinking during the second week in November. The family was there and took turns sitting with him. At one point, the phone rang. It was Michael, who had an idea: a last drink for the old man. Peter went through a drink list with him, and Mailer shook his head yes for rum and orange juice. Peter told the story at Mailer's memorial some months later.

Michael finally returned with a bottle of rum and a container of orange juice. But all we had was a plastic cup, which if you knew my uncle, was worse than no cup at all. So Michael went to the nurses' station and managed to get a real glass, and we started to mix the drink. Norman took over at this point, indicating the correct proportions for water, orange juice, and rum. One last problem: how to give it to him. Because of the breathing tube in his throat, he wasn't supposed to drink; he could choke. Sacrilege, but we gave him the drink on one of those lollipop-shaped sponge-on-a-stick thingies. I dipped the sponge in the glass then put it in his mouth. He gave a look of utter exasperation. Then he grabbed the glass out of my hand. I looked to Michael. He shrugged. We all watched Norman put the glass to

P. 1068

Norman
D. 1068
just said

X

his lips and take a nice long sip. Then another. He was going to drink that drink the way it was supposed to be drunk even if it killed him. After a few sips, he allowed himself a smile. We all did. Norman held up the drink and pointed at each of us. He wanted us to share the drink with him. So we passed the glass and we each took a sip.

A few hours later there was a conference with the doctors, who said that he would go quickly if all the tubes were removed. The family agreed that this would be done in the morning.

X/ Stephen, who had just flown back from the West Coast where he was in a play, said he would stay the night with his father, and everyone else went home.

"About five a.m.," Barbara wrote in a memoir, "the telephone rang and woke me."

X /

It was Norris, who had just received word from the hospital that Norman had died. Sue and Marco were staying with me. We threw on some clothes and grabbed a cab. Stephen was there, of course, with his tale of how the bells and whistles Norman was attached to had awakened him and that as he stood at the foot of the bed, Norman sat up, gave him a beatific smile, and then fell back. A medical team came into the room and pronounced him dead.

X

We sat in the room with Norman's body for several hours until the usual arrangements could be made. The family began to arrive. We were pretty quiet and grim to begin with. I think at one point Betsy went over to the bed and held Norman's hand. And Marco, I believe, tried to find some Hebrew prayers we could say over Norman. But as others began to arrive, the usual Mailer élan

revived, and we were all talking at once. Leading to a moment of ghoulish comedy. A young doctor, probably an intern or resident, opened the door and entered the room.

'Well,' she said cheerfully, 'you seem to have a nice party going. But I have to give Mr. Mailer an injection.' There was stunned silence until someone blurted, 'But he's dead.'

Oops. She was out the door. She fled so fast we couldn't help ourselves.

We burst out laughing.

I hope Norman's spirit was still there. ^tI was a moment he would have relished.

The official time of death was 4:28 a.m., November 10, 2007. The cause ~~was~~ on the death certificate was acute renal failure.

Laudatory tributes appeared within 48 hours on the front pages of newspapers around the world. Kakutani's was among the most thoughtful:

Mr. Mailer used his copious talents—quick skewering eye; a gift for the cameo portrait; bat-quality radar for atmosphere and mood; and blustering, bellicose prose—to capture the American spirit as it lurched from the civil rights and antiwar demonstrations of the '60s into the Watergate era of the '70s. In his best work Mr. Mailer made America his subject, and in tackling everything from politics to boxing to Hollywood, from astronauts to actresses to art, he depicted—or tried to depict—the country's contradictions: its moralistic prudery and

grasping fascination with celebrity and sex and power; the outsize, outlaw past of its frontier; and its current descent in to 'corporation land,' filled with cheap consumer blandishments and the siren call of fame.

About 200 paid respects at McHoul's funeral home in P-Town, mainly locals. His agent, Jeff Posternak, and his editor, David Ebershoff, were there, along with many other friends. They embalmed NM in NY and slicked his hair down, making him look much different. The local funeral home director fluffed it up a bit. Speaking at the grave the next day were several of NM's children and friends: Michael, Danielle, John, Stephen; his nephew Peter, Ivan Fisher, Dick and Doris Goodwin, Tom Piazza, Doug Brinkley, Congressman Neal Abercrombie and Larry Schiller. Danielle's husband Peter played J.J. Johnson's "Lament" and Michal's wife Sasha sang an Irish lullaby. Stephen sang "Your Song" by Elton John. Michael said, "Dad would have been appalled by that song, Stephen, but you did it well." Everyone threw handfuls of sand on his coffin. I said, "Earth receive an honored guest; Norman Mailer is laid to rest." NCM was poised and serene throughout. She graciously posed for photos for the flock of reporters who were there, and answered a few questions. After that, she invited everyone back to the house for food and drink, including two ex-wives, Beverly and Carol.

Before the coffin was closed, John Buffalo put the ace of spades in one of his father's pockets; Pat Doyle slipped in another card, and Donna Lennon a white poker chip. His grandson Alejandro contributed a hand-crafted piece of organite. Matthew placed a photograph of the family taken in Maine on his father's chest. Norris added a note. Norman Mailer was prepared for his next voyage.

P1064
w/c 343, 118