

From January to early May, he worked almost every day in the office on the floor below his apartment. Mounds of transcripts and notes took up most of the floor space in the 8' x 12' room with a single window overlooking the Brooklyn Heights Promenade and the East River, ^{and lower Manhattan} where huge cranes loaded and unloaded freight vessels. Trucks on the Brooklyn-Queens

Expressway under the Promenade rattled the windows day and night. The radiator hissed and clanked. The confined space reminded him of what a prison cell ~~was like~~, he said, and over the months of ten and twelve-hour days he came to understand Gilmore "as well as I know some of my ex-wives." When he came up for air to write some letters on May 10, he had 600 pages of

typescript. One letter was to Abbott, whom ~~he thanked for a tip that~~ Warden Wyatt Cupp of Oregon State Prison was "on the take." ~~Mailer didn't know if this latter nugget was authentic, but~~

~~later learned that Schiller had left \$10,000 in an unmarked envelope on the desk of Utah State Prison Warden Sam Smith to insure access to Gilmore's execution.~~ ^{who} Abbott was the first

correspondent to learn that Norris had given birth to a son on April 16. "We're calling him John Buffalo—don't ask me why, I just like the name," he wrote. ~~A week later he wrote a long letter to Uncle Louis and Aunt Moos in South Africa noting that the baby looks like "a big old tomcat with a blob of a nose so that at times he bears an uncanny resemblance to W.C. Fields, but at~~

~~other times looks like a leprechaun."~~

^{In a letter to Uncle Louis and Aunt Moos} Louis and Moos were among the first to know the book's title. ^{Mailer wrote} He also told them that it would be a book with "as many characters and situations and clarity of purpose, I hope, as 'The Naked and the Dead.'" What he was aiming for, he went on, was the deep psychology of the murderer, "which has never been touched by anyone, except for that author sitting next to God himself, old Dostoyevsky." This letter, and several others written that day, show that Mailer had

Raise
real
legal
concern

now firmly decided on most of the narrative key episodes, selected his post of observation, found his voice and chosen a title. But knowing the full story, he said later, was "a hazard." When writing novels, he didn't want to know how things were going to turn out, preferring to learn as he proceeded. He wanted *The Executioner's Song* to read the same way, and was purposefully inattentive to anything but that portion of the story under construction. Being overly conversant with its future events, he said later, "would make me curve what was happening to my characters at the place where I had them." Having made the key decisions, he was now ready to pick up the pace, and not merely because of his confirmed sense of direction; he needed a new infusion of cash. He planned to work double shifts for the next three months in order to have a 1,200-page manuscript by August 1. He told Morton Yanow, a California writer with whom he had struck up a correspondence, that *Song* would be "not unlike 'In Cold Blood' except, of course, vastly different in tone but the same essential technique," that is, nothing would be imagined, but it "reads in the form of a novel." He hoped that the similarities ended there because it would be "tedious" if his book was compared to Capote's in every review.

More often than not, Mailer spent parts of June and July in Provincetown, and then went to Maine for August. This year, he stayed in New York and worked until August. To help their financial situation Norris was doing portraits on commission, and also teaching art classes at St. Anne's Episcopal School where Matthew attended. On weekends some of the other children visited. Mailer told Louis and Moos that it is "truly a menagerie come Saturday and Sunday—the great irony is that I was never cut out for fatherhood at all." Norris handled whatever came up with the children and was "a splendid mother," he said. She also read the manuscript as it was typed by one of a half-dozen typists, including Martha Thomas, who became a valued helper

and good friend. Judith McNally was also proving to be a fine assistant. She did research for the book while handling Mailer's literary affairs and correspondence, and like his other secretaries pitched in to help with household chores. Within a year or two, she would sign his name to letters, although she never achieved a good facsimile of his inelegant, but serviceable handwriting.

Another assistant was Jere Herzenberg, who came to work for him at about the same time as Judith McNally. A musicologist working on a graduate degree, ^{she} ~~she~~ began doing chapter outlines, going back to interviewees when necessary. She told Rollyson that Mailer was "meticulous on this book. If you put a fact down, you had to say what interview, what page, and you had to have it right behind the outline, footnoted." In the past, Mailer regularly read his work aloud to others, or to himself, for cadence and tone, and then made adjustments. Even his letters were done this way; when he taped them for his secretaries, he would mouth a phrase or sentence, and then speak it clearly as revised, ^{told Mailer} ~~mutter then utter~~. For *Song*, Herzenberg recalled, ¹ ~~he~~ dictated just about everything into a tape recorder to get the accent and the rhythm down. I would go over the transcriptions of the tape checking for grammar and punctuation, and then he would edit the transcripts." He wanted everything to be scrupulously documented, and he also wanted to capture, as far as possible, the idiolects of his huge cast of characters. As Herzenberg put it, Mailer wanted the book to be "in the voice of the people of Utah."

word?
yes

Before he left for Maine he wrote again to Yanow about his progress. "The manuscript will probably go on to 1400 or 1500 pages," he said. Looking ahead to the publicity he would be doing for the book, he said, "God, will I get tired of the question, 'Why did you spend so much time and space on such a man?'" This prediction was accurate; it was often the first question he

was asked. To Abbott, who was deluging him with descriptions of prison life, he revealed that he would run out of money by the end of September, but did not feel sorry for himself because it was a situation "entirely of my own making as I was warned often enough en route as I kept getting married and divorced." He said he needed a minimum of \$250,000 a year to support his establishment. "I thought I'd be able to do the book on Gilmore in six months and gain a half year on myself." Now he predicted that it would take him until January 1979 to complete it.

Abbott's commentary on prison life appealed to Mailer because it was both detailed and analytical. He told him that he was often tempted to strike his tasks and write to him "sometimes to agree, sometimes to discuss things up a bit, for I find that our minds are similar in fascinating ways, and then diverge." The fact that they had both read *Das Kapital*, he suggested, was the reason for this convergence. Marx "probably changed the way in which I express my thoughts," he wrote, and there was no question about Abbott having "a nice sense of the dialectic." He offered to set up a correspondence between the prisoner and Malaquais, who he referred to as "fantastically intelligent," even if at 70 he had slowed down a little. Malaquais, he told Abbott, had thought a great deal about revolution and "probably hates the idea of establishment and police as much as you do." Abbott agreed, and letters between Malaquais and Abbott were soon exchanged.

Mailer took off three weeks in August and then returned to work. He wrote no letters and did little else except write ^{the book} In Maine, he jogged three times a week, but back in Brooklyn he got little exercise—he sparred with Torres, his son Michael and other friends once a week—and his weight blew up to 200. He had learned over the years that it was impossible to write and keep in

good shape at the same time. He summed up his situation in a letter to a writer friend, Mary

Breasted:

I work six or seven days a week don't go out, and curse my primal verbosity of mind. The worst of it is that all the people who like my other books will probably not like this one. It's not searching, but panoramic and descriptive, almost pedestrian. The materials are so godawful strong I didn't know any other way to do it. Just put it there and take people through the waxworks. It's incredible stuff, really.

He continued working through the fall, and on December 6 delivered a rough draft of 1969 double-spaced pages, as he announced to Gilmore's cousin Brenda, who he counted on to spread the word to her family.

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Norris had gotten pregnant with John Buffalo in the summer of 1977 when she and Mailer were living in Provincetown at 565 Commercial Street. Beverly was away acting in ~~Hartford~~ ^{to Hartford}. Mailer, Norris and the children drove there one night to see Beverly perform, and Norris, who was getting along fairly well with her at the time, recalls that her performance was excellent. But after her pregnancy was revealed, things changed. A photo of a very pregnant Norris appeared in *People*, and Mailer called her mortified parents in Arkansas to promise he would marry her. Towards the end of the year, he called Beverly in Provincetown and asked her to come to Brooklyn for a talk. He had been putting off asking for a divorce, but with a second child to be born out of wedlock, and obvious pressure from Norris, he was ready. Norris states in

her memoir that "Beverly totally flipped out" when she was told of the pregnancy. Mailer was leaning in the window of her car on the street outside 142 Columbia Heights when she floored the gas pedal. "He said he'd pulled his head out of the car just in time to keep from being decapitated." Beverly sued for divorce in Massachusetts in October 1978; ^{as} Norris wrote, "that started a legal battle that lasted for nearly three years."

Money was the chief contention at the trial. Both pointed to fights, lapses, indignities and infidelities, but Beverly stated publically ^{the two} that Mailer was a good father, and the boys moved back and forth between the parents, eventually dividing their time between when they were teenagers. Mailer had been giving her \$400 a month and paying the mortgage and taxes on ^{the} 365 ^{new} Provincetown house, but Beverly planned to move to New York to renew her acting career, and wanted more support. ^{she argued} ~~The heart of her argument was~~ that she had supported his career for six years, 1963 to 1969, during which time he had published eight major books (four of them dedicated to her), and won several major awards. Now it was her turn. She asked for \$1,000 a week, child support, the house in Provincetown (valued at \$135,000) and \$10,000 a year for a New York apartment. "Listen," she told *People*, "he said he was broke when I met him, and it's the same story now. Norman is a corporation. He's screaming poverty, but he makes \$347,000 a year." His response was that she was asking for \$120,000 in annual pre-tax dollars, an impossible sum, as he currently owed a total of \$400,000 to Scott Meredith, his mother and the IRS, and was making regular payments to Adele, Jeanne Campbell and Carol Stevens, who he called "my fifth wife." When asked by Beverly's lawyer if he was feeling "a sense of obligation" towards Stevens, he said, "If feelings of loyalty and tenderness are obligation, then I felt an obligation," adding, "She is a fine, unselfish woman [. . .] an artist in her field," who "is not built for rough

living." He was at a loss trying to explain how various advances had been spent, or what he had done with the money from the sale of his *Village Voice* stock. "His affairs are a holy mess," Mailer's lawyer, Monroe Inker, told the judge." Mailer added, "My talent is making money, not managing it."

The trial, ^{Unpleasant, of the marriage} a miserable affair, went on for months. Details such as Mailer hitting Beverly in the face with a wet bathing-suit, and Beverly calling Norris a witch when she appeared in the courtroom were reported in the *Boston Herald* and other papers. Perhaps the only moment of humor came when Mailer told the *Herald* that his fourth wife was a talented actress. "In fact," he said, "after she testified in the divorce case I went up and spoke to her for the first time in a year. I said, 'I want to congratulate you on a fine performance. Of course, you could use somebody to write your dialogue.'" The divorce was granted on March 21, 1980 under existing Massachusetts law as a *decree nisi*, a provisional judgment. A six-month waiting period was required.

Judge Shirley R. Lewis granted Beverly a lump sum of \$7500 from the pending sale of the farm in Philips, Maine that Mailer owned with Dick Goodwin, and awarded her \$575 a week in alimony for seven years, plus \$200 a week in child support. He was also required to pay their tuition at the private schools they were attending and for four years of college, and to keep up health care benefits for all three. Finally, he was required to pay the premium on a \$50,000 life insurance policy on his life. But the waterfront house in Provincetown, which contained so many memories for the Mailers, was lost. Despite various attempts to save it, it was sold by the IRS for \$65,000. After a long legal struggle, Beverly was evicted.

A month after Judge Lewis' decree, Beverly decided to contest the divorce. Her lawyer said she unhappy with the settlement terms and wanted to re-litigate the matter in a New York

court. Judge Lewis rejected her appeal on September 25, and Inker told Mailer he was free to marry. His plan was to marry Carol, divorce her posthaste, and marry Norris. When Norris saw him leave on the evening of November 7 for the ceremony with Carol, she put on a "brave face," but knew "he was on his way to marry a woman he still had feeling for. (He would always have feeling for her. It was something I lived with, like arthritis)." He married Carol in the chambers of Judge Shirley Fingerhood, a friend of his sister. As Norris noted, "They had written down their vows, which were on the order of, 'I want to honor the years we have spent together and the love that created this beautiful child, Maggie.'" She lay awake that night wondering if Carol would decide to remain married "and let me stew, as she had stewed for ten plus years while he was married to Beverly." Her fears were for naught; Carol signed the papers. The next day Mailer flew to Haiti for a weekend divorce. On the morning of his second marriage in four days, November 11, 1980, he was distraught when he awoke. He said, "All my life, all I have ever wanted was to be free and alone in Paris." She said to him:

Look, sweetie. What would happen if you were free and alone in Paris? You'd be walking down one of the boulevards and you'd sit at a sidewalk café to have a cup of espresso. A pretty girl would walk by and you would give her one of your twenty-five cent smiles. She would smile back and stop to talk. You would invite her to sit and buy her a cup of coffee. You'd go to a museum, and then take her out to dinner. Soon she would be living with you, and then she would get pregnant, and you wouldn't be free and alone in Paris anymore, would you?

Mailer laughed, and as John Buffalo jumped into their bed, he said, "Okay. Let's go get married and legitimize this little bugger."

Calls were made to friends for the ceremony that afternoon. Pat Lawford Kennedy came with a case of champagne, and the maid of honor, Norris' friend, Jan Cushing Olympitis, brought a wedding cake. Mayor Ed Koch attended with his deputy Dan Wolf, as did future mayor David Dinkins, who was the city clerk at the time and had signed their marriage license. Susan, Michael and Maggie couldn't make it, but Matt and John Buffalo, Betsy, Danielle and Kate were there, as was Stephen, the best man. Rabbi David Glazer performed the ceremony. A few others attended: Barbara and Al, Fan, Dotson Rader, José and Ramona, Jean Stein and the Goodwins, who drove down from Massachusetts, ^{among them} and a few more. ^{Torrey} ~~Jeffrey Michelson, who boxed with Mailer and had worked for him several years before in Provincetown, came with his girlfriend, Laura Bradley.~~ In the only pictures of the event, taken by Rader, Norris looked gorgeous in her new champagne-colored satin suit. ~~Jeffrey Michelson, Mailer's boxing pal, said~~ Michelson recalled that Mailer said his vows "with great theatrical diction and when he gets to the part about 'fidelity,' he drops half an octave lower, drawls the word with precision and looks Norris in the eye with conviction bordering on a glare. Not a threatening glare, but a drop-dead serious, I swear-to-God, strike-me-dead glare." Norris' parents couldn't attend but were very happy that their daughter was legally wed. "I was no longer the tootsie; I was the wife," she recalled.

Undeterred by the weddings, Beverly continued her appeals. Her lawyer, Gerald L. Nissenbaum, accused Mailer of committing bigamy. "And I call it trigamy," he said, "because he's gotten married twice since his divorce" from Beverly, which because of appeals was not final, he argued. Eventually, the case went all the way to the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, which in September 1982 decided against the fourth Mrs. Mailer in a ruling that overturned previous rulings that had allowed many divorce cases to go on interminably. It ruled

Did you
ever tell
us when
Barbara
arrived?
Was it
Maggie?
yes

Mailer's
old
friend?

that once a probate judge grants a divorce, the party seeking the divorce cannot seek dismissal merely to seek a better settlement—"forum shopping"—in another venue. The decision, in effect, rewrote the state's divorce laws going back to 1933. The New York Times, in a brief editorial titled "Mailer's Ring Cycle," praised him for reminding the world of the merits of marriage at a time when the institution itself was in question. "Call the novelist a matrimoniac, or call him a mensch. We call Norman Mailer a still point in a turning world." Mailer's lawyer put his own seal on the situation: "Norman Mailer won't get married again. And you can quote me on that." He was correct: Norris and Norman lived together as man and wife for one day short of 27 years.

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While the divorce case was dragging on, he was making final changes to *Song*. By the end of March the revisions were completed and the manuscript whittled ~~it~~ down to 1681 pages.

The question of who would publish the ~~hardback~~ was still open. Schiller and Meredith decide to go back to Little, Brown. They didn't press for a large advance, and accepted \$25,000. As soon

as it was in the hands of Ned Bradford, Mailer composed a form letter to the hundreds of people to whom he owed letters. After the salutation—"Friends, Penpals, Champions, Calumniators, and Occasional Correspondents"—he went on to announce his divorce case and the submission of a manuscript "a little short of 400,000 words." He added that it was "as long as *The Brothers Karamazov* and one-quarter as good."

He told Mort Yanow that ~~for many years he had the leisure to explore his "states of feeling,"~~ but all he had done recently was "a lot of slogging. The book's completion, made him feel like "a con who's counting the days since he stepped through the gate" to freedom. Louis

at Little Browns
the stakes of your own feeling
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and Moos got only a few words on the book—he told them “it reads as easily as greased peanuts.

