

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

The piece covers predictable territory: obscenity, sexuality, censorship, the women's movement, AIDS, birth control, the loneliness of celebrity and the sensuality of Catholicism. Mailer brings in Warren Beatty, ^{Marilyn} Monroe and ^{Andy} Warhol as points of reference. He praises Madonna's ability "to take her kinks to the public":

She offers no balm to sweet, sore places; she is the stern instructor who shows us how difficult it all is, especially sex in its consummation. Yet she gives us something Marilyn never could, something less attractive but equally valuable:

she dramatizes for us how dangerous is any human's truth once we dare to explore it; she reminds us that the joys of life bed down on broken glass.

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

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

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

I Promiscuity for the young Mailer was health; like Rousseau he equated the satisfying of his sexual urges with both health and freedom, although unlike the Enlightenment *philosophes*, there was always a guilty edge to his adventures. The older Mailer is ready for limits and *quid pro quos*, as his second comment shows. The assigned photographer attempted to get a shot of

This is a
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Madonna's
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Madonna sitting on Mailer's lap. Madonna was willing, but Mailer, at five-foot-seven, 200 pounds, wearing a black dinner jacket that made him resemble "a barrel wrapped in velvet," said no.

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

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

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By September he had a complete manuscript of 1,700 pages, or a book of 1,000 pages, more or less. Two months later he had it down to 1,400 manuscript pages, which resulted in the ~~final~~ published book of 828 pages. The New Yorker, now edited by Tina Brown, published a 45-page excerpt, including six pages of striking photos of Oswald in Minsk. It was his first (and last) major piece in the magazine, and he was pleased. Another excerpt in Parade, builds to Mailer's conclusion: "Every insight we have gained of him suggests the solitary nature of his act."

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Besides, it is too difficult, no matter how one searches for a viable scenario, to believe that others could have chosen him to be the rifleman in a conspiracy." Mailer said he was 75 percent certain that Oswald acted alone.

Oswald's Tale was published on May 12, 1995. The American reviews were generally positive, the best he had received since *The Executioner's Song*. Among the major reviewers, only Michiko Kakutani, writing in the *New York Times* three weeks before the book's publication date, was dismissive, calling the book "boring and presumptuous, derivative and solipsistic." The British reviews were even better (it was published in England on September 7) than the American. A quartet of major literary figures—Martin Amis, Christopher Hitchens, Allan Massie and Andrew O'Hagan—^{was} were enthusiastic in their praise of how Mailer, as O'Hagan put it, recognized "Oswald's struggle to become a man—to become an important and effective male character—as the foundation of much of his adult distress." Massie found the portrait of Oswald to be "utterly convincing, partly because it contains so many contradictions." He was an idealist and a liar, "fiercely independent and emotionally dependent; this one day and the opposite the next. His Oswald is both likable and repulsive; to be pitied and feared. He is in many ways, as Mailer insists, like the young Hitler revealed in *Mein Kampf*."

When he went to Minsk, Mailer said, "I hoped there would be a smoking gun." Hitchens observes that Mailer's "natural writerly prejudice in favour of meaning and pattern over sordid random coincidence," his desire to find incontrovertible evidence of a conspiracy, made it difficult for him "to come to a conclusion that lies athwart his prejudices." Amis makes essentially the same point: "Everything in Mailer rebels against" the view that J.F.K. "had his brains blown out by a malevolent Charlie Chaplin with a wonky rifle and a couple of Big Ideas."

If Oswald was a lone wolf, Amis says, "All we are left with is absurdity, more garbage, more randomness and rot." There were only two ways for Mailer to get out of the dilemma: "Either Oswald wasn't acting alone—or he wasn't a nonentity." Confronted by what he learned in Minsk, reinforced by all that he had read, he chose the latter course; no conspiracy, and a complex Oswald; a man dealt a bad hand, in no way heroic, but bold, idealistic in a twisted way, and sympathetic. "What is never taken seriously enough in Oswald," Mailer said, "is the force of his confidence that he has the makings of a great leader."

Epstein faxed ~~another British review to~~ ^{review} Mailer, an unsigned one that appeared in the *Economist*. It seems in hindsight that ~~he~~ ^{Epstein} was correct to call it "the most sensible review yet." The reviewer said that Mailer, writing thirty years after the event, faced "a doubly ungrateful audience: those who no longer care, and those whose minds are already made up." Nevertheless, those who could suspend their judgment would see that "Mr. Mailer has produced a masterpiece." ~~She or he~~ ^{The reviewer} notes his touch in providing "tiny novelistic details":

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

The details are historically accurate, but in his anatomy of Oswald's character, the reviewer says, Mailer is unable to resist making Oswald more likable, more tortured and more substantial than he was. "What Mr. Mailer forgets is that he has told us so much about Oswald that we know just how thin any layer of nobility must be." In his laudatory review in the *New York Times Book*

Review, Thomas Powers echoes the *Economist* reviewer—as do a majority of the others. “I admire Mailer for his effort to understand Oswald, but at some level I feel invited to place a sympathetic arm around the killer’s shoulder,” Powers wrote, and “I’m not about to do it.” The Tolstoyan compassion Mailer sought to create for wretches like Oswald—Powers calls him “an insect” who “brought pain to many and happiness to none”—was unpalatable in 1995 and remains so. *Oswald’s Tale*, like *Ancient Evenings*, is another of Mailer’s books for readers a century hence, readers removed from the pain of one of the greatest tragedies of twentieth-century American life.

Portrait of Picasso finally appeared on October 15, about three years after it was completed. The fact that it was Mailer’s second book appearing in five months probably hurt sales. Morgan Entrekin, the publisher, was quoted as saying he was cutting the first printing from 100,000 to 50,000 for this reason. He also said that he hoped review editors would assign “literary types, rather than more exacting art critics to assess Mailer’s view of another eminence.” His hope was dashed; most of the major reviews were by professionals in the art world, some of whom had written extensively about Picasso. Writing in the *New York Times* (Michael Kimmelman), *the Nation* (Eunice Hilten), and the *New York Review of Books* (Roger Shattuck), three art critics were unanimous in their opinion that Mailer was “poaching on the turf of taste makers and scholars,” as Robert Taylor (*Boston Globe*) put it. Kimmelman called the book “clumsy and disappointing” and chided him for missing the influence of the large, robust women in the works of Renoir and Maillol. Shattuck, an old acquaintance of Mailer’s, lectured him on a variety of sins. Mailer’s “most grievous failure” was failing to explain how “Kandinsky

in Munich, Malevich in Russia, Mondrian in Holland, and Kupka and Delaunay in Paris crossed the line into non-figurative or 'abstract' painting" in his discussion of Cubism. Lipton criticized Maller for leaving out the estimable views of William Rubin, unaware that he refused to be quoted. ~~His~~ ^{Malevich} speculations on Picassos's inner life were passed over, for the most part. (Who?)

Mailer is no art critic; his descriptions of Picasso's work are solid but unexceptional. He does make a contribution by translating and then quoting ^{Shapiro} ~~copiously~~ from the memoir of Fernande Olivier, the woman who lived with Picasso from his years of obscurity to his early successes. Mailer's commentary on their relationship—both were narcissists—is one of the best things in the biography and an addition to Picasso scholarship. But art criticism was not his purpose. His announced goal was "to make Picasso as real as any good character in life or in art." To show the agonies and ecstasies of Picasso's early years, he drew on his own. Despite the usual denials, Mailer in more than one interview admitted to traits he shared with Picasso. "At a much higher level," he told Pete Hamill, "he had the same sort of restlessness in his mind that I have in mine." Both were short, stocky men possessed of huge energy, large libido, vast ambition, and an unshakable belief in the importance of their artistic missions.

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

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

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

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

The reviews, Mailer said, were "the worst I've ever gotten for a book" ^{That is} a slight exaggeration; they are almost as negative as those given to *Barbary Shore*. Kakutani again was in the lead, publishing her review two weeks before the book's publication date. Echoing

Richardson, she called it "an old-fashioned cut-and-paste job," and criticized Mailer for promoting "the notion that art redeems, that the sins of a great artist can be rationalized, excused or glossed over." Mailer does find heroic qualities in Picasso, but saying that he overlooks his faults reveals a cursory reading. ^{Mailer} He takes pains to criticize Picasso for his betrayals of friends and mistresses. Two days after ^{Kakutani's} her review appeared, Mailer fired off a letter to the editor of the *Times*, complaining that she had rushed her negative review into print.

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

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

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In November 1994 ~~He~~ flew to London for meetings with his publisher, and then went on to Paris to meet with the French publisher of *Portrait of Picasso*. ^{He} ~~Another commitment was an appearance with Jean Malaquais on ARTE, a French-German cultural television network. Their conversation, broadcast soon after, led to a serious breach between them. Malaquais sternly~~

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accused him of abandoning his ambition to be a history-changing writer[✓] and becoming "just a commodity," a television celebrity. Seven months after the program aired all over Europe, Mailer's oldest friend wrote to him dismissing the program as "poor," but not apologizing for or retracting his comments. ^{Mailer} He replied in June 1995, calling Malaquais' letter "incomprehensible."

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

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

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

Malaquais: Being a celebrity is your infantile malady.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mailer: Well, I'd hardly call myself a pillar of American society. To this day I'm seen in America as a bizarre creature who doesn't fit categories

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

Malaquais: But I wanted to be insulting.

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

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

Malaquais' second wife, Elisabeth, who had known Mailer since the 1960s, rebuked her husband for his public chastisement of Mailer during their television ^{appearance} ~~entirety~~. "To this day," she said in 2010, "the ARTE show gives me goose pimples." She felt that her husband was entitled to comment on "Norman's confusion between heroism and celebrity," but not publicly. Malaquais told her that he was sorry for the pain he had "apparently" caused, but was not ready

to apologize. "Was it not the truth?" he asked. Realizing her husband's "inflexibility," she wrote to Mailer seeking a *rapprochement*. She argued that Mailer's letter had hurt Malaquais, and ^{Malaquais's} Jean's comments had hurt Mailer, ^{and} the two injuries, therefore, ^{canceling} canceled each other out.

"There's no equality in the deeds," Mailer said in his reply. "Mine was a personal letter to my oldest friend, chilly as could be, with intent to wound, but finally, it was personal." Malaquais' "denunciation" was seen by a million people. He concluded his letter to Elisabeth:

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

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

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

episode) or downright anger (the political posturing), for instance. I cannot recall any sign ever of indifference on Jean's part. Jean thought of Norman as a genuinely warm and kind man, demonstrably generous (not only vis-à-vis his friends) and incredibly attuned to the life of his country, intellectually of course, but emotionally in particular.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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other thing he had to report was that he was "trying to build up the intellectual capital and the energy to start the second volume of Harlot's Ghost, and in the meantime I look for distractions, do a piece about this, do a piece about that, whatever comes through. I truly know how old fighters feel when they want to avoid championship bouts." He ended this gloomy dispatch by sending love and noting that "all is relatively OK here." But it wasn't. He would be 73 in two months, and needed a victory.

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

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In a commencement address several weeks later, on May 27, 1995, Mailer was more upbeat. Speaking at Wilkes University in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, he spoke of the end of the Cold War. "Looking back on it, we were like magnetic filings in the power of a huge electromagnet, the Cold War, and almost all of us pointed in the same direction." But when Communism collapsed, "the great switch on this great electromagnet was released and now all

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the fragments went in all directions." Those who built their lives under the overhang of the Cold War "are now superannuated; myself among the others," and many Americans "don't have a clear sense of the future." But this dislocation had an upside, he told the graduates. "You will go forth in the rare position of being—in the spiritual sense—of being pioneers because you are going into a new and undiscovered frontier," a place where "all the guide rules of the 19th and 20th century have been used up." Perhaps, he concluded, you can regain the dream on which the nation was founded. "If you believe that there is more good than evil in the sum of humanity, then democracy can prevail," a sentiment that could be traced back a half-century to "The White Negro." For the future, he said, "exciting and fearful and incredible days and years await you." Mailer had already begun thinking about a book that would speak to the new millennium.

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During the week in Paris when Mailer had his unhappy conversation with Malaquais, he stayed at the George V, one of his favorite hotels. Norris was not with him, and one night, unable to sleep, he found a Gideon Bible in English in the night table and began to read the New Testament. It was the first time he had looked at it for many years, although he had read parts of it in college. "I couldn't make head or tail of it," he said, adding that he was "a stranger to Christianity." This was not a result of overt anti-Semitism of the kind faced by his mother, who was called "sheeny" and "Christ-killer" by Irish kids in Long Branch (an experience that made her wonder how her son could have so many Irish friends). Rather, he felt "subtly excluded":

Christmas is not for you, and you don't know anything about Jesus Christ. You haven't grown up with him. When I was a kid, it was almost as if Christ was the enemy, the renegade Jew, the one who brought all the trouble down on the Jews.

At least that was the mentality of the immigrant first-generation and second-generation Jews I grew up with. And then, of course, later in life one became sophisticated about it; Christ was certainly not the enemy, but he was still very much a stranger.

A few years earlier, he and Norris were visiting her family in Atkins, Arkansas. On this occasion, Norris' father, James Davis, a deacon at the local Freewill Baptist Church, invited Mailer to attend the adult Sunday School. "To my knowledge, no other Jew had ever come to that Sunday School," he recalled, adding that he ^{had also been} ~~was also~~ the first Jew that Norris had ever met. "They were excited," he said, "because they'd been reading about Jesus the Jew for thirty, forty, fifty years. They'd been living with it. And they'd never seen a Jew. And now there was one among them. So they approached me with the most curious kind of respect." He felt the welcome was particularly warm. As he learned, they assumed that he might be better equipped to interpret some difficult lines in the Old Testament concerning Abraham and his son Isaac. Mailer did his best, and afterward kept pondering "this odd moment, where they felt that being Jewish gave me an authority in relation to the Bible." Perhaps, he thought, he might also have something to say about the New Testament.

Another experience that heightened his interest in the Bible ^{had come} ~~came~~ in 1994 when he read *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* by Pope John Paul II. Written in the form of an interview, it deals with a range of topics, including the relationship of Christianity to other faiths. He read it because he remembered John Paul's 1987 encyclical *On Social Concerns*, which had impressed him enough to recommend that P.E.N. offer the Pope an honorary membership (opposed by Sontag, who succeeded Mailer as president), although it was never voted on. Mailer admired its

Isn't this remarkable?
It's just acknowledged that he can't make sense of the New T. and no he is going to write about it!?

analysis of the Cold War and the two superpowers, America and Russia (the former representing, as ^{John Paul} he put it, "the power of greed," and the latter "the power of oppression"), and the poor in the Third World, as well as the underprivileged in the superpowers. The Pope kept mentioning the Gospel of John, and this prompted Mailer to read it. "I was curious now," he said, and after reading John he read the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, first in Paris, and then several times in the U.S.

