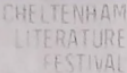


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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Norman Mailer: A Double Life by J Michael Lennon

Reading this utterly gripping and meticulous life of the famously combative Norman Mailer is as good as meeting him in the flesh

John Carey



A Double Life seems an inadequate tag when applied to Norman Mailer. He did enough living for a dozen ordinary people. His first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, published in 1948 when he was 25, won instant fame, not least for its obscenity. *Life* magazine called it "insidious slime". Between then and his death in 2007, he poured out a Niagara of novels, biographies, dramas and journalism, gave 700 interviews and wrote 45,000 letters. He won two Pulitzer prizes and was proposed for a Nobel. Critics compared him to Shakespeare and Dostoevsky. The mere sight of his name on a book jacket guaranteed bestsellerdom. In 1972 he was advanced \$1m, then a record, for a mammoth fictional history of mankind (mercifully never finished).

He had six wives, eight children and countless mistresses, spent several brief spells in jail, and some weeks in a psychiatric hospital in 1960 after stabbing his second wife, Adele, while he was (as often) stoked up on liquor and pot. He missed her heart by a fraction of an inch. His political ambitions were lofty. In 1972 he ran for the Democratic nomination for mayor of New York, and 25 years later considered opposing Bill Clinton in the Democratic presidential primaries.

biographer, he worked alongside Mailer for more than 20 years, keeping a meticulous journal of his subject's daily activities right down to the timing of his lavatory visits. Despite this weight of scholarly research it is a gripping read, like viewing 60 years of American history through a vertiginous blur of megalomania.

The young Mailer was burdened with a sense of personal inferiority that probably helps explain his relentless desire to shock and his incessant, macho posturing in later life. A puny, bookish, lower-middle class Jewish boy from Brooklyn, subsisting on a scholarship, he felt slighted by the wealthy Wasps at Harvard, who had a disparaging term, "meatballs", for lower life-forms like him. Conscripted into the US army in 1944, he found himself humiliatingly relegated to doing cooking and odd jobs for the battle-hardened Texans of the 12th Cavalry Regiment. It was on their tales of combat, and his own experience of it after the landings on Luzon in the Philippines, that he based *The Naked and the Dead*.

He worked out a philosophy to justify his approach to life that was based partly on DH Lawrence and partly on the writings of the screwball psychiatrist Wilhelm Reich. The basics of this belief system were that instinct was noble and natural, whereas self-restraint and repression were evil and could give you cancer. In this scheme of things science and technology were irredeemably unnatural, and had visited on mankind a miscellany of abominations, among them antibiotics, the moon landings, insecticides, logical positivism, frozen food, plastics and contraception.

These and other Mailer hates were, he believed, not just evil but devilish. For it had been revealed to him during a pot-induced trance in 1955 that God was not all-powerful but locked in perilous combat with the devil. By obeying their instincts humans could help God, whereas when they resorted to science and reason the devil gained ground. On this metaphysical level Mailer saw his busy sex life as "messianic lust", lending God strength. His tendency to punch or head-butt fellow guests at parties (including, on a famous occasion, his *bête noire* Gore Vidal) was similarly, he believed, redemptive, a bid to "blast" the 20th century out of its crippling restraint, as well as giving "shithead snobs" a dose of reality. A fervent devotee of boxing, he sparred regularly with a professional fighter, joined the throng of fans around Muhammad Ali, and wrote boxing journalism still deemed matchless by aficionados.

Risk-taking was part of his code, because it meant obeying instinct and defying caution. He practised it in his social life. Seated next to Diana



It was the Abbott affair that brought him up most sharply against what his beliefs entailed. Jack Henry Abbott was a bank robber and murderer with intellectual interests whose letters from prison came to the notice of a group of New York literati including Mailer. They published the letters, glorified Abbott's talents, and helped to get him released on parole in 1981. Within weeks he flew into a rage in a restaurant and stabbed a young waiter to death.

Mailer wept when he got the news — the only tears he sheds in this book. But he did not give up on Abbott.

Lennon is wisely neither apologetic nor evasive. He quotes magnificent passages from the books, which should earn Mailer new readers, and he stresses Mailer's generosity, his love and care for all his children and most of his ex-wives, his astonishing productivity and his boundless vitality that seems to bounce up at you off the pages. You end up feeling that to have read this huge book is as good as to have met him in the flesh. Perhaps better.

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THE TIMES

Books of the year: Biographies and memoirs



Diana Vreeland, former Vogue editor, in 1985

Iain Finlayson

Norman Mailer: A Double Life by J. Michael Lennon**Simon & Schuster £30; e-book £12.49**

This book amply proves that size still matters: a big life needs a big book, in this case 948 authorised pages. For 60 years, from 1948 when he published *The Naked and the Dead* to his death in 2007, Mailer hardly stopped to draw breath. The sheer egotistical excess of written and oral material is both a biographer's dream and nightmare; but Lennon, unlike his subject, resists getting punch drunk, keeping the literary wild man caged though still capable of self harm.

Penelope Fitzgerald: A Life by Hermione Lee**Chatto & Windus £25; e-book £12.98**

This comes in at just over half the size of the Mailer biography, but punches beyond its weight. Beneath the seemingly quiet, decent life of an innocuous-looking writer there lurked harrowing domestic catastrophes and a financial fecklessness that would have had even Mailer reeling on the ropes. In her career, the novelist Penelope Fitzgerald was saved and supported by the devotion of her publishers and now, in reputation, she is rewarded by a superb biographer who is intrigued by the ambivalence of "her tragic view of life and humorous style".

The Trip to Echo Spring: Why Writers Drink by Olivia Laing**Canongate £20; e-book £6**

Echo Spring is the pensive name that the alcoholic Brick gives to his liquor cabinet in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and the play's author, Tennessee Williams, is one of the usual suspects, — with Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Cheever, Raymond Carver and the poet John Berryman — in this book about writers behaving badly. Laing's lively, stylistically original and sometimes acutely personal study of writers and alcohol avoids literary cliché while coaxing out the subtext of their writings to show the causes and effects of addiction.

Becoming a Londoner by David Plante**Bloomsbury £20; e-book £17.99**

This memoir casts intriguing new light and shadow on the poet Stephen Spender. Back in the Sixties the poet adopted Plante, a good-looking young American novelist and his lover, the brilliant poet and publisher Nikos Stangos, as conspirators within his marriage to Natasha Spender. The complexities of interconnected liberal literary and artistic life in 1960s and 1970s London are exposed in candid extracts from the extensive, sharply observant, drily witty diary that Plante has kept since 1966.

THE TIMES

Norman Mailer: A Double Life by J. Michael Lennon

Norman Mailer in New York, 1977. He loved to fight — but was hopeless in the US army

John Sutherland

Looking at the 946-pages of this book one thinks, vaguely, of rupture trusses. A quarter of its girth is endnotes, few of which will interest the general reader. It's written in a style which is generally pedestrian and occasionally downright clodhopping.

But nonetheless it's a fascinating read. Why? Because it's about Norman Mailer. And, as the "authorised biographer" and a personal friend, J. Michael Lennon has had first dibs at the 500 cubic feet of literary remains Mailer sold to the University of Texas. He was glad it went there, Mailer said, not merely because they paid him \$2.5 million but because he'd always admired Texan manhood.

One of the favours the Russian Cossack did American Literature was to encourage, by brutal pogrom, Jewish families to find refuge in the Land of the Free. After the statutory two or three generations, there was, by the 1920s, the richest of literary crops. Arthur Miller and Mailer, for example, grew up in the same area of Brooklyn (after their first meeting they parted thinking neither would amount to anything).

Mailer and Miller in their different ways, went on to pay court to the ultimate shiksa, Marilyn. Hired to write an essay to accompany a book of Monroe photographs, Mailer ejaculated 100,000 words. Arthur did one better by making her Mrs Miller. Interestingly, and prophetically, Marilyn avoided meeting Mailer because she thought he was one of those guys who were only interested in "images" of her.

"All mothers," responded Philip Roth's mother (when asked whether she resented the depiction of her in *Portnoy's Complaint*) "are Jewish". Mailer's was very Jewish. She would storm down to his high school and furiously protest when any teacher at PS181 dared give him less than an A. She named him "Melech", which means king in Hebrew, and, by God, meant it. He grew up prodigiously bright, registering highest-ever IQ scores throughout his school years and made it to Harvard, not, at the time, all that welcoming to Jewish kids from Brooklyn.