You can’t stop.” Most of his letter to them is given to an account of the divorce case. He

compared it to “Chinese water-drop torture,” but said he found it “tonic” to be “fighting Beverly for the last time.” He also talked about John Buffalo, who had just turned one: “He’s sturdy as

hell,” with “a glint of pure intelligence in his eye,” that is “reminiscent, I’m afraid, of

Eisenhower.” Mailer was 55 when John was born, and had more opportunity and inclination to

observe his qualities and quirks than any of his other children. John said that his father “never

had a coach like I do.” To put it bluntly, he continued, “He’s my best friend.” Mailer would

never call John Buffalo his favorite, but the bond with his youngest child was strong. Mailer had

also grown close to John’s half-brother Matt, who had decided a few years earlier to change his

last name to Mailer.

Mailer’s favorite correspondent during this period was ^{Jack} Abbott; he made his most extensive epistolary comments on *Song* in a long letter to the convict. He said he had considered incorporating some of Abbott’s experience into *Gilmore*, but didn’t because he wanted to exclude anything he was not certain *Gilmore* had felt or said. Also, he said, *Gilmore* did not share Abbott’s Marxist-Leninist thinking. He was “a profoundly religious man with an unshakable conviction of karma” who was “softer” than Abbott, and gave “much more parley to what you would consider the enemy,” that is, the prison administration. For many years, Mailer told Abbott, he had been a disciple of Jean Malaquais, but “turned away from his thought because I found it—and this word will infuriate you—unendurably arid.” Entering into a genuine dialogue with Abbott, he said, would depend on openness to each other’s arguments. But he sensed the same granitic intellection in Abbott that he saw in Malaquais, who had harangued him

the previous evening. "He said the same thing he was saying to me for twenty years," he said. Finally, his old mentor began to irritate him and he said: "You are like a monkey who's lost his arms and lost his legs and clings to the top branch with his teeth. You're so afraid that if you fall into the pit below, you might have to accept one spooky or divine notion of existence." Malquais' mind was fully formed and impermeable to new ideas, Mailer believed. They remained friends, but engaged in fewer deep discussions.

Abbott told Mailer that Israel was the puppet of the capitalist democracies. Mailer replied that he was "no automatic Zionist hardon," a partisan who had the same question for all propositions: "Is this good for Israel?" Abbott also kept reminding Mailer that he didn't understand what a long-term convict's experience was like, and Mailer came back strong:

[Y]ou the fuck don't know what it is to be a Jew. You don't know what it is to have six million of your people killed when there are only twelve million of them on earth. You don't know the profound and fundamental stunting of existence that got into the blood cells of every Jew after Hitler had done his work. It's easy for you, it's contemptuous, you say 'There's Israel doing the lackey's work for the U.S. against the bold, brave Arab nations'—who, as you know full well, have the most hideous prisons in the history of civilized existence. Yet you have your kneejerk reflexes, and one of them is up the Arabs, down the Israelis.

Mailer's stance on his Jewish identity throughout this remarkable letter is similar to Bellow's, who gave a talk in 1988 about his identity as a writer, a non-observant Jew and an American. Like Mailer, Bellow found it neither possible nor desirable to escape from "the Jewish past—not only its often heroic suffering but also the high significance of the meaning of Jewish history."

Watching the 1945 newsreels of army bulldozers pushing piles of bodies into burial pits had given Bellow "a deeply troubling sense of disgrace or human demotion," ^{his version} the equivalent of ~~what~~ ^{he felt} ~~called the~~ M~~ailer~~ feeling a "profound and fundamental stunting of existence" when he and Adele had visited Buchenwald. ^{and encouraged}

In later letters to Abbott, Mailer brought up the Jewish experience several times, ^{and told} ~~him about~~ ^{to read} Heinrich Graetz's *History of the Jews*, and the Talmud. Mailer owned the six volumes of the former and 26 volumes of the Soncino edition of the latter. He offered to send Abbott a single volume of the Talmud, saying it would take him two years to read it properly. Some years later, Abbott converted to Judaism. ^{very many had read it?}

Told him what about the Talmud?

Ψ Ψ Ψ

A good deal of Mailer's time during this period was spent in Boston going over the manuscript of *Song* with Little, Brown's lawyer, John Taylor "Ike" Williams. Because of the large number of living people who speak or are spoken about in *Song*, there were multiple legal issues to deal with: privacy, defamation of character, copyright, and the legality of the releases Schiller had obtained from scores of people in Utah. Williams had met Mailer once before in 1963 (at a rowdy New York party where Williams punched him in the nose—both were drunk), but he did not know Schiller. As Williams recalled:

So, here is this heavy guy with all those cameras around his neck. This was at Haussermann, Davison & Shattuck, Little, Brown's law firm. We were in this conference room which we had to ourselves for weeks. My job was to legally vet the manuscript with Norman. This guy was always popping in and out and taking

pictures, and I said, 'Who the fuck is that?' Norman said, 'That's Larry Schiller. There wouldn't be any book without him.' He explained that Larry was the one who went out to Utah early on, got the rights from the Gilmore family tied up, and gathered up interviews. And Larry was the one who attended the execution. When Larry approached Norman, he already had this enormous body of material. He said to Norman, 'I just don't know how to write the narrative on this spectacular material.' I didn't really have an idea then about how important Larry was to the book. It was deserved, but at that point for Little, Brown this was Norman's book. Norman never said, 'You'll have to ask Larry.' Larry never sat with us. Norman had mastered the material and felt it was his book.

Williams explained that in a couple of instances minor characters were created so as to avoid potential libel issues. For example, an army buddy of Nicole's father, one who never existed, was inserted so as to avoid identifying someone who might have abused her as a child, according to hearsay.

Ned Bradford died on May 12, 1979, and another Little, Brown editor, Roger Donald, ^{began} ~~took over~~ working with Mailer. Shortly before Bradford's death, Mailer and Schiller met with him to talk about the marketing of *Song*, which had been announced as a forthcoming nonfiction book. Schiller was worried that it would be reviewed in tandem with a forthcoming crime narrative about another real-life murderer, Charles Sobhraj, in Thomas Thompson's *Serpentine*. Tom Wolfe's book about the Mercury astronauts, *The Right Stuff*, was also to be published at the end of the year, and Wolfe, like Mailer, was writing it as a straight narrative, excluding himself. Schiller saw these developments as potentially "devastating." He told several people—not

including Mailer—that if nothing changed, Mailer might be throwing away a Pulitzer. Schiller recalled the meeting: “I’m sitting with Norman and Ned Bradford at Little, Brown, and Norman says, ‘Well, Ned, I’m not going to put this on the nonfiction list. It’s going to go on the fiction list and I’m going to call it a true life novel.’ And of course I immediately inside myself say, ‘Thank God, because a novel is never reviewed in tandem with a nonfiction book.’” Asked if Bradford or anyone else at the firm objected, Schiller said, “No. Ned needed a little explanation by Norman; he didn’t understand it for a few moments. Norman explained to him that there are areas in which he had extrapolated. Between A and C he’d written B. I personally believe he never would have won the Pulitzer if it was on the nonfiction list.” Schiller may have been correct. To win in nonfiction, *Song* would have to have beaten Douglas Hofstadter’s *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, a classic study of cognitive science and creativity in the work of a logician, an artist and a composer. In fiction, the competition was easier. The other two contenders were Philip Roth’s *The Ghost Writer* and William Wharton’s *Birdy*, important books, but less distinguished than *The Executioner’s Song*, which is indisputably one of Mailer’s half-dozen finest works, perhaps his greatest.

Mailer describes *Song* in his “Afterword” as “a factual account,” one which is “as accurate as one can make it.” Given the fact that the material from the transcripts, legal documents, media and psychiatric reports was not altered in any significant way, and that no one came forward later to complain that words had been put in their mouth (as they had with Capote’s *In Cold Blood*), the obvious question is how could he call the book a fiction, a “true life novel,” as it says on the dust jacket. When asked this question by a *Times* reporter, Mailer admitted that his decision had caused some confusion, but defended it by noting that “nonfiction

This book won the Pulitzer!

Do you want to qualify with "half-dozen"?

provides answers and novels illumine questions. I think my book does the latter.” Readers a century from now, he continued, people who know nothing of Gilmore or Mailer, “would say, ‘That’s a good novel.’” He wanted the book “to read like a novel, feel like a novel, to smell like a novel”:

If you feel like you’re in the room with people, the events have taken place before you and you don’t know what is going to happen next, and you want to know what happens next, then you’re in the presence of a novel. I thought that this is what the true definition of whether something is fiction or non-fiction. I think that non-fiction bears the same relationship to life as vitamin pills bear to food. In non-fiction, there’s a tendency to digest the material, absorb it, and return it to you as vitamin pills. The essence is gotten out of the various experiences, compressed and delivered to the reader. The reader can then digest the non-fiction and convert it back to fiction, convert it back to reality.

Mailer wanted it both ways: accrue every benefit of factuality and historicity—“this really happened”—while adding fictional immediacy and interiority. No one made too much of a fuss about his generic claim, and Mailer was fairly successful in distinguishing his “true life novel” from *In Cold Blood*, Capote’s “nonfiction novel.”

Schiller remembered Mailer and Capote meeting several months before *Song* was published. He and Mailer walked into the bar at the Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles. “Sitting there all alone at the bar is Truman Capote. Norman doesn’t even notice him, but I do. And being my normal bold self I say, ‘Mr. Capote, I’m a friend of Mr. Mailer’s. Would you like to join us for a drink?’ And he gets this twinkle in his eye and a little smile and says, ‘Of course.’”

"He sits down next to Norman, and says—I'm paraphrasing all this—'Norman, about this book you've written, it's awfully long isn't it? I hear it's very, very good. But awfully long, isn't it? It'd be nice if every once in a while you could condense something a little.' Norman says something like, 'I don't think you've ever understood anything I've written.' And Capote says, 'How could I understand it? I get lost because it's so long.' At which point there was a bit of pleasant conversation, and then Truman said, 'I've got to go. It's so delightful to see you, Norman.' I forget exactly how he said it, but definitely that word—delightful.

In a 1983 interview with Lawrence Grobel, Capote recalled that in the introduction to his 1980 collection *Music for Chameleons*, he had pointed out that Mailer had won several prizes and earned a great deal from his nonfiction books, "although he has always been careful never to describe them as 'nonfiction novels.' No matter; he is a good writer and a fine fellow and I'm grateful to have been of some small service to him." During a subsequent television interview with Grobel, Mailer said he didn't mention his debt to Capote because it "was so famous that you didn't have to give credit to it." Capote saw this program and was angry. He said he had "no respect" for Mailer's book because "he didn't live through it day by day," as he had with his murderers, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. "He didn't know Utah, he didn't know Gary Gilmore, he never even met Gary Gilmore," he said. Mailer's book "just really annoyed me." As for him calling Mailer a copycat, "Well, Norman *has* been copying me for years."

Mailer had another reason to be upset. Capote had warned Norris that it would be a mistake for her to marry Mailer. "That was the measure of his vanity," Mailer told Plimpton. "I

wasn't even furious. I was amused. I thought, 'My God! He sure doesn't understand Norris!' It reminded me of that joke: What's the epitome of vanity? Answer: It's a guy floating downstream on his back with a hard-on. He approaches a drawbridge and yells that it's got to be raised." In September 1984, two weeks after Capote died, Mailer was asked again about their tiff about acknowledging influence. He said, "I think he was terribly hurt that I didn't have some sort of dedication page in *The Executioner's Song*, which went on the order of 'If not for *In Cold Blood* . . ." Mailer went on: "But this is all nonsense, I mean, we can't stand around giving credit to each other all the time." Perhaps. Yet it would have been gracious for Mailer to have included a nod to Capote in his "Afterword" to *Song*, as he had for Abbott.

Both writers acknowledged Lillian Ross' nonfiction narrative, *Picture: A Story About Hollywood*, an account of the making of *The Red Badge of Courage*. Her 1952 book is fictive, if not fiction, and uses ^{several} ~~almost~~ novelistic technique, ^{S.} ~~Like *Song* and *In Cold Blood*, it is told by an~~ anonymous narrator, populated with real people speaking dialogue as if they were fictional characters, has detailed settings, employs foreshadowing, situational immediacy and so forth. This debt aside, the books of Mailer and Capote are different in several ways. First, Capote's murderers were not seasoned convicts who had served long terms like Gilmore. Second, they were inarticulate by comparison. Capote tried to make Perry Smith into a *litterateur*, but his essential banality is apparent. Mailer said many times that the best writing in *Song* was not his, but is found in Gilmore's letters to Nicole. He wrote her 10 or 20 pages a day for months, about 1500 pages all told. Mailer includes all or part of 58 of them, including this one:

Nothing in my experience, prepared me for the kind of honest open love you gave me. I'm so used to bullshit and hostility, deceit and pettiness, evil and hatred.

(?)
These things are not unique to fiction

Those things are my natural habitat. They have shaped me. I look at the world through eyes that suspect, doubt, fear, hate, cheat, mock, are selfish and vain. All things unacceptable, I see them as natural and have even come to accept them as such. I look around the ugly vile cell and know that I truly belong in a place this dank and dirty, for where else should I be? There's water all over the floor from the fucking toilet that don't flush right. The shower is filthy and the thin mattress they gave me is almost black, it's so old. I have no pillow. There are dead cockroaches in the corners. At nite there are mosquitos and the lite is very dim. I'm alone here with my thoughts and I can feel the oldness. Remember I told you about The Oldness? and you told me how ugly it was—the oldness, the oldness. I can hear the tumbrel wheels creek. So fucking ugly and coming so close to me. When I was a child . . . I had a nightmare about being beheaded. But it was more than just a dream. More like a memory. It brought me right out of my bed. And it was sort of a turning point in my life . . . Recently it has begun to make a little sense. I owe a debt from a long time ago.

Mailer parcels out the love letters carefully over 800 pages, from Gilmore's arrest to the day before his death. Their star-crossed love-and-death affair—few commentators fail to note the similarities to the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet—is one of the story's two keels; the other is the fierce, legal struggle that dominates the second half of the book, one side trying to halt the execution, the other trying to hasten it.

"Real life," Ivy Compton-Burnett once observed, "seems to have no plots." But as Mailer stated several times, nonfiction was much easier for him to write than fiction because journalists

and historians do have some sort of a record/ and usually know beforehand their characters, settings and themes; they have documents, witnesses, artifacts. Sometimes there is too little information; occasionally, there is too much. In the case of the Gilmore saga, Mailer was initially bewildered, by "trying to put people and events together. I really had to work it out. Try encountering a hundred names at once. It's like looking at the laid-out pieces of a clock." Even after mastering the huge cast, Mailer faced another problem. On one of their plane rides, he said to Schiller, "I have a problem with the book," After their suicide attempt, Gilmore goes back to prison and Nicole is sent to a mental institution. "Who's the character that ties these two people together?" Mailer asked. Schiller had two suggestions. The first was Tamera Smith, the *Deseret News* reporter who befriended Nicole and obtained copies of Gilmore's letters to her. But she had no personal contact with Gilmore. The second was Earl Dorius, the chief assistant to the attorney general of Utah. Mailer went to lunch with Dorius, who was then dealing with the legal situations of both Gilmore and Nicole, and then called Schiller up: "Oh, wonderful, nice guy, but he doesn't work. You don't know anything about writing books." A short while later, showing that he did know a thing or two, ^{Schiller} he pointed out to Mailer that the only other person significantly involved with both Gilmore and Nicole after the suicide attempts was none other than Larry Schiller.