He ^{then} immediately realized "how good a story it was," and called it "the spiritual or psychological keel of Western civilization." But while Jesus' unique voice and profound sayings are "at the least worthy of Shakespeare," he found the story as a whole "not well written." The prophetic voice of John is memorable, but the narratives of the other three evangelists, who carry the burden of linking the early life of Jesus with his death and resurrection, are filled with clumsy transitions and vague descriptions. "I wanted to retell it the way all writers want to retell a classic story," he said. "There are ^{exactly 100} a hundred writers who could do a better job, and I'm one of them." Ignoring his promises to Random House about "Harlot's Grave," and telling no one save Epstein, Norris and Judith, in early 1995 he began working on his version of the New Testament, told in the first person by Jesus, speaking long after the events he describes.

Asked what motivated him to write it, Mailer said, "If suddenly I had picked up a copy of *The Iliad* and said I wanted to do a new version of it, people would have understood." But this was not the case with the New Testament; people "have stronger feelings about it," and a Jew rewriting the central story of Christianity was likely to be seen as a poacher, as he had been with Picasso. When he told Norris his intention "to write a book that her father would read," she told him he was crazy. Initially, Epstein was also against the idea. "I remember arguing with him at

length about his book about Jesus," he recalled, "which I thought was simply not for him, and probably not for me either." Mailer was not moved. He described his attraction as "almost animal-like—the way an animal knows it's time to come out of hibernation, so it digs its way up to the surface whether or not it has a clear take on what the weather might be."

He did some research, ^{reading} most notably two books by Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* and *The Origin of Satan*. Mainly, however, he relied on various versions of the New Testament and his own sense of Jesus' inner life. "Celebrities," Mailer told Charlie Rose, "are used to living with two personalities." The first is the "at-home personality; when you're brushing your teeth you're like everyone else." The other personality "has power in the world," and "people virtually p-e-e in their pants when they meet you." He said he felt he had "a small insight into what it was like to have a double nature since I've lived with it all my life since I was 25." He hastened to add that being a celebrity was far, far different from being a half-divine person. He was confident that he could make reasonable surmises about Jesus' dual nature by reference to his own. He continued working on it off and on through the first half of 1996, and then put it aside during the summer so he could attend the political conventions.

^{He wrote} Preceding his two pieces on the political campaigns for George, a new political magazine, ^{but first published in} ~~was a piece he wrote for~~ *Esquire* on Patrick Buchanan, a conservative political commentator and advisor to Republican presidents. Like his 1994 Madonna piece, it is half profile, half interview. He had discovered that Buchanan, who had just been defeated in the GOP presidential primaries by Sen. Bob Dole, had qualities that he admired, ^{an article} ~~and~~ political positions. Buchanan, a Reagan Republican, was critical of American corporations, angry that they loved their profit margins enough to send American jobs overseas. Mailer had thought that he was the

his words of young Christian dogmat that Jesus was divine and human

only ^{similar} left-conservative in the country, but now recognized that Buchanan had the credentials to ^{OK?}

join him. His growing admiration for Buchanan was based, in part, on his growing disillusion with the President. Mailer had met Clinton a few times, and he and Norris had visited him in the White House, but ^{their conversations} he had never gotten beyond pleasantries, and he had little hope of becoming a

Clinton counselor or intimate. Still, he tried. In late 1994, he had asked for an interview. Clinton ^{The President} wrote back and asked for a list of the topics to be explored. Mailer declined to be specific (except

for promising to bring up a matter on which they would disagree—the Cuban situation), and instead proposed that Clinton give him carte blanche to poke around in the presidential psyche:

"I think you owe it to yourself to have one of our best American writers—myself humbly nominated—to take a shot at interpreting your presidency and yourself. My feeling, and it's paramount, is that the public needs a fresh look." Let us discuss, he continued, "your more intense concerns, your preferences, your biases." He offered his piece on Madonna as proof of his ability "to see you as a human being rather than as a public servant and/or politician." His letter was not as thoughtless as his 1961 letter to Mrs. Kennedy in which he spoke of the "odd strong honor" of the Marquis de Sade, but it was high-handed enough to earn the same response: silence.

Mailer was unhappy with Clinton for not making civil rights a larger theme of his presidency, and for practicing what ^{Mailer} he called "boutique politics"—providing a morsel for every interest group, but not being willing to risk political death for any large idea or policy. Mailer was so angry with what was going on in the country that he actually, seriously, thought about running in the primaries against Clinton. At one point, he said that he was thinking of running as Eugene McCarthy's second, and had spoken to him about it, but this ^{they decided against it} gambit went nowhere. He

^{he hoped}
 knew he would lose, but ^{he} his campaign might introduce intriguing ideas that would irritate Clinton. When Norris got wind of this quixotic venture, she replied in ^{he said} "the quiet tones he had come to know all too well—the steel in the voice of a soft-spoken southern woman is as palpable as the cutting edge of a Damascus blade"—that she would leave him if he dared to declare. She was particularly scornful of the speech he planned to give to the media: "I've been married six times. I committed a felonious assault against my second wife. I've been untrue to every woman I've cared about. Gentlemen and ladies of the press: Do your worst! I've broken through the media barrier. There's nothing to ransack in the closet." His wife, he concluded, was right again: "he was no recognizable grade of presidential timber." It would be a disaster. "It was the American presidency, after all. As soon could the Marquis de Sade have proposed himself for the papacy." Yet, at the time, he had been dead serious.

The two *George* reports—the first on the conventions, and the second on the subsequent campaigns—^{never enter} ~~skirt all~~ deep waters. They provide overviews and samples of the speeches, platforms and debates, and juicy details of political scandals. Dole is compared to various movie stars: "Seen up close, Dole looked tall and spare like a movie man, a leading man. Cowboy roles. Not Randolph Scott, exactly, not Gary Cooper or Clint Eastwood, but a casting director would put him in the file that said: HUMPHREY BOGART ON A HORSE." Clinton is held up to a range of movie stars and athletes, from Muhammad Ali to Warren Beatty, as well as to Ramses II and J.R. Ewing, the lead character in the television program *Dallas*. Both pieces are competent, as is the Buchanan profile-interview, but they are devoid of the drama and insight of his earlier political narratives. He was temporizing, running in place, instead of writing the sequel he had put off for over five years. He had long planned to begin it with the assassination

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of J.F.K., a fact he could not have failed to recall when he sat down to discuss his articles with the editor of *George*, the only son and namesake of the slain president.

Ψ Ψ Ψ

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

This happened out of sight. Can you tell us how long it took him to write?

He was excited about the script. "Boxing," he said, "is a wonderful culture, a genre with edges that are rarely explored, and I would like to try my hand at directing one more time. He told Michael his only condition was that Knox be given a role. But shortly after preproduction work got under[#]way, the backers pulled the plug. "*Tough Guys Don't Dance* was an interesting film, but not a commercially viable one," Michael recalled, and the backers were "nervous" ^{for that reason} ^Λ about M^Λailer directing the new film. Another factor was that the two leading actors—Halle Berry and Brendan Fraser—were still relatively unknown. "My dad had the reputation of a man who was untested in the arena of Hollywood," Michael said.

✓ was this before Beauty Cast he in Bulwoll
yes

Michael told his father that the money, \$3.5 million, had been raised, the actors signed up, but then, for no announced reason, the backers stopped taking his phone calls. "Either they

had found another property they wanted to work with more, or they simply didn't have the funds and couldn't face us," the elder Mailer said in a letter. Michael said that he was trying to find new backers. "Lord, I hope he succeeds," his father said. None of this was true. Michael had decided not to tell his father that the backers had insisted that he find another director, and he had shown them his middle finger. "To this day," Michael said, 'it's my most heartbreaking experience in the filmmaking business.' ^{Norman} Mailer's directorial career was over.

Salving his disappointment over the cancellation of "Ringside," was the reception of the long-delayed documentary about the 1974 Ali-Foreman championship bout, *When We Were Kings*. Along with George Plimpton and Spike Lee, Mailer was recruited to give retrospective commentary on "The Rumble in the Jungle." He focused on the way Ali used the rope-a-dope to confuse and tire Foreman, recalling both the nuances and psychology of Ali's ringmanship.

Released in February 1997, the film won ^{several} a special award ^{including} at the Sundance Festival and went on to win the Academy Award for best documentary, and several others, including an Independent

Spirit Award. It is generally thought to be the finest documentary ever made on boxing and is ^{permanently} linked forever with ^{Mailer's} *The Fight*, often named as the best nonfiction narrative on a prizefight. Both Ali and Foreman attended the Academy Award ceremony, and were cheered by an enthusiastic audience.

^{if date is important, you have to tell us why}
~~With the exception of a review in *Publishers Weekly* on March 21,~~ ^{early} Kakutani was again the first major reviewer to comment on *The Gospel*. Her negative review, ^{in *The New York Times*} which appeared April 14, drums on the theme of celebrity. Mailer is fascinated by it, she says, because he is one. His book, therefore, is "a sort of novelized 'Jesus Christ Superstar' starring Jesus as an ambivalent pop star and guru: a silly, self-important and inadvertently comical book that reads like a

combination of 'Godspell,' Nikos Kazantzakis' 'Last Temptation of Christ' and one of those dumbed-down Bible translations, all seasoned with Mr. Mailer's eccentric views on God."

Saving graces: ~~None. The anonymous *Publishers Weekly* reviewer also criticized the novel for having Jesus mouth Mailer's theology of "an anthropomorphic God at war with other Powers," but also found much to praise. "Mailer is brilliant in depicting the human side of Jesus—his confusion and pride as he comes to understand who he is; his love for sinners and hatred of the pious; his terror at his impending fate and above all, his grapplings with the limits of his powers." The reviewer says *The Gospel* is "partially a failure," but "also a triumph. Its penetration into Jesus' human heart rivals Dostoyevsky for depth and insight."~~ Pleased with the review, Mailer had it reproduced on the back jacket of subsequent printings. ~~The novel was his~~ *Despite Kallitani's pan*
tenth best seller, and reached number seven on the list.

Besides his novelistic abilities, Mailer pointed to two assets he had for writing the novel. His celebrity had been of some help, as he noted in his conversation with Charlie Rose. But his Jewishness, he said, was "an inestimable advantage, because I tend to believe there is virtually a Jewish psychology." Jesus was "extremely Jewish. He worries all the time, he anticipates, he broods upon what's going on, there's an immense sense of responsibility." In writing the novel, "I began to realize for the first time in many, many years how Jewish I am." Another trait he shared with Jesus was the notion that you pay a price for everything you get. "That conviction," he said,

is at the very center of Jewish belief, as opposed to Christian belief, where God takes mercy on you, and you're lifted and you're saved." The Jews tend to believe that you never get it without paying something in return. So it is delightful to

contemplate these miracles once you recognize that you can use yourself up—indeed the angels whisper to Jesus at a certain point, and say in effect, ‘Don’t overdo it.’

Critic

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

Kermode finds Mailer’s book to be daring, a “clever” addition to the apocrypha surrounding the Jesus story, and “the first, so far as I know, to be attributed to Jesus himself, a gospel-autobiography, no less, of the son of God.” Mailer’s midrash, his extensions of the Gospels (Jesus brooding on Herod’s slaughter of the innocents for example), and his theological speculations are not what interest Kermode. “The writer’s powerful mind works in a specialized way, not by theological argumentation, but by telling or retelling story.” This was what Mailer set himself to do, Kermode concludes, and having “accepted the dare, Mailer can make a fair claim to have come honorably close to winning it.”

Jesus’ voice is the novel’s largest achievement. Mailer was pleased to present both the spoken words of Jesus, ^{imagined} and his thoughts. It was a gamble, but as Epstein noted, “Norman’s more of a risk-taker than most of his contemporaries.” Two novelists who reviewed the book, Reynolds ^{John} Price and ^{Mailer’s} Updike, commented favorably on Jesus’ voice. ^{OK?} His decision to provide access to “not only His mental weather, but the motives that underlay His titanic claims and actions,” Price says, gives Mailer “powerful moments of invention,” allowing him to “speculate with a welcome freshness on the secrets of Jesus’ nature.” Updike praises “the quiet ghostly voice of Jesus,”

rendered in "direct, rather relaxed English that has yet an eerie, neo-Biblical dignity." In its first draft, the locutions of Jesus were closer to those of the King James Bible, but Epstein objected to the overuse of words like "didst" and "mayhap," "penny" instead of "coin," and Mailer ~~dialed~~ ^{lowered} it ^{down} ^{the} ^{vocabulary} ~~back~~ ^{to} a few degrees to its final, more modernized ~~level~~. He was pleased when his father-in-law told him that he enjoyed the passages that presented the language of Jesus' thoughts.

Overall, *The Gospel's* reviews were better than those ^{for} of Picasso, worse than those ^{for} given to Oswald's Tale. The harshest review was in *The New Republic*. The reviewer, James Wood, followed Kakutani in lashing Mailer for saying that his experience of celebrity aided him in understanding Jesus. But Wood's chief criticism was the first-person perspective, which he found to be absurd, and the language, which he called "a spastic simulacrum of biblical style." However unhappy Mailer may have been with the review by Wood, an important critic, he was furious about the magazine's cover, which carried a cartoon portrait of Mailer with a crown of thorns on his head under the title of Wood's review, "He Is Finished." A few months after the review appeared, in the summer of 1997, Mailer ran into the magazine's publisher, Martin Peretz, outside a Provincetown restaurant. He had known Peretz since the mid-1960s when he invited Mailer to speak at a Harvard rally against the Vietnam War. "If he'd just said, 'Hello Norman,' it would have been all right," Mailer said. "But he had this huge smile on his face. So I punched him." Then Peretz went in and told everyone that Mailer had hit him twice. "I guess it was a kind of badge of honor," Mailer said. ~~Like~~ Peretz said that Mailer's punches were "flabby." Mailer told friends he had hit him "hard, but not hard."

Ψ Ψ Ψ

In many of the interviews he gave when doing publicity for *The Gospel*, he was asked about his promise to write a sequel to *Harlot's Ghost*. ~~It was a fair question; he had made the promise six years earlier.~~ He often brought the issue up himself. But the 50th anniversary of *The Naked and the Dead* was less than a year away, and he had promised to write a new introduction for the anniversary edition. It occurred to him that the date, May 6, 1998, would also be a good time for a retrospective anthology. He would turn 75 a few months earlier, and the two celebrations could be combined. The editing job would not be particularly difficult, he assumed, and completing a new book only a year after the last would buy him good will from Random House, vital if he were to finish the sequel. Such a collection had been on his mind ever since Vidal had published his own retrospective collection in 1993. *United States: Essays, 1952-1992* is 1295 pages long, and contains the great majority of Vidal's literary and political-historical essays, but none of his fiction. Mailer decided that his book would also be ^{long} oversized, and would include excerpts from virtually all his works.