Mailer studied engineering at Harvard, unspectacularly. What he intended to do, from the beginning, was to write. Lennon's title somewhat misleadingly recalls Jekyll and Hyde. His epigraph, a quotation from Mailer, makes it clearer: "There are two sides to me, and the side that is the observer is paramount."

On the outbreak of war he attempted to get deferment on the grounds that he was writing a great novel. The draft board thought fighting Japan was more important. As a soldier Mailer proved useless. Nippon had nothing to fear from Private Mailer. But he was observing all the time.

The story of a reconnaissance patrol behind enemy lines that came out of his wartime observation, *The Naked and the Dead*, was hugely successful and hugely offensive. One of the things that most offended (in 1948) was the promiscuous use of the

three-letter word “fug”. “So you’re the young man who can’t spell,” Dorothy Parker is supposed to have quipped.

Fame, said Mailer, made him “macho”. He feuded with virtually every major writer of his time and came to blows with all and sundry, taking lessons from champion pugilists for the purpose. It was the Irish in him, he liked to imply. He loved the fighting Irish and it fuelled his admiration for J. F. Kennedy. The President’s womanising was, he felt, something else they had in common.

Women were the other big thing in Mailer’s life. He was late in losing his virginity, but he made up for lost years. Not for him the one pram in the hall. He had nine children by six wives — on all of whom he cheated massively. “Infidelities” is one of the longer entries in the index. When a friend asked him why he did it, Mailer replied because fidelity was “too safe”. He went out of his way to annoy feminists. He loved women, he said. He also liked lions — but he wouldn’t want either of those dangerous species allowed out of their cages. He stabbed his wife Adele, almost killing her, during a drunken quarrel. By the middle of his career he was haemorrhaging a small fortune in alimony and child support. He was, one could say, financially ruined by his loins. (Those curious to know the length of the Mailer penis, the cause of his money woes, will find the information on page 749).

Did he need to be always teetering over the abyss? Probably yes. Lennon quotes fascinatingly from letters in which Mailer is forever pondering the nature of his genius. It’s metaphysical in nature. Sometimes bizarrely so. He ran for Mayor of New York in 1969 on the “existentialist” ticket. When asked by a sceptical voter how existentialism would clear up the snow that was the bane of the city in winter Mailer blandly replied he would urinate on the drifts. He got few votes. His opponent’s promise of more snow-ploughs was more persuasive.

The saint and the psychopath, Mailer believed, were congenital. His greatest triumph in literature, his 1,300-page anatomy of the murderer, Gary Gilmore, fuses his unique talents as fiction and fact writer (Mailer invented the word “factoid”). *The Executioner’s Song* is a masterpiece. His lowest point, lower even than the stabbing of his wife, was his campaign for the release from prison of the murderer Jack Abbott on the grounds of his literary talent. Virtually the first thing Abbott did on release was to kill again. Mailer persisted in seeing him as a Karamazov *de nos jours*.

What, then, of Mailer’s work, will last? *The Naked and the Dead*, *Armies of the Night* (his finest exercise in “New Journalism”), *The Executioner’s Song*, and the memory of a prime contender for the wildest man in literature award.

Norman Mailer: A Double Life by J. Michael Lennon, Simon and Schuster, 946pp, £30, e-book £18.39. To buy this book for £22, visit thetimes.co.uk/bookshop or call 0845 2712134

Further reading

The Naked and the Dead (1948)

“The natural role of the twentieth-century man is anxiety,” Mailer wrote, aged 25, in his Second World War novel, which drew on his own experiences with the 112th Cavalry Regiment during the Philippines campaign.

The Armies of the Night (1968)

A historicised and novelised account of the March on the Pentagon, the 1967 anti-Vietnam War rally that took place in Washington DC. The visceral account earned him a Pulitzer Prize for non-fiction.

The Executioner’s Song (1979)

Mailer’s Pulitzer Prize-winning documentary novel is based on the life and death of Gary Gilmore, a double murderer who asked for the death sentence and was subsequently executed by firing squad in Utah in 1977. *The Executioner’s Song* is based on interviews with those who knew Gilmore and his victims. The first part of the book follows Gilmore’s life and in the second, Mailer focuses on the trial.

Mailer Unbound

LAWRENCE R. BROER
University of South Florida

According to Fitzgerald, "There never was a good biography of a good novelist. There couldn't be. He is too many people if he's any good" (qtd. in Wilson, *The Crack-Up* 177). Yet it would be hard to imagine a better told writer's life than J. Michael Lennon's *Norman Mailer* (2013). When Mailer directed his friend and longtime scholar of his work to feel free to put in everything, Lennon did just that—at least everything relating to Mailer's work as psycho-autobiography. We knew Mailer's work was intensely personal, but now we know the unique nature of Mailer's fictional self-revelations; they are a continuous working out of complex psychological oppositions at the heart of what Lennon aptly calls Mailer's "double life." Lennon's *Mailer* reads like one of Mailer's own absorbing journalistic books. It will prove invaluable to readers hoping better to understand and to evaluate the author's place in American literature.

NORMAN MAILER: A DOUBLE LIFE. By J. Michael Lennon. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013. 947 pp. \$40.

According to F. Scott Fitzgerald, "There never was a good biography of a good novelist. There couldn't be. He is too many people, if he's any good" (Wilson 177). Yet it would be hard to imagine a more well-told story of a writer's life and work than J. Michael Lennon's *Norman Mailer: A Double Life*. Certain to have proved important to Mailer (1923–2007) in light of his admiration for his literary mentors, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway, the complete and authoritative feel of Lennon's study bears comparison with three of modern literature's most classic literary biographies: Joseph Blotner's *Faulkner: A Biography* (1974), Matthew J. Bruccoli's *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (1981), and Michael S. Reynolds's multi-volume *Hemingway* (1987–99). When Mailer told Lennon, his friend and longtime scholar of his work, to feel free to put everything in, Lennon did just that—at least everything that matters to our understanding of Mailer's work as psycho-autobiography.

We knew that Mailer's work was intensely personal, but with Lennon's guidance, we know more precisely the unique nature of Mailer's fictional self-revelations; they are less factual than mental—that is, a continuous working out of the complex psychological oppositions at the heart of what Lennon aptly calls Mailer's "double life."

We learn how Mailer's early life with parents of unlike dispositions—a responsible, hard-working mother and a reckless, adventuresome father—pulled him in opposite directions, creating not only dual but multiple selves. As Mailer's sister put it, if Fan was a bourgeois "saint," Barney was "probably a bit psychopathic" (187), a social rebel whose extremes Mailer came more and more to admire and would write into all his major protagonists. In Lennon's words, the opposed pressures "opened a fissure in the adolescent Mailer's personality that widened as time passed until it became a gaping divide" (20). While Mailer thanked both parents for "a range of personality to draw on" in his work (13), he was aware that such divergent identities might prove destabilizing among the blur of personalities that he and his public created. Critic Richard Poirier warned Mailer that, despite the merit of such hugely varied books as *An American Dream* (1964), *Armies of the Night* (1968), *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970), and *The Gospel According to the Son* (1997)—a seemingly inevitable consequence of the author's multiple selves and wide-ranging intellectual interests—Mailer seemed locked into a system of dualisms that he needed to escape to grow as a writer (453).

For better or worse—a question Lennon leaves open for the reader to decide—Mailer would spend the rest of his life trying to understand his soul's self-contradictions, oppositions that would provide the major literary dynamic throughout his varied career as novelist, creative journalist, biographer, dramatist, filmmaker, actor, political activist, and self-styled existential theologian. In one of Lennon's most amusing anecdotes, Mailer relates to Sigmund Freud's scolding an apprentice analyst for being unable to focus his abundant energy and talents: "Reik, you want to be a big man? Piss in one spot" (337). In Lennon's view, the most troublesome of Mailer's dualities was his desire to become America's foremost writer, dependent upon privacy and tireless self-discipline, as against the myriad attractions of "ego-gobbling" celebrity that followed early success—the siren song of Hollywood nightlife in particular. At a party where Mailer was feted by the likes of Humphrey Bogart, Charlie Chaplin, Montgomery Clift, Ginger Rogers, and Elizabeth Taylor, Marlon Brando said to him, "Norman, what the fuck are you doing here? Why aren't you on a farm in Vermont writing your next novel? What kind of shit is this?" (125).