Mailer could have cut out most of the legal and media exertions detailed in Part Two, "Eastern Voices." The first 500 pages of the book cover the period from Gilmore's release to the day that he insists that his sentence be carried out, November 1, 1976. "By that time," we are told, "Gary Gilmore was a household name to half of America." Even allowing extra space for the execution and autopsy, Mailer could have covered the final ^{ten weeks} months of his life in 200 pages,

bringing in the book at a hefty but manageable 700 pages. But after his conversation with Schiller, he realized that Gilmore's story could not be disassembled from the stories of those who helped assemble it—Schiller and his team. Schiller "might be the only one with a realistic notion of what could happen when you died in public," as Barry Farrell observed. *schiller's associate*

"Eastern Voices," moves deftly among the huge cast: from Gilmore to those who seek to aid or impede his effort to die, to Nicole, friends and families, prisoners (Gibbs being the most memorable), and to various members of the media—Farrell, Tamera Smith, and national figures like Jimmy Breslin, Bill Moyers, David Susskind and, at the end, Geraldo Rivera and Rupert Murdoch. At the center is Schiller, frantically seeking to record everything. Schiller "had to obtain this story," Mailer wrote. "That was fundamental. He wanted this story from his spinal cord out." He was Gilmore's chief interviewer (they met five times in person), as well as his advisor, paymaster, salesman, media spokesman, witness to his execution, literary executor and distributor of his ~~remains~~ *ashes* *even* *and*. If 300 people have speaking parts in *The Executioner's Song*, Schiller had dealings with 99% of them. *who?* *1D*

Mailer's abilities were put to the test by "Eastern Voices," not only by the increased size of his cast (169 new characters are mentioned by name) but by the nature of their relations—supportive, manipulative, parasitical, obliquely and directly opposed—with each other and with Gilmore, Nicole and Schiller. In "Eastern Voices" Mailer not only carries the story to its grim conclusion, he also doubles back, recounting Schiller's efforts to collect the information to ~~gather up the pieces of the clock that Mailer reassembles in Part One.~~ Approximately 125 of the final 500 pages of the book consist of documentary material. Mailer wisely chose to include this material, without which Gilmore's legal battles and love affair would be opaque. *8*

But his decision to extend the ambit of his narrative and present a full portrait of Schiller was dictated not only by Schiller's centrality, but also by Mailer's desire to give the reader something that Capote purposefully omits: the story of the story. The interviews with George Plimpton and others that Capote gave on both his personal involvement with the killers and his methods of research and reconstruction are at least half again as interesting as *In Cold Blood* itself, and would have been a welcome addition ^{to the book}. He cannot be criticized for leaving out what the nineteenth century called "the love interest"—unlike Mailer, he had none—but any careful comparison of his book and Mailer's should fault the lack of reference to Capote's emotional and extended involvement with Hickock and, especially, Smith. Mailer recognized that half of his story was the sharp-elbowed maneuvers of the media to gain access to Gilmore and his legal struggle—which he won by losing his life—and that this vicious, tawdry, but equally fascinating part of the story could best be seen from the centrifugal vantage point occupied by ringmaster Schiller. As Gilmore's chief observer, he provided Mailer not only with his observations of Gilmore, but with a privileged view of himself observing Gilmore. "Do you *really* want to have this story in the book?" Mailer asked Schiller, who replied, "Do what you want." As he states in his ^{Afterword,} "Schiller stood for his portrait, and drew maps to his faults," exposing not only "the stuff of his visions but the logic of his base schemes."

Schiller realized, he said later, that by giving enough unedited material to Mailer, "I will never fucking have to worry about somebody saying that I hired Norman Mailer to write this book and he whitewashed Larry Schiller and cleaned up all the things that he was being criticized for doing to get this story." Mailer interviewed Schiller a number of times. "I held back very, very little," Schiller said "I knew I'd be helping the project," ^{he said}. Schiller's self-

Mailer's

scrutiny is roughly equivalent to ~~the~~ sometimes comic, sometimes somber, generally unsparing self-portrait of Mailer in *The Armies of the Night*. Schiller was critical to the success of the book in more ways than one, [✓] and became Mailer's most important collaborator, ~~a position he retained~~ until Mailer's death. Real life does have plots, if you have the wit to see them.

Ψ Ψ Ψ

Mailer owed ^{to} the British publisher of *Marilyn*, Hodder and Stoughton, a book, and within a week of turning in the final draft of *Song*, he began work on *Of Women and Their Elegance*, which he later described as a "fantasy autobiography" of Marilyn Monroe. Having been preoccupied with matters of veracity and documentation for over two years, Mailer was ready to give his imagination a workout, and the short novel invents several improbable episodes—some quite salacious—in Monroe's life during the period she was married to Arthur Miller. A disclaimer accompanying an advance excerpt from the book states that the episodes "are not intended to be wholly factual representations" of Monroe's life. He would later transform the novel into a play, "Strawhead," which was performed at Actors Studio.

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When he was finished with the 50,000-word Monroe book, he went off to Maine with Norris and the children. The summer of 1979 was their last at the Thomas house. While there he wrote to Susan, and said he had "a nice feeling" being with all the kids, especially now that he was done writing. He had written so much, he said, that "I don't even squeeze words out of my dick no more, they come out through my elbows, and I'm probably capable of writing with my nose." He had to take some time off, he said, or "I was going to go squeak." Susan was about to marry Marco Colodro, ^{a Chilean economist} and he offered to have a party for her at the Brooklyn apartment. He

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relaxed, did a series of interviews with James Atlas for a *Times* profile, and caught up with his correspondence.

Abbott wrote to M^{Mailer} for help; he wanted to be paroled. He asked Abbott what he should say, noting that the authorities would be unlikely to believe anything he might say about "your good character, sterling deportment" since it was obvious that they had never met. "I could, however, write glowingly about your literary possibilities. I did as much for [Eldridge] Cleaver years ago and it was one of the factors contributing to his release." Abbott was still nearly two years from his release, and M^{Mailer} kept up a stream of encouraging letters.

With *Song* on its way to the printer, he felt relaxed enough to compose a *faux* obituary, which he published in *Boston* magazine. "Novelist Shelved," is a comic offshoot of the divorce follies in which he was engaged. "Norman M^{Mailer} passed away yesterday," it begins, "after celebrating his fifteenth divorce and sixteenth wedding. 'I just don't feel the old vim,' complained the writer recently." The piece contained a number of brief tributes from notables: Capote ("He was always so butch"); Vidal ("He had the taste of a Snopes"); Gloria Steinem ("A pity. He was getting ready to see the light"); and Warhol ("I always thought Norman kept such a low profile"). President Jimmy Carter lauded him for advancing "American book-writing and reading," and regretted that he and his wife "never did get to invite Norman Miller [sic] to the White House." Family members were not quoted, but it was reported that around the deathbed were "eleven of his fifteen ex-wives, twenty-two of his twenty-four children, and five of his seven grandchildren, of whom four are older than six of their uncles and aunts." The piece became a family favorite, and John Buffalo read it at the Carnegie Hall memorial for his father 29 years later.

The Ex Song was published on October 15, and

Just before publication, with advance copies in circulation, Mailer embarked on a

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publicity tour, traveling to Boston, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Ann Arbor, Salt Lake City, Los

Angeles, not to mention several appearances in New York. He appeared on William Buckley's

appeared
Song was published in

England on November 5, and Mailer flew over for three days of meetings with reporters, who

seemed as interested in his divorce case as the book. He told one British reporter that he felt it

was a mistake to have called his book a "true life novel," and should have called it a "true crime

novel." In later years, Mailer said more than once that he wished he had eschewed a subtitle

altogether.

^S
James Atlas' long profile of Mailer was the cover story in the *New York Times Magazine*

a few weeks before *Song* was published. It was the longest biographical piece on him since

Brock Brower's 1965 profile in *Life*. The cover photo of Mailer in an open-necked blue work

shirt ^{was} is a good one. He had lost weight after finishing the book and looks trim. The camera angle

^{was} is kind to his big ears. Mailer had to like this photograph, as well as the others accompanying the

profile, one of which showed him standing with Norris, looking beautiful, and Buffalo on the

rocky, low-tide shore below the Thomas house in Maine. But he hated the profile, calling it, with

some justice, "a defile." Atlas is vinegary throughout. He sets the tone with his opening

description of what he felt was Mailer's boring reading at Harvard in the spring of 1979—there

is no mention of any successful readings or talks at his alma mater or elsewhere—and continues

with a catalogue of gaffes and blunders. Less attention is given to his achievements. Atlas gives a

fairly brief description of *Song*—presumably the profile's *raison d'être*—and makes only a few

evaluative comments. He grants that Mailer "made eloquent the sprawling cast of inarticulate

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characters" in the story, but says it is flawed by "his addiction to the grandiose." He dislikes the "Homeric" description of Larry Schiller, and says the book is "far too long." Atlas returns relentlessly to the question—a fair one—of whether Mailer will make good on his early promise to write the great American novel. He is not hopeful, ^{and} ^{cites} ~~talks about~~ the "shrinkage of his literary reputation," and how he "cultivates a prurient reputation." Like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he says, Mailer is "garrulous, vain, paranoid, vengeful, incessantly self-reflective." Two weeks after the profile appeared, Mailer ^{responded} ~~gave some feedback~~ to a reporter at *New York* magazine.

Atlas, he said, "merely pretended great friendship and sympathy during months of interviewing," and then went on to write a "mean-spirited" piece. He was upset with Atlas' suggestion that the only reason he had classified *Song* as a novel was "to compensate for his failure to produce the definitive work of fiction he used to boast of so tirelessly." But what angered him most was the quote he included from William Styron, who said Mailer had become "a figure of pathos." Atlas passed over their long-running feud, and Mailer cried foul. Many years later, when a friend showed him a copy of the profile, Mailer said that he believed that Atlas (who he ^{was} ~~now~~ liked) might have been given editorial direction to rough him up. Norris was still angry about Atlas saying that Mailer bored the Harvard audience. She was there, she said, and it was "not true." She recalled how she got back at him. At a party at the home of Jean Stein, not long after the profile appeared, Stein brought Atlas over to meet Norris, who was several inches taller than him. She looked right over his head and said, "Oh yes, where is he?" Norris ~~was not all sweetness and light; she could be icy.~~

^{an} In his interview with ^{John} Aldridge about *Song*, Mailer said that for years he had been interpreting the American scene, and felt that he had "used up my audience." Now, he said, "I want ^{another} ~~a different~~ audience. I want those people who think I'm difficult to read." So in the period between turning in the manuscript and publication day, he began to cast about for representatives of this new readership. Martha Thomases, who had helped type *Song*, introduced him to 23-year old Legs McNeil, one of the founders of *Punk* magazine, and perhaps the first to use the word "punk" to describe the ^{1970s} ~~mid-seventies~~ rock-and-roll offshoot described as "fast, hard-edged ~~music, typically with short songs, stripped-down instrumentation.~~" *Punk* also took swipes at the establishment, left and right. After Gilmore's death, his final words, "Let's do it," appeared on punk musicians' T-shirts. McNeil was associated with the ^{early} ~~first~~ major punk rock group, The Ramones, and was the manager of another, Shrapnel. He admired Mailer's writing and considered himself to be "representative of the new audience Norman hoped to reach."

^{his outspoken married Village} According to McNeil, ~~he~~ had been compared to Mailer in a *Voice* story, and people were watching when they met in Martha Thomases' kitchen. "I'm sure you've never read anything I've written, and I've never read anything you've written, so, just to set the record straight, we're even." Mailer laughed at this bluster. McNeil invited him to come to CBGB, a music club in the Village where Shrapnel was doing a benefit to buy bullet-proof vests for the police. He was surprised when Mailer showed up a few nights later with "a scorching redhead," Norris. It was smoky and loud, but Mailer seemed to enjoy the scene, and later he and Norris went to a party with McNeil at Joey's Ramone's loft. Thomases recalled Mailer saying that the musicians reminded him of young boxers. Mailer took McNeil aside for a talk, and told him that "he was

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the Godfather and I had to listen to him because I was just like him." Two days later McNeil came to Brooklyn to interview Mailer.

When he showed up, Mailer challenged ^{him} McNeil, to walk across the narrow catwalks 20 feet above the apartment floor. McNeil, who had a hangover, declined, saying, "I haven't got anything to prove." After a quick tour, they sat down for the interview, which was published in the marijuana magazine, *High Times*. Mailer touched ^d on many topics in the interview, including Hemingway and the Women's Liberation movement, at the time staples in all of his interviews, but made scant comment on drugs for an interview in a magazine devoted to the topic. He ^{did} say that he liked punk music more than he thought he would. Perhaps the most interesting comment is when McNeil asks him about cancer, which Mailer calls "schizophrenia of the cells."

He explains that when people are in a crux—he uses the example of being in a bad place while rock-climbing—"I think we get driven very near this insanity of the mind or the flesh." ^{He repeated what I heard} Some ^{said many times} people ^{Some people under stress just} opt for letting the mind go, other people opt for letting the body go." ^{the result} The result:

~~schizophrenia or cancer~~ He would present such a situation a few years later in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*.

Shrapnel was invited to play at the engagement party for Susan and Marco Colodro, a

^{Chilian economist} at the Mailer apartment. She remembers a huge crowd, including Woody Allen and Kurt Vonnegut. The band set up in the loft above and played while the guests danced to tunes such as "I Lost My Baby at the Siegfried Line." "Damn good song," Vonnegut said to the guitarist, "lots of feeling." Mailer got into a head-butting contest with Glen Buxton, another rocker, and later got into a wrestling match with McNeil. As the band was leaving, Mailer pressed bottles of scotch on them. One of them said, "Norman, we don't know how to drink

Colodro should have been with first mentioned

that this was an old theme of Mailer's? ("I would have gone into cancer gulch" etc.)

Scotch yet." Mailer replied, "Well, you'll learn, you'll learn." Shrapnel played at ^{the house} 142 a few more times, but Mailer soon drained what meanings he could from punk rock. McNeil would become a family friend, but there would be fewer such hijinks as the decade went forward. ~~M~~ ^{Mailer turned}

~~57 shortly after Song was published.~~

Ψ Ψ Ψ

The Executioner's Song was reviewed as widely and as warmly as *Naked* and *Armies*.

With the exception of negative reviews by Diane Johnson in the *NYRB* and Germaine Greer in *Hollywood Reporter*, all the major reviews were enthusiastic. The book reached number three on the *Times* best seller list, and spent longer—25 weeks—on it than any of his ^{other} ~~past or future~~ books, excepting *Naked*. Mailer maintained the approval of his old admirers, and gained the attention of ^{new audience} ~~a generation too young to have~~ protested the Vietnam War. He was awarded his second Pulitzer for *Song* (which gave him "an emotional boost," Norris recalled), and was a finalist for both the American Book Award and the National Book Critics Award. It has never gone out of print and is probably the Mailer book most often taught in college classes—English, journalism, American studies, and criminology.

There was disagreement over the relative merits of the book's halves. Partly because of Schiller's ⁵⁷ ~~record of recording~~ the final moments of criminals and celebrities, partly because of the media's disinclination to read about its own avidity for the sensational, and partly because of the force of "Western Voices," ² ~~(as praised by Joan Didion in the Times Book Review)~~; "Eastern Voices" was generally less admired. As a character, Schiller failed to impress everyone. One reviewer said, "When Mailer has Schiller thinking of Gilmore's letters to Nicole, 'must be tons of meat and potatoes in those envelopes,' we know Mailer isn't writing about Francis of Assisi."

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But another reviewer, ~~Mailer's friend~~ John Cheever, notes that Schiller "is offered a large sum of money for an exclusive account of the execution [\$125,000 from one of Murdoch's editors, who called him repeatedly] but he refuses money for the first time in his career and contributes a sense of decency and fitness to the narrative that is shared by the other principals." Christopher Lehmann-Haupt found the book's finest achievement to be "a stunningly candid report on the complex, ambiguous and often-disturbing relationship that increasingly exists among the news, the newsmakers, and the reporters."

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in the New York Times Book Review

9) Joan Didion's review, stands with Kazin's on *Armies* as one of the finest and most influential appreciations of Mailer's work. She points out that the dominant speakers in "Western Voices" are those of women, and that "Eastern Voices" is largely comprised of stories by men: "Men tend to shoot, get shot, push off, move on. Women pass down stories." She quotes what Bessie Gilmore says after she learns that Gary is under arrest for murder: "I am the granddaughter and great-granddaughter of pioneers on both sides. If they could live through it, I can live through it." Didion calls this "the exact litany which expresses faith in God west of the 100th meridian." Her key perception, however, is that the first half of the book, because its strongest speakers are women, is "a fatalistic drift, a tension, an overwhelming and passive rush toward the inevitable events that will end in Gary Gilmore's death." These western women do not generally "believe that events can be influenced. A kind of desolate wind seems to blow through the lives of these women." Conversely, the men of "Eastern Voices," the lawyers and reporters and prison administrators, "move in the larger world and believe that they can influence events." The contrast, she says, gives the book its immutable form, a symphony in two movements. She concludes her review: "This is an absolutely astonishing book."