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

I expect on the personal level a stroke has that quality, and I know I have an uneasiness about it that probably causes me more slight but actual psychic or spiritual discomfort than the thought of death itself. Death is as large and as final

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P. 111?

a transmogrification as one could ever find, but we spend our lives thinking about death, or trying to, whereas a stroke shunts us off to a siding. So from the above you can understand that I commiserate with you.

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

He ~~finished work on~~ the volume, now titled *The Time of Our Time* (an echo of his 1958 short story, "The Time of Her Time") around Labor Day 1997. Writing to Edith Atkin, he said that the new book would be "a commemorative work. It isn't enough that I advertise myself, now I'm going to 'commemorate' me! Awful!" In a Random House Q and A to herald *TOOT*, as Mailer took to calling it, and ~~keep up~~ interest in *GATT*, his nickname for *The Gospel According to the Son*, Mailer said that "one extremely famous person" he'd like to read *GATT* was President Clinton, "in the wan hope it will remind him that we are not necessarily put on earth to aid and abet the rich in further enriching themselves." He also named *U.S.A.* by John Dos Passos as his model for *TOOT*, as he said in the acknowledgements and appreciations statement to the book: "Occasionally, since this had become an out-of-category volume influenced by one of the most

who?

And was he OK with this or troubles by it?

who?

not GATS? NO!

monumental works of American literature, nothing less than *U.S.A.*, by John Dos Passos, I even took the liberty of improving old sentences." The most common improvement was to substitute "that" for "which" in numerous places, correcting an inveterate grammatical error that Veronica Windholz had helped him to recognize. But he also revised many passages, usually cutting more than he added.

Dissatisfied with a topical organization ("equal to a row of potted plants"), as well as one based on order of publication ("useful presentation for a biographer," but of no interest to most readers), Mailer was at an impasse in his first months of work on the anthology. Eventually, he found a solution: With two notable exceptions, the 130-odd episodes from 30 of his books were arrayed along a chronological line from 1929 to 1996. ^{Random House copyeditor} ~~The rule of placement called for placing~~ ^{because he decided to place} each piece according to the date of the events depicted. "Boxing with Hemingway," the opening piece (a review of Morley Callaghan's *That Summer in Paris*) was published in 1963, but it depicts a 1929 event. The exceptions were excerpts from *Ancient Evenings* and *The Gospel*, which were tacked on at the end.

World War II is the collection's armature. The great majority of the episodes demonstrate its direct or indirect influence ^{on events,} from the founding of the CIA, the Cold War, rocket technology, Cuba, the Vietnam War, and the assassination of J.F.K. Commenting on similarities between the film *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer said, "The Second World War was a watershed. Everything is of it, before it or after it. It's a point of reference. It's still my point of reference." Dos Passos' point of reference, of course, was the First World War. Mailer's unspoken intention was for *The Time of Our Time* to continue the narrative begun by Dos Passos, employing many of the narrative tactics, and doing for the second half of the twentieth century

what his predecessor did for the first. In his Foreword, he says, "There is little in this book, even when it comes under the formal category of non-fiction or argument, that has not derived, then, from my understanding of how one writes fiction." While Mailer did not go so far as to call his anthology a novel, it is in scope, structure, variety, voice and "feel" congruent with Dos Passos' three-volume masterpiece.

The two books are of a size: Mailer's at 1,286 pages and Dos Passos' at 1,449. Both use many story-telling modes and handle equally well rapid shifts of narrative focus. Film and journalistic techniques are adapted by both writers, from the "camera eye" of movies to interpolated newspaper articles and headlines, as well as capsule biographies of the great figures of the age. Dos Passos includes profiles of J.P. Morgan, John Reed and F.D.R., and Mailer gives sketches of Marilyn Monroe, Abbie Hoffman and J.F.K. ^{Various} A variety of points of view are used, and both books have several touchstone characters. When an interviewer pointed out to Mailer that his collection reminded her of *U.S.A.*, he said he was following Dos Passos' lead with "the idea of certain characters reappearing in somewhat different circumstances, 30, 40, 200 pages down the road. For example, ^{EMERSON} Gene McCarthy reappears three or four times. Nixon does, Castro does. And some of the fictional characters reappear and reappear. And what I like about it was the nearness of fictional characters to real characters. Of course, Dos Passos was doing that." ^{Mailer and} Between them, Dos Passos and Mailer can lay fair claim to being the chief novelistic chroniclers of what Henry Luce called "the American Century." ^{was} ^{uncontestedly.}

The reception of *TOOT* was better than for any of his books going back to *The Executioner's Song*. Even Kakutani had some kind words, and her review appeared two days after the publication date, perhaps ⁱⁿ a response to Mailer's letter of complaint. She praised his

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

One of the most perceptive reviews of the collection is entwined with a profile, which also records a visit to Provincetown and a conversation with Mailer in his third-floor study⁽ⁱⁿ⁾

David Denby had read all or most of Mailer's books, and it is clear that he enjoyed the man and admired the writer, but this side idolatry. Near the beginning of his 12-page piece in the *New Yorker*, he gives a sketch of him at 75:

Mailer is looking well. His hearing has faded slightly, and he has some arthritic trouble with his knees. Using a cane, he sways on Provincetown's streets like a retired sea captain. But he's lost weight—he's down to about a hundred and eighty pounds from the rotund two hundred of a few years ago; the loss is partly the result of a complicated diet that commences with a nearly indigestible cabbage soup. ('The elements fight against one another so hard,' he tells me, 'that the cells exhaust themselves, and you lose weight.' Mailer is a vitalist in all things, even in

weight reduction.) His hair is thinning but snowy white, his forearms are strong, his voice is full; all in all, he still has the look of a barrel-chested elder Jewish sage which he achieved about fifteen years ago. David Ben-Gurion striding through some brave kibbutz gave off a similar robust glow.

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

Denby praises *TOOT*, saying that no one of Mailer's generation "could match the book's variety, its manic energy, its spiritual violence and striving." It is both "daunting," he says, and "eccentric," referring to the book's unusual organizational principle. He asked Mailer if using the normal method—date of composition—might not have been a better strategy because it would present readers with "a clear spiritual autobiography of Norman Mailer." Mailer answered with a sigh, "I've been waiting to write an autobiographical novel all these years, but I've been waiting to become the hero of my own life in order to write it. I have never become the hero of my own life." One clear reflection of his answer to Denby's question is the way Mailer limited his presence in *TOOT*. He excludes most of the self-portraits in his work, especially the nonfiction narratives of 1968-1975, *Armies* to *The Fight*. There is self-reference, but a reasonable quantity. "The main good motive behind this book was my desire to let people separate my work from myself," he said.

Mailer becomes just another character in the American cavalcade he presents, taking his turn along with Sgt. Croft and McLeod, Monroe and DiMaggio, Herman Teppis and Lulu Meyers, Rojack and Ruta, John and Jacqueline Kennedy, the astronauts, Oswald, his mother, and

wife Marina, Gene McCarthy, Gary and Nicole, Harry Hubbard, Hugh and Kittredge Montague, Modene Murphy and Frank Sinatra, Nixon, Ali and Madonna. The glue that holds *TOOT* together, as Denby points out, is "Mailer's imagination of history," and one of the great things about the book is that we "forget which realm we are in—nonfiction or fiction, reality or fantasy—or why any of these categories matter." As James Campbell has noted, Mailer, like Didion, Vidal and Baldwin, is a "two-hander," that is, "adept at both fact and fiction." His version of the history of the country from World War II to the century's end, in Denby's fine metaphor, is "a long, long night in which movie stars, Presidents, intelligence operatives, and gangsters meet in that ideal Mailer after-hours spot where only grownups are allowed to gather and where the music is always insinuating and sweet." The endless critical discussion about primacy among Mailer's fiction, history, biography and journalism gets a one-word answer from *TOOT*: moot.

Not sure where to grab names here.

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

Lawrence recalled

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

His major commitment, ~~of course~~, was the sequel. "I've been waiting seven years to be visited by the muse for this second volume. She's been silent. I've been waiting. But now she's come back. What happened is that I got a major idea. So now, we'll see." The idea, he said later, was to make Hugh Montague a Jungian, and open the sequel with him living secretly in Moscow. He was considering how he might use Jung's ideas as a way to avoid writing about the event-crammed 1960s and 1970s, especially the Vietnam War. But by the end of 1998, he ^{still} had not written a word of "Harlot's Grave."

CT Chapter 15

Old Freighter, Uncertain Sea

The first years of the new millennium were a time of contraction and consolidation for Mailer. He had a new right hip installed in February 2000, and his doctors told him that he

Revised Chapter 15, 1/15/13

Chapter 15

Old Freighter, Uncertain Sea

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

His health problems were age-related and not immediately threatening; his wife's were more severe. In 1999 she had a hysterectomy, but the doctor removed only one of her Fallopian tubes, and she soon learned that there were ^{other} tumors on the ^{one remaining} cancerous ^{tumors}. She ^g Several operations and both chemotherapy and radiation treatments followed. When she went on a book tour for her first novel in 2000, she wore a wig, having lost all her beautiful red hair. For

realize that this changes the sense but you woman is ambiguous you are probably being ironic and speaking in Norm's voice, but not all readers

the next ten years, as the tumors spread, Norris battled cascading illnesses, and did so with stoic grace and a dash of gallows humor.

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

She had a studio adjacent to his on the third floor of their Provincetown home, and ~~when~~ ^{ONE} ~~someone found it absolutely necessary~~ to communicate with him, they would email her, and she would walk ten steps into his space with the message. Otherwise, they worked separately, he writing, and she painting or handling the family finances. But after she began writing, she talked to him about technical matters, and then asked if he would read her unfinished manuscript. He said no. "I told her that if I read it, and she didn't finish it she would never forgive me. And she nodded. She's fairly tough-minded." When the page proofs arrived, he said that perhaps it was time to take a look at it, and she agreed.

After an hour of reading, he handed her his initial edits. Amazed to see that he was line-editing her novel, she bridled. "No. You can't edit this book. I have to be able to say that I wrote the whole thing myself. I don't want you to edit it," she said. "Our styles are too different." When asked, "Do we influence each other?" he said:

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

Norris' ^Sself-assessment in regard to literature matches Mailer's. She said more than once that she preferred *People* magazine to the *NYRB*. The primacy of his work was ~~entirely~~ ^Iobvious to her, and the entire family.

Mailer told her that if he couldn't edit her novel as he went along, then he couldn't read it. "Fine," she replied. "Then you'll either read it when it comes out or you won't read it." He handed her back the proofs. "I never even looked at what he had done. I know there were a lot of people who would have given three years of their lives if Norman Mailer would have edited their manuscripts, but I was not one of them." When asked how he'd have edited the novel, he said, "I could have made it about five percent better. That's all though. The book was essentially there." Norris had made her point. Her novel was a modest success, with generally warm reviews, good sales, and a paperback edition. It is dedicated to her husband and two sons.

About the same time that *Windchill Summer* appeared, Tom Wolfe published *Hooking Up*, an essay collection. It included a full-throated attack on three novelists who had found fault with his 1998 novel, *A Man in Full*. Titled "My Three Stooges," the essay accuses Mailer, Updike and John Irving of wasting their careers by pursuing private obsessions instead of exploring "the rich material of an amazing country at a fabulous moment in history." Wolfe's long-held contention was that the American novel had fallen into a "weak, pale, tabescent condition"—a view for which Mailer had some sympathy—that could only be remedied by sending "a brigade of Zolas" out to document the raw life of a fast-changing, unpredictable country. He was happy to present himself as the American Zola, and label the three ~~stooges~~ ^{novelists} as "old lions" who had "retreated, shielding their eyes against the light, and turned inward." Years before he had made fun of Updike's clothes and his "thatchy medieval haircut," and called Mailer's *An American Dream* "boring and logorrheic." But Wolfe didn't believe these reproaches had prompted the negative reviews from Mailer and Updike, and he had never fought with Irving, who called his novel "journalistic hyperbole described as fiction." The unspoken, root cause of their criticisms, ^{of him, Wolfe} he argued, was his success—*A Man in Full* was a number one best seller for ten weeks—and the three ^{old pilots} "bags of bones" were "shaken," fearful of becoming "effete and irrelevant." ~~Their attacks exuded what he called "the allergens of jealousy."~~ Mailer (*NYRB*) and Updike (*New Yorker*) had written longish reviews of Wolfe's novel; Irving made his comments on a television talk show.

A master of the *ad hominem* slash, Wolfe bolstered his bag-of-bones swipe by bringing up Updike's bladder problems, Mailer's "rusted-out hip," and the way Irving's "sexagenarian jowls shuddered." At 68, Wolfe noted, he himself still looked trim in his double-breasted white

~~suit, white homburg, white cane and gloves as seen on the all-white (first time! he bragged) cover~~
~~of Time, puffing its story about "the novelist with the white stuff!"~~ The media loved all this
~~nastiness and there was a medley of clucking noises and braves in the New York Observer, the~~
~~Times, Boston Globe and Internet sites such as Salon.com, to name a few.~~ Some commentators
 pointed out that the three old lions were hardly uninterested in the rip tides of American culture,
 as even a cursory look at their numerous and notably realistic books demonstrated, for example,
 Irving's *The World According to Garp*, Updike's Rabbit Angstrom tetralogy, and *The*
Executioner's Song. Wolfe's demeaning of Mailer's book seemed especially trumped up. Asked
 how he could call Mailer inward-looking in the face of the immensely detailed societal portrait
 given in his Pulitzer-Prize winning narrative, Wolfe said that Mailer owed it all to "a remarkable
 Santa Claus named Lawrence Schiller," and proceeded to infer that Mailer had sat at home while
 his friend did all the research. Schiller did wear out a lot of shoe leather, but Mailer did his share
 of interviewing, before transforming 15,000 pages of research into an unforgettable thousand-
 page story. Wolfe conceded nothing, however.

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

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

Ψ Ψ Ψ

^{A.} One of the books he read in the summer of 1998 was Ron Rosenbaum's *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil*. ^{1998 study} A novelist and journalist of wide experience and interests, Rosenbaum had spent ten years off and on interviewing Hitler experts in the U.S. and Europe. The book turned Mailer's head. "Long after the details had faded from my mind the feeling of the book remained," he said, and just as he was settling on ^{his} an overarching plan for the sequel to *Harlot's Ghost*, "this little muse appeared in an apse of the literary church," he recalled, "and wiggled her finger at me." Until then, "I was absolutely intrigued with the idea of

why open the chapter in 2000 only to go back in time?