The sudden fame of *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and Hollywood glitter were literally seductive. If his father's vice was gambling, the son's addiction was his passion for women. A few months before his death, Mailer told Lennon, "When in doubt about my motivation, *cherchez la femme*" (124). And search Mailer did, with marriages to six beautiful, complex, and interestingly different women and countless affairs. As a prideful "psychic outlaw" or "saint and psychopath," two people inhabiting him that he referred to throughout his career, marriage and devotion to six children would not deter "the desires of this gallant bucko" (171). Mailer appreciated Freud but chafed at the master psychologist's notion that a civilized world depended upon sexual restraint. As a form of sexual anarchy, Mailer declared, "A way has to be found to unbind the Prometheus within each of us, to unloose the rebelliousness of our nature, and to give full sway to . . . instinct" (164).

Mailer's ample family life and adoration of women and fascination with sex undoubtedly prove the deepest and most personally and artistically consequential of all his conflicted identities. Though Lennon is commendably impersonal in his treatment of Mailer's lifelong struggle with the masculine-feminine tensions in himself, we see its origin in Mailer as a physically delicate child and son of a mother who loved and coddled him outrageously, "a tearful, bookish momma's boy" so unathletic he had trouble vaulting over the horse in gym class and was bullied by neighborhood boys (23). Mailer was subsequently oriented toward the company and praise of women while needing to dominate the world of men for balance, something he literally did as a brawler and relatively accomplished amateur boxer. It was a desire to command, he said, that produced great tyrants as well as great novelists, a shaky proposition in light of his declaration that "it was more important to be a man than to be a good writer" (150). Mailer's compensatory pride in male virility caused him to identify with D. H. Lawrence's passion to be masculine as no other writer while at the same time explaining Mailer's famous quarrels with Gore Vidal, Truman Capote, and Tennessee Williams, though Mailer's late-life reconciliation with Vidal is one of the most endearing moments of Lennon's narrative—see the photo of both aged albeit still rakish-looking men in Provincetown in 2002 (on an unnumbered page between 660 and 661), smiling and embracing but supported by canes after their appearance in George Bernard Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell*.

To his close psychiatrist friend Robert Linder, Mailer said he worried about impotence and harbored a fear "that under everything I'm a ho-

mosexual" (165), a thought that would no doubt cheer Mailer's feminist critics, Kate Millett, Betty Friedan, and Germaine Greer, spokeswomen for the women's liberation movement who labeled him a sexist who wrote of women purely as sexual implements of male pleasure. Lennon cites Mailer's famous gaff to Orson Welles that "women should be kept in cages" and his subsequent mea culpa that it was "the wrong remark at the wrong time," something he had said "in fun and idiocy," and that he had failed to realize "how intense was the anger, fury, and frustration" he had caused (436). *About Mailer's belief that the abolition of male-female differentiation advocated by Millett and company equated with "the technological destruction of nature" and "the death of heterosexual romance,"* Lennon counters with affectionate irony that "forty years after his dire warnings, we can observe that sex differentiation is decidedly less clear cut, but heterosexual romance survives" (436).

Perhaps offsetting the vitriol of female attackers, Lennon explains, Mailer received high praise from major female novelists such as Joan Didion, Joyce Carol Oates, and Cynthia Ozick. Oates applauded Mailer's awe of women, calling him "a visionary, a poet, a mystic" (444), while Diana Trilling defended him as "the most important writer of our time" (442). Trilling said that, like D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller, Mailer believed in "the body as the gateway to heaven" (443). On a more personal note, Doris Kearns Goodwin said about Mailer's many affairs that all those women continued to care for him because they understood that he really loved them (735). Mailer's daughter Susan was devastated by the critical abuse to which her father was subjected, but said she realized that his being playfully provocative, with an impulse to clown, was something feminists tended to miss (445). Nonetheless, Mailer never ceased believing that he was the feminists' scapegoat. "The feminists were killing my wallet, my reputation," he said. "New young movements have to kill someone regularly. But that person has to have value" (436). One assumes that even his worst detractors would have smiled at the eighty-four-year-old author's totally-in-character flirtations with his twenty-nine-year-old nurse as he lay dying in his hospital bed (760).

Despite Mailer's conjecture about men and women possessing essentially different natures, Lennon's Mailer comes across as more bisexual than gender absolute, for sexuality was never simple or one-dimensional. Reflective of the gender opposites within himself, Mailer mused that one side of his face looked comparatively masculine, hard, strong, and proud while the other side looked anxious, tender, and vulnerable (183). Though

Mailer dubbed himself "the intellectual mentor of orgasm," dreaming "of all the women he will never enter" (185), he chided his feminist antagonists for treating sex mechanically rather than as a form of spiritual communion, for reducing the awesome, transformative power of orgasm to experience best measured by periodicity and count (*Prisoner* 66). Lennon cites the influence of D. H. Lawrence in Mailer's "brilliant" interpretation of Lawrence's belief in sexual love as the saving power of humanity, specifically Lawrence's belief in erotic instinct and risk (438-39). "If risk was involved," Mailer said, "so much the better" (124). Sex was sublime, both writers believed, only when the partners were without what Lawrence called "reserves or defenses" (438). Noteworthy for Lawrence scholars, Lennon applauds Mailer's lengthy discussion of Lawrence's work in *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971) as superb literary criticism and the best critical thinking ever about *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928).

Lennon sees Mailer's objections to the mechanizing of sex, technology's assault upon the natural, in light of the author's personal theology, a dichotomous metaphysics in which a "God and Devil in harness" pull "against the universe in opposite directions" (434). Thus the efforts of Women's Liberation to equalize the sexes served the Devil's purpose by cutting human beings off from their primitive instincts and turning them into machines. Referring to one of the most brilliantly vivid moments in all of Mailer's fiction, in *Of a Fire on the Moon*, Lennon cites Mailer's awe at the sight of the Saturn V rocket rising orgasmic-like into the heavens and hearing himself say over and over, "Oh, my God! Hot in the intimacy of a forming heat." Some giant conception was being delivered, Mailer concludes, but "[d]id God voyage out for NASA, or was the Devil our line of sight to the stars?" In Lennon's reading of Mailer, rocketing humans to the surface of a dead moon was "technological sacrilege" (422).

In perhaps his most important contribution to our understanding of the artistic and philosophic evolution of Mailer's art, Lennon points out three ideologically climactic moments when Mailer's God/Devil cosmology took form and changed his work forever, moments that served to unify and empower his embattled artistic vision as nothing had done before—not his parents' disharmonious marriage, not the eternal struggle for power and the pathos of its loss between and within men epitomized in *The Naked and the Dead*, and not his Lawrencian battle with flesh and spirit. The first of these epiphanies was his discovery of the "invincible dualist" Oswald Spengler and Spengler's understanding of Western history in terms of "paired opposites," particularly a striving for the divine versus

a Faustian lust for power (64). Reflecting his own wide-ranging intellect and penchant for deep cultural analysis, Mailer was inspired by Spengler's ability to see the relationships among developments in such separate fields as warfare, astronomy, medicine, architecture, and statecraft (63–64). The second moment was his encounter with William James's view of nature as a "battle between light and darkness" (62). And the third was the "tutorial" in Eastern mysticism by James Jones that caused Mailer to replace his "hard-shell atheism" with a more emotionally and spiritually fortifying vision of man's place in the universe: "belief in a God who was not all-powerful, an existential God" vying with a technological Devil for possession of mankind's divided soul (191). Mailer's beleaguered God is a blank space, a cosmic question mark who presents to the future of humankind more spiritual ways of being, but whose completion depends upon human intervention.

I suggest that it is the thought-provoking metaphorical power of Mailer's God/Devil cosmology that matters. "What was paranoia," Mailer asks in *The Prisoner of Sex*, "but belief in the Devil?" (*Prisoner* 133). Indicative of Michuko Kakutani's observation that Mailer's outrageous metaphors could be "off the wall and on the mark at the same time" (qtd. on 727), the author hoped his metaphorical and metaphysical leaps of faith would lead to more expansive perception and understanding of existence. In *Armies of the Night*, Mailer refers to this problematic apprehension of truth as "intuitive speculation," where meaning is "emotional, spiritual, psychical, moral, existential or supernatural" (72). Yet the author apparently does literally believe that such a spiritual battle for the soul of humankind exists. Lennon cites Mailer's *On God: An Uncommon Conversation* (2008) for his rebuke to Christopher Hitchens for the atheism in his 2007 *God Is Not Great* (757). In *Why Are We At War?* (2003), Mailer grants that 9/11 was clearly a day on which the Devil won a great battle, but he sees the greater struggle between God and Satan for dominion over the earth and mankind's embattled soul as undetermined (*Why* 111). In his dialogue with his son John Buffalo Mailer in their *The Big Empty* (2006), Mailer says that, given the terrible historic stress of the twentieth century, the Devil may be just as powerful as God and that the latter is probably doing the best He or She can (N. Mailer and J. B. Mailer 12). Then again, Mailer finds the power of technology so great that it may render the struggle between God and the Devil irrelevant, more powerful than both.