Discussing Didion's characterizations of the two parts of the book, Mailer said, "Yes, she's absolutely right." But he didn't see it at the time. When he was writing "Western Voices" he was thinking of cowboy movies, and for "Eastern Voices" he had a vision of media hordes coming from New York. "I saw the first half of the book as masculine and the second half as feminine." After reading her review, however, he realized the opposite was also correct—"women playing a masculine role in the first half of the book and men playing a feminine role in the second half." It was not done intentionally, he said. "If it emerges out of something you haven't thought about, out of the unconscious preoccupations of your mind, where you sort of half-see what you're doing and someone else sees the other half, that's always the ideal." Years later, he offered another metaphor ^{what he often referred to as} for the navigator, which reinforces his comments on the composition of *Song*: "What I found as a writer is that signals from the unconscious are faint. It's as if you are on an outpost in the North Pole and your radio is weak and you can barely hear what people are saying."

Ψ Ψ Ψ

Two weeks after *Song* was published, Mailer flew to Illinois to give ^{Jack} Abbott a copy. He traveled via Chicago, and stayed at the Drake Hotel on Lake Michigan. When he checked in, the front desk receptionist, an attractive middle-aged woman named Eileen Fredrickson, recognized him. She asked if he would sign her copy of *Naked*, and he agreed to do so the next day when she brought it to work. The next morning, she told him that she had forgotten the book. He asked where she lived and said he'd be happy to take a cab there to sign it when she was off work. They set a time, and Eileen, who was excited, called her sister to tell her. "Be careful, he stabbed his wife," she was told, but Eileen said she wasn't worried. Mailer came and stayed the night. In

the morning, she recalled, "I took him back to the Drake about seven-thirty in the morning in my car. I said to him, 'Norman, just consider it a one-night stand.' The next day he called me and said, 'If I came over again it wouldn't be a one-night stand, would it?' And I said, 'No.'" The relationship they started would continue until the year he died. He called her often, sent her autographed copies of his books, and got together with her when he was in Chicago.

✓
J. Michael Lennon, a young professor at the University of Illinois-Springfield, had been working with Mailer to put together his latest essays and interviews for what would become *Pieces and Pontifications*, and when Mailer told him that he was coming to see Abbott, he offered to pick him up at the airport. His brother, Peter, who was familiar with southern Illinois, came along, and on November 3, 1979, they drove Mailer to the prison. Peter recalled the visit:

Over breakfast, he talked at some length about *Apocalypse Now* and how Brando personified evil in it. He said the atmosphere and combat scenes in it were the best he'd ever seen. He said he was keeping an epistolary promise by visiting Abbott. He seemed eager—not nervous, but curious about the visit. It was a half hour drive through a dense, leafless forest to the isolated maximum security Marion Federal Penitentiary. After Norman announced our arrival (by speaking into a mechanical device a few hundred yards from the walls, at which point you are surveyed from the guard towers), we parked and walked to the main entrance. Norman remarked that everything, the sky, landscape, razor wire and walls were grey and, in fact, colorless. No one liked it. Michael and I were confined to the outer hallway alongside a guard station. Norman had one hour and it was just noon. At precisely one he was back out—book in hand.

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Over drinks later, he said that he liked Abbott and felt that in a few years, he might get out.

Abbott deserved a chance, he said.

Upon his return, Mailer wrote a long letter to Abbott telling him that Cy Rembar had agreed to be his literary lawyer, and would not charge him anything "until you make some real money." He said that he would find a way to get Abbott a copy of the book ~~prisoners are not allowed to have~~ adding that he ~~hardcore books~~ wished the situation had occurred when he was still writing *Song*. "It would have given me more understanding of Gilmore's vast rage at the regulations," he wrote. "Somehow I think that the human soul is built to encounter major injustice with more equanimity than the penny varieties." The meeting in Marion was "terrific, he continued, "And if you like me, that's great, 'cause I dug you." The rest of the letter is devoted to a discussion of Abbott's writing. He said it was natural for him to write about "the journey of your soul."

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It is the kind of writing which is very hard to read over long stretches when written by anyone smaller in stature than Nietzsche or Kierkegaard. And while I'd never say you cannot end up ultimately as good as them the odds are obviously not in your favor. Guys like that come along once or twice a century. In any event, I have no hesitation in suggesting, nay, recommending the following because even if it never takes hold and you don't do much with it, I think it will enrich your writing in general. And that is, I would attempt if I were you to try other forms of writing as exercises, literary exercises, and build up your skills—that is probably anathema to you—in a way parallel to the way some work out to build up their bodies.

Mailer said he suspected that Abbott would have a flair for drama. In 1987, Abbott proved him to be correct about his dramatic abilities. He wrote and published a play, "The Death of Tragedy," which seeks to exonerate him for the crime that returned him to prison three months after he was paroled.

Abbott finally got a copy of *Song*, and at the end of November sent Mailer a 56-page letter of commentary. Mailer wrote back to say that while he did not agree with everything, he found it to be "fascinating," especially the parallels Abbott made between *Song* and Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*. He was at some pains to defend why he had not taken a position on various matters in the book. "It's the first book I've written," he wrote, "without a clear sense of what I thought and what I wanted to teach others." Abbott felt that Brenda had betrayed her cousin Gary by setting up his arrest. Mailer responded by noting that while Brenda loved Gilmore, he had killed two innocent people in two days.

She is thinking of the neighbors as well as her family. Gary could shoot the cop, Toby, her neighbor. Hurrah, say you. Horrors, says Brenda. It isn't necessarily all cowardice on her part although you will think so, and Gary as well. But she lives on the surface of society where you breathe the advantageous air. In that place, the loyalties are on the surface, to one's neighbors, to society, to the team. Horseshit, you say. And, horseshit, say I, but faintly. Because I don't know for sure anymore.

Mailer would soon find himself in a bind similar to Brenda's, torn between supporting a friend ~~Abbott~~ and condemning him for a senseless crime.

Let's
tell the
story

With *Song* selling briskly, Scott Meredith had been able to renegotiate the contract with Little, Brown. He would now receive \$30,000 a month against the royalties for the projected three-volume novel, and by the fall of that year he had been paid close to \$1.5 million, which allowed him to pay off his loans to Meredith, ^{and} his mother and finally get even with his taxes. For the first time in a decade, he had enough money coming in to focus all of his energies on the novel. "I leave it for two years and come back," he told Mills, ^{his daughter Hilary} and it says, 'Oh you look tired, you've been away, here let me wash your feet.'" But he saw that the patience of this good wife of a novel was not bottomless. "I think," he said, "I've finally got to finish the Egyptian novel." By the end of January, he had 800 pages of manuscript.

His focus was intense enough that he forgot to write a second letter for Abbott, supplying some details left out of an earlier one, to the Utah Board of Pardons. He apologized in an April 11 letter, and told Abbott not to read any "psychological substrata into all this." During a two-month burst of writing, he had failed to write a number of important letters. "I'm just not mentally coordinated enough to put a really big show on the road," he said. He had delegated to Judith McNally the task of assembling Abbott's letters into a piece that might be sold to a magazine, buttressing Mailer's testimonial to the Board about Abbott's literary skills. Mailer had told Robert Silvers, co-editor of the *NYRB*, about Abbott, and on June 26, the letters were published there. In his introduction, Mailer explained how he had become friendly with Abbott, recounted his decades in federal prisons, which he said had been Abbott's "secondary school, his university, his family, his culture."

He returned to Provincetown in July of 1980, his first summer visit there in three years. In August the family traveled to Maine, renting for the first time a sprawling old farmhouse on the water that belonged to the Putnam family, descendants of Rufus Griswold, the scurrilous nineteenth-century editor and anthologist who created the false legend of Edgar Allan Poe as a dipsomaniac and drug addict. Even with a household full of guests, Mailer worked a few days a week on *Ancient Evenings*. He sometimes tricked new visitors into jumping off the dock into the bone-chilling water. "Come on in; it's perfect," he yelled to them. Mailer loved the water, and tried to swim daily in the summer.

In the fall, back in Brooklyn, he wrote to Larry L. King about their abstemious situation—he and King had both quit drinking.

By temperament, I'm a manic-depressive, which means I enjoy the depressions if they're deep, rich, mahogany, and melancholy, almost as much as the highs. My idea how to live is to feel in one hour that one is the best damned zapped fucker in the U.S. and then spend the next day mourning the tragic depths of one's profound incompetence. I've always looked upon that as living. Now here I am, trimmed-down Norm, down to 170 from 200, able to jog two miles a day at a peppy clip, brisk and birdlike in my manner to all and sundry who greet me, slightly reminiscent of a Democratic-party equivalent to George Bush, you know, peppy.

His moods did not alternate much, he said.

I keep telling myself it's the dues I must pay, that maybe a year must go by, or two years, before the epiphanies ring in my ears once more. I don't know, Larry. You've had it a lot tougher than me, because you're a born hell-to-leather drinker, and I was just a nice Jewboy from Brooklyn who acquired the habit, but I console myself ultimately with the thought that it's curious and interesting to be without booze this long. I find my relations to everyone are as altered as they were during the period when I ran for mayor and found myself shaking hands with individuals whose eyes I would not normally have deigned to spit into. I'm sort of tolerant and bland and can't stand myself these days, but on the other hand, I boxed three three-minute rounds a couple of Saturdays ago.

One of the reasons Mailer stopped drinking for eighteen months was to channel all his energy into *Ancient Evenings*, which could no longer be shunted to a siding while he took on journalism assignments. He now had the time, strength, cash and patience to complete it. Based on numerous comments he had made in interviews, the literary world half-believed he would actually deliver it in the near future. A few hangovers a month would impede the steady progress he was making, not to mention the loss of brain cells. He said more than once that a night of heavy drinking cost him a lot more than boxing three rounds. Sparring once a week from 1978-^{during the years}

to 1982 was one of Mailer's distinct pleasures, and a welcome break from writing all day in a tiny room.

"By the time I was born," John Buffalo wrote, "boxing had become the family sport. My father and his friends, my brothers and their friends, and my cousin and his friends went to the Gramercy Gym every Saturday morning." Michael and Stephen had been boxing for years with

their father, as had their cousin Peter ^{Alson} (Barbara's son ~~by Larry Alson~~), who was a decade older than them. From the age of three, John went along with them to the gym, where they were joined by a group of friends, including Jeffrey Michelson, editor of a porn magazine, *Puritan*, and Sal Cetrano, a poet and high school English teacher. José Torres, who had trained at Gramercy under Cus D'Amato, had a set of keys to the grimy, third-floor walk-up on East 14th Street. During the week professionals and Golden Glove contenders trained there, but on weekends it was locked. ¹ Dup^y Torres let them in, and often stayed to give free tutorials to "the raging Jews," as Mailer's amateurs called themselves. Among the group, John Buffalo wrote, there was an understanding: "They were not there to beat the piss out of each other, but to learn a little about themselves."

Torres was the boxing advisor on a movie titled *The Main Event*, starring Ryan O'Neal and Barbara Streisand, then being filmed in New York. O'Neal was an excellent boxer, a former Golden Gloves fighter, and Torres started bringing him to the gym on Saturdays. At first O'Neal boxed with Torres, but as time passed, he began to spar serially with the Mailer crowd. Michael, who would box in Golden Gloves tournaments a couple of years later, was 16 at the time, and much lighter than O'Neal, but got in the ring with him a number of times. "He was very good and technically proficient," Michael recalled, "although like a true Irish boxer, he enjoyed taking a punch. I used to hit him at will and marveled at how easy it was to connect on him, but he would punch back and it stung." His father also liked mixing it up with O'Neal; it was a chance "to get extended in the ring," Mailer wrote in a boxing memoir, because "Ryan could be as mean as cat piss." On one occasion, O'Neal broke Cetrano's jaw. On another Saturday, as Mailer described it, O'Neal threw "cruel left hooks to the stomach until the editor collapsed, still conscious, in the middle of the second round, wholly unable to go on." Mailer, who was next up

against him, saw that O'Neal had turned "angelic," a bit ashamed of what he had unleashed on Michelson, "a sweet guy, extraordinarily optimistic about life." "Feeling like an avenger," Mailer hit O'Neal with several straight rights. In their first clinch, O'Neal said, "You punch harder than anyone here." Mailer replied, "Go fuck yourself." He and O'Neal continued to box, and Mailer relished their exchanges: "It was as close as it ever came for me to gain some knowledge of how a professional might feel in a real bout for money with a hard-hearted crowd out there and the spirit of electricity in the ring lights."

Boxing, Mailer said, is as close to chess as to football, all three requiring "discipline and intelligence and restraint." As does writing, which he often compared to boxing. In an interview

shortly after Mailer's death, the British novelist Ian McEwan said of him: "Boxing and writing were wonderfully confused in his mind." *But while Mailer compared the two,*

McEwan may not have thought deeply about his

he knew how different they were.

remark, and probably is not familiar with Mailer's many utterances on the two pursuits. Take the

matter of discipline. Writers and boxers who are professionals must be formidably disciplined to achieve their goals, but in one sense writing requires more *discipline* because, as Mailer pointed out,

"boxing has objective correlatives." Invariably, one boxer dominates the other, he continued, but with writing, "you can't tell if it's good on a given day, and you almost don't want to know."

Over long years, a writer may develop the instinct to see that something is quite well done, but the chance of delusion is considerable.

There is another large difference between the two pursuits, as Mailer *had* explained to Torres in the summer of 1973 when *they* he traded writing and boxing lessons with him. *Mailer* He said to him,

Torres recalled, *said* that writing was about truth but "boxing was the opposite. It's about cheating and deceiving and lying," and Mailer predicted that it would be hard for him to learn to write

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well after years in the ring "cheating with a jab." Writing is also a form of mendacity, it could be argued, but beneath these differences Mailer believed, was one "huge similarity," which is "this battle with yourself that goes on constantly, and this demand to get the maximum out of yourself." Both boxers and writers "have to call up something deep down in themselves in order to continue." An ambitious boxer wants his victory to be remembered for years, decades, while a writer who is serious seeks "to make a change in the history of one's time." In both boxers and writers, there is an inner struggle, an *intestinum bellum*, between courage and resignation. Great boxers and writers, Mailer said, "become aware that the main bout is with themselves."

~~Even~~ the bodily toll, he believed, was much the same for professionals in the two fields, as he said in an interview with his friend Barry Leeds. Writing a novel is hell, he said:

It's an unnatural physical activity to sit at a desk and squeeze words out of yourself. It means that you secrete various kinds of fatigues and poisons through your system that you don't get rid of easily. As you get older, it's worse. [. . .]

One of the things that characterizes almost every older fighter I've ever seen training for a fight is the depression that hangs over him and his camp because the only thing good that can come out of it is money. The rest is all a foregone conclusion. Even if he wins the fight—even if he wins it well—he's not going to get a new purchase on life out of the fight the way a young writer can by a decisive victory. And that's true of writing. Writers will often make grave decisions—am I going to write this book or not? And at a certain point you have to believe that the book can be enormously important or you won't suffer that kind of self-destruction.

This seems to contradict the idea that boxing has no objective conclusion

Consequently, both writers and fighters are often hypochondriacs. "It goes with the territory," he said.

A headache was the usual result of a day at Gramercy for Mailer, but overall it was a welcome respite from the ^{physical} inactivity of writing. Psychologically, it brought his two selves, or at least his "two systems of anxiety," as he put it, into some kind of "quiet balance." A couple of years later, when his knees started to go, "I gave it up, I eased out of it," he said, "and have never felt as virtuous since." Michelson remembers getting into the ring with Mailer just before he hung up his gloves. "I don't remember who it was," he said, "but someone at the gym asked Norman on his 59th birthday just how good a boxer he considered himself to be, and Norman came back with: 'I'm better than any other 59-year-old novelist.'"

Ψ Ψ Ψ

Immediately after their marriage, the Mailers left for England. He had been offered a minor role in *Ragtime*, based on E.L. Doctorow's novel and directed by Miloš Forman, with whom he had become friendly. Mailer played Stanford White, the flamboyant nineteenth-century architect who designed, among many other structures, Madison Square Garden. A socialite and a womanizer, he had a serious affair with actress Evelyn Nesbit, perhaps the most famous beauty of her day, when she was 16 and he was in his mid-forties. Nesbit's jealous husband, the railroad magnate Harry K. Thaw, shot and killed him in the roof garden of Madison Square Garden in 1906. Norris got a bit part in the film as White's date, sitting next to her husband when he is shot.