Montague as a Jungian," intending to have him surface in Russia with "some mad notion" of converting the nation to a polity based on Jungian principles. But then the idea of a Hitler novel came to him. All through 1999 he researched, eventually deciding to write about Hitler's childhood. "There were only a few good books. Just three or four really counted, and none of them of course could do more than satisfy a little bit." In addition to Rosenbaum's study, Mailer drew heavily on August Kubizek's *The Young Hitler I Knew* and Franz Jetzinger's *Hitler's Youth*. He also read several books on apiary science. Beekeeping would play an important ^{part} in the novel that he would write over the next seven years.

As he continued to read and take notes, he also began another project with Schiller, a teleplay based on a number one best seller that Schiller and James Willworth had written about the highly controversial O.J. Simpson murder trial. Schiller paid him \$250,000 for reshaping *American Tragedy: The Uncensored Story of the Simpson Defense* into a four-hour miniseries. Initially, Mailer had been uninterested in the trial, but he thoroughly enjoyed the Schiller-Willworth book. "My old friend and colleague has come up with a book that is impossible to put down," he said. He finished the teleplay in July 2000, and it was broadcast in mid-November.

Simpson went to court to try ^{to} block the miniseries, claiming that Schiller had violated an agreement with him, but his ^{claim} failed and the program was aired as scheduled. ^{In the} ~~It was not a huge~~ ^{hit but} received fairly strong ratings.

^{Meanwhile, Mailer did} Research for the new novel ^{he} ~~was done~~ secretly, as Mailer explained to Morton Yanow:

I have not told anyone what the private idea of it is, not even my wife or Judith, both of whom, being excellent private detectives, are trying to find out but will not necessarily know until I begin the writing. The reason I don't want to talk

about it is I think it would spook this work and would be even more dangerous than the usual pitfall of talking a book away. So I wrap silence around me and austerity, as if I were a grand old man, which for better and for worse, I am not.

Judith typed this letter and soon learned the secret. She did, after all, order books for him, and she and Norris surmised what the novel would be about. The specifics—the portion of Hitler's life to be depicted, the point of view, bee-keeping and life in rural Bavaria—were still evolving. Mailer ended his letter to Yanow with a metaphor about his condition, ^{that} ~~one~~ which reveals his weakening health, his determination, and his self-dramatizing imagination:

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

With the help of a German-speaking friend, Elke Rosthal, Mailer began studying German, aided by his memory of the Yiddish his parents spoke at home. His reading was not limited to books about Hitler and World War II; he also read German philosophy (Herder, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche) and poetry (Goethe, Heine and Rilke). He particularly enjoyed *Conversations of Goethe with Johann Peter Eckermann*, and saw parallels between himself and the German polymath. Both he and Goethe, he said, essayed a variety of literary forms, were interested in science, politics, government, and led active social lives. The Faust myth was

something else that connected them. "I'm raising the bar higher than ever before," he said about the new novel. "It will contain every idea I ever had." It would have "some of the magical aura" of the Egyptian novel, but it would also be more documentary, historical, objective—less so than *Oswald's Tale* and *The Executioner's Song*, however. After he completed the Simpson script, at ~~the end of 2000~~, he was ready to begin.

Howz
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the tale
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July

He wanted a different location to begin writing, a place completely free of interruptions. A few years earlier, ^{and his wife Doris} the Lennons had purchased a condo about half a mile from the Mailer home. Mailer knew the area well, and called it P-Town's suburbs, a place atop a modest hill away from the noise of the town's center. He liked the view of the monument and the harbor from the third floor studio. The condo was vacant except on some weekends, and its owners were happy to give Mailer a key. In mid-December 2000, Norris dropped him off there with his notes, a ream of paper and a fistful of pencils, and he began writing. If the weather was bad, she would drive him back and forth; otherwise he walked four or five days a week and, if the condo was free, also on weekends. He could do a mile with his canes, one-third of a mile without them. By the beginning of April, he had produced 150 typescript pages. ^{when} At that point, he returned to his study at home.

^{written} His routine in his final years deserves comment. The following, ^{This was Mailer's writing routine} taken from Lennoh's "Mailer Log" ^{for July 15, 2005:} (7-15-05) describes his working day before his health went into precipitous decline in the summer of 2005.

When I first spent a lot of time with him, in the 80s, he had dinner at a reasonable hour—around 7:30. But then he began working later and later, often not coming down from his study until close to 9 p.m., while his family and guests waited and starved. But he has changed his pattern now

and does not work much after 6 p.m. 'It was just too hard,' he told me a couple of months ago, 'so I am working shorter periods.' He normally gets up between eight and nine, but takes a long time to get downstairs. Then he has his breakfast, often two poached eggs and dry white toast, sometimes fruit and oatmeal. Hearty breakfast with o.j. and coffee. He reads the papers as he eats—the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times*, and does the *Times* crossword puzzle every day, until they get really difficult on Friday. The Globe publishes a daily epigram by Dr. Johnson or Emerson, Montaigne, etc., and NM often writes a rejoinder to them (a collection of these is now in the hands of his agent). He goes to the loo around 11 and sits on the can reading for a long time. His last act before going up to his study is to play a couple of hands of solitaire—"combing my mind," he calls it. Then, somewhere between 11 and 12, he climbs slowly up the two flights to his study and begins to work. He has a late lunch, around 2:30 or 3:00, and then takes a nap. He has always pushed himself, and rarely broke routine unless he was traveling to promote a book, speak, or be on a panel, etc. When he isn't working, he told me, he gets into trouble. True.

NM always sits in the same chair at the dining room table—the center of all activity at the Mailer home—with his back to the living room and facing a wall, not the glare from the sun and sea to his right. Visitors will often sit to his left at the head of the long wood table that seats ten.

The table is full of the day's projects: piles of mail, manuscripts, books and magazine, photographs and piles of newspapers. When it gets too cluttered, the papers are thrown away and the rest moved to the six-foot wide, three-foot deep shelf before the Oriel window. When the shelf is packed a foot or two high, the stuff is shunted to the basement. It is fascinating to go through this stuff; last week I saw the following: letters from other writers or editors seeking endorsements on a ms., books to be signed for fans, copies of newly published editions of NM's work from around the globe, contracts for film and literary work, letters and cards and drawings from old friends, *Poetry* magazine, *Nation*, *Stop Smiling*, *American Conservative*, *New York Review of Books*, *Provincetown Arts*, as well as the black box containing poker chips and cards for the nightly Texas Hold 'em game. A green felt poker board, folded up into sections, leans on the wall near the window. A lot of this stuff spills into the bar, which adjoins the dining room. From the telephone there, NM speaks to Judith several times a day. In the afternoon after lunch, he goes through the mail, makes phone calls to Judith, and usually to a few of his nine kids. Hardly a day goes by without some of them calling.

Ψ Ψ Ψ

The spat with Tom Wolfe brought Mailer into closer contact with John Irving. Mailer admired *The World According to Garp*, but had only met Irving a few times. In March 2001, Irving wrote to ask if he and Norris would do a benefit reading for a private school in

Manchester, Vermont. He suggested A.R. Gurney's *Love Letters*, in which a man and a woman read aloud their fifty-year correspondence. Mailer didn't think it was a role he could do well, and Norris thought perhaps that George Plimpton might substitute. When Mailer called him, Plimpton came up with a different play, "Zelda, Scott & Ernest," which he and Tom Quinn had written, based on the letters of the Fitzgeralds and Hemingway, as well as excerpts from Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* and Zelda's novel, *Save Me the Waltz*. "Norris can be Zelda," Plimpton said. "She's an actress and from the South." Mailer, who would of course play Hemingway, read the script and liked it. Over the next eighteen months, Plimpton and the Mailers would perform the play more than a dozen times, beginning in Vermont, and then in ~~Easthampton, New York, Provincetown, New York City, Washington, D.C., and St. Paul, Minnesota.~~ In the summer and fall of 2002, the trio performed it in seven European cities, beginning in Paris and ending in London.

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

similarities." Physically, he said, "we each have spindly legs and we're barrel-chested." Mailer said Papa was a writer who

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

Norris was ~~slightly~~ less enthusiastic about her role. She had the fewest lines, and she interacts only with Scott, not Hemingway. She was also miffed about being given less ^{notice} ~~comment~~ in reviews of the play, and in joint interviews with Mailer. "I'm not much like Zelda in temperament or mind or anything else, but our situation is the same," she said. "I'm married to a famous writer, and I'm trying to be a writer herself"—she had begun work on a sequel to *Windchill Summer*. Mailer interrupted the conversation at this point. "So far I haven't stolen any of your stuff," he said. "No, you haven't stolen my stuff," she answered. "Scott lifted Zelda's diary. He lifted whole passages of her work and put it in his work and didn't attribute it to her." You're exaggerating, Mailer said, adding that since Zelda was in a mental hospital when he took the passages, and Fitzgerald "was thinking she's never going to do it, so I might as well use it." Norris pushed back: "Well, you'd be above stealing my work?" His reply: "Well, I hope I would be." Ever since the crisis in their marriage, and especially after the publication of her first novel,

Norris was less willing to act merely as the dutiful domestic manager of the household¹ and more eager to present herself as a writer. They jostled more now in public.

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

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

people overlooked his playfulness, missed his wink, and Shainberg noted that "even when he's angry, it's not clear how much he means to be taken seriously."

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

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

'Did you say half?'

'Maybe 55%.'

'Fuck you, Norman.'

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

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

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

What happened to wild man Mailer, the gent who butted heads in bars and got into boisterous scrapes on television? "Well," Mailer said, "he finally ran into a woman who was

exactly his equal, which I think is very important. People only get domesticated when they meet their equals."

Ψ Ψ Ψ

Juggling projects was a worn path for Mailer, and between performances of the play, he continued working on the Hitler novel, as well as working on still another Schiller project. In February 2001 Robert Hanssen, a longtime FBI agent with an unblemished record, was arrested for passing classified information to the Russians in exchange for cash and jewels. He was only the third FBI agent to be accused of spying. Hanssen was a devout Catholic and member of Opus Dei, a conservative institution founded in 1928 for rank-and-file members of the Church. The father of six who brought his family to Sunday Mass at the same church attended by FBI Director Louis Freeh, Hanssen had been passing secrets to the Russians for 15 years. What made the situation of larger interest was the fact that Hanssen's job at the FBI was counterintelligence, and one of his responsibilities was to design a plan to ensnare a suspected mole inside the FBI—himself. Mailer could hardly ignore the story of a man who gave the following description of his secret life to his Russian handlers: "I am either insanely brave or quite insane. I'd answer neither. I'd say, insanely loyal. Take your pick. There is insanity in all the answers."

Is Hanssen's Catholicism relevant? yes

Schiller asked Mailer to write the script for a miniseries, but unlike the O.J. Simpson teleplay where he had worked from Schiller's book, the Hanssen project required travel and research. In the months following the arrest, Mailer and Schiller again took to the road, this time to interview people associated with the man responsible for what former FBI Director William Webster described as "possibly the worst intelligence disaster in U.S. history." They traveled around the U.S. and to London and Moscow to speak with family members, Russian and U.S.

intelligence agents who had worked with Hanssen, his closest friends, ^{Circled} Catholic priests, and one of the psychiatrists who interviewed him after his arrest. The two people they most wanted to interview were Hanssen and his wife ^B Bonnie. Mailer wrote to her in April:

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

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

On September 11, 2001 Mailer was in Provincetown working on the teleplay, ^{when} his daughter Maggie, who was staying at his Brooklyn apartment with a clear view of the World Trade Center, called ^{about} him the attack. Like millions of others, she was "terrible^y affected," he said. For the next few days, he watched television constantly. "That only happens a few times in your life," he said. "Jack Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy. Martin Luther King. Maybe ten times." His first

✓
"she"
OK?

reaction was to feel left out: "Being up in Provincetown, 300 miles away, the bit of blood that's still journalistic felt wistful."

Right after the disaster, *in a telephone interview,* Mailer called the WTC "an architectural monstrosity," and offered the opinion that if no one had been killed "a lot of people would have cheered to see the towers destroyed." He went on to say that the terrorists who carried out the attack were "brilliant." To do such a thing required courage, but most Americans were convinced that the act was carried out by "blind, mad fanatics who didn't know what they were doing." It was time to "take a calm look" in order to understand what motivated a mission of such horrific destruction. In a second telephone interview, he said that most Americans didn't understand that in many countries, Americans were seen as "cultural oppressors" who erect "high rise buildings until the meanest, scummiest capital in the world will nonetheless have a ring of high-rise hotels and buildings around their airports. A lot of people resent it profoundly." If the U.S. did not recognize the damage caused by its "huge, profit-making way of life," he concluded, "We are going to be the most hated nation on earth."

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

we're a 300 lb. man who's 7 ft. tall, superbly shaped, absolutely powerful, and every three minutes he's got to reaffirm that his armpits have a wonderful odor."

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

We small Austrians have a very clear position towards your great America. We are always for America and always against America. Always for America because we want to be protected and because, in the global clash of civilizations, we belong after all to the West. Always against America because in our central European souls, there is a lot of arrogance coupled with anger and envy. It is therefore a great relief when Mailer shoulders our anti-American burden because you can't be more anti-American than this great American. Norman Mailer has a European concept of patriotism: he loves his country not how it is but how it should be.

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

The Hanssen teleplay was completed by November 2001, at which time Schiller decided to write a nonfiction narrative based on Mailer's script, adding more information from other sources. It was published the following May as *Into the Mirror: The Life of Master Spy Robert P. Hanssen*, and was another best seller for Schiller. The miniseries, which was well-received, was broadcast on CBS in two parts on November 10 and 17, with William Hurt as Hanssen and Mary-Louise Parker as his wife. Mailer was paid \$250,000 for the teleplay, and the income enabled him to keep up with his huge monthly ^{expenses} ~~not~~, approximately \$50,000. The Hitler novel was years away and Mailer felt obliged to come up with a book for Random House—it had been four years since *The Time of Our Time*—^Q ~~and~~ _{in} early 2002, he began to think seriously about a project Lennon suggested. Mailer's insights and anecdotes about the craft of writing were scattered in several of his books, in various collections, uncollected interviews, transcripts of television programs and in talks he had given. "Presented with the cache," Mailer wrote in the acknowledgements to the resulting book, "I began to see that the form of a legitimate work was present, barely visible, but with the unmistakable heft of a book." In early February 2002, he began to delineate the contents of what would be *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing*.

On February 10, just as he was beginning, he received word that Jack Abbott, who had been denied parole in 2001, had committed suicide. Michael Kuzma, who had advised Abbott in a lawsuit against the ~~State~~ of New York about a beating he had received in prison two years earlier, said that he was not satisfied that ^{Abbott} ~~he~~ had killed himself. Abbott had told him that he was worried about his safety. He was discovered hanging from a sheet and a shoelace in his cell. Bill Majeski, the detective responsible for his capture, questioned whether it was suicide. "Everyone ^{body} ~~one~~ hated him," he said. Abbott's sister, Frances Amador, also doubted it was suicide. "But it's not

something you can prove," she said. Abbott's ex-wife, Naomi Zack, noted that Abbott's eye disease and dental problems may have been factors. He tried to kill himself at least twice before he died, she said. Henry Howard, the father-in-law of Richard Adan, said, "That's the third person he murdered, and he got the right one."