The drama of Mailer's passionate life and explosive personality reads like one of Mailer's own absorbing, fast-paced journalistic books, good

reading for any audience. But the study of the dialectical play of opposites over the course of Mailer's career will prove invaluable to readers hoping better to understand and to evaluate the nature and quality of the author's place in American literature. For certain, Mailer's cataclysmic vision proves equal to his Olympic-sized ambitions to become the greatest American writer of his time. But implicit throughout this timely biography is this key question: Did the dispersion of Mailer's vast psychic energy over so many varied subjects and genres, especially his journalistic and biographical writing, compromise his potential for still greater work, leaving the matter open as to whether Mailer ever wrote his *Moby-Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*, or *Crime and Punishment*? That question will never be answered to everyone's satisfaction. Putting us in mind of Hemingway's admonition to Fitzgerald that writing facile stories for quick money would damage his talent, Mailer calls writing shorter novels "down payment" on his promise to "hit the longest ball ever to go up into the accelerated hurricane air of our American letters" (325–26).¹ Mailer acknowledged in 1973 that, after "all the speed writing he had done," to which we may add frequent public appearances, essays, debates, acting, film and playwriting, "he was finding novel writing particularly hard" (472). When tempted to set aside his manuscript of *Castle in the Forest* (2007) to write a piece on the World Series of Poker, he remarked, "I've been abandoning novels like wives for many years" (748).

Robert F. Lucid, in his edited collection of critical essays, *Norman Mailer: The Man and His Work* (1971), worried that Mailer had not yet written a novel that would put him in the company of Faulkner or Hemingway, "vast as his imagination is demonstrably vast"; but Lucid resolved his own concerns, concluding that Mailer had accumulated a body of work whose intellectual brilliance and scope of thought was "fine enough to be called an actual realization of Mailer's soaring aspiration" (qtd. on 448).² The fact is that, as Mailer announced in postponing work on his most ambitious novel, *Ancient Evenings* (1983), he found actual events invariably more extraordinary and interesting than fiction, and thus he found himself unable to resist breaking away to address some contemporary phenomenon (452). When responding to *Armies of the Night*, William Inge urged Mailer to remember that the artist's concern should be "with the heart and human sensibilities"; Mailer said he wanted to do just that, but had concluded that "the disease of the 20th Century is that politics had invaded the heart and polluted our sensibilities and there is no real way out—that one must write about politics as endemically as love"

(411). Thus, for Mailer, the social, the psychological, and the metaphysical were never divisible inquiries but part and parcel of what he said was the fixed philosophical point of his work: the desire to discover reality in society (733).

Mailer fretted that he and his contemporaries had written too much about themselves and not enough about the larger American world, yet like Whitman before him, Mailer used his own intensely contradictory inner life—the struggle to balance the “angel in oneself and the swine” (420)—to explore and interpret the psychic doubling of humanity as a whole (“Everyman a marriage within himself” [183]) and the good and evil of America in particular.³ But rather than being a novelist per se, he would use his intuitive, speculative novelistic gifts in tandem with self-revelation to perfect new literary forms for which he had an instinctive literary genius. As a New Journalist, Mailer offered unprecedented analyses of America’s complex psychic life that would establish his supremacy as the sagest and most incisive social critic of the American twentieth century. As Lennon explains, Mailer would use himself “as a species of divining rod to explore the psychic depths of personalities as disparate as Marilyn Monroe, Henry Miller, Gary Gilmore, Lee Harvey Oswald, Picasso, Christ, and Hitler” (435), people as divided as himself and with whom he shared existential similarities.⁴ Both the novel and New Journalism would require enormous aesthetic risks that Lennon likens to Mailer’s habit of testing his courage by walking narrow ledges outside his several high-rise apartments, the source for Stephen Rojack’s existential negotiation of the parapet in *An American Dream* (310). As Mailer explained himself in *The Prisoner of Sex*, his aesthetic daring would be to explore “emotions at the very edge of the word system, beyond the purviews of scientists, doctors, psychologists, even if he is good enough, the best of his contemporaries who work at philosophy itself” (qtd. on 91). In pages as brisk and alive as Mailer’s own, Lennon persuades us that Mailer’s work was indeed distinctive and powerful enough to assure him a place in the forefront of American letters.

Notes

1. Mailer said he hoped to write a novel that “Dostoyevsky and Marx; Joyce and Freud, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Proust and Spengler; Faulkner, and even old moldering Hemingway might come to read, for it would carry what they had to tell another part of the way” (qtd. on 251). And yet, offsetting the public image of Mailer’s oversized ego, one of the surprising revelations of Lennon’s biography is Mailer’s modest assessments of his own work, even self-deprecation of the size of his talent. Responding to Saul Bellow’s *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), the generally combative Mailer commented, “Well, one might as well eat the crow right here. Henderson is . . . worthy of Gulliver or Huckleberry Finn” (qtd. on 326).

2. Lucid was originally Mailer's authorized biographer and archivist. When Lucid died in 2006, Mailer asked Lennon to take over the writing.

3. I agree with John Aldridge's evaluation of Mailer as the country's "chief chronicler and interpreter" (qtd. on 351). In a PBS interview, Mailer explained, "I've always felt that my relationship to America is analogous to a marriage. I love this country. I hate it. I get angry at it. I feel close to it. I'm charmed by it. I'm repelled by it. It's a marriage that has gone on for at least the fifty years of my writing life. And in the course of that marriage what's happened is the marriage has gotten worse. It is not what it used to be." For a more complete discussion of Mailer's love/hate relationship with America, see my essay, "Identity Crisis: A State of the Union Address."

4. Lennon presents us with multiple ways through which to understand the author's demonstrably volatile life, consistent with Mailer's double-edged nature, what Mailer frequently refers to as the criminal side of his saint/psychopath duality. First, Mailer felt he could best understand the dangerous "maddened beast" in everyman by exploring, even encouraging, it in himself. Responding to the madness of Hitler's concentration camps in perhaps his most famous and influential essay, "The White Negro" (1957), Mailer remarks, "The Second World War presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it. For if tens of millions were killed in concentration camps out of the inexorable agonies and contractions of super-states . . . one was then obliged also to see that no matter how crippled and perverted an image of man was the society he had created, it was nonetheless his creation . . . and if society was so murderous, then who could ignore the most hideous of questions about his own nature?" (*Advertisements* 338). Second, Mailer defends his self-acknowledged psychopathic impulses, "the dark side, the rebellious and the demonic" in himself (qtd. on 221), such as stabbing his second wife, Adele Morales, as a form of psychic therapy, a courageous and cleansing form of existential risk taking even if vicious (qtd. on 220–21). Third, following in Hemingway's footsteps, Mailer no doubt understood the value of his bad boy image, keeping himself constantly in the public's eye as useful self-promotion.

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A conversation with J. Michael Lennon, author of NORMAN MAILER: A DOUBLE LIFE

Q: What was your relationship with Norman Mailer, and how did you come to write a biography of him?

ML: We first met in 1972 when I was writing my doctoral thesis on his work, and got friendly. A couple of years later, I met Robert Lucid, his first archivist and authorized biographer. Eventually, I became Bob's understudy, and when Bob died unexpectedly in 2006, I began writing my own version of the official, or authorized biography, with Mailer's blessing. I was almost done editing Mailer's letters at the time, but shelved that project for the bio.

Q: The subtitle of this biography is "A Double Life" – what do you mean by that?

ML: Mailer could see reality only as a series of oppositions. Everybody and everything, all phenomena, is twinned. All of his own identities—riflesman, novelist, filmmaker, political activist, family man, womanizer, journalist, and so on—had a double. Doubleness was his tool for understanding people, politics, nature, the universe even. What makes it more fascinating is that each twin has a minority within. Monsters have an enclave of virtue, and the converse is true for saints.

Q: There's been a lot written about Norman Mailer over the years. Did you have new sources or materials to draw from when researching this biography?