The John Lennon tragedy occurred shortly after Mailer finished his stint on the film, and, retrospectively, it changed the experience for him. "The killing of John Lennon," he said, altered everything: I no longer took my movie death seriously; I had the shock of a real death going through my system. Like fifty million other people I cared about Lennon; my own concerns were put into proportion." A few years earlier Lennon and Yoko Ono had responded to Mailer's request for financial help for a Canadian drug dealer, Robert Robotham, a friend of Richard Stratton's, who had received an ^{nally} unconsciously long sentence for selling marijuana. Mailer testified at his trial. Lennon and Ono had also attended Susan and Marco's engagement party in Brooklyn earlier in the year.

Forman ⁿ had offered ^{Mailer} him the role because ^{he} Mailer had the same kind of status in New York in 1980 that White had in 1900. "They both had an aura of accomplishment in art and social life," Forman said. "Besides, I thought it might help me get invited to his parties." Mailer said he took the role "to satisfy my curiosity." He wanted to compare the experience of making experimental films with being in a \$20 million commercial film, this one produced for Paramount Pictures by Dino De Laurentiis. "I thought it must be wonderful being a screen actor. Much easier than staring at blank sheets of paper. I was wrong. It wasn't easy at all." But he did get to meet his boyhood idol, Jimmy Cagney, who played the police commissioner in the film. He and Norris also had their honeymoon during their week in London. When Michelson asked her what sights she saw during her visit, she answered, "The ceiling of my hotel room."

Upon his return, Mailer went on a promotional tour of four cities for *Of Woman and Their Elegance*. The book grew out of Mailer's interaction with Milton Greene, who had taken photographs of Marilyn Monroe, as well as many ^{other} celebrities such as Gene Kelly, Marlene

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Dietrich and Jimmy Durante. Mailer agreed to write a text on the photos but he didn't want to interview models. "I wanted to write about Marilyn," he said. The novella received few reviews, the majority negative, and was overshadowed by *The Executioner's Song*, which was a paperback best seller through the end of 1980.

The national moratorium on executions ended with Gilmore's death, ^{which} and opened a national debate on the morality of capital punishment. It was not surprising, therefore, that Walter Anderson, the new editor of *Parade* magazine, the Sunday supplement with a readership of 40,000,000, would contact Mailer about writing a piece on the topic. Anderson, a 34-year old, ex-Marine sergeant who had done a tour in Vietnam, was a bit apprehensive, however, because Mailer had once described involvement with the magazine as "stepping in shit." But Anderson was changing the gravitas of *Parade* by publishing writers such as Studs Terkel, David Halberstam and John Cheever. ~~The pay was good, the size of the audience unmatched, but~~ Mailer had questions: "Norman wrote to me about the capital punishment essay," Anderson recalled, "and said, 'You may not be comfortable with what I produce.'" Anderson replied that whatever Mailer wrote would "set the benchmark on what people will argue against." Anderson, who became a close friend and reader of Mailer's manuscripts, said the piece was "brilliantly written."

purple
"Until Dead: Thoughts on Capital Punishment," could have been the appendage Mailer once considered ~~tacking on~~ ^{putting at} the end of *The Executioner's Song*. It explores the pros and cons in detail, noting that Gilmore's insistence on being shot to death had underlined the issue "in royal blue ink." He first considers the deterrence claim and finds it to be specious. Most murders, he argues, are committed by psychopaths "in need of quick gratification. Patience is not part of their

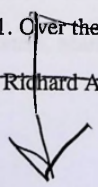
powers." Those who commit atrocities "are usually poor, raddled wretches so schizophrenic in their inmost wheels that psychiatry itself is disturbed by a look into their minds." Retribution is not something that necessarily occurs to them. Conversely, there are crimes ^{that} "make one sick with rage"—innocent children killed in acts of mayhem, old ladies raped and tortured. Such crimes call forth "the instinct to flush it out," find a scapegoat. "Living amid all the blank walls of technology, we require a death now and again, we need to stir that foul pot." Perhaps, he says, "we need the official bloodbath to restore ourselves to the idea that society is not only reasonable, but godlike," a point of view he immediately dubs as "cynical reasoning" and "vastly offensive." Yet, he concludes that the primitive instinct that supports capital punishment "may be one of our last defenses against the oncoming wave of the computer universe."

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Anderson said that the magazine received thousands of letters on the essay. The response was so large, he believes, because Mailer's reason for supporting *some* executions "is neither vengeance nor justice. Capital punishment is a safety valve." Mailer's ambivalence on the matter, a manifestation of the clash between his left-radical and conservative selves, is instructive, and sharpens the debate. ^{But soon Jack} A crime committed by Abbott ^{would commit a crime that} ~~a few months later~~ would add another layer of complexity to the question. ~~A month after Abbott's conviction for manslaughter,~~ Mailer said that ~~he had been more in favor of capital punishment "until this happened."~~ He told Dick Cavett on PBS that ~~"the Abbott business" gave him food for thought.~~

Ψ Ψ Ψ

He might have completed *Ancient Evenings* in the summer of 1981, but Abbott was paroled on June 5, 1981. ~~Over the next eight months, the "Abbott business" would result in the death of a young actor, Richard Adan, and damage to the lives of many other people, Mailer~~



~~included. His novel, which was delayed for several months, was the least of the casualties. The~~

~~"Abbott business" might be said to have begun on this date, but it had a long foreground, going~~

~~back to Abbott's out-of-wedlock birth in January 1944 (the month Mailer received his induction~~

notice) at Camp Skeel, an army base in Michigan, to Mattie Jung, a prostitute of Chinese descent

from Salt Lake City, who later committed suicide. His father was Rufus Abbott, an Irish-

American soldier from Texas, reputed to have been a "short-tempered alcoholic." His son, John

Henry Abbott, grew up in foster homes and detention centers, and began a run of sentences as a teenager that kept him behind bars for all but nine months of his life until age 37. His crimes included passing bad checks, robbing a bank, and killing another inmate in a prison fight. Abbott was proud, violent, intransigent, and consequently spent a lot of time in solitary—14 years. An intelligent and voracious reader with an extensive vocabulary, he was unable to pronounce many words that he had never heard spoken. He called himself a "state-raised convict," and wrote that he had "high esteem" for violence. For the good convict, violence is a tool that "makes us effective, men whose judgment impinges on others, on the world: Dangerous killers who act alone and *without* emotion, who act with calculation and principles, to avenge themselves." But outside prison walls, he promised, it would be different. Thomas Harrison, the parole chairman, asked him: "What we're interested in is your potential for hurting somebody. You say there is no such potential, is that right?" Abbott replied "No, no . . . There won't be nothing like that."

Abbott's anger was not unusual. He had been beaten, drugged and humiliated any number of times. In the months before he was paroled, there was a prison strike at Marion, which began when an inmate threw a tray of food from his cell. Then, as alleged in a U.S. District Court suit filed by prisoners, Marion guards took prisoners one at a time, hands manacled, to a

special room where they were beaten with three-foot wooden clubs. Abbott was the last one. After that, he told his sister, he expected to be killed^d and became paranoid^d about his situation. A lawyer he knew later told a reporter, "He had become deathly afraid of ending up in a cemetery plot there." It was at this point that he gave authorities the names of the strike leaders, and implicated some defense lawyers, which led to his release.

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Mailer, Scott Meredith, Robert Silvers of the NYRB, and Emmett McDonald, a young editor at Random House, wrote letters to the Utah Pardon Board at Abbott's request attesting to Abbott's extraordinary literary abilities (because Abbott had escaped from the Utah State Prison, he had to return there in order to be paroled). In his letter, Mailer said "I am aware of the responsibility of what I propose," adding that "Abbott is in need of a special solution that can reach out to his special abilities." Mailer later told a friend, "I didn't see how I could not help." He became Abbott's most devoted champion, although McDonald and Norris spent more time with him, and Silvers was generous to him in several ways. Random House gave Abbott a book contract and a \$12,500 advance. Mailer picked Abbott up at the airport, and insisted on carrying his bags. Then he brought him home for dinner. Norris looked down as they climbed the stairs and saw him for the first time.

Mailer's wife,

He was wearing a dark blue pin-striped suit with a vest, a white shirt, and red tie, and little round glasses. It was a color Xerox of what Norman wore all the time. He came up to the door, smiled, and stuck out his hand. 'I'm Jack,' he said. He was about as tall as I am, slim, neat, and nervous. I couldn't tell what his ethnicity was. He had a slightly exotic look, with tan skin, and was much more attractive

than I had anticipated. I wasn't afraid of him at all. In fact, there was something moving about him, dressed up in his Norman suit with those little glasses.

John Buffalo showed Abbott his G.I. Joe toys and then sat down with him, Matt, and their parents for a dinner of mashed potatoes and roast chicken. Abbott had seconds and said it was the best meal of his life. Norris was saddened when she realized that what he said was probably not flattery.

For the next few weeks, Abbott came to dinner two or three times a week. He thought Norris was marvelous. Silvers recalled Abbott telling him, "She's great, she's great! She understands." He confided in her, ~~and~~ told her about his mother and how he had bought a new stone for her grave in Salt Lake City. Almost every day he would call her on the telephone. Mailer was at his studio down the street most of the day working on *Ancient Evenings*. Abbott asked Norris for advice on matters such as where to buy toothpaste or stamps. According to Robert Sam Anson, who wrote a long, detailed piece about him for *Life*, Abbott told her about his hopes and fears, including some unnamed women who he said "were after me." Norris said, "Don't worry, Jack. I'm not after your body; I'm after your mind," and Abbott laughed, which was "something rare for him." Norris also took him shopping at Macy's. Buying a pair of jeans was a major operation.

'Is there someone who issues them to you?' he said, eyes wide, looking at the stacks and racks of clothes.

'No. You just find your size in something you like and go try them on. Over there, in the dressing rooms.'

'You mean they let you take and try these on? With nobody watching?'

"It was a concept he could hardly grasp," Norris said. She hesitated to get too involved with him, "but Norman had little time or inclination to go shopping with Jack, or answer his questions—there were so many."

Mailer did bring Abbott to the Salvation Army halfway house on East 3rd Street in the Bowery where he was required to live until ~~his parole ended on~~ August 25. On another day, he took him to the New York Public Library and showed him the *Denkmäler aus Aegypten und Aethiopia* ^{en} (*Monuments of Egypt and Ethiopia*), twelve massive folio volumes created in the second half of the nineteenth century by one of the fathers of Egyptology, Karl Richard Lepsius. It is likely that he showed him volume III, containing drawings of bas-reliefs of Ramses II at the Battle of Kadesh, a key episode in the ~~then~~ ^{yet} unpublished *Ancient Evenings*. Jill Krementz, the wife of Kurt Vonnegut, took a photo, published in *People*, of Mailer and Abbott examining one of the folios.

^{Enroll} McDonald had regular meetings with Abbott about the upcoming publication of *In the Belly of the Beast* ^(a series of letters to Mailer about prison life), and was one of the few people who saw how frazzled Abbott was, especially in new social situations. As he and Abbott were about to enter the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Abbott almost lost his temper when a guard ordered him to put out his cigarette. He put it out, but glared at the guard. There were other such incidents. When Mailer appeared on the Cavett show several months later, he explained the psychology of state-raised convicts. "When you're in a jail cell, the only way you keep your head intact is to make constructions with that head, every day of your life." Creating scenarios to explain all that you observe is a critical survival

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tool, he said. Compounding this sense of menace is the noise in prisons. "The din is constant," Mailer said.

In prison, every little moment is of significance. The guard who walks by who's been friendly to you every other day and suddenly he frowns at you; that means the warden has gotten down on your case. Or that some powerful prisoner is having thoughts about you. And the guard is associated with that powerful prisoner and you're getting the message. Now whether these things are true or not, it's the way people in prison tend to think, because they have nothing to divert themselves.

If there is agreement about any aspect of the "Abbott business," it is that the Bowery halfway house was one of the worst places imaginable for him to have been sent. It wasn't prison, but it was noisy, filled with parolees, and located in a tough neighborhood. There were rules and regulations to be followed, including daily face-to-face checks. ^{Later} At Abbott's trial, ^{would} Mailer testified that he loathed living there. "Instead of unwinding him, it was tightening him up." When someone lifted a pair of his shoes, Abbott called Norris and said he was going to kill the thief. Not much later, his blue pin-stripe suit was missing, and when he called Norris, she got "the feeling of lava boiling down inside Jack." As it turned out, the director ^{of the house} had put it away so it would not be stolen.

One night after Abbott had been in New York for about two weeks, the Mailers had a dinner party for him, inviting four close friends: Jean Malaquais and his daughter, Dominique, Dotson Rader, and Pat Lawford Kennedy. Abbott was uneasy. Rader described him as "the repairman who came to fix the fridge and then was asked to stay for dinner." But Abbott knew

Malaquais and agreed with his radical politics, and he had also read some of Rader's books about the anti-Vietnam War movement, so he was able to carry on a conversation. The evening fell apart, however, when Malaquais began criticizing the U.S. as an imperialist country. "Abbott ratcheted it up a notch, ^{Norris recalled wrote} calling America a fascist hellhole run by pigs." Mailer was getting nervous, especially after ^{Ms. Lawford} Kennedy, the sister of a martyred president, got into it with Abbott. She asked him why, if he hated the country so unreservedly, he didn't leave it. He answered he would like to go to Cuba. That was sufficient, Norris said, to unhinge ^{Ms. Lawford} Kennedy. She replied, "Cuba! Splendid, I'll buy you a ticket. *One way!*" Then she and Rader left. On the way home, she told him that Abbot had a killer's eyes.

At the end of June, the Mailers went to Provincetown where they were renting a large house in the East End for a month. Abbott was invited for a long weekend. He had his own room on the water, and gazed out for hours. He had never seen the ocean before, and didn't know how to swim. They showed him around town, and he had his first ice cream cone in 30 years. Over lunch with Norris at an outdoor café on Commercial Street, he explained to her how to kill someone with a knife. "He said it should be a sharp knife, and you should put the tip between the person's second and third shirt buttons and push hard, one quick thrust. That sends the knife right into the heart, and it's over immediately." Abbott seemed to think that he was providing her with a valuable tip, she said.

Danielle was there during Abbott's visit, and her father asked her to go to the movies with him. "It never occurred to any of us that we should be afraid of him," Norris said. Danielle, 24 at the time, said she would never dream of defying her father. "He was always certain of the value of unusual experience," She and Abbott, ^m who she described as "extremely handsome with

chiseled features," walked over a mile to the theater. He was "socially unskilled, but very respectful," she said, and "seemed like a caged animal." Abbott got up four or five times during the show, and when he came back, "he was sniffing and snorting like he had taken cocaine." On the long, dark walk back to the East End, he talked a bit about prison, but was generally reserved. The whole experience was "unnerving," she said.

A letter from a Marion inmate, Garrett Trapnell, to novelist Peter Matthiessen had been passed on to Mailer by Bob Silvers. It stated that Abbott had given a 116-page deposition to an Assistant U. S. Attorney about lawyers sneaking in drugs to prisoners in Marion, and also that he had informed on others, breaking the code of convict solidarity. That deposition had made Abbott immediately eligible for parole. The letters of Mailer and others played only a minor role, however. The Utah Parole Board chairman was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying that "Mr. Abbott had been given psychological tests and that the results were 'consistent' with his being released." When he was in Provincetown, Anson wrote, Abbott was concerned about how Mailer now felt about him, given the information that he was a snitch. He denied, however, informing on fellow convicts, admitting only to implicating the lawyers. Mailer said he couldn't judge him. "I don't know what I would have done. I never had to spend 25 years in prison."

Abbott took the bus back to New York, and a week or so later the Mailers drove in to attend a celebratory dinner at a Greenwich Village restaurant, hosted by Jason Epstein, editorial director at Random House. Attending the event beside the Mailers were Silvers, McDonald, and novelist Jerzy Kosinski. Abbott had corresponded with Kosinski starting in 1973 when he was president of the American chapter of P.E.N, and asked that he be invited to the dinner. They embraced passionately like long-lost friends. "Abbott was sort of bewildered by all this," Silvers recalled.