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

Ψ Ψ Ψ

Norris' father had a heart condition, and in the spring of 2002 began to decline. She flew to Arkansas several times to help her mother, usually accompanied by either Matt or John. On July 21, after a long hospital stay, James Davis died. After the funeral, Norris tried to convince her 83-year-old mother to move to Provincetown, but Gaynell refused. She had diabetes and didn't drive; she had never written a check, and was afraid to be alone at night. After Gaynell broke her ankle four months later, Norris got her to agree, after considerable cajoling, to ^{move} come to Provincetown. Norris was now driving her husband, her mother and herself to doctor's appointments in Boston and Hyannis, as well as shopping, cooking and running the house. Mailer, who would be 80 in a few months, rarely drove any more. Gaynell was miserable, and

Given what
you say, it
seems odd
that some
think he
did not
commit
suicide

wanted to return to Arkansas. She and her son-in-law were usually cordial, but it was "like they were from different planets," Norris said. Depressed and lonely, Norris^S mother, a devout Baptist, found almost everything on television to be sinful and repugnant, and "did nothing all day except sit and read in a chair tucked into a small room off the living room, the black ink of her mood seeping out all around her."

Norris wanted to write, but was overwhelmed. "A part of me," she said, "sometimes wished I could just give in and become mad rather than have to be the stable force in everyone's life, the one who was always taking care of people, the one who everyone turned to in a crisis. I just wanted to cry and scream sometimes and have someone take care of me, but there was no one who could." ⁹¹ Norris's

Added to her load was a non-paying position as artistic director of the Provincetown Repertory Theater, which she enjoyed but was only able to handle with the help of her production manager, David Fortuna. Mailer, remembering the successful reading of "Don Juan in Hell" they had done nine years earlier, proposed a benefit performance to aid the always-needy theater. He contacted Vidal and asked him to reprise his role as the Devil. Norris would take the part of Doña Ana, Don Juan's former paramour, Lennon would play the role of her father, the Commodore, and Mailer would be Don Juan, and direct. Vidal accepted immediately and flew in from his home in Rapallo, Italy for rehearsals. Norris thought that Vidal got involved

to make as a way of making up ^{to Mailer for his} (for linking Mailer to Charles Manson) ^{remains years ago} ^{earlier}

Vidal stayed at a nearby guesthouse, but came to the Mailer's every morning for breakfast. Norris recalled the "wild and wooly week" in her memoir: "Rehearsal all day, some kind of lunch, and dinner, ending with a late night of drinking and verbal sparring between Norman and Gore in our bar. I didn't for the life of me see how Gore was making it so well. He

But Vidal had already performed the part so why think the ax was not yet buried
She said it

had more energy that all of us combined. We were all exhausted." Lennon recalls dropping Vidal ^{Vidal} off at the White Horse, watching him pour himself a Scotch nightcap, and then returning in the morning to find him lying fully dressed on his bed with the glass still in his hand. The 77-year-old Vidal popped up and went right back to work.

"Don Juan in Hell" is a 90-minute dream sequence in the third act of Shaw's *Man and Superman*. It is often cut from productions of the play, one of Shaw's greatest, and performed separately. Mailer trimmed "Don Juan" to 60 minutes ^{in Provincetown} and made further refinements during rehearsal. Vidal knew his part almost by heart [✓] and while he listened politely to Mailer's suggestions, played the role his own way. On the night of the performance, October 12, ~~Vidal~~ ^{a reviewer said} Vidal, wearing his jacket with the dark-red lining, told Mailer, "Norman, when I walk on that stage, you are going to hear a roar of applause the likes of which you have never heard." The applause was indeed loud and "the reading flowed and had sparks of brilliance," especially in the Devil's arguments for the superiority of his abode over the dull place above. The four dissect with every weapon of wit and rhetoric the great philosophical questions, culminating in a masterful set of exchanges between Don Juan and the Devil on the merits of the Life Force. It is brilliant dialogue, perhaps Shaw's finest. "If you were scoring the bout, it would go to Vidal," said ^{the} ~~one~~ reviewer, who called Vidal's portrayal "flawless." Mailer agreed that Vidal was terrific, "almost as good as Charles Laughton in playing that role."

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

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

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

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

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

I tell you Sal, I get nervous about the possibilities of human nature even making it through the next century. We’re just too fucked up, too determined to take over the savvy, the realm of genius of the Creator. I expect it’s because we’re

prodigiously dissatisfied after the 20th Century with His or Her inability to come to our aid in times of terrible historic stress, but then, none of these liberals out there ever seem to recognize that the Devil may be just as powerful as God, and you can't lay blame on the first party who is probably doing the best He or She can do under these dreadfully parlous circumstances.

Showing the powers of the Evil One (as the Devil is referred to in *The Castle in the Forest*) as he and other evil spirits wander through the world seeking the ruin of souls—Hitler's especially—would be one of the chief preoccupations of the novel, and Mailer was perfectly willing to believe that organ transplants were a demonic activity. He was making good progress on the novel, losing only a few months to assemble *The Spooky Art*. In between performances of "Zelda, Scott and Ernest," in the fall of 2002, he and Norris had driven across Germany to Vienna, accompanied by their Austrian friends, Hans and Freidl Janitschek, stopping to see the Dachau concentration ^{camp}, Hitler's Berchtesgaden retreat, and locales in Upper Austria where he had lived as a boy, which would be the main setting of the novel.

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

Cancer had always been Norman's metaphor for evil, and now here was his wife, suffused with it. Was it his fault? Had he given it to me? It weighed on him,

tormented him, and caused him to stay away from me. He moved into the bedroom down the hall, which hurt me at first, but the luxury of having my own bathroom and my own TV compensated.

Her weight dropped to 103, and for a time she had to wear a colostomy bag. She joked about it, telling her friends that she was going to "design a 'Bag Bag,' in all different colors and fabrics, so people could wear them outside their clothing," instead of hiding them. Mailer helped by doing some of the cooking, ~~but he was too far removed from the family's finances to aid there.~~

He was having chest pains, but refused to see his doctor in Boston, and began "popping nitroglycerine tablets like they were candy." Gaynell was still in a slough of despond, especially when she realized that she would not be returning to Arkansas. Aurora Huston came for a week, as did Christina Pabst, a friend from Actors Studio, and the children ^{helped} ~~filled~~ whenever they could. Finally, the Mailers decided to hire ~~someone, and settled on~~ a waiter from a local restaurant, Dwayne Raymond, who ^{was} they found to be both congenial and bright. He would work as cook, personal assistant, and a bit later, typist and researcher. Raymond would also become one of Norris' confidantes. He worked for the family until Mailer died four years later.

Ψ Ψ Ψ

The reception given to *The Spooky Art* was surprisingly warm, given the fact that it is an omnium-gatherum containing little original writing. Some slack, perhaps, was given to the old lion on his ^{eighty} 80th birthday. There was some debate about how skillfully Mailer had cobbled together cuttings from over two hundred different sources, but most reviewers found the book to be a thoughtful analysis of the psychological aspects of the writing life. Michiko Kakutani, again reviewing the book before almost everyone else, praised the sections on craft—point of view

choices and the struggle to create a style—and Mailer's "keenly perceptive" comments on the weaknesses of his own books, but overall she found the book to be "startlingly" uneven. She compared it to the blather of a "garrulous raconteur" next to you on a long bus ride, sometimes compelling but also numbing in his "self-absorption, his defensiveness, his capacity for wacky mumbo jumbo." Her summation: "Such ridiculous, self-indulgent nattering is just the sort of thing that won Mr. Mailer a reputation as a 'criminally egomaniacal' writer in his heyday, and distracted attention from his better work." For Kakutani, self-effacement stands near the summit of writerly virtue.

Mailer, characteristically, was of two minds about the merits of detachment. Kakutani quotes approvingly his negative stance on the question: "Writers aren't taken seriously anymore, and a large part of the blame must go to the writers of my generation, most certainly including myself. We haven't written the books that should have been written. We've spent too much time exploring ourselves. We haven't done the imaginative work that could have helped define America, and as a result, our average citizen does not grow in self-understanding."

Other reviews found merit in Mailer's self-splunking. Both James Campbell and Ron Rosenbaum (*New York Observer*) found introspection to be one of the collection's virtues. Echoing the judgments of Harold Bloom and Alfred Kazin, Campbell says that readers go to Mailer's books chiefly "for his alertness to 'every intimation about himself,' which he has expressed with greater vivacity than any contemporary." Rosenbaum says that in *Advertisements for Myself* Mailer "broke ground for every memoirist who's put pen to paper since," and lauds him for "finding a way—in *Armies of the Night* to write about the personal and the metaphysical, the personal and the ideological, and even the personal and the *theological*." Whenever Kakutani

New York Times
Book
Review

Enough
Kakutani



~~cast a backward glance over Mailer's work, she moved briskly when she came to *Armies*. In this~~

~~review, she limits herself to calling it, rather blandly, "ground-breaking journalism." One might~~

~~ask if she was cognizant of a point made by Kazin in his review of *Armies*. Whitman was just as~~

~~"outrageous an egoist and actor as Mailer." Like Whitman, Mailer had bouts of narcissism, but~~

then got bored with himself. Then the cycle repeated. The salutary effect of this alternation,

which runs through Mailer's work from the late 1950s on, is often overlooked. His self-

promotion and his self-effacement, his blather and his brilliance, cannot be separated. As Walter

Goodman, ~~a colleague of Ms. Kakutani's~~, said of Mailer, "At his most engaging, he manages to

be off the wall and on the mark at the same time."

Mailer wrote another letter to the publisher of the *Times*, with copies to Kakutani and fourteen other *Times* writers and editors, complaining about her consistently early reviews and asking for a meeting with her. He also pointed out that she was in error in her review when she said that dates for items in the book were not supplied, since the main text is followed by ten closely printed pages of source notes. The *Times* acknowledged this error in its corrections column, but Kakutani ~~neither acknowledged her mistake nor replied~~ ^{did not reply} to Mailer's request for a meeting. A few weeks later, he said in an interview that he had a female literary enemy at the *Times* who he described as "a posterior aperture." He would continue to up the ante.

In the same interview, he named his other enemy: President George W. Bush. ~~As the world knew,~~ the invasion of Iraq was imminent, and Mailer was stoked up in opposition in a way not seen in the previous decade, a period when "I really didn't have anything to say about America." His uncertainties disappeared with the 9/11 attacks. The nation's guilt over what he called "economic gluttony," and its growing imperial ambitions had been smoldering for years;

the 9/11 attacks lit the flame. Mailer put aside the Hitler novel, and began giving speeches and interviews and writing a series of anti-war, anti-Bush essays. "I know I'm going to have to pay for it," he said, ^{and using a typical Mailer analogy adding} "but if you don't use freedom of speech, it's like an unused dick. It tends to dwindle."

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

X
Can't resist.
An occasional common sense of this sort is welcome Mike.
ygo!

For certain, Jesus did not. You weren't supposed to pile up a mountain of moolah.

You were obligated to spend your life in altruistic acts. That was one half of the good American psyche. The other half, pure American, was, as always: beat everybody. One can offer a cruel, but conceivably accurate remark: To be a mainstream American is to live as an oxymoron.

Despite the contrived evidence of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, and lack of proof of his collusion with Osama bin Laden, the fears generated by 9/11 were powerful enough for Bush to declare war against evil, a word he used "as a narcotic for that part of the American public which feels most distressed," Mailer said. Saddam Hussein was an excuse, Mailer argued, for establishing an overwhelming American military presence in the oil-rich Middle East, an essential first step in the inevitable struggle for world dominance. "Flag conservatives truly believe America is not only fit to run the world, but we must. Without a commitment to Empire, the country will go down the drain." Mailer was not alone in his

analysis. Vidal wrote his own ^{short} ~~little~~ book on American imperialism, and numerous foreign affairs commentators issued the same warnings. Mailer quoted one of them, Paul Brookman, who said that after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1992, a document came out of the Defense Department that "envisioned the United States as 'a Colossus astride the world, imposing its will and keeping world peace though military and economic power.'"

With a few refinements, "Only in America," was reprinted in the *NYRB* at the end of March and, combined with excerpts from his interview with Dotson Rader on 9/11 [✓] and another interview on the dangers of empire from *American Conservative*, appeared as a 111-page paperback in April 2003. *Why Are We at War?* was reviewed along with Vidal's collection of essays, *Dreaming War: Blood For Oil and the Cheney-Bush Junta*, which came out a few months earlier. ^{Both books} ~~and~~ makes many of the same arguments. Both were well-received, at least on the left-liberal side, and Mailer's made the paperback best seller list. After witnessing the President's triumphant arrival via Navy jet on the deck of an aircraft carrier where he announced, prematurely, the end of major combat operations in Iraq, Mailer shifted from a geopolitical to a psycho-political stance in his attacks on Bush.

In his *NYRB* essay titled "The White Man Unburdened" (nod to "The White Negro"), Mailer points to white male insecurity as one of the buttresses of Bush's war. A successful effort in Iraq would provide "psychic rejuvenation" to those white males who were "spiritually wounded" by 9/11, he wrote. White males had been taking "a daily drubbing over the last thirty years. For better or worse, the women's movement has had its breakthrough successes and the old, easy white male ego has withered in the glare." Rooting for white sports heroes was no longer the same, unless you were a fan of tennis, ice hockey, skiing and a few other sports.

"Black genius now prevailed" in football, basketball, boxing and a lot of baseball, "and the Hispanics were coming up fast; even the Asians were beginning to make their mark." But white American could still root for "an extraordinarily good, if essentially untested, group of armed forces, a skilled, disciplined, well-motivated military." The military could prove to be "quintessential morale-builders to a core element of American life"—the average American male who "had very little to nourish his morale since the job market had gone bad." If watching your favorite sports teams was not what it used to be, then tune in to the war—"sanitized but terrific." Mailer's invective had not been as good since he went after L.B.I.

Ironically
the armed
forces —
the arm
anyway
— contain
more
African
American
than
ever
ago

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

work on *Cheap Diamonds*, the sequel to *Windchill Summer*, in which her heroine moves to New York City and begins a modeling career.

Another project was a collection of approximately 100 captioned head drawings, "dpoons," which were interspersed with poems from his 1962 collection, *Deaths for the Ladies*, and a few new ones. Mailer kept ^{his assistant, Dwayne} Raymond busy for three months printing out various page layouts and cover designs for the softbound volume of 276 pages, titled *Modest Gifts: Poems and Drawings*. The cover consisted of the title and a five-stroke sketch of Norris' ^S features which also could be seen as birds in flight. Mailer often studied the formation flying of a flock of pigeons swooping around his house and over the harbor. He remarked more than once that its movements were so acrobatically precise that the pigeons must be inhabited by the spirits of departed Army Air Force pilots. He insisted that there be no publicity campaign for the collection, published on October 23, and it was hardly noticed.