ML: Yes, I had a good deal of new material. He wrote about 45,000 letters over 70 years, and many of them are revelatory. He was quite candid in his correspondence. It took me several years to read them all, and I guess I am the only one, besides him, to have done so. I also did a score of long interviews with him in his last decade, and during his final thirty months I visited him nearly every day. My wife and I lived nearby in the same town, Provincetown, at the tip of Cape Cod. His family was helpful, very helpful, and I talked with them formally and informally for years. His sister Barbara was absolutely critical. She read everything I wrote and made numerous suggestions. I also interviewed his friends, editors, lovers—over 80 people. Larry Schiller, his most important collaborator, was also generous with his insights and access to his archive.

Q: Who are some of the people you interviewed from Mailer's life?

ML: Besides his nine children, his nephew, his sister, his wife Norris Church and her living predecessors (he was married six times), I interviewed a number of writers who knew him: Don DeLillo, William Kennedy, Gay Talese, Barbara Probst Solomon, Dotson Rader, Dick and Doris Kearns Goodwin; several of his editors: Jason Epstein, David Ebershoff, Veronica Windholz, Tina Brown, Harry Evans, Walter Anderson; and quite a few of his close friends—Mickey Knox, Richard Stratton, Jim Toback, Bill Majeski, Ivan Fisher, Jeff Michelson, Sal Cetrano, many more. I was also fortunate enough to be able to interview two women with whom he had long affairs: Lois Mayfield Wilson and Eileen Fredrickson.

Q: Did Mailer share anything with you about his writing process?

ML: He talked about it all the time. It was one of his favorite subjects, and I devote quite a few pages to how it changed over the years. He had all sorts of routines and superstitions about the work process. I helped him put together a book on the topic, *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing*.

Q: How did real life experiences impact Mailer's writing?

ML: Profoundly. He called experience “the church of one’s acquired knowledge.” For him, the most valuable kind of experience was that which was unexpected, experience that is thrust upon you—for example, his 25 months as a rifleman in the Philippine campaign during WWII. He kept a list of 161 soldiers he had served with, with notes on each. He was endlessly curious, right to the end.

Q: What would you say is the lasting legacy of Mailer’s work on American literature?

ML: Three things: 1) He was the key innovator in the New Journalism movement, the wave of participatory journalism that took place from the late 1950s through the early 1970s. *The Armies of the Night*, his 1968 Pulitzer-Prize winning account of the anti-Vietnam War movement is one of the finest achievements of this movement; 2) Along with Gore Vidal and William Buckley, Mailer was the most important public intellectual in the American literary world for over 30 years. There is no one like him these days; 3) Mailer was to the latter half of the twentieth century what John Dos Passos was to the first half: the most important chronicler and commentator on major events and figures in American Life: Marilyn Monroe, Hemingway, JFK, Nixon, Bill Clinton, Muhammad Ali, many more. He also created some wonderful fictional characters, Elena in *The Deer Park*, and Rojack in *An American Dream*, for example.

Q: Mailer knew many of the most famous writers of his generation, from Joan Didion to Tom Wolfe. How did he fit in with the literary crowd of his times?

ML: In the 1950s, he was very close with William Styron, James Jones and James Baldwin. These friendships collapsed or waned, and he did not go around with writers as much afterwards, although he was friendly with Gay Talese, Robert Lowell, Joan Didion and William Buckley for decades. Later, he had warm relationships with Bill Kennedy and Don DeLillo, and a lot of younger writers. He never liked the idea of being out of touch with ordinary citizens, and had many close friends who were not literary.

Q: What was unique about Mailer’s contributions to journalism?

ML: He put the writer on the stage of the story, and was adept at using a variety of fictional techniques. But he also knew when to shroud himself, as he did in *The Executioner’s Song*. He won his second Pulitzer for it.

Q: Despite being married six times, Mailer was a devoted family man with nine children. You saw his family interactions yourself – what was he like at home, in private?

ML: Like the rest of us, he had a variety of moods, but he was usually quite lively, full of beans. He relished a good debate on the issues of the day, loved jokes, anecdotes, banter. And he was curious, as I have said. Sitting around his dinner table was never dull; everyone was required to get in the conversation, perform a bit. Always fun, lots of laughter. He generally had a twinkle in his eye.

Q: What else might readers be surprised to learn about Mailer’s personal life?

ML: His incredible work ethic. He turned out a new book, on average, every 18 months, over 60 years, and had at least one best seller in each decade from the 1940s to the 2000s. Another is his 60-year affair with Lois Wilson, who was an amazing person. One last thing: his ambition. Everyone knows he had a lot of it, but the fact that he measured himself not just by the achievements of Hemingway and Bellow, but also Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, and did so beginning in his 20s, will surprise many people. His faith in his genius was unshakable, even during some dark days in the early 1950s.

Q: Mailer had close ties to many public figures – from politicians to Hollywood stars and pro athletes. Why do you think he was drawn to celebrities?

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ML: He felt he understood them, had an insight into the two things at the root of their motivation: ambition and identity. Novelists, he believed, understood these matters better than anyone else.

Q: Did Mailer ever discuss his work as a filmmaker with you? What first got him interested in exploring that medium?

ML: He spent a lot of his youth in the movie palaces of the Depression, and got hooked. He believed that lively people acting without detailed scripts could deliver incredible performances. In a couple of his experimental films, they did. He also felt that film was challenging fiction for narrative supremacy in the 1960s, and wanted to play a role.

Q: Mailer is best known as a writer, but he was also a public intellectual and activist – what are some of the issues he was most passionate about?

ML: You name it. It would be easier to list issues he did not write about. Two of the issues he was most worried about were the encroachments of technology, and the fragility of democracy. He seems quite prescient these days.

Q: Why was it important to Mailer to get involved in the 1969 mayoral race in New York City?

ML: He wrote a piece about JFK's 1960 campaign, "Superman Come to the Supermarket," and believed that it helped get him elected. After that, he wanted, as he put it, to get his hand on the rump of history, gain political power and change the given. Running for mayor of New York seemed like a real possibility to him, and he did run a marvelous, quixotic campaign. But he fared poorly (4th out of five candidates in the primary), and went back to writing.

NORMAN MAILER

A Double Life

"In this meticulous authorized biography, Lennon offers a comprehensive and unflinching look at the life of the controversial American novelist, journalist, and filmmaker... Lennon's almost clinical perspective shows the author's restless innovation, which was indispensable for understanding the U.S. in the second half of the 20th century." — *Publishers Weekly*

"A must-read for students and admirers of Mailer's work." — *Kirkus Reviews*

"In the hands of this superb biographer, Norman Mailer comes vividly to life—irresistible, brilliant, formidable, hungry for fame, and endlessly fascinating. Lennon's great achievement lies in matching Mailer's energy and talent with his own. This is surely one of the best biographies ever written of an American writer."

— Doris Kearns Goodwin, author of *The Bully Pulpit* and *Team of Rivals*

"Lennon captures Mailer brilliantly—in all his guises and disguises. At the heart of Mailer's writing was a selfishness to live as many lives as possible, coupled with a deep and elusive empathy. He kept slipping into new times, and geographies, losing himself there. The only things worth doing were the things that might break a heart—and indeed he broke many. Lennon looks at a literary life with great compassion and comprehensive accuracy. A biography for scholars and readers alike."

— Colum McCann, author of *TransAtlantic* and *Let the Great World Spin*

"Mailer comes alive on every page, often in his own words, compulsive in his self-overcoming, in his 'Napoleonic' battling with peers and critics to become America's number-one writer, and in his often self-destructive dealings with the world he wanted to analyze (and did) and conquer (not quite). This biography is brisk and electric, a vigorous panorama of the 'singular, unprecedented and irreplaceable' life that Norman Mailer lived."

— William Kennedy, author of *Changó's Beads* and *Two-Tone Shoes* and *Ironweed*

"I knew Mailer for more than a half-century; he was the most prolific and wide-ranging literary intellect of my lifetime. Thanks to Lennon's biography, I am learning a lot that I never knew."

— Gay Talese, author of *A Writer's Life* and *Thy Neighbor's Wife*

"Norman Mailer lived a big, brash, bawdy, belligerent life, and J. Michael Lennon has captured every moment of it."

— Deirdre Bair, author of *Saul Steinberg* and *Samuel Beckett*

In **NORMAN MAILER: A DOUBLE LIFE** (Simon & Schuster; October 15, 2013; \$40), author J. Michael Lennon presents the definitive portrait of one of the most important and controversial figures in American literary and cultural life in the second half of the twentieth century. The authorized biographer knew his subject for decades and had unfettered access to Mailer's voluminous papers, unpublished letters, family members, and acquaintances.