(Ital) "He was like walking in a dream, and he didn't know quite how to cope." At the end of the dinner, Epstein offered a toast to Abbott's literary success. On the telephone, Abbott told his sister, "These people really like me," and after a pause, "That's never happened to me before."

Norris was worried about Abbott in the heat of the city, a place "where everyone was testy, a bad combination for someone as paranoid as Jack." He called her on the phone in a state of agitation and said, "I'm going to blow, I'm going to blow." She told him to stay cool; his book would be published on July 18, and good things were in store. When David Rothenburg, executive director of The Fortune Society, which helps released prisoners, saw Abbott and Mailer on "Good Morning America," he immediately called Random House and urged them "to go slow with him on the interviews. He has to learn how to walk." Rothenburg invited Abbott to come by for help, but Abbott turned him down. ^{Richard} Rick Stratton, who had met a few criminals in his day, advised Mailer not to get involved with Abbott. Mailer answered, "You know, that's one of the things I like about our friendship. We don't have to agree." Like everyone else, Mailer was also counting on good reviews and sales ^{for Abbott's book} to level Abbott out. He and Abbott discussed the possibility of getting him a residency at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire. Norris ^{later} summed it up, "Boy, were we naïve."

The early reviews of *In The Belly of the Beast* were enthusiastic. Abbie Hoffman, in a *Soho News* review, compared Abbott with two other writers who had taken on the prison systems of their countries, Russia's Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Argentina's Jacobo Timerman (ironically, Mailer had recently written a letter to New York officials supporting a lesser sentence on a drug charge for Hoffman, who had been on the lam for seven years). Writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, Terrence Des Pres also summoned up the Russian gulags,

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describing the maximum security prisons where Abbott had grown up as "an archipelago of the damned." Des Pres, who had written an important work on the Holocaust death camps, described Abbot's book as "the most fiercely visionary book of its kind in the American repertoire of prison literature. *In the Belly of the Beat* is awesome, brilliant, perversely ingenious; its impact is indelible, and as an articulation of penal nightmare it is completely compelling." Mailer spoke to Abbott on the telephone on July 17, a Friday, and told him that the Sunday review from Des Pres was going to make him a star. When Abbott went out to celebrate that night, he must have felt like Jay Gatsby when he first saw the green light on Daisy's dock. But ^{only a day} a few hours later, and 24 hours before the Sunday Times containing the rave review appeared on millions of doorstep, Abbott got into a violent disagreement outside a 24-hour restaurant, the Binibon, on the corner of Second Avenue and East 5th Street, just two blocks from the halfway house.

On ^{the} ~~that~~ evening ^{of July 17} Abbott ^{went} had gone dancing at a German beer hall with two young women, Veronique de St. Andre from France, and Susan Roxas, a Barnard College student from the Philippines, whom he had met in an East Village bar. Roxas later testified that she had seen a knife sticking out of Abbott's belt, and asked him about it. "This is a bad neighborhood," he said. After the beer hall he took them for an early morning snack at the Binibon, walking in with one on each arm at around five a.m. He had eaten there before, although there is no evidence that he knew Richard Adan, the night manager and their waiter. A 22-year old Cuban-born actor and aspiring playwright, Adan was the son-in-law of the restaurant's owner, Henry Howard, himself an actor. Abbott ordered some food, and while the women were looking over their menus they noticed that Abbott was having an argument with the waiter. Then he was gone.

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It is not clear why Abbott and Adan went outside, but ^{they argued} ~~then dispute was~~ about the rest room. Apparently, Adan said that the bathroom was for staff use only, citing insurance concerns, and Abbott didn't like the answer. It is possible that Abbott invited him outside to argue, or fight, or that Adan ^{went out to try} ~~was attempting~~ to calm him down, something he knew how to do, according to Bill Majeski, the New York detective who ^{would soon become involved} ~~was responsible for capturing Abbott~~. Adan may also have been showing Abbott where he could relieve himself behind a dumpster, ~~one~~ located next to a wall mural honoring the slain John Lennon. An eyewitness at Abbott's trial, Wayne Larsen, said Abbott lunged at a conciliatory Adan, who was backing away, "with terrific velocity because his hair [Abbott's] sprung back from his head." ^{Abbott} ~~Then he~~ stabbed him in the chest with a knife with a four-inch blade. Larsen, a Marine veteran of Vietnam, said the blow "made a resounding impact," and then, "for emphasis, ^{Larsen} thumped his chest with both hands, which shook visibly during his testimony." Abbott then stepped back and screamed at Adan, who was trying to stanch a "canal of blood" flowing from his chest, "Mother fucker, do you still want to continue this?" Adan screamed back, "God, no. I already told you I don't." Then he walked a few steps along Second Avenue and fell, bouncing on the pavement "like a Ping-Pong ball." He died within minutes. Roxas testified that Abbott came to the door of the restaurant and shouted to her and her friend, "Let's get out of here! I just killed a man." They went outside and Abbott said, "You don't know me." Then he ran.

"By the time I got there," Majeski recalled,

there were about twenty people standing around. When I walked up to the scene the overnight detective squad was just arriving. I saw a kid lying in the street and he had this angelic look on his face. So many years later I can still see that look

on his face. My first impression was, 'This is not a bad guy.' Clearly he was a kid. There was a flow of blood that emanated from his chest because he was stabbed in the heart. Apparently, there was a lot of blood pumped out very quickly, and there was a stream running from the middle of the sidewalk down the curb and then into the street itself, a pool of blood in the street.

At six a.m. Abbott called Mailer in Provincetown. Mailer was groggy, and Abbott said he'd call back. Abbott returned to the halfway house ^{where} and a security guard saw him in the lobby. Next, he went to McDonald's apartment, but McDonald didn't answer—he had a feeling it was Abbott. At eleven, Abbott kept a brunch date at the Upper East Side apartment of Jean Malaquais. "He was extremely subdued and talked, as always, about literature and his projects," Malaquais recalled. Abbott left at noon.

At Port Authority ^{Bus Terminal} in midtown, he caught a bus and for the next nine weeks eluded capture. He went south, via Chicago and Texas, to Mexico and the Guatemala border, and then to the oil fields near New Orleans. Majeski said, "I had a lot of conversations with Richard Adan's mother early on, and with his father-in-law. I kind of found myself promising the both of them, independent of each other; I promised them that I would get him. Once I made that commitment, to myself, ^e than I couldn't let it go." He ~~had~~ read *In the Belly of the Beast* and realized it was well-written, but saw that Abbott "was not well-informed about life on the outside." He concluded that eventually Abbott would ask for help from people he knew, as he had only \$200 when he fled. Majeski spoke to Mailer briefly on the telephone the next day, but knew he needed to meet him in person. He called Judith ^{Mailer's secretary} who told him it was impossible for Mailer to come to New York. "You know how Judith could be—very stand offish. I said, 'Unless you arrange a

who?

meeting with him I will show up and I will arrest him.' She was saying, 'You can't do that, you just can't do that.' I wasn't going to do it, but that's how I got to him." The first meeting did not go well, but Majeski was persistent and kept calling Mailer and others.

Any time I got a new lead or a suspicion as to where he was I would call them and say, 'Listen I've got information that Jack was seen in Chicago and I understand that he was trying to get in touch with you.' They say, 'Oh no, he's not trying to get in touch with me.' But a couple days later I'd talk to that same person, 'I heard he was reaching out to you.' And they say, 'Ah . . . oh no, no he didn't call.' So I knew he was. I believed that Norman was going to get contacted by Jack and he was. And later Norman did tell me he was contacted by Jack, but he didn't tell him where he was. Norman was probably the least cooperative of all—maybe not least, but less than most, although there was mutual respect from the beginning. He was not a big help in telling me things verbally, but he still fell into that category of *not* telling me information. And that's fine. If Norman knew Jack was in Texas, I could still pick that up from him just like I could from all the other people. Every conversation with the people I called ended with me saying, 'Tell Jack Majeski's right behind him.' And when I finally met Abbott in the courthouse corridor, he knew immediately who I was. 'You're Majeski,' he said.

One of the people Abbott was calling was Scott Meredith, his agent. Meredith had the phone records. "Abbott was calling him," Majeski said, "to find out how his fucking book was selling."

Ultimately, Majeski was able not only to tell Louisiana authorities where Abbott was working, but also the alias he was using: Jack Eastman—Abbott kept his first name because it

was tattooed on the fingers of his left hand. On September 23, he was captured in the oil fields. He was charged with murder upon his return, and immediately retained Ivan Fisher, a New York criminal defense lawyer recommended by Mailer. Abbott was put in 24-hour lockdown, solitary, because Fisher was afraid someone would kill him. Majeski and Fisher got to know each other at the ensuing trial, and they both became lifelong friends with Mailer. During the time Abbott was on the run, his book went through five printings, and the following year the paperback became a best seller. He earned approximately \$100,000 in royalties while ^{he was in Louisiana} loading and unloading trucks for \$4 an hour.

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On ^{July} June 16, two days before the events at the Binibon, Barbara Probst Solomon flew to Provincetown to do an interview ^{with Mailer about} on *Ancient Evenings*, which Mailer was determined to finish that summer. She hoped to publish ^{her interview} it in the *New York Times Magazine*. In recalling the visit, she explained her relationship with him, which went back to the fall of 1947 when she ^{had} met him in Paris. ~~I am one of Norman's oldest friends that is still here to talk with you," she said.~~ "I knew him from the time I was a young high-school graduate and he was not yet THE Norman Mailer." Her husband ^{had} died in 1967, and shortly after that, she continued, "at a time when Mailer had broken up with Beverly, Norman and I sought each other in a more intimate way. But that was temporary. I would characterize what we had over those many years as simply a profound friendship." As they were talking in Mailer's studio on Bradford Street that ^{Sunday} Saturday, someone—a friend or perhaps one of the older children—came in and said that Jack Abbott had killed someone in New York.

It was the first time I ever saw Norman cry. He broke down, he cried, at that moment—cried for the dead student. This is not a side he often revealed. 'This is the worst thing,' he said. By the worst thing he meant he felt in some way responsible for the murder. And then the *Times* said to me, 'Well, put Abbott in your interview.' But my interview had been a literary interview. It actually was completed before we knew of the murder. So I said, 'Abbott happened after. You'll see when you look at it. This was a literary interview. We finished it.' The *Times* then said no. I called up Bob Silvers of the *New York Review*, and he said, 'Oh, this is not the time for a literary interview with Mailer.' So it was published in the *Boston Review* and *Pieces and Pontifications*, and other places. When I told Mailer, he said, 'Well, I'm in the outfield now.'

Prof. Mike
 Writing to Lennon on July 29, Mailer said, "I've been in a state of shock from Black Friday, i.e., early Saturday a.m. I can still hardly believe Jack did it. Your relative V.I. Lenin once said "Whom?" as a test to ask "who benefits?" when you can't figure something out. I reckon it was the devil." Norris believed that their telephones in Provincetown and Brooklyn were tapped, but Majeski said this was not the case. During this period, Mailer had nothing to say to the press. In early August they went to ~~the Griswold place in~~ Maine with the family. Danielle remembers that he was "extremely depressed." Unable to reach Mailer, frustrated reporters pestered Scott Meredith for a statement. Mailer's agent said that he had met Abbott "a few times after his release and he seemed a gentle, kind person." As far as Mailer was concerned, Meredith said, he was "still unwilling to talk about it. I think that unwillingness will be permanent. He's just heartsick." His first public statement came when Abbot was caught: "Jack

Abbott has had one of the toughest lives I've ever encountered, and the next stage is not going to be any easier." From start to finish, Mailer did nothing to distance himself from Abbott.

Norris first met Ivan Fisher when she and Mailer went to his office to discuss the upcoming trial. Fisher, who stands about six-foot-^{five}~~six~~ and speaks in a booming voice, said, "We're going to have Jack back out on the streets before you know it. Don't worry about a thing." Norris was "flabbergasted," and replied that Abbott "is going to do this again and again if he gets out," and should be locked up permanently. "Norris was morally offended, deeply, that I actually wanted to win an acquittal for Abbott," Fisher recalled. "This set us apart instantly." Mailer, "the constant voyeur," moved his chair back, so to speak, to watch the exchange. "He loved the notion," Fisher said, "that there I was, you know, the complete counterpoint to the soul of the woman he loved most in the world." ^{SD} The trial began in mid-January 1982.

Fisher mounted a strong defense, reading from Abbott's book about prison-induced paranoia, and speaking emotionally about how Abbott's world ^Cview was the result of a 25-year prison education. Pounding on a table and speaking in loud tones, he said, "He went from the belly of his mother to the belly of the beast." The prosecution had a dozen witnesses who either saw Abbott stab Adan or placed him in the restaurant that morning. Abbott's claim that Adan pulled a knife, which would have made his act self-defense, convinced no one. Naomi Zack, a philosophy professor who later married Abbott, said that long after he had been convicted Abbott still asked friends to search for Adan's knife in the alley. It was "the holy grail" for him, she said. Needless to say, it was never found.

Mailer testified for 20 minutes on January 18, and described how he and Abbott had corresponded, and the letter he wrote in support of his parole. His testimony merited only a few lines in news reports. But after the proceedings were over that day, reporters surrounded him and he got into an impromptu discussion with them in the courthouse press room. It was a terrific mistake to take on 35 reporters, but he had no calculation in his bones. He admitted that he had missed Abbott's capacity for violence, that he didn't "pay enough attention to the little warnings he gave me in a quiet little voice about how that halfway house was really getting him ready to blow." Asked what he felt about Adan's death, he said, "Richard Adan's death is an absolute tragedy. Who's pretending that it isn't? It's a hideous waste, it's a horror. The fact that Richard Adan is killed is something that the people who are closest to Abbott are going to have to live with for the rest of their lives. I mean, you can't have my blood unless you go for it, but you can have my psychic blood, because naturally, I, like many other people are upset about the death of Richard Adan." The mood shifted when Mailer said he was opposed to a lengthy sentence for Abbott. "Adan has already been destroyed," he said, "at least let Abbott become a writer." Further pressed, he said, "Putting people in prison and turning the key on them, and forgetting about them, that is the cellar, that's the ground floor of fascism. A democracy involves taking risks." This enraged the reporters. Paul Montgomery of the *Times* said that in his 25 years as a reporter, Mailer's press conference was "the worst New York press gang bang I've ever seen. Everybody went crazy at once, pushing forward."

Norris said, "Norman was never cool under pressure, and tended to get angry and say stupid things when goaded, and the press are expert in goading." If Abbott was freed again, Mailer was asked, wouldn't he kill again? He replied, "I'm saying culture is worth a little risk."

That's what I'm saying over and over for 30 years." Mike Pearl of the *New York Post* came back sharply: "Which elements are you willing to gamble with? Cubans? Waiters? What?" Mailer repeated himself: "Society has got to take certain risks," adding that he felt "very responsible" for what had happened. Things got raucous at this point, and the volume went up; insults were traded. Mailer used the phrase "scumbag journalism," and shortly after, the news conference dissolved in acrimony.

The jury was divided between those who wanted to come in with a murder verdict, and those who wanted ~~case of~~ manslaughter. After 15 hours of deliberation, those favoring manslaughter won. Henry Howard called the verdict "ridiculous"; Mailer called it "fair." The sentence was 15 years to life. Abbot, who had spent the previous five months in solitary reading *The Golden Bough*, Sir James George Frazer's massive compilation of religious myths and practices—Mailer owned a 12-volume set and had sent him a reprint—received the verdict with resignation. Mailer called Abbott after the verdict, and they talked about the problems state-raised convicts faced when they get out. Their conclusion was that such men "are both too strong and too weak to handle the world." When told that Henry Howard had said that his son-in-law's blood was on his hands, Mailer said, "I think he's right," and walked away.

Norris ended her account of these painful events by discussing how Mailer had "analyzed violence, studied it his whole life, played with it in his imagination." She puts his fascination with violence in the context of his writing, especially "The White Negro," and also the stabbing of Adele. From the stories he told her, she concluded that the 1960 stabbing had been a crucible, and that "he had gone through the fire and come out cleaner and forged of

greater steel." She concluded, "Norman always had a huge ego; he believed he could change the course of a river by the strength of his personality." He thought Abbott could do the same, failing to understand, as she observed, that not everyone was like him.