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

In September, George Plimpton died ^{and} Mailer spoke at the memorial at St. John the Divine in Manhattan. Philip Roth also attended. ^{and} He later transferred his memory of Mailer's eulogy to a character in his novel, *Exit Ghost*.

Guy's eighty now, both knees shot, walks with two canes, can't take a stride of more than six inches alone, but he refuses help going up to the pulpit, won't even use one of the canes. Climbs this tall pulpit all by himself. Everybody pulling for him step by step. The conquistador is here and the high drama begins. The Twilight of the Gods. He surveys the assemblage. Looks down the length of the nave and out to Amsterdam Avenue and across the U.S. to the Pacific. Reminds me of Father Mapple in *Moby-Dick*. I expected him to begin 'Shipmates!' and preach upon the lesson Jonah teaches. But no, he too speaks very simply about George. This is no longer Mailer in quest of a quarrel, yet his thumbprint is on every word. He speaks about a friendship with George that flourished only in recent years—tells us how the two of them and their wives had traveled together to wherever they were performing a play they'd written together, and of how close the two couples had become, and I'm thinking, Well, it's been a long time coming, America, but there on the pulpit is Norman Mailer speaking as a husband in praise of coupledness. Fundamentalists creep, you have met your match.

After the service, Mailer headed for the men's room. "Urination had become one of my preoccupations," he said. As he was cranking along on his canes he saw Roth, with whom he'd had "an edgy relationship for thirty of forty years." Roth asked him where he was going in such a hurry. Mailer told him, and added, "Let me warn you, when you get to my age, you're going to be looking around for telephone booths in which you can relieve yourself." That time had already arrived, Roth informed him. "Well, Phil," he said, "you always were precocious." It was the only time they had ever laughed together, Mailer said. He attributed the warm moment to

Plimpton's spirit. He had liked George enormously, admiring the way he moved with ease through such a range of projects and pursuits while managing to edit a leading literary quarterly for a half-century. After the memorial he wondered aloud about how much time he still had, considering all his ailments, if someone with George's vigor could ^{dis}~~go~~ at 76.

Ψ Ψ Ψ

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

He was in dire need of care, felt lonely, but was too proud to acknowledge it.

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

(Did Mailer society always meet in Provincetown? Only 2004-2007? Or did NM + Norms open their house to the Mailer Society only 2004-2007? (Founded in 2003),

~~and~~ met every fall in Provincetown from 2004-2007. The Mailers invited the keynote speaker for *had been founded when?*

lunch every year. Neil Abercrombie, a Democratic congressman from Hawaii (now governor of ~~that~~ state), spoke in 2004. He had written his Ph.D. thesis on Mailer, and they had been friends for decades. Ed Doctorow, who was one of the editors of *An American Dream*, was the 2005 speaker, and William Kennedy spoke in 2006. Mailer thought it would be gauche to listen to speeches and panels about him and his work, so he had never attended any of the conference events, *but hosted* ~~save~~ the closing party. Kennedy had met Mailer in 1968 when he was editing *Maidstone*, and written a warm review of *Beyond the Law*. They saw each other many times in the '80s—at P.E.N. meetings, fundraisers at the New York Public Library, and at the Actors Studio. Mailer introduced him to Paul Newman who wanted to play Francis Phelan in the film version of Kennedy's Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *Ironweed*, but Jack Nicholson had already had sewn up *Phelan* *SP?* the role. Newman was a bit too cerebral for the role, Kennedy said, "and he didn't look like a bum. Jack had a magical way of transforming himself into the slouch of a bum." Nicholson was nominated for an Oscar for his portrayal, which Mailer admired. The *Kennedys and Mailers* ~~two couples~~ enjoyed each other's company.

For his keynote, Kennedy wrote a half-comic, half-serious dialogue among him, his uncle 'Billy,' an unnamed interviewer and Mailer. When he learned that the Mailers didn't plan to be at the luncheon where he would read it, he quickly cajoled them into attending. Mailer said it would be like Huck Finn listening to the eulogies at his own funeral, but Kennedy told him he would regret missing the jokes. The Mailers came and laughed as hard as everyone else ~~and~~ at Kennedy's piece, "Norman Mailer as Occasional Commentator in a Self-Interview and Memoir."

Toward the end of the dialogue, Mailer notes that American novelists have failed to do the imaginative work of defining America, and Kennedy responds, using Mailer's published words:

Kennedy: I soon realized I wasn't up to the task and throttled down to the individual, for instance in a novel about a pool hustler very like my favorite uncle. I called him Billy Phelan and he comes to a crisis during a political kidnapping when he refuses to be an informer. If I may, I'd like to invite Billy into this conversation, buy him a drink. Will you have a drink, Billy?

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

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

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

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

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

Kennedy: I remember a critic panning a self-absorbed novelist and saying rather neatly that literature wasn't about the self, but what came home to the self through

experience. Norman has written extensively about the *self*, about *writing*, about the self, and *against* writing about the self. Norman seems to have written about every choice a human being can make. [. . .]

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

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

Kennedy was a great host and hosted a cocktail party at his city house, the Albany row house where Legs Diamond was shot in 1931. NM talked about the problems of writing the sequel to *Castle*, the largest being the vast amount of material to be covered. He wants to write about Hitler as a struggling student-artist in Vienna, about his affair with his cousin and her mysterious death, about the events after ¹⁹³³ the ~~1932~~ seizure of power when Hitler, and of course the war, the concentration camps and his suicide in the bunker. He offered one possibility for handling all this and more: ^{the story} move to Russia and Rasputin, ^{for a time} using Dieter's time there as a way of being able to avoid chronicling every major milestone in Hitler's life. He explained that he thought of doing something like this with Montague in the unwritten sequel to *Harlot's Ghost*.

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

Dick and Doris Kearns Goodwin were also regular visitors to Provincetown. Whenever either of the Mailers had to go to Boston for medical work, they invariably stayed at the Goodwin's home in Concord, 20 miles outside of Boston. The Goodwins are dinner conversationalists of some repute, and the Mailers loved Dick's memories of the Kennedy White House, Castro and Che Guevara, and Doris' tales of interviewing L.B.J. at his Texas ranch in his final years. Mailer's opinion of Johnson improved after reading her book *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, based on her extensive interviews with the former president. Mailer relished her account of how L.B.J. carried on long conversations with "delicate Kennedyites" while sitting on the toilet.

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

All these women he had the affairs with still care. I think the answer is, perhaps serially, the fact that he loved them. You can't fake that. Women know if you're just using them and I think he never did. He had to fall for someone to be really interested in them. Maybe I'm being too overly positive toward him, but my guess would be it's one thing to have a whole series of love affairs, whether it's three days or sixty years, versus just using women for sex. I don't think he did that; at least that would not be the man I knew. He might have done that earlier. He just loved women and that's what is so bad about the rap he got from some of the writing that he did. I felt to the contrary that he totally respected my opinions and feelings on things. He would ask me, often at dinner, what I thought about this or that. There was never a sense of, a moment of, condescension.

Team of Rivals
 Mailer was a fan of Goodwin's new book about Lincoln, and talked about it with
 Lennon: *as he wrote in his "Master Log"*

NM and NCM have both read Doris' book about Lincoln, *Team of Rivals*. He told me how much he likes the language, written and spoken, of the time. When I asked if he liked he Abe's homespun metaphors, he said no, not particularly. It is the high rhetoric of statesmanship and congressional debate, the speeches and passionate letters about abolitionism that he enjoys. This made me remember that many years ago I asked him what he thought of the Elizabethan Age, with its cast of daring, dashing players: Essex, Raleigh, Marlowe and so on. He said that he much preferred the Victorian Age with ladies in layers of petticoats and corsets, and men in vests and cravats, and went on with glee about the efforts needed to

undress and possess the beauties of that time. NM relishes formal (if humorous) rhetoric, long, rolling, Melvillean sentences. He also admires Carlyle and has been compared to him, as well as to Spengler, Emerson, Edmund Burke. This love of slightly pompous, slightly humorous, somewhat ponderous prose is just one side of his linguistic identity, but it is perhaps the dominant one.

Ψ Ψ Ψ

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

John Buffalo and Michael accompanied their father to Toronto where he ^{was} went as a boxing consultant on the film *Cinderella Man*, based on the career of James Braddock, the heavyweight champ in the mid-1930s. Before the trip Mailer read up on Braddock, played by Russell Crowe,

and watched old footage of his fights. Ron Howard, the film's ^{director,} producer, listened to his analysis of Braddock's bout with Max Baer, whom he defeated for the championship in June 1935 at Madison Square Garden. A 10-1 underdog, Braddock won in a unanimous decision. "Baer got spoiled," Mailer said, "he wasn't used to getting hit." For the film, Crowe trained hard for a year in Australia, boxing and weight^{lifting}, to get ready for the role. He and Mailer, according to Michael, got along well. After completing one scene, Crowe was sweating and took off a black fleece vest ^{that} which had the name of Crowe's training camp on it. He gave it to Mailer, who brought it home. He wore it with dark sweatpants and Uggs, Australian sheepskin boots with fleece on the inside that were comfortable and required no socks—one less time-waster, he remarked ^{fewer} and yet magically muffled foot odor.

This reads like a commercial

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

^W He was paid \$100,000 for his advice. The money came at a good time, but it was a stopgap. Mailer was still locked in what he called "the bowels of cash flow," and needed a new paying project every few months. In the fall of 2004, he agreed to appear with his Stephen on an episode of "The Gilmore Girls," a long-running comedy series about a single mother and her daughter living in Connecticut. Stephen was cast as a reporter, and his father played "Norman Mailer." A few years earlier, he and

Stephen appeared in the pilot for a series called "Street Time," directed by his friend Richard Stratton. Mailer was "Saul (Two Canes) Cahan," a Jewish mobster just released from 27 years in prison who has to report regularly to his parole officer, played by Stephen. One cast member said that Mailer was convincing because "he has a certain rough kind of look about him—his voice, his mannerisms." Mailer loved playing an old wise guy, and lapsed into the role easily. He would put on his sunglasses, look you up and down slowly, and say in a leathery voice, "Who the fug are you?"

Financial relief arrived in the spring of 2005 when the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas-Austin agreed to purchase Mailer's archive. The deal was brokered by Glenn Horowitz, a New York rare book dealer who described himself as a "combination of a scholar and grifter," Horowitz got \$2.5 million for Mailer's papers to be paid over six years. The delivered archive contained 500 cubic feet of material, including manuscripts and personal papers from Mailer's childhood through the early 2000s, and approximately 45,000 letters. It is the largest author collection in the Center's extensive holdings. Mailer became friendly with the center's long-time director, Tom Staley, and made two trips to Austin in connection with the transfer. In addition to the price, Mailer said he liked the idea of his papers being in Texas because of his wartime service with the 112th Air Cavalry.

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

~~books on Hemingway that I have read.~~ ^{Papa's} Valerie had been Ernest's secretary, and later had been ~~married to Gregory for 20 years.~~ Mailer and John got along famously, and the wine flowed that evening. In a letter to Anne Barry about the evening, ^{Mailer} he said, "The sad truth is I'm still at my best when half loaded." He said he over-served himself with Grappa, a very strong Italian brandy that they drank "in honor of Hemingway."

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

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

During his first visit to the University of Texas in late April 2005, Mailer met Douglas Brinkley, a prolific young historian and editor. ^{Brinkley} He wrote a story in the ^{the} *New York Times* about the sale of Mailer's papers and followed up a few months later with a long profile in *Rolling Stone*. Brinkley used the occasion of Mailer's April speech at the University attacking Bush and the

Iraq War—a “steppingstone to taking over the rest of the world”—~~as the launching pad for a~~^{to write his}
 brisk overview of Mailer's career. The day after Mailer's speech they went to lunch and ~~Mailer~~
~~went at Bush again, criticizing his use of American English. “He has dumbed himself down,” he~~
~~told Brinkley.”~~^{yet again} After disposing of Bush, Mailer talked about literature. He said that Kerouac's
On the Road was a classic that “captured something hard about late adolescence—the thing
 about being free enough to travel and take your adventures where they come.” And he talked
 about his old anti-war comrade, the late Allen Ginsberg. In 1979, Mailer was at a National Arts
 Club event where Ginsberg was the speaker. “He was a little nutty,” Mailer said. “You never
 knew when Allen the Hun would take over.”

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

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

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

also
^

Erlanger

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

Ψ Ψ Ψ

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

I think at the moment we die, we are the sum of all the good and bad we've done, all the courage and cowardice we've exercised. And so, for example, if we die

with a desire to be reborn, I think it means a great deal to God. If you will, it's like reaching into a litter to select a pup, and there's one who catches our eye because he wants us. He is the one we choose to take home. Using that crude analogy, I would say it's important to be ready. After all, that is the one situation we can't simulate, can't preempt.

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

John Buffalo was around for most of the summer and he and his father finished work on *The Big Empty*, and turned in the manuscript to Nation Books for publication in February 2006. John challenged his father in some of their exchanges, gently but firmly, and this gave the book a ^{some} modicum of narrative tension as they worked their way through issues of dissent, politics, and the psychology of boxing and poker. ~~Norris wanted to take some photographs of father and son for possible use on the cover, but Mailer had had some dental work done in late August and wasn't ready for the camera yet, as noted in the "Mailer Log":~~

~~He has a new set of uppers that don't fit and he is gumming his food with gusto. He looks like an old Irish stevedore, out for fish and chowder on Friday night. On the night of September 2, he got a piece of pot roast in his throat and Marco Colodro had to give him the Heimlich Maneuver. It popped out. The incident made him recall Fig Gwaltney's death by choking, he told me. Fig, he said, was a flammable mixture of boldness and caution, and was regularly angry with his wife's overweening caution, which might have led to the choking.~~

The whole clan sat on the deck the next morning and talked about Bush and the suffering caused by Katrina and whether it would help or hurt the Democrats. NM was, as usual, quite pessimistic, feeling that the citizenry would not really hearken to the plight of poor blacks, or be willing to criticize the President. The feeling that we are in a watershed period was palpable though. Apparently, NCM sent \$500 to the Red Cross for the victims and NM doesn't like the Red Cross. A couple of others criticized it too. NM gave a humorous rant in a brogue like James Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey*. Then NM and NCM did their usual funny *faux* fight for us with NCM saying what I have heard her say 50 times: "We never fight when others aren't around; Norman just likes to put on a show." With a big toothless laugh showing his eyeteeth, he agreed. Laughter all around.