J. Michael Lennon

Mailer, the writer

The most famous author and the leading public intellectual of his generation, Mailer is one of a handful of serious American writers who have become known to a broad public beyond the usual confines of the literary world. He became a national celebrity at the age of twenty-five with an enormous bestseller, his bold World War II novel *The Naked and the Dead*, and went on to write ten more bestsellers, both fiction and non-fiction. Two of them (*The Armies of the Night* and *The Executioner's Song*) won the Pulitzer Prize.

In landmark essays like "The White Negro" and "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," Mailer engaged passionately and vividly with the major cultural and political currents of the postwar era, from the rise of the hipster and the Beat Generation in the 1950s to the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, and the anti-war movement of the 1960s, as well as the women's movement (of which he became a vehement public antagonist) of the 1970s. Mailer obsessed about the assassination of JFK and the suicides of Marilyn Monroe and Ernest Hemingway (whom he regarded as his principal literary role model), writing frequently about all three of these iconic figures. A vastly influential journalist as well as a novelist, he was a pioneer of the "New Journalism" and a co-founder of the trend-setting New York weekly *The Village Voice*.

Upon Mailer's death in 2007 at the age of 84, tributes and appraisals appeared on the front pages of newspapers around the world. Lennon cites that of Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times* – on occasion one of Mailer's most withering critics – as one of the most thoughtful. Kakutani writes: "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 into 'corporation land,' filled with cheap consumer blandishments and the siren call of fame."

Mailer, the man

Mailer gained fame and sometimes infamy not only from his literary and political endeavors, but also from his often-unruly personal life, his fascination with sex and violence, and his vitriolic public feuds with other writers. Mailer was married six times (to a fellow Jewish intellectual, a Latina artist, the daughter of a Scottish duke, an actress, a jazz singer, and an art teacher), was the father of nine children, and had countless affairs throughout his life. He knew many of the most celebrated writers of his generation (including William Styron, James Jones, Truman Capote, Arthur Miller, Gay Talese, Joan Didion, Lillian Hellman, Saul Bellow, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, and Tom Wolfe), and quarreled with several of them, most notably with Gore Vidal, in a legendary confrontation on Dick Cavett's television talk show.

Aspiring briefly to political rather than literary power, Mailer ran for mayor of New York City in 1969, in a campaign that was as entertaining as it was quixotic. In the first of the two most notorious and regrettable incidents of his life, Mailer stabbed his second wife, Adele Morales, with a penknife and narrowly missed killing her. As a result, he was committed to the psychiatric ward at New York's Bellevue Hospital for seventeen days, escaping prison only because Adele refused to press charges against him. In the second incident, Mailer championed convict writer Jack Henry Abbott, who after being released from prison stabbed an innocent young man to death.

Mailer's "Double Life"

As Lennon's title implies, his biography explores the many dualities in Mailer's identity – journalist and activist, devoted family man and relentless philanderer, intellectual and boxer, novelist and politician, saint and psychopath – which all became fodder for his writing. One of the most enduring tensions in Mailer's life and work was between his craving for the spotlight and his yearning to remain the inconspicuous observer. As Lennon writes, "Mailer's desire for fame, and his distaste for it, never abated over his long career. Nor did his ability to determine how he might write about his current situation, whatever it might be. It became a reflex." Mailer himself once said, "There are two sides to me, and the side that is the observer is paramount," although readers of Lennon's biography may find this assertion debatable.

The authorized biography

After knowing Mailer and his work intimately for many years, Lennon became his authorized biographer in 2006, with complete access to all his papers, library, and massive correspondence – about 45,000 letters over sixty-eight years. In Mailer's final years, Lennon conducted more than twenty extensive interviews with him, and over the last thirty months of Mailer's life, Lennon visited him daily in his longtime home in Provincetown, Massachusetts. "While always his own best lawyer," Lennon writes, "Mailer never hinted at how he wished to be portrayed, nor did he ask my intentions. He answered all my questions candidly and with much good humor, enjoining me to 'put everything in.'" In addition, Lennon had the full cooperation of Mailer's last wife of twenty-seven years, the late Norris Church Mailer, as well as his sister and lifelong confidante, Barbara Mailer Wasserman, and the rest of the Mailer family.

Drawing on this epic research, Lennon reveals Mailer's sources and influences for each of his major works, as well as his state of mind at every critical point in his life and career. From early on, Mailer was blunt in his ambition to be "a really great writer," an artist whose role is "to be as disturbing, as adventurous, as penetrating as his energy and courage make possible." Lennon traces the development of that fierce ambition from his Brooklyn boyhood as the intellectually gifted scion of two immigrant Jewish families through his highly disciplined and promising literary efforts as an undergraduate at Harvard, his stunning early success as a novelist, his disappointing flirtations with Hollywood and Broadway, his stumbles as a fiction writer, and his decision to pursue multiple genres of writing at once. Lennon also chronicles Mailer's self-conscious, constantly evolving attempt to forge an intellectual and psychological identity for himself, based on an idiosyncratic amalgam of Marx, Freud, Hemingway and Wilhelm Reich, as well as gleanings from Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, D. H. Lawrence, and Stendhal, among others.

Few people have ever tried on as many personas as Norman Mailer – novelist, journalist, filmmaker, biographer, lover, husband, father, fighter, philosopher, politician, Jew, American – or achieved such remarkable success in so many different arenas. As during his lifetime, Mailer continues to inspire both admiration and loathing, yet his status as one of the preeminent and most provocative chroniclers of the latter half of the twentieth century is undeniable. J. Michael Lennon's gripping, monumental, and authoritative biography offers the most comprehensive and balanced look yet at this seminal figure, as well as an enthralling panorama of America's literary and cultural life over the past six decades.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. Michael Lennon is Emeritus Vice President for Academic Affairs and Emeritus Professor of English at Wilkes University in Pennsylvania. In addition to being chair of the editorial board of *The Mailer Review*, he

has written or edited several books about and with Mailer, including *Norman Mailer's Letters on An American Dream, 1963-69*; *Norman Mailer: Works and Days*; *Conversations with Norman Mailer*; and *Critical Essays on Norman Mailer*. He is the past president of both the Norman Mailer Society and the James Jones Literary Society and serves on the board of both organizations. From 2005-2007, he was a literary consultant to the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas-Austin, where he assisted in the cataloguing of Mailer's papers, and was a Fellow there in 2009. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Paris Review*, *Playboy*, *Provincetown Arts*, *New York*, *Modern Language Studies*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *New England Review*, among other publications. He lives in Westport, Massachusetts.

ABOUT THE BOOK

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The Top 10 Norman Mailer Books (reprinted from *Publishers Weekly* (October 11, 2013))

By J. Michael Lennon

In 1948, a 25-year-old World War II veteran leaped into prominence with a number one best-selling novel about his combat experience in the Pacific, *The Naked and the Dead*. Over the next 60 years he wrote across a range of genres: biography and memoir, a column in the *Village Voice*, crime and sports narratives, poetry and short stories, several film scripts, and ten more novels of astounding variety. Along with Gay Talese, Tom Wolfe and Joan Didion, he was one of the founders of the New Journalism, which adapted fictional techniques to nonfiction. A nearly ubiquitous media figure and intellectual provocateur, he performed on the public stage more brilliantly than any writer since Mark Twain. But he was also a machine of literary production, producing 44 books, all told. He may be the only major American writer with one or more best-selling books in each of seven consecutive decades.

There has been debate on whether Mailer's greatest achievements are in fiction or nonfiction, but it is clear that he was ambidextrous, so to speak, excelling in both. I lean slightly toward his nonfiction in my picks.

1. **The Executioner's Song**—An immense panoramic nonfiction novel with over 300 characters that recreates the last nine months of Utah murderer Gary Gilmore. Relying heavily on the actual words of those involved (taken from 15,000 pages of interviews), Mailer depicts Gilmore's Romeo-and-Juliet love affair with a young mother, Nicole Baker (both attempted suicide), and details the legal struggle between those who sought Gilmore's reprieve and those who opposed it—the latter led by Gilmore, who insisted that his death sentence be carried out. He won and in January 1977 got four bullets through the heart—the first execution in the U.S. in ten years. Lawrence Schiller, Gilmore's advisor, media spokesman, literary executor and the distributor of his ashes, holds the narrative together, and stands in for Mailer, who tells the story anonymously in what he called “a quiet voice from the other side of the hill.” He won his second Pulitzer for this book.