But M^{ail}er had been pretty much been given a pass for ~~"The Trouble,"~~ although not by

himself, nor by Adele, and he knew that there would be a never-ending cost to his children, especially Danielle and Betsy. Reporters and editorial writers, pundits and writers of letters to the editor, abetted by M^{ail}er's ill-considered and inflammatory statements about culture and risk, were righteous in their comments on the Abbott business. ~~Noting the earlier stabbing was de~~ rigueur. The pieties of law and order were fingered like rosaries by op-ed writers, and M^{ail}er

was pilloried for romanticizing violence. ~~Ronald Reagan was now president, and patriotism and the verities of home, family and flag were trumpeted. M^{ail}er was the perfect target.~~ The New

Republic ran a color cover depicting him and Abbott sitting at a restaurant table on which lay a bloody knife and an open handcuff. On the wall, there is a portrait of the ex-con Jean Genet and his champion Jean-Paul Sartre. Inside the magazine, James Atlas called Abbott's book "a hectic

screed full of shrill political jargon," adding that it was "irresponsible" of M^{ail}er to say that Abbott could earn a living as a writer. Lewis Louis Lapham, who still remained at Harper's after his colleagues had resigned en masse, stated in the Chicago Tribune that "M^{ail}er now endorses

sociopathic killers instead of prize fighters." Lance Morrow of Time complained of the soft

Sentence verdict Abbott had received, and suggested that Abbott and M^{ail}er "be shackled together with molybdenum chains." In a front-page essay in the Times Book Review, Michiko Kakutani wrote a thoughtful, balanced piece that explored the M^{ail}er-Abbott relationship. There was a myth at work, she wrote.

~~The stabbing of Adele~~

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It was the myth, as Mailer puts it in his introduction, whereby 'the boldness of the juvenile delinquent grows into the audacity of the self-made intellectual.' It was the wishful impulse to see Mr. Abbott's life as a story not just of crime and punishment, but of crime and punishment and redemption; and it was the fervently held belief that talent somehow redeems, that art confers respectability, that the act of writing can somehow transform a violent man into a philosopher of violence.

Kakutani, who would later become Mailer's critical *bête noire*, came closer than anyone else to ^{articulating} ~~encapsulating~~ Mailer's unspoken assumptions about Abbott. Mailer never stopped believing that art can ennoble, and that it is possible to rise above one's errors and crimes, but "the Abbott business" challenged his deepest beliefs about human nature. It forced him to recognize the folly of believing that sinners and criminals could *invariably* be saved by art, could move forward into greater humanity rather than retreating into less.

The majority of those who attacked Mailer for his ^{advocacy} ~~espousal~~ of ^{of Pardon} ~~Pardon~~ Board made the assumption that his letter to the Utah Pardon Board was the linchpin of his release. Mailer never disputed this, even when it was convincingly shown that his testimony was only one factor, and far from the most important in the ^{had} ~~Pardon Board's~~ decision. Abbott ^{had} sprung himself by ratting out his fellow prisoners, as he ^{himself} later made clear in conversations with Naomi Zack. But even after friends pointed to his limited culpability, ^{Mailer} ~~he~~ insisted it was greater. Malaquais, Torres, Lucid and others all tried to convince him otherwise, to no avail. Appearing on the Cavett show after Abbott's conviction, he said, "I'm not trying to hide behind others. Or say that I wasn't the

only one who got him out. I certainly was one of the two or three people who were finally instrumental in getting him out." Mailer's idea of retributive balance, karmic debt, made him take more blame than he was due, according to his daughter Danielle. ~~Simply put,~~ on some level ~~he~~ ^{my have} believed that he was atoning for ~~another~~ ^{his} stabbing, ~~one that took place~~ ^{of Adair} 21 years earlier. But it was only a down payment on that huge debt.

At a Fortune Society meeting shortly after Abbott's conviction, William Styron stood up for Mailer, saying, "My heart goes out to him. I have an Abbott in my life." Styron had aided a prisoner, Benjamin Reid, who later raped a woman while on parole. Styron repeated his defense of Mailer at a P.E.N. conference, and in an essay, where he said, "Remembering one's own Elysian ~~781~~ childhood in juxtaposition with that of Reid and Abbott, I think it is fair to say that a concern for either of those wretched felons has less to do with romanticism than with a sense of justice, and the need for seeking restitution for other men's lost childhoods." Styron's gesture led Mailer to write him a letter, his first to him since 1958. He wrote, "I just wanted to say that it was gracious of you and generous and kind of gutty to speak up for me the way you did about the Abbott business." Mailer and Styron's friendship was rekindled, perhaps the only happy outcome ^{separate} of their attempt to help "wretched felons."

Chapter 12

Pharaohs and Tough Guys

"I had to go to Yugoslavia for some reason," Schiller said, "but on the way to Yugoslavia, I stop to see Norman in London." This was not happenstance. Schiller had purposefully flown via London instead of Frankfurt^u so that he could see Mailer, who was there acting in Miloš Forman's *Ragtime*. Five months earlier, in July 1980, NBC had signed an agreement with Schiller to produce and direct a television mini-series based on *The Executioner's Song*^y and had insisted that he sign Tracy Keenan Wynn to write the script. Wynn had many film and television credits, and a few years earlier had won an Emmy for his adaptation of Ernest Gaines's^s novel^y *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. "Take your four million dollars," the executives told Schiller, "and go make your film." Schiller had a problem, however.

^{to write the screenplay}
 Mailer had been his first choice, but both CBS and ABC, where Schiller had good relationships, didn't want Mailer as the writer because he had never had a script produced. Schiller then went to movie studios, and they accepted Mailer as the first draft writer (mainly because all theatrical screenplays are re-written), but they didn't think Schiller had the requisite experience to direct a feature film. "I realized then that, you know, no way was this deal ever going to be made with both of us together," Schiller said. Next, he tried NBC where the new president of the entertainment division, Brandon Tartikoff, was revamping programming and taking chances^{h/c} and liked the proposed miniseries. Nick Nolte was the first choice to play Gilmore, and Priscilla Presley as Nicole (although ultimately the roles went to Tommy Lee Jones and Rosanna Arquette). Schiller called Mailer and told him that he was going with Wynn and NBC. "You've written the book and won your Pulitzer, and now it's time for me to tell the story my way." Mailer didn't argue, Schiller said.

in London

At lunch with Mailer and Norris at ~~Grosvenor House~~ in December, Schiller knew Mailer would ask about Wynn's script. He said that it was a fine adaptation, but not exciting. Not much else was said, and Schiller left for Yugoslavia. In February 1981, Schiller received a new script *from Mailer, written "on spec."* Schiller in the mail *it was Mailer's, and he liked it enough to send it on to NBC. Mailer had no contract;* ~~his version was done on "spec."~~ At first glance, it seemed nearly the same as Wynn's, but there were subtle changes, lines shuffled or dropped, and some additions. Schiller explained:

With every single character in Mailer's version, the dialogue defines the character. I just couldn't believe it. 'I don't give a shit about your pants'—that line defines Brenda right off the bat. In Mailer's scene that was the first line. Tracy used the same thing, but it was the third line in his scene. By the time you got to that line, its power was dissipated.

NBC also liked the script. "It was just different," an NBC vice president stated. "It had a different tone." Schiller had already paid Wynn, and *when NBC accepted Mailer's version, he* ~~now~~ had to pay Mailer \$250,000. *OK?*

The question of who should get the screen credit was contested *and* went to the Writers Guild for arbitration. ~~Schiller wanted the credit to go to Mailer, which angered Wynn. "I've been writing for 10 years," he said, "and I felt my script for 'The Executioner's Song' was my best work. I can't do any better."~~ Mailer's script, he said, "was something out of the 30s." Wynn sent the Guild a detailed analysis of the two scripts, arguing that Mailer's was derivative. Mailer had not read Wynn's script, and wrote a brief letter to the Guild that attempted to prove it. His argument was that anyone who wrote a script based on the book would have to depict the same key events and characters. He explained it this way:

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

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

~~There was fine tuning on the script right up to its filming in the fall of 1981.~~ Mailer even visited the location in Utah, as he said, ~~"to protect the dialogue."~~ He was also working intermittently on ⁶ "Strawhead," his play about Marilyn Monroe. *Ancient Evenings* was still a long way from completion, but first he had to finish work on his new collection, divided into a dozen essays and prefaces (*Pieces*) and ²⁰ interviews (*Pontifications*). His reflections on television, "Of a Small and Modest Malignancy," his comic memoir of the ^I *Harvard Advocate*, "Our Man at

Harvard," and his essay on Watergate, "A Harlot High and Low," were the key essays: The interview section ^{writing} was comprised of five published in the 1950s and 1960s, and 15 newer ones, including ²⁰ 1975 interview with Laura Adams on reincarnation and magic. This ¹ last interview, one of Mailer's most important, contains a long discussion of his belief in magic, something he was exploring in *Ancient Evenings*. The 400-page collection, which he dedicated to his sister, appeared on June 21, 1982, not long after Abbott was sentenced. The timing did not help the book's reception, which was quiet and mixed.

Pieces and Pontifications, Mailer's fifth miscellany, is a product of the 1970s, when he "was much out of step." Besides dropping the third person ⁵ personal and shifting focus away from ^{start} himself, Mailer ~~his exposed selves~~, he had withdrawn from politics to a great extent after the 1972 election.

~~Unable to find a handle for Watergate and, like many Americans, numbed by the downturns and disasters of Carter's one term in office: the energy crisis, a wobbly economy, the nuclear disaster at Three Mile Island, the Snyler invasion of Afghanistan, and the event which doomed Carter's reelection—the imprisonment of the American embassy staff in Teheran. In his review of *Pieces and Pontifications*, Lucid put his finger on Mailer's malaise in the decade: He spent his first 20 years as a writer "envisioning and anticipating moments of climactic crisis," in his personal life, in politics and culture, and sometimes all three, overlapping. "But always the crisis was about to happen. Always our situation was before. The 1970s represented after. The counter-culture was over. The war in Vietnam was over." One world was dying and a new one had not yet been born.~~

~~"Post-apocalyptic dwindle," was how Lucid characterized the interregnum.~~

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

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

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

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

1983
Little, Brown set publication for April 4, to be followed by the novel’s appearance in England in late May.

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

(Rowbotham was still in prison, and running his ^{drug} operation from prison.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

~~old copy~~

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

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

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

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

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

deleted

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

~~792 missing~~

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

Ψ Ψ Ψ

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

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

in their coffins, and also on the narrow linen bandages ^{that swathed} ~~with which the remains were swathed.~~

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

The editors asked if he had read Vidal's novel ^{Creation}, about ancient Greece and Persia, and he said no. "Gore and I are always working in terribly different directions." Vidal is a rationalist and an atheist, he said, and comparatively speaking, I am "a diabolist and mystic." Mailer's protagonist, Menenhetet I, is a magus who seeks the links between the high and the low, excelsior and excrement. As ^{Robert Begbie} ~~Robert Begbie~~ notes in his study of the novel, in Menenhetet's

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

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

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

was unable to make the leap after he got enmeshed in the fascinating belief and practices of the ancient Egyptians. He was, for example, deeply attentive to the fact that a dung beetle had been deified as Khepera, the God who propelled the Boat of Ra out of the Duad in the morning, and pushed it below the horizon at night. For decades he had been fascinated with magic and had read widely in works such as ^{Sir James George} Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, and ^{R. C. S. LYNN} Thorndike's eight-volume *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, both of which he owned. Ancient Egypt, a culture saturated in magic for thousands of years, was the perfect place for him to explore his interests. ^{He was fascinated} "Magic," he said, ^{by the} ~~was their~~ ^{100% of magic in Egyptian life.} substitute for technology. As you start getting into it, the problems they solved with their magic were about as cock-eyed and absurd as the problems we solve with our technology." When asked what *Ancient Evenings* was about, he often said, "It's a novel about magic."

He followed his sources with modest rigor. Professor David B. O'Connor, an Egyptologist at the University of Pennsylvania, said that he enjoyed the novel because "Mailer had so well grasped the cultural and historical thrust of ancient Egypt," despite a few errors. The largest of these, as Mailer readily admitted, the practice of telepathy, was never part of Egyptian belief. Several of his characters send and receive mental messages, and Mailer argued later that at some point in the distant past, before the Egyptians, humans had the power of telepathy. But in modern times, he speculated, "the amount of electromagnetic disturbance all our machines make, particularly our communication machines, has polluted whatever that ring is around the earth that transmits messages." He based this belief, in part, on the fact that dogs never watch television. "I think," he said (remembering the clairvoyant Tibo), "they live in so complete a telepathic

framework that the set communicates nothing to them." Such were the wrinkles in the mind of the novelist at 60.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ψ Ψ Ψ

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

more than 50 interviews he gave in 1983. The media campaign for the novel exceeded those for all his

earlier books but, ^{he told one interviewer that} as Mailer told Bogiebing, too much visibility is worse than too little. Authors who have good sales "get very little personal publicity. We don't read much about Saul Bellow, John Updike." He admitted that he had lost the battle with those who carved nasty messages on the sarcophagus of his legend. "So I've just said the hell with it." He often likened his clip file to the tail of a dinosaur. Collectively, the reviews ^{for *Ancient Evenings*} were worse than those received by any of his books since the 1950s. In ^{his review in the} ~~his review in~~ the *Times Book Review*, De Mott called the novel "a disaster." ^{There were some notable exceptions, however.}

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

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

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

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

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book.

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

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

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

however

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

Go to
p. 805

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

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

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

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

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

from 1962.

✓ his long self-interview

what is this?

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

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

his planned
 Mailer intended that "The Boat of Ra," the second novel of the trilogy, would begin with the same explosion that concludes *Ancient Evenings*. In "The Last Night," his 1963 short story, a lone spaceship is propelled out beyond the sun's gravity by a series of planned nuclear detonations that destroy the earth, sending "a scream of anguish, jubilation, desperation, terror, ecstasy" across the heavens. Aboard are eighty humans and some animals seeking a new home in distant galaxies. Most of the novel, beginning with this story, would take place aboard the ship. Meni will be aboard, reincarnated in one of the survivors of the earth, which has been ravaged by corruption, plagues and wars. Humans may have been "mismated with earth," and "the beauty that first gave speech to our tongues commands us to go out and find another world," one where the power of the word will have primacy. Mailer's short story ends with "a glimpse of the spaceship, a silver minnow of light, streaming into the oceans of mystery, and the darkness beyond." A decade later in the mid-1990s, he and Norris would collaborate on several versions of a screenplay based on this story, the last attempt to salvage something of the "big novel" that he never finished writing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mike
You
have
more
on A.E.
than
all his
other
books
combined

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



However hampered by the first person point of view in *Ancient Evenings*, Mailer was not ready to abandon it. He used the same perspective—minus the telepathy exercised by Meni—in his next novel, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, a murder mystery set in contemporary Provincetown. It is narrated by Tim Madden, a 38-year old bartender with literary ambitions who spent three years in prison for selling cocaine. As ^{Mailer} he explained to ~~Dexter~~ after completing the novel, the first person was amenable because a good novel, he said, "can come out of the simplicity of an interesting, intelligent voice, full of unexpected turns and agreeable perceptions." Madden's colloquial American is a ^{welcome} relief after the orotund locutions of Menenhetet. Conversant with literary and philosophical topics, Madden is well-travelled on both sides of the tracks. He attends séances, collects coincidences, and is sensitive to the stark beauty of the Provincetown Spit, which he describes as "the fine filigree tip of the Cape [that] curls around itself like the toe of a medieval slipper." All of his senses are unsheathed, especially his olfactory abilities, which come close to matching those of Menenhetet. His vision is sharp enough to distinguish among the dozen shades of dun in the winter woods of the Cape; and his ears subtle enough to discern "the rustle along the beach that comes with the turning of the tide." He lives on the water side of Commercial Street in the quiet East End of town (near, therefore, to the three-story brick house ^{627 505 Commercial Str.} Mailer rented from 1970-72 [and purchased in the early 1980s). The house is owned by Madden's wealthy wife, Patty Lareine, who on the "drear" November morning on which the novel opens, has been gone for 24 days. She has left him for a tall, powerful black man, a sexual athlete named Bolo.

to whom
Mailer?
the
reader
?

OK?

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

Did
 you
 tell u
 this
 earlier?
 no!