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

Mailer had been taking two nitro tablets a day, and his recognition that he could not keep increasing the dosage was one more reason to agree to the operation. But he still had reservations. "Having my blood pumped out of me and sloshing around in a machine, running through loops of plastic is an unhappy prospect," he said. The plastic, he ^{believed} ~~continued~~, might be the reason that Tom Wolfe and Larry McMurtry had become depressed after by-pass surgery. Told that surgery depression passes after a time, he said, "Yes, but when you're 83 you don't want to lose six months; it's not worth it."

Initially, Mailer was told that he was having a single by-pass operation, but his coronary arteries were more clogged than supposed and he ended up having a quadruple. ^{by Mailer's bypass} The operation was successful and the doctor reported that he had the heart of a 40-year-old. After two weeks in the ICU, he was moved to a rehabilitation facility on Cape Cod. From there he was able to talk to ^{by} people on the telephone. Speaking in a hoarse, excited voice, he said that a tremendous number of new ideas had come to him, especially about spiritual matters. "I'd like to talk about them now," he said, "but talking gets me too excited. I'd only be scraping the rim of the can." The experience had brought him closer to Norris, he said, and he was troubled by how much she worried about him. Two days later, he said that he had gotten into too many bad habits. "I feel like Scrooge, all my previous life revealed in a flash, along with a desire to change." In October, he went home. His favorite journey used to be the sight of the Brooklyn Bridge after dinner in Manhattan, but now it was "the sight of Provincetown as one rides up over the last rise and there is the Pilgrim Monument in all its subtle presence." ~~From the top of the rise he could also see, to the left, the harbor fronted by closed-up beach houses and tourist cabins, and beyond them fishing boats at Macmillan Pier, and to the right salt marshes and lagoons and the high peaked sand dunes partly covered with cord-grass, pitch pine and scrub oak.~~ The vista always gave him a

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lift. Still short of breath, he had to suck on some sort of plastic device—which he loathed—to test his wind. He was counting on the salt air to strengthen his breathing and energize his psyche.

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

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

Recovery was slow. He spent a lot of time on the deck napping and watching the pigeons and gulls maneuver over the low tide flats. He read a piece in the *Atlantic* by Bernard-Henri Lévy ^a the French writer and public intellectual. ^{who} Lévy had spent a year travelling around the country, following the footsteps of Tocqueville, ~~who spent two years in America in the 1830s.~~

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

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

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

Jason Epstein had returned and

you said about the book plans to end in 1903

Ebershoff and others who had read the manuscript found the long description of the courtship of Nicholas and Alexandra, and other events leading up to Nicholas' coronation, to be problematic. The narrator, a fallen angel named Dieter, or D.T., leaves young Hitler and spends 100 book pages fomenting confusion in the imperial Russian court. Norris, Lucid and others compared the Russian excursion to the bloated Uruguayan episode in *Harlot's Ghost*. Mailer seemed to be repeating his mistake. Ebershoff said, "I didn't feel he had digested his material as well," and he seemed to be relying on only "a few sources, rather than a library of sources." It was true, Ebershoff also found it to be "incredibly digressive." He made this point to Mailer in Provincetown and, in early 2006, in New York, Gina Centrello, the president and publisher of Random House, agreed on the need to cut back the Russian section. At one meeting with Mailer, she and Ebershoff listed all the qualities of the novel that they admired. Then they told him that there was a section that needed "a little work," which she explained, was "a publisher's euphemism for, 'This section needs to be cut.'"

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

I nodded sheepishly.

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

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

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

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

and we were talking about the book's publication, but also the Russian section in particular. He said that he had been hearing this, obviously, from me ~~and from~~ you and Norris, and it's been going on for a while, and he knew what we were saying had some merit. And right at the table he said, 'I know what I'm going to do. I'll dare the reader to skip over it. I'll just tell them just turn to page X,' and he said, 'Make sure the copy editor figures out what the page numbers will be, and Adolph Hitler's story will pick up again right there.' It was brilliant. I saw that he immediately understood what he was doing, not only in terms of the narrative, but the way people might talk about it, and that it could be controversial, and some

people would love it because it's kind of a wink. Other people would be infuriated. I thought it was so clever.

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

Ψ Ψ Ψ

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

Another theme woven through the dialogues is a contrast he made in his 2004 Nieman Fellows lecture at Harvard, titled "Myth Versus Hypothesis." The lecture is a careful demolition of the premises for the Iraq War, and the myths that sustained it. President Bush and Vice ^{Dick} President Cheney enunciated the myths: "We must war against the invisible kingdom of Satan," now manifested in Islamic monsters opposed to all that America, God's favored nation, holds sacred. Therefore, "Good will overcome a dark enemy." Opposed to the simplisms of American

exceptionalism is the art of hypothesis employed by novelists: "A good novel," Mailer says, is "an attack on the nature of reality," a reality that is always changing: "The honor, the value, of a serious novel rests on the assumption that the explanations our culture has given us on profound questions are not profound. Working on a novel, one feels oneself getting closer to new questions, better ones, questions that are harder to answer." There is no ^{assertion that} ~~question of~~ novelists

^e actually capturing reality completely—"unless you are Charles Dickens and are writing *A Christmas Carol*." Novelists *approach* reality; certainties are few and surmises abound. He placed the lecture near the beginning of *The Big Empty*, and the dialectic it endorses sets the tone for the conversations.

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

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

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

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

Dinners were "a unique version of dinner theater, where you're not only eating the meal, you're also the show," and everyone at the table felt somewhat elevated, he said. "Their game would be better than ever before. And one of the reasons why it's so hard living in this world without

Norman Mailer is because I never feel as intelligent as I did when I was around him." He could lead you to a conclusion that you were already bound for, but couldn't quite see, John said.

Ψ Ψ Ψ

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

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

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

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

exchange led to a discussion of the way the Hitler family interacted.

in the Forest was Mailer's Castle is his first family novel, and he planned to hit on this point in pre-publication interviews. The interstices of family life, the grudges and anxieties and hidden agendas, all that nitty-gritty, are carefully delineated in the novel. The death—euthanasia, really—of the household dog, Luther, brings out the cross-currents in the family, and Klara's mistaken belief that Alois is part Jewish is even richer in its presentation and implications. All this gave Mailer hope of good reviews. But every Mailer book is tested against his announced aspirations and accomplishments over a half-century, and some reviewers want notches on their guns. He was also concerned about how the novel would be received in Germany, and can't decide if it will read it "for exculpation," or see it as one more finger pointing at the German psyche. He didn't

This reads like the punch line to a bad joke.

Would it be regarded as one more finger pointing at the German psyche?

like any of the initial dust jacket designs and sketched out a new one. It showed the entrance to a gloomy castle and on the stone lintel was a swastika. He colored it in, and ^{that} it became the basis for the final jacket. For the German edition, and those in other European countries, the swastika was removed, as it violated the EU law. ^{on the entrance of a castle}

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

When she wasn't too tired, Norris liked to sit in, as did his sister and the Lennons.

Neighbors Astrid Berg, Chris Busa and Marty Michaelson also played, as did a local journalist, Anne Wood, and a retired telephone operator, Pat Doyle, whose wry wit Mailer enjoyed. Most of his children played when they were visiting, and some of their spouses. All guests were encouraged to play. It was an open game with a \$20 buy-in so it was rare when someone lost or won \$200. When Mailer's nephew Peter, who played professionally and wrote a book about participating in the World Series of Poker, *Take Me to the River*, showed up for a game, some players groaned. A superb player, he usually walked out as a winner.

In July, a magazine editor heard about Mailer's interest in poker and contacted him about doing a piece on the World Series of Poker, a piece depicting tournament highlights and

characters, and presenting his ideas about the lure of the game. "I feel that there is a big poker novel to be written," he said, ~~and was sorely tempted to put off volume two of the Hitler trilogy.~~ His memories of Las Vegas in the 1960s were there to be drawn on, as well his psychological hypotheses. ~~The decision will work itself out over the next three months, he said. He could feel himself declining, and if he had been younger and healthier, there is little doubt that he would have taken the assignment.~~ When someone said that it would be a shame if he dropped the Hitler series, he nodded his head in agreement. "I've been abandoning novels like wives for many years, and I'd like to continue this one."

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

Already
too much
Kakutani

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

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

The feet can go, the knees, the hips—not that they're all gone yet, but they're going—the eyesight, the hearing, the sense of taste, the screwing. I take pleasure in announcing to friends that once I could boast of a seven and a half inch column

of silver dollars, but now I'm down to half a roll of dimes. This, believe it or not, inspires my pleasure. It's a wan expression of audacity but it's still my own. Anyway, I tell you this not to feel sorry for me—I've had a reasonably interesting life—but to present this as preface to the one solid benefit of old age, which is you come to know at last who the hell you are. And so you are at peace with what you did and what you failed to do. And even the envy and competitiveness that kept one driving and working is moderated to the point where your heart does not turn black if a fellow novelist of high proportions has written a good book.

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

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

STET

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

Whenever Mailer had oysters, which was often, he examined the shell, and half the time found a face there, in relief. The waitress at Michael Shay's with whom he flirted asked him at the end of every meal which pile he was bringing home, and boxed them up. He cleaned them and then put them out on his deck to bleach. On each shell he saw the suggestion of one, a Greek

warrior, or a long-dead beauty. He had Norris touch up the features with paint, ^{then} and photograph them. He thought ^{they} it might make an interesting book.

Ψ Ψ Ψ

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

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

Back in Provincetown, he was feeling more optimistic about the novel's chances. He said that he had three things going for him: 1) Hitler, about whom there is always interest; 2) the ten-year gap since his last novel, which would make readers curious; and 3) Dieter, his demonic

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first-person narrator, who is intermittently omniscient. Limiting his power are the Cudgels, God's angels, who can shield the consciousness of certain people—Nicolas II, for example—so that Dieter cannot enter the person's mind. But he can follow young Hitler's thoughts easily, and can also use "dream-etchings" to suggest nefarious actions to his charge. Using a celestial figure as narrator allowed Mailer to retain the intimacy of the first person voice while not being bound by its limitations, a perspectival sleight-of-hand that parallels the clairvoyance of Meni in *Ancient Evenings*.

With no interviews scheduled until the new year, he began to think about a new dramatic version of *The Deer Park*. Michael had been visiting and talking with his father about filming a staged reading of the play. Stefan Morrow, who had played Stoodie in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, which had directed and acted in a staged reading of the play the previous year, and Mailer saw and liked it. He invited Morrow to co-direct, if the money could be raised, about \$200,000 Michael estimated. Mailer wanted to do it at the Provincetown Theatre with professional actors but no audience. Michael thought he could sell it to cable television. As Mailer was working on a new version of the play, a work that had engaged him, off and on, for nearly a half-century, word came that Bob Lucid had died of a heart attack on December 12.

Mailer agreed to speak at the memorial service for his old friend at the University of Pennsylvania in April. He had also agreed to speak at the Boston memorial for Bill Styron, who had died a month earlier at the age of 81. On December 14 he made the two-and-a-half hour drive from Provincetown to Boston, making several pit stops, some on the shoulder of the busy highway—Mailer was unfazed about public urination. He slept through a lot of the trip, but talked about both Lucid and Styron. He said he generally hated funerals because "people say all the wrong things." He was one of the last speakers at the event, which was held at the Boston

It's clear that after every major novel he needs some sort of diversion

Public Library. Impatient and bored, he could hear little of what was said. But when he got behind the microphone, he was fully in charge, bantering with the audience, laughing at his own infirmities. He opened by saying, "On top of everything, I'm deaf," and dominating the room. He told a funny story about playing croquet in Connecticut with Bill and Rose Styron and Howard Fertig. ^{Rose} She was sitting in the front row and laughed heartily. Four months later, when the time came for Lucid's memorial, he felt too weak to attend, and his remarks were read by Lennon.

It was Bob's exceptional talent as a lecturer never to obscure the mystery of an explanation. A fine novel, as he would present it to his classes, was an opportunity to enter a little more deeply into the perplexities and complexities of existence itself. Social enigmas and psychological discoveries were not to be understood in full, completely and masterfully, rather they were to be elucidated to a further degree, and thereby prepared for further interpretations.

To what extent Mailer's complaints registered at the *Times* is unknown, but ~~Kakutani did~~ ^{judge} ~~not review~~ *The Castle in the Forest*. ^{film and then} The job went to Janet Maslin, long-time *Times* literary and ^{reviewer} film critic. Her review was ~~negative~~, but not nearly as dismissive as Kakutani's was predicted to be. Maslin's blows are glancing; her tone is respectful. She almost seems to like Mailer's extensive research on Hitler's incestuous heritage, but turns up her nose at the excremental and apary investigations, the former ~~seen~~ as too exhaustive, and the latter too obvious. Two days later, Lee Siegel, in a 6,200- word essay in the *Times Book Review*, thoughtfully examines Mailer's entire career before giving unalloyed praise to the novel, which he calls "an utterly strange work of naked, wild empathy." Mailer, he said, is "an immensely disciplined craftsman and stylist who has spent the larger portion of his life at the writer's trade." The *Times*, Mailer

noted, had not pissed him off with this review. Nor was he displeased with J.M. Coetzee's conclusion in the *NYRB*: "Keeping the paradox *infernal-banal* alive in all its anguishing inscrutability may be the ultimate achievement of this very considerable contribution to historical fiction."

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

Ψ Ψ Ψ

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

← They pulled all his teeth because they were afraid his mouth would get infected and that was something that wasn't necessary, but it made a big difference. He said, 'Did you ever know anybody who lost his teeth?' [Lois getting very emotional here, having trouble breathing and talking] And I said, 'Yes,' and he said, 'What was their reaction?' and I said, 'Desolation.' [Lois very upset and serious during this part of interview] That was my father. He was so proud of himself – handsome –and they pulled his teeth and they never fit and they moved around in his mouth, and so I said, 'No, I know it's terrible.' And Norman said, 'It sure is,' and he'd had a lot of his vital parts operated on, I don't know what's what, and the same thing happened to Norris. So, then he said, 'How would you characterize me?' I didn't say a word.

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

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

I got him at KQED about to be interviewed by Mike Krasny. And he said, 'I'll call you in an hour.' And he did, exactly in an hour. And I said, 'I'll never see you again.' I knew that that was it. And he said, 'Yes, I'll be here, I'll be back here in a year. I will have finished the next book and I'll be talking to Mike Krasny about

it.' And I said, 'That's good, I look forward to it.' And that was that [long silence]. I'm not sure I have anything else to say about Norman. I tried to think of a way of characterizing him in a word or two, but you know, I can't. That's not how you go about Norman. He's very—he's magnificent and rare. Nothing else like him.

*This is
so moving
Moke*

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

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

had been for a long time. Mailer said he would like her to spend at least ten days a month with him.