2. **The Armies of the Night**—Describing himself in the third person, Mailer draws on the techniques of the novelist, the journalist, and the historian to depict a divided nation. Generally considered to be one of the glories of the New Journalism, the narrative is a sharply observed account of the October 1967 anti-Vietnam War March on the Pentagon, the culmination of three days of protest in the nation's capital. Mailer, the half-comic, half-heroic protagonist, was arrested and jailed for his part in the March. *Armies* also contains a brilliant portrait of poet Robert Lowell, Don Quixote to Mailer's Sancho Panza. The book won both a Pulitzer and the National Book Award.
3. **An American Dream**—Written month by month for serial publication in *Esquire*, this dread-soaked 1965 novel about a psychology professor who murders his high society wife shows Mailer at the height of his metaphoric power. Narrated by the protagonist, Steven Rojack, the focus is on his haunted conscience, and his operatic struggle with his wife's father, Barney Oswald Kelly, one of the great villains in modern American literature. President Kennedy has a cameo role in the story, which is set in the wealthiest section of New York City just months before his assassination. Joan Didion called the novel "the only serious New York novel since *The Great Gatsby*."
4. **Advertisements for Myself**—This 1959 miscellany contains samples of all Mailer's earlier work stretching back to short stories written in college, as well as his endlessly reprinted essay about hipsters living in the New York *demimonde*, "The White Negro." Excerpts from his *Village Voice* column are included, as is a new short story, "The Time of Her Time," which details the sexual adventures of a Village stud, Sergius O'Shaugnessey. The collection is held together by bursts of italicized prose—part confession, part tirade, part visionary testament—recounting the ups and downs of his literary career and written in an edgy, slangy, sardonic style.
5. **Harlot's Ghost**—Mailer's longest book (1310 pages) is a spy novel. Like a long freight train, his story of WASP intelligence agents in war and peace snakes through upper-class American life (Mt. Desert, Yale, the 21 Club), picks up speed as it moves through international intrigues in Europe, slows to a crawl in Uruguay, and then accelerates rapidly as it moves through the CIA's attempts to poison Castro, its failed invasion at the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban missile crisis. Some of J.F.K.'s extramarital love affairs comprise

another strand of the novel's loosely braided narrative of deception, loyalty, betrayal and heroism. Despite its flaws—a 260-page digression set in Uruguay, and characters who spout their author's favorite ideas—the novel is still a magnificent, if incomplete, achievement, reminiscent of an unfinished cathedral. It ends with the words: "To be continued," a promise never fulfilled.

6. **The Naked and Dead**—Set on the fictional island of Anopopei, where a Prospero-like American general attempts to defeat a stubborn Japanese force, Mailer's novel vies with James Jones' *A Thin Red Line* as the finest fictional depiction of World War II combat. Using the notes he collected on more than a hundred soldiers he served with, Mailer demonstrates his considerable powers of characterization and ability to portray every misery of jungle warfare.
7. **The Fight**—The definitive account of one the most dramatic prizefights in history, "The Rumble in the Jungle," Muhammad Ali's epic championship bout with George Foreman in Kinshasa, Zaire in 1974, also provides a brilliant evocation of Congolese *n'golo*, or life force. The supporting cast includes Hunter Thompson and George Plimpton. Mailer's last major effort at self-portraiture.
8. **Why Are We in Vietnam?**—Set in the peaks of the Brooks Range in Alaska, Mailer's 1967 novel of big-game hunting and communing with the wilderness is one of his briefest, a mere 200 pages. Narrated in a hip, obscene fashion by a mysterious narrator, the novel also contains an implicit anti-war message. Although he grew up in cities, Mailer's sensitivity to nature's resonances must be considered as one of his most commanding skills.
9. **Marilyn**—Mailer's first collaboration with Lawrence Schiller, and his first full-length biography (1973), examines one of Hollywood's most glittering icons. He explores the tragicomedy of Monroe's many love affairs, with emphasis on those with Joe DiMaggio and Arthur Miller. Monroe's inner life, Mailer admits, resembles his own in several ways, especially the interplay of identity and ambition. Critiques of her major films are interspersed.
10. **The Time of Our Time**—Another monster of 1300 pages, *TOOT*, as Mailer called it, contains 130-plus excerpts from his books arrayed

chronologically so as to deliver a portrait of the U.S. from World War II through the Clinton Administration. The Cold War is the volume's defining event. Admittedly written under the influence of John Dos Passos' multi-volume novel, *U.S.A.*, Mailer's collection picks up where its predecessor leaves off. The cavalcade of characters includes fictional and historical figures from twenty of Mailer's books, yet it somehow hangs together.

inside, or it could have been a dozen. I was so flustered I couldn't look. One asked something incomprehensible, in Gaelic or a thick accent. I looked then at his red hair and wide grin, and made some silly squeak, and they all laughed and stared at us for a moment before driving slowly on. We turned back shortly thereafter, whether because of the rough track, or the falling night, or the possibility that those boys would be turning around and following and taking us prisoner high on the desolate slopes. I don't know, and me with only a thick copy of the Everyman's Poems, bought the day before in the gift shop at Drumcliffe Church, to defend us. The boys were just joking with us, I'm sure, the local variation of "Who's buried in Grant's tomb?", but for a moment Yeats's crazed Cuchulain still roamed that place, a place all the more thrilling for its centuries of boys and beasts, where Anglo devils had better fear for their suburban lives. And as I now read the poems, or if a few more years pass and we return, I expect I'll feel the same wild surmise, even if terraced housing encircles Ben Bulbin's throat like strings of false pearls.

Mount Hope (Roger Williams Univ.) Interview

J. Michael Lennon knew Norman Mailer as a friend, and took on the famous author's sometimes-messy life as his official biographer

The acclaim for J. Michael Lennon's biography of author-celebrity-politician-journalist Norman Mailer has been resounding since Simon & Schuster published the book last year. "Norman Mailer: A Double Life" illuminates the often-dual nature of the author who, through both sublime writing and sheer bombast became one of the best-known authors of the second half of the 20th Century.

Lennon, too, led something of a double life, becoming a longtime friend of Mailer's even as he researched, observed and interviewed on the way to the publication of the book.

Lennon, a Massachusetts native, made a career teaching English at the University of Illinois-Springfield, where he headed the Institute of Public Affairs for two decades, and Wilkes University, where he helped found the low-residency MFA program. He has edited books of critical essays on Mailer and James Jones; his forthcoming book of mailer's selected letters comes out late this year from Random House.

Lennon lives with his wife, Donna, in Westport, Mass.; they lunched with Mount Hope editor Edward J. Delaney overlooking the bay in Bristol for a conversation about Mailer and the writing of the biography.

MI: Explain how you came to do the book...

JML: I was the understudy to write the biography of Mailer for a number of years. The original biographer was Robert F. Lucid, a professor at Penn and a friend of Mailer's going back to the late Fifties. Bob did a lot of excellent research, but he never really got deep into the writing. And then, in the early years of the new millennium, he got ill, and his wife got ill. His wife died, and he had macular degeneration. He never gave up writing the biography, but he was stalled in his later years. He died in December 2006, and

I took over. When I got the manuscript, I saw that he had only gotten to 1951 in Mailer's life. I had a choice: extend his manuscript—Lucia's estate was interested in that—or begin anew. Bob had a beautiful style—at his best, he was positively Jamesian—but it wasn't my style. So I started from scratch. I was putting together an edition of Mailer's letters at the time, and I put that on the shelf, and went to work on the bio. Seven years later it was published.

You were a friend of Mailer's and figured in his life. So you were, in essence, a character in the story that you were writing. The book treats yourself in a third-person way. Tell me how you came to that approach.

The first decision was whether to put myself in the bio or not. Finally, with advice from several people, I concluded that I had to become a character. In 1980, I was involved in making a documentary about Mailer made in Germany. I was the interviewer. Mailer and I were friendly—I met him in 1972—but the documentary really cemented it. As time went on, it was pretty clear that the role I played in editing some of Mailer's books, working on his Archive, spending time with him on Cape Cod, made it unreasonable for me not to be in the bio. I had come up with the ideas for two of his books, *The Time of Our Time*, published in 1998, and *The Spooky Art*, which

came out in 2003, and worked with him on several other projects, including his letters. The next question was how to depict myself. Should I use first person? Refer to myself as "I"? Or use the third? I went back and forth. I talked it over with Donna, my wife, my agent, editor, my brother, and Mailer's sister, Barbara. Finally I wrote a sentence, "Mailer met Professor Mike Lennox that fall," and I thought, Well, why not? Mailer wrote about himself in the third person; I can do it.

You had to wrestle with the idea of objectivity. How did you?