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

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

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

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

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

SPDY?
yes

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

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

There are other candidates from a list of bizarre characters

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

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

plot is the weakest element. The last third, he admitted, "drifts heavily and ponderously from revelation to revelation."

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

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

I don't know that this has been said

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

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

The edition
As a paperback it went through at least 15 printings.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Well, I need money,' Mailer replied.

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

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

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

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

Reviews of the novel were somewhat better than ~~those~~ for *Ancient Evenings*, and it reached number four on the best seller list, his third book in five years to make it. Singled out for praise in even some of the unfavorable reviews was Madden's father, Dougy, another in the long line of male mentor figures in Mailer's fiction. Madden senior arrives in Provincetown the morning after his son has retrieved the heads from the Truro burrow. In his prime, a large, strong man (six-foot-three, 280 pounds), he is now weak from chemotherapy and, disgusted with the nausea that accompanies the treatment, has decided to give it up. Bourbon is his new medicine. Tim Madden is half-Irish, one-quarter Jewish and one-quarter Protestant, a "sensitive Irishman." But his father is a "pure ethnic," Mailer said, "I wanted him to be a real Irishman marked by that special kind of probity that they can possess, along with powerful, murderous emotions."

During another gray P-town day, father and son pass the bottle and discuss cancer, courage, and the disposal of body parts. Statistics, Dougy says, indicate that people in mental institutions get cancer at a much lower rate than the general population. "I figure it this way," he says, passing on one of Mailer's favorite dualisms, "cancer is the cure for schizophrenia.

Schizophrenia is the cure for cancer." But he discovers another cure: dirty jobs. The more

horrible, the better. Dougy secures ~~baking~~ wire to an anchor, ties it to spikes he has driven

through the eye sockets of the two heads, and plummets them some fathoms down. Later, he gives sea burials to the bodies of the two women, as well as ~~those of Nissan, Stoodie, Hilby and~~ others, among them

Regency, who is killed by ~~Madeleine~~ after he has a mental breakdown and a stroke. "Crazy people in serious places had to be executed," Madden says. A short time later, Dougy reaps the homeopathic benefit of his grisly work when his cancer goes into remission. "Maybe I was in the wrong occupation all this time," he tells his son.

Another instance of his fascination w/ the Irish

right?

retrieved from

he had found in the woods

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



About six weeks before his concentrated effort on *Tough Guys*, Mailer completed an adaptation of Henry Miller's trilogy ^T *Sexus, Nexus, Plexus*, known as *The Rosy Crucifixion*. The opportunity to write his third screenplay came from a young editor at the *Village Voice*, Rudy Langlais. He wanted to use Miller's masterwork as the basis for "the first classy X-rated Hollywood film." After he read *Genius and Lust*, he knew that Mailer was the screenwriter he wanted. Langlais pitched Mailer the story of Miller's profound love for his second wife, June Edith Smith (Mona in the novel), and her affair with Anastasia, who lived with them for a time: "Boy meets girl, boy loses girl to girl, boy gets girl back." Mailer was enthusiastic and went to

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

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

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

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

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

Ψ Ψ Ψ

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

SP?

This is all in the book, right?
yes

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

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

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

her memoir. ~~Her interviews were sold to various magazines, with Meredith helping on sales.~~

~~presumably~~ One of her interviews with Mailer included Vidal, and was the cover feature in the

May 1991 *Esquire* (he and Mailer had made up by this time), but Mailer said it was a weak piece, even after he had tweaked it. He edited her interviews before they were published, with

the exception of the last two, which she refused, in the name of honesty, she said, to let him review or change. Mallory was unaware that ~~it was a common practice~~, and believed that it was

"his way of hiding the truth." By revising his comments, she said, "he controlled his image for

history." Norris eventually learned about Mallory, who was not timid about showing up at Mailer events, but the affair was fairly quiet until she moved to New York ~~a few years later~~.

~~Mallory, by her own description, was an alcoholic, a sexaholic and a drug abuser. Money, and access to celebrities seemed to be her chief aspirations, although she did hope to become a writer, and did like and admire Mailer. She was 42 when they met, still beautiful and sexually appealing.~~

Among ~~his~~ close friends, the affair caused consternation, but he waved off every warning. The relationship was based on passion, according to Ivan Fisher. "It was a huge part of his being. And a huge part of his passion was sex. And his relationship with Mallory was 100 percent sexual. Period. There wasn't the teeniest, tiniest nanogram of anything other than sex involved there. If you are looking for an idea, read her book [. . .] *Flash*, yes. And you'll know

exactly what this affair was about. It wound up causing ~~her~~ [Norris] enormous pain." *Flash* is Mallory's 1988 novel about an alcoholic, sexaholic, drug-abusing female flasher. "Mallory packs her novel with down-and-dirty sexual details," said one reviewer. Mailer gave it a blurb, as did,

~~inexplicably~~ Gloria Steinem. By the time the book was published, Norris realized that Mallory, unlike Mailer's other mistresses, lacked discretion, but not determination. She wanted to become

Let's be careful + stick to what she has published

some famous people insisted on the right to do this. She

Mallory

and

Mallory

Mailer's

Mailer's lawyers

OK?

the seventh Mrs. Mailer. The protagonist of her novel is trying, after an affair with a French millionaire, to win a major role in a film ^{via} the casting couch. Her true passion, however, is for Sacha Sachtel, a sixty-year old producer, the "King of Kink," modeled on Mailer.

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

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

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

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

He does not mention the stage of a relationship that precedes living together: an affair. Besides Mallory, he was still seeing Carol Stevens, and whenever he visited Chicago, Eileen Fredrickson. He called her regularly. When he was on the West Coast, he rarely failed to spend time with Lois Wilson, ~~whose husband was aware of their relationship~~. They had a long correspondence. With ~~both of~~ these very different women, he never felt beleaguered, and enjoyed friendship, sexual intimacy, dining out and conversation. No strings. There were other affairs, but these were the most important.

One way to understand Mailer's relationship with Carole Mallory is to see it as part of his lust for experience, which he once defined as "the church—if the word may be allowed—of one's acquired knowledge." Experience was holy. His sister remembers him telling her, in so

you have told us

many words, that "experience was more valuable when you felt that you could, you know, turn it into art. Otherwise, there wasn't much point to it." Women were of inexhaustible interest to him—mysterious, dangerous, of infinite variety. Mallory was unlike anyone he had known before. He was fascinated by her crassness and amazed by her promiscuity, which seemed to match his own. There was so much to learn. When he was asked by *Cosmopolitan* his opinion of a woman if "she sleeps with you too soon," he replied: "No woman has ever slept with me too soon. I don't pretend I'm typical, but I've always found promiscuous women interesting. I suspect I would have been promiscuous if I'd been a woman. I certainly have been as a man. So I don't make judgments. The faster a woman would sleep with me, the more I liked her."

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

When I was very, very young and in New York I knew people like Parker Tyler and Glenway Westcott, Ginsburg and Auden. They were all gay guys older than me. [...] One of the things I was continuously warned about, by Tennessee and others, was homophobia. Norman was on the list. I was warned that he was

homophobic. I knew Norman quite well and I never had a sense of that, quite the opposite. I feel he was fascinated, intrigued, by homosexuals and homosexuality. He would go into the very specific, raunchy details, and to me very embarrassing details, about exactly what physically you did as a gay person. And he wanted the moist specifics about the encounter. Sometimes I provided them, sometimes I would get my back up and say this is too much.

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

(L)
WHO??
Meredith
Wyllie
Epstein
Who?

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

Years ago, Calder Willingham told me a story about a situation where he tried every trick to make a woman leave him. Finally she began going with another

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

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



In early 1984 Mailer went alone to Russia on a *Parade* assignment, traveling there for two weeks in mid-March. He went first to Lithuania, and traveled by train from Kaunas to Vilnius, not far from the towns where his parents were born almost a century earlier. From there he traveled to Leningrad and Moscow. Everywhere he went, he saw the vestiges of World War II's destruction. Buildings were crumbling, the people looked battered. "It's a sad place," he wrote in the *Parade* piece, "A Country, Not a Scenario." "I felt as if I were back on the Lower East Side of New York 100 years ago. I could have been watching my grandparents walking by."

Schiller, who was in Russia filming *Peter the Great*, opened some doors for Mailer in Moscow. Mailer wanted to be relatively anonymous, so Schiller got him a room in the massive Rossiya Hotel, near Red Square. His tiny room had a sink and toilet, but no bath or shower. Hot

^{unreliable}
 water was ~~off~~. The toilet paper was cut-up newspaper. With the aid of a bottle of vodka, Mailer
^{but}
 persisted for three days, and when he could no longer endure the bad food, sandpaper towels and
^{rock-like} soap, he called Schiller. "Get me out of here," he ~~said~~. ^{Through his connections,}
 Schiller got him into the majestic National Hotel, overlooking the Kremlin. Built in 1903, the
 hotel hosted Russian royalty, as well as famous artists. What impressed Mailer was that its guests
 had included Trotsky, Lenin and Felix Dzerzhinsky, the first head of the Russian secret police. In
 his year of study under Malraux, Mailer had learned of the critical role played by
 Dzerzhinsky's organization, the Cheka, ^{the} forerunner of the KGB. He would later write ^{about} of
 Dzerzhinsky, an "evil artist" of counter-espionage. Schiller got him booked into Room 107,
 where Lenin had stayed. ~~After the rubbery food at the Rossiya, Mailer enjoyed Chicken Kiev in~~
~~the National's "hard currency dining room," Schiller recalled. He added that "Mailer went from~~
~~the lowest of the low to the best of the best."~~

Mailer spent most of his time discovering the capital on his own, but Schiller introduced
 him to Vladimir Posner, the son of a Russian spy and a spokesperson for the Soviet Union in the
 1980s. He also met Genrikh Borovik, a former KGB agent and journalist, who spent many years
 in the U.S. as head of Russian news agencies, and wrote a book on Soviet double agent Kim
 Philby. Through them, Mailer met a number of Soviet intelligence figures who explained the
 structure and operation of the country's competing spy agencies. The *Parade* essay contains his
 initial observations on the KGB and the surveillance of citizens. Russia was much less of a
 police state than he expected, and he walked around Moscow unimpeded for several hours every
 day for a week. He met dissidents and questioned them about the reign of terror under the
 previous regimes. *Glasnost*, the open and frank discussion of the past, was about to commence

under Mikhail Gorbachev, who became General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1985. In June, he returned to Russia, this time with Norris, and they spent three weeks touring.

In a letter to Abbott after they returned, Mailer said that he was "lying around and thinking, wondering whether a new book was starting in me." That summer in Provincetown he did no writing. He ^{gave} interviews for ¹⁵ *Tough Guys*, spent time with his children, swam, relaxed and spent a month deciding what he would write next. He told a reporter that he had narrowed the field to three possibilities. *The Boat of Ra*, promised to Random House, was the first. Learning enough science to make the inter-galactic voyage of a space ship credible worried him, however. He felt that an understanding of astrophysics, a fast-changing and complex field, would be essential, but giving some realistic notion of traveling at the speed of light would be a challenge.

The second novel he was considering was "The Castle in the Forest." It opens in 1945 when a U. S. Army unit arrives at a German castle used as a concentration camp. "The leading characters," ^{according to Scott} Meredith ^{said}, "are an American Jewish doctor and a German doctor who confront each other and clash over contending philosophies." In 1954, Mailer had made a false start on this novel, which he then called "The City of God." The third possibility was a CIA novel. The Russian trips and the end to the Cold War influenced his decision, as did his 1973 essay on Watergate, "A Harlot High and Low." His continuing obsession with the assassination of J.F.K. played a part, as well as his own opposed identities: family man and philanderer, Left-conservative, activist and observer, rationalist and transcendentalist, to name the most important. All these coalesced in his decision to embark on a huge circumambient novel of the Cold War and the bifurcated lives of spies. His title, *Harlot's Ghost*, came later.

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

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

Sometimes I think, 'That ugly kike,

That four-eyed faggot,

Is the bravest man in America.'

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

Mailer and Ginsberg had ^{become}~~gotten~~ close, when both of them were on the anti-war ramparts,
 but their friendship ^{had}~~began~~ tentatively. "Ginsberg and I met in a strange way," Mailer said. "Like
 scientists who are each working on the same problem—far apart in every other way." But now,
 he continued, "I have a lot of respect for him. He is truly one of ^{the} few honorable men I have
 known in the literary world." He also respected Burroughs, whom he called "the shyest man in
 the world." They did not have a close relationship, however. After Burroughs' ^Sdeath in 1997,
 Mailer said that he had spent perhaps the equivalent of six evenings with Burroughs, all told. At

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Naropa, the three men took part in a discussion titled "American Soul? What Is?" Mailer had warm memories of the session, "We had the damndest time out in Colorado," he said. "Being on with Burroughs is like being with W.C. Fields. He is one of the funniest men alive. He can say, 'It is eighty degrees today in Kansas,' and the audience is wiped out." He added that he still admired *Naked Lunch*.

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

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In the fall of 1984, for the first time in 15 years, his financial affairs were not in total disarray. From early 1977 when Schiller enlisted him in the Gilmore project, to the end of 1982 when he submitted the 1744-page word manuscript of *Ancient Evenings*, he had been going flat out. After that, he told Carol Holmes, "the will to work collapsed, and I did nothing for a year." He rallied to complete *Tough Guys*, but now he wondered if he could find the energy to begin another huge novel. As he wrote to an admirer, Alex Hicks, "The next two books of the trilogy have to be written and that's never automatic. It's killing to write, you see. Excessive bile gets secreted and all sorts of collateral poisons lay waste to your body. I groan at the thought of a thousand pages." Writers with jobs in higher education look forward to a sabbatical from administrative chores and teaching so they can research and write. For Mailer, the P.E.N.

You have told us that his finances were now in better shape, and you have told us that he was having trouble starting his next book.

~~presidency was a reverse sabbatical that forced him to shelve his writing projects so that he could~~ ^{Mailer}
 preside over committee meetings, twist the arms of potential givers, give speeches and deal with
 media. One reason he accepted the job was that "men like myself in small towns who've been
 reprobates all their lives go into church work" when they reach 60. After several years of
 monkish work, Mailer looked forward to the interactions that went along with the presidency.

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

His oldest children—Susan, Danielle, Betsy and Kate—had all finished college, Michael
 was a sophomore and Stephen was in prep school; Maggie and Matt were in high school, and
 John Buffalo, the youngest, was in first grade. For the first time in 20 years, there were no babies
 crawling around the floor of 142 Columbia Heights—except when the grandchildren from Chile
 were visiting. Susan and Marco had their second child, Alejandro, in 1985. Norris now had more
 time and was doing a lot of painting, including several commissioned portraits. She had several

shows, including her first in Little Rock. She introduced Mailer to Hillary and Bill Clinton—now Governor of Arkansas—and they got a private tour of the Governor's mansion. Dotson Rader and Pat Lawford Kennedy flew in for Norris' show and like everyone else was impressed when the Clintons attended the reception at the gallery. Lawford and Mailer saw Clinton as a potential presidential candidate. Hillary also impressed him. Later, he said, "That might be the brightest woman I ever met."

Chris
1985

Through the spring of 1985, he worked on fundraising for the January 1986 Congress. Over 200 distinguished writers from 85 countries were invited, plus 800 writers from the U.S. Paying for the expenses of the foreign writers was the largest item on the budget. Mailer came up with the idea for a series of readings to be held in the fall of 1985, two writers a week at a Broadway theater that was "dark" on Sunday evenings. A series ticket would sell for \$1,000, and if 1,000 people subscribed, the gross would be \$1 million. Even after expenses, the budget for the Congress would be covered. Selecting and pairing the writers, all from the U.S., would require diplomatic skills of a high order. Mailer began writing letters and making calls.

P.E.N.

There was no way not to include Vidal, whose literary reputation was at its peak. His masterful novel *Lincoln*, the second volume of a heptalogy covering American history from the founding of the Republic through the 1950s, was a best seller for the latter half of 1984. Mailer had not seen Vidal since their fight at Lally Weymouth's party seven years earlier, and knew that inviting him would require a sensitive *rapprochement*. Instead of making direct contact, he asked Knox to speak with him during one of Vidal's visits to Rome from his home in Rapallo. Find out, he told Knox, "whether his hatred for me is still essentially one of his first passions." Mailer now shared an editor, Jason Epstein, with Vidal, and Mailer thought Epstein "for his own self-

Mick
Knox