Norris left their Toyota sedan in case he needed it, but Raymond or friends usually drove him wherever he needed to go. But on April 17, he announced to Raymond that he was taking a day off from working on the revision of *The Deer Park—A Play*, and going to lunch at The Wicked Oyster in Wellfleet. Raymond was a bit worried about his boss driving and offered to accompany him, but Mailer said he preferred to go alone. As soon as Mailer left, Raymond called Norris in Brooklyn, and she said there was nothing to be done. Raymond drove by the house at 7:45, but the car wasn't there. He learned later that Mailer had gotten home safely, after dinner at the Lobster Pot, the big tourist restaurant. He'd left the Toyota when he had trouble starting it, and taken a cab home. Norris emailed Raymond that she was proud of Norman, "and you can tell him that for me."

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

Norris came to Provincetown regularly in the spring, and Mailer travelled to New York for a few events—to receive the Hadada Award from the *Paris Review* on April 23, presented by

 E.L. Doctorow, and on June 27 to appear in conversation with Günter Grass and Andrew O'Hagan at the New York Public Library. ~~The first event was a fundraiser and Mailer wore, for the last time, a tuxedo. For the event with Grass, with whom he had crossed swords at the 1986 P.E.N. Congress, he wore his Russell Crowe vest and his Uggs. He had lost more weight, and was subsisting on oysters, red wine mixed with orange juice and Dove bars. "He couldn't walk more than a few steps, even with two canes, without resting," Norris wrote. "He could hardly breathe. The audience gasped when he walked out on stage."~~ ^{at the Public Library} When Kate saw her father, looking like King Lear at the promised end, she said, "We shouldn't let Dad do this. We have to take him to the hospital right now." But when he got on stage and began talking, Norris said, "He was astounding in his clarity and scope of thought." Barbara, sitting next to Norris, said, "If we can keep him on stage, he'll live forever."

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

Mailer told the audience at the beginning of the program that this would probably be his last public appearance. But he would travel back to New York for one more event, a showing of

Tough Guys Don't Dance and *Maidstone* at Lincoln Center on July 22. In between the films there was a discussion on stage with film critic Michael Chaiken, Lincoln Center programmer Kent Jones and Lennon. ~~The event was sold out.~~ As at his appearance with Grass and O'Hagan, Mailer looked feeble until he began to answer questions, which he did for 45 minutes. In response to a question about working on Godard's film *King Lear*, he called the director the "second most evil person" he had ever known (Ronald Reagan is the first). "He spoke powerfully and eloquently about his years directing," Chaiken recalled, "the pleasure it had brought him, and the seriousness ^{which} in which he endeavored to make ~~them~~ ^{his films}." After the discussion, *Maidstone* was shown. Mailer said that the second half was "repetitive and self-indulgent," with too much histrionic foreshadowing. In the Green Room afterwards, a number of friends and admirers stopped by, including John Bedford Lloyd, who played Wardley in *Tough Guys*, actor-comedian Jerry Stiller, A.O. Scott from the *Times*, Lee Siegel, who had reviewed *Castle*, and Lana Jokel, ~~one of his film editors.~~ He knew that it was his last public outing, and drew out his conversations.

Back in Provincetown, Mailer was up and down, ^{weak} weak and spirited one day, feisty and grumpy the next. There was talk of him getting an electroshock treatment. He said that if it didn't help, "I will be an invalid for the rest of my life." He continued to work. The success of Christopher Hitchens' *Why God Is Not Great* was a key factor in his decision not to postpone the theology conversations book. Random House was eager to publish it as soon as it was edited. After much discussion, he approved the title: *On God: An Uncommon Conversation*. It was scheduled for publication on October 16. ~~By this time, his appetite was much diminished, as noted in the "Mailer Log": "He can eat a plate of oysters and some soup, but cannot eat the big~~

meals he consumed just a couple of years ago. He is trying to eat just the things he really enjoys, like Mary Kitchen's Roast Beef Hash (which Dwayne ordered on the Internet), and an omelet with raspberry jelly in it. But yesterday, he took only one bite of the omelet and one spoonful of cereal. He is getting very thin and complains about his short breath all the time. Norris thinks he may have a heart problem."

Norris returned to Provincetown for the summer, and all the children sensing this could be his last summer, ^{visited} ~~came for visit after visit~~. On August 1, ^{Norris} ~~she~~ left on a three-week promotional tour for her new novel, traveling to Atlanta, Chicago and the West Coast. She planned to return in time for the September wedding of Maggie and John Wendling on the low-tide flats behind the house. For an hour or two a day, Mailer went over the final changes and jacket design for *On God*. He also read and was impressed with Andrew O'Hagan's review of Don DeLillo's new novel about 9/11, *Man Falling*. He said that perhaps it would be DeLillo who replaced him as the writer who takes on all the big themes and events in American life. He went on to say, "There was a time when I felt completely secure in tackling all the big topics. I was totally confident."

~~Much of his table talk had become elegiac; he kept summing up his record, trying to peer around time's corner to learn his place in literary history. He proposed "The 30-year rule": a place in the canon is dependent on being read 30 years after one's death.~~

On Norris' instructions, Mailer's three upcoming speaking engagements were cancelled. He was angry when he learned, but admitted that he wasn't up to long trips anymore. He still planned, however, to go ahead with the filming of *The Deer Park—A Play* in November.

Michael hadn't yet raised the necessary production money, so Mailer planned to use the next big

DeLillo said in 2010 that it was Mailer's "ambition, risk, broad vision, wide range-- aspects of the American tradition that put me on the path I've been following all these years."

check from Texas. Norris didn't know of his plan, and he knew she would be furious when she ~~learned~~ ^{did}. One obvious reason that he continued to take on new projects was to keep the adrenalin² flowing. But he was realistic enough to know that he probably wouldn't be able to write the next Hitler novel. "I'm too weak," he said.

He wrote his last letter on August 3, to help honor an old friend. "James Jones is one of the few major American novelists to emerge here since the Second World War. He was immensely talented and I think it is a splendid idea to endow a chair in his name at Eastern Illinois University. He would have grumbled, but I think it would have given him true pleasure." He wanted to begin the sequel to *Castle*. "It's all there," he said, pointing to his head, "a helluva novel. Hitler was so human, and I'd love to cook him to a turn." Now he was only functioning five or six hours a day, sleeping the rest. In mid-August, he stopped climbing to his study, and worked sporadically at the dining room table.

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

Mailer asked, "But how would they die?"

"By not eating or drinking," Lennon said.

Or eaten by a wild beast," Susan said.

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

Time."

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

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

A few days later when Lennon stopped by, Mailer said he had an epiphany at three a.m. and almost called him. He explained that he wanted to do another book of conversations, this one on cancer. It would explore the idea that besides stress, trauma, repression and guilt, cancer is caused by boredom. His plan was to have someone read the obituaries of corporate leaders in the *Times* over a one-year period to see how many died of cancer, his idea being that it kills a disproportionate number. Challenged over long, busy lives, executives get bored after retirement and succumb to cancer. He wanted Lennon to assemble all the references to cancer in his interviews and writings on the topic. He went on for 45 minutes and then said he wanted to sleep, which he did. Before he lay down, he said that his doctor told him that if he didn't start eating he would die. ^{He said he was} This hit him and he is trying hard, eating steak and eggs in the morning, soup, more chocolate and ice cream and fish at night.

Bill and Dana Kennedy visited him, as did Gene and Sarah Kennedy, his Chicago friends and many others. On September 19, Bill Majeski came, and there was poker for several nights running, Mailer's last games. On the 22nd, Danielle and her husband Peter McEachern drove him to Brooklyn. Norris had finally convinced him. They made numerous pit stops on the six-hour drive. He now weighed not much more than 100, and Peter was able to carry him up the four flights of stairs to the apartment. His plan was to return to Provincetown in a month for the Mailer Society meeting.

Matthew recalled seeing his father in Brooklyn:

I was in denial as to how bad off he was. He was losing weight and didn't look good. I brought ^{his children} Salina and Mattie over for a visit. He'd just gotten up from his nap; he was sleeping a lot at that time. Got to the table and I learned he was planning on going to the hospital. It dawned on me that this could be it. I asked him, 'Are you afraid? Do you think this is going to be it?' And he said, 'Look, I've had a great life, I just don't want a bad end. I finished my novel, I'd like to write another book but I don't have that burning desire to write another one, it's just not there.' There was this dark cloud over him. Mom took a picture of us sitting there—I think it was the last picture ever taken, come to think of it.

On October 3, he checked into Mt. Sinai Hospital. ^{sent on the Upper East Side of Manhattan} Copies of *On God* arrived that day, and he signed a few. Surgery was scheduled for 7:30 the next morning. At 1:00 p.m., the surgeon told those waiting that the operation was successful. Larry Schiller and his wife Kathy Amerman had just flown in from the West Coast and joined everyone in the waiting area. The doctor said that she had drained and inflated Mailer's lung, and that his heart was strong through the

operation. Family and friends were allowed in a few at a time to see him later in the afternoon.

When they went in, they saw right away that he was still feeling the pain killers. He was ranting. He had a dream ^{that} and Schiller was the Devil and he was God and they made a pact to rid the world of technology. He flirted with the nurse, a 29-year old woman, who took it with good humor. He told her that she should write a novel and use her meeting with a famous author as the first chapter. Later, he had her write a vignette about a weekend with her boyfriend and promised to critique it.

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

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

The media was eager for information, and ^{the} emailed and called friends and family. So many people, some of them crazy, were trying to visit him in the hospital that finally a guard had to be posted to screen visitors. He looked somewhat better toward the end of the month, but he ^{his} still wanted to pull out all the tubes and wires. For obscure reasons, he had a tracheotomy, and so

could only mouth words, and write notes, most of them illegible. He wrote a note to Donna Lennon, and then pointed to the word "P-Town," and then to himself, indicating that he wanted to go there. The family discussed getting him there, but the risks were too great. On October 29, he was operated on for an infection in a vein in his groin. He told his nephew Peter, "My ass feels like Iraq."

~~John Buffalo had a serious talk with the doctors and they said he'd be able to speak and eat and write again. Roller coaster is the smile everyone used to describe the emotional state of family and friends over the past three weeks.~~ Seeing one of the most ferocious, intense communicators of the last 100 years, the man who had written 40 books and been interviewed a thousand times, locked into silence by his ailments was heart-breaking. The look in his eyes was woeful. He was angry and very frustrated that no one could read his chicken scratches.

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

During the second week in November, he began sinking. Family members took turns sitting with him. At one point, the phone rang. It was Michael, who had an idea: a last drink for

the old man. Peter went through a drink list with him, and Mailer shook his head yes for rum and orange juice. Peter told the story at Mailer's memorial some months later.

Michael finally returned with a bottle of rum and a container of orange juice. But all we had was a plastic cup, which if you knew my uncle, was worse than no cup at all. So Michael went to the nurses' station and managed to get a real glass, and we started to mix the drink. Norman took over at this point, indicating the correct proportions for water, orange juice, and rum. One last problem: how to give it to him. Because of the breathing tube in his throat, he wasn't supposed to drink; he could choke. Sacrilege, but we gave him the drink on one of those lollipop-shaped sponge-on-a-stick thingies. I dipped the sponge in the glass then put it in his mouth. He gave a look of utter exasperation. Then he grabbed the glass out of my hand. I looked to Michael. He shrugged. We all watched Norman put the glass to his lips and take a nice long sip. Then another. He was going to drink that drink the way it was supposed to be drunk even if it killed him. After a few sips, he allowed himself a smile. We all did. Norman held up the drink and pointed at each of us. He wanted us to share the drink with him. So we passed the glass and we each took a sip.

A few hours later there was a conference with the doctors, who said that he would go quickly if all the tubes were removed. The family agreed that this would be done in the morning. Stephen, who had just flown back from the West Coast where he was in a play, said he would stay the night with his father, and everyone else went home.

"About five a.m.," Barbara wrote in a memoir, "the telephone rang and woke me. It was Norris, who had just received word from the hospital that Norman had died. Sue and Marco were staying with me. We threw on some clothes and grabbed a cab. Stephen was there, of course, with his tale of how the bells and whistles Norman was attached to had awakened him and that as he stood at the foot of the bed, Norman sat up, gave him a beatific smile, and then fell back. A medical team came into the room and pronounced him dead. We sat in the room with Norman's body for several hours until the usual arrangements could be made. The family began to arrive. We were pretty quiet and grim to begin with. I think at one point Betsy went over to the bed and held Norman's hand. And Marco, I believe, tried to find some Hebrew prayers we could say over Norman. *got a copy of the Hebrew prayer, Kaddish, from the hospital rabbi, and he and Michael and Stephen read it, then* But as others began to arrive, the usual Mailer élan revived, and we were all talking at once. Leading to a moment of ghoulish comedy. A young doctor, probably an intern or resident, opened the door and entered the room. *no Lizzy? and we all said "Amen!"*

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Mailer used his copious talents—quick skewering eye; a gift for the cameo portrait; bat-quality radar for atmosphere and mood; and blustering, bellicose prose—to capture the American spirit as it lurched from the civil rights and antiwar demonstrations of the '60s into the Watergate era of the '70s. In his best work Mr. Mailer made America his subject, and in tackling everything from politics to boxing to Hollywood, from astronauts to actresses to art, he depicted—or tried to depict—the country's contradictions: its moralistic prudery and grasping fascination with celebrity and sex and power; the outsize, outlaw past of its frontier; and its current descent in to 'corporation land,' filled with cheap consumer blandishments and the siren call of fame.

About 200 people paid respects at McHoul's funeral home in P-Town, mainly locals.

Mailer's agent, Jeff Posternak, his editor, David Ebershoff, his collaborator, Larry Schiller, were there, along with many other friends. They had embalmed him in New York and slicked his hair down, making him look much different. The local funeral home director fluffed it up a bit.

Spoke at the grave the next day were several of his children and friends: Michael, Danielle, John, Stephen; his nephew Peter; Ivan Fisher, Dick and Doris Goodwin, Tom Piazza, Doug Brinkley, Congressman Neil Abercrombie and Larry Schiller. Danielle's husband Peter played J.J. Johnson's "Lament" and Michael's wife Sasha Lazard sang an Irish lullaby. Stephen sang.

what
happened
to
Wylie?

[skat]

~~"Your Song" by Elton John. Michael said, "Dad would have been appalled by that song, Stephen, but you did it well."~~ Everyone threw handfuls of sand on his coffin. ~~Lennon said, "Earth, receive an honored guest; Norman Mailer is laid to rest."~~ Norris was poised and serene throughout. She posed for photos for the flock of reporters who were there, and answered a few questions. After that, she invited everyone back to the house for food and drink, including two ex-wives, Beverly and Carol.

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

odd word,
isn't it?
He had
models
from
Tolstoy
to Dos Passos