I had a long relationship, 35 years, with Mailer. I presided over his funeral; I co-produced his memorial at Carnegie Hall. I'd written or edited a half a dozen books on him, so it was pretty clear

that I liked the guy, and that I got along with him. But I admired him this side of idolatry. You know, I didn't approve of everything he did—not did he—and he was pretty unambiguous in telling me before he died to me to put everything in; let it all happen: "No one is ever going to believe Norman Mailer's is a plaster saint, so you might as well just let it rip." So that was what I did. I also decided that the three crisis moments in his life would form the structure of the bio.



One was the stabbing of his wife.

One was the stabbing of his second wife Adele, in 1960. The second was Jack Abbott, a murderer who he helped get parole, and who murdered again. The third was when his sixth wife, Norris, left him, temporarily, because of his philandering. All three crises were the result of his blunders, his pride, his selfishness and so forth. He knew that all of this material was going to go in the bio, and he never shied it. He told me everything; he encouraged me to talk to everyone. After a time, it got pretty easy because I thought, Well, Norman would have wanted me to write about this. But I tried to avoid a lot of commentary on these events. Better to get down the essential contours of the great tragedies and difficulties of his life and let readers decide for themselves. That's my general stance.

I had an interesting experience reading your book and Adam Begley's Updike back-to-back. It appears that Updike wrote what he wanted to write and money came from that, but I was surprised in reading your book how much of his output was based on the obligations to the five ex-wives, the many children, and the IRS. Do you see that monetary debt as part of an artistic motivator? Did it make him a better writer?

That's a good question. It's complicated. If you look at the Mailer books that have been the most commercially successful, you'll find, in almost every case, that they resulted from a combination of financial need and what you might call long-term vested

philosophical interest. For example, *The Armies of the Night*. He wrote that in a couple of months, 90,000 words in nine weeks. He was paid a large amount of money for these words by Willie Morris, the editor of *Harper's*, which published the piece in early 1968. At the time, it was the highest payout the magazine had ever made, and, I should add, the longest single essay or memoir in American magazine history. The sales of that issue, and the subsequent book were terrific, and he won a Pulitzer and the National Book Award. It's never gone out of print. But, to be clear: he wanted very much to write about the events of that book, namely, his participation in the March on the Pentagon, which he saw as a real turning point in American history, the moment when the nation started to turn away from the Vietnam War. And that led to L.B.J.'s decision not to run for re-election. Some of his other books, books that he got huge sums for—*Harlot's Ghost* and, especially, *Ancient Evenings*—were not as successful. *The Executioner's Song*, a massive, 1,000-page nonfiction saga that came out in 1979, was done with the same mix of motives. Mailer needed the dough, and he had a profound interest in Gary Gilmore, the first man to be executed in the U.S. after a ten-year hiatus. Gilmore, you will remember, insisted that his execution be carried out. A firing squad put four bullets in his heart. Gilmore's story was a crucible for all the issues Mailer had been fascinated with for decades—especially his ideas on death, karma, and reincarnation. He always had a double motive for his actions, and that's one reason for the title of my book *Norman Mailer: A Double Life*. Norman always needed money, but

he was also in love with his subjects.

It seems the last thing you'd tell any serious writer to do is write a book in three months. How did he do it?

I said somewhere in the bio that he had two compositional modalities: fast and slow. In the fast modality he could write 10,000 words a day, and he did, and they were good words. In the slow gear, he revised over and over—on *Ancient Evenings*, for example. It has great moments, but a lot of it is not successful. I don't think his enduring reputation will be based on *Ancient Evenings*. It's going to be based on *Armies and The Executioner's Song*. *Harlot's Ghost* is another book that I think will be remembered, whatever its flaws. It will be remembered as one of his great novels. Mailer never had writer's block.

He was always ready to write. Occasionally, in the Fifties, he had some trouble getting traction, but after that he just wrote and wrote and wrote. He learned after a period of time how to get a draft out, a rough, shaggy draft, and then go back and rewrite and fine-tune it. But in the early days, no page went into the completed pile until it was perfect. *The Deer Park*, his 1955 Hollywood novel, was written like that.

He was so much of a public figure... was that to the benefit or detriment of his art?

I think that the jury is still out. It brought him immediate publicity and renown, but it also created a cadre of people who despised him because they thought writers should stay home and write rather than pontificate on TV programs. Updike is an example of that. From college on, Mailer was a gregarious person, and after a few failures he learned to become a pretty good public speaker. He enjoyed it. He enjoyed the action. He could speak well even when half-drunk and he could do different voices: Harvard, Brooklyn, Texas, he could do Irish (learned from Brendan

Behan). Mafia (he loved *The Sopranos*). He became a really fine performer. But while he was performing, he was observing himself. Robert Lowell once said something like:

"Mailer was in the middle of everything at the March on the Pentagon and he never took a note. He was acting

out and he was drunk, but he remembered everything that happened, every conversation. I've never seen anyone remember things so accurately." The observing side of Mailer always watching the performing side, and then went home and wrote about it. In my view, he was one of the premier insider-outsider figures in American literature. He knew the Kennedys. He knew Muhammad Ali. But he never joined the establishment; he flirted with it. He wasn't crazy about going to the American

Academy of Arts—it was too stuffy. I'd rather go to a bar in Provincetown and talk to the local characters, the Portuguese fishermen. He had a raging thirst for experience, and for meeting people from every strata and enclave, not just famous people. But he liked them too. He enjoyed being with William Buckley, Henry Kissinger, the Clintons. But he didn't want to spend all his time hobnobbing with the wealthy and celebrities, not at all.

One fascinating person in his book was Lawrence Schiller.... He seems largely ignored. What do you make of that? He had a lot to do with some of Mailer's best work. What was the connection there?

Schiller was Mailer's most important collaborator. I take a distant back seat to Larry Schiller, who is a friend. He was a great dealmaker. He has great ideas for books that would sell, books about Gary Gilmore, and the spy Robert Hanssen, and the football player O.J. Simpson. Larry doesn't know much about great literature. He's dyslexic, he doesn't know grammar. But he knows how to package a great story. He still calls me up and says, "What does this word mean?" Or he needs some help on his verb tenses, stuff like that. He is also a terrific interviewer with a great eye for story. Mailer learned that Schiller had gifts for understanding the underbelly of American life, and interviewing the people in it. Larry would talk to any thug in the world if there was a good story in it. There are no pretensions about Larry. He's as raw as they come. Larry always has devil cooking, dozens of them. He did the longest interview in the history of *Playboy* (April 1977) with Gilmore.

Larry said of the Gilmore saga, "I don't have the hands to write this book." He needed Mailer. He had the wit to understand that Mailer was the person to write it, the guy with the narrative ability. Initially, Mailer had all kinds of ideas on how to write it; he was going to write an essay; it was going to be a play. But when he got into the raw material, the interviews and transcripts, he saw, eventually, that it had to be a narrative. Schiller knew this all along. Mailer discovered his method at the tip of his pencil. Schiller kept sending him material, piles and piles of interviews. Mailer was losing himself in all the paper. He couldn't swim. "Stop sending it," he said. "No, there's more, there's more," Schiller replied. That's why the book was written in 18 months instead of 8 months. It was an enormous effort to get that beast under control, and without Schiller it would not have happened. Mailer and Schiller met at just the right time in their careers. They needed each other. They did eight or nine projects together, most of which were quite successful.

Do you think in the end he was judged as a great writer? Did he ever get to where he should or wanted to be?

No, I don't think he did. He didn't accomplish everything he wanted, but he raised a high bar. He always talked about Dostoyevsky writing the first half of *Confessions of a Great Sinner*, which was *The Brothers Karamazov*; and Mailer said it was a failure from one point of view, but look what he got out of it. Mailer wanted *Harlot's Ghost*, which is half-done, to be seen in that light. I think he's going to be remembered, like Byron and Mark Twain, as a



J. Michael Lennon



Norman Mailer and J. Michael Lennon, 1988

literary celebrity. But ultimately he will be remembered for several great books, seven or eight: *The Armies of the Night*, *The Executioner's Song*, *An American Dream* (one of my favorites) and *The Naked and The Dead*. Then, *Harlot's Ghost*, *Advertisements for Myself*, *The Fight*, and his classic about the moon-shot, *Of a Fire on the Moon*. So he's going to be remembered for different things. Another is that he was one of the last great public intellectuals, along with Robert Lowell, Susan Sontag, Gore Vidal, and William Buckley, intellectuals who were known and listened to by the general public. When Robert Lowell turned down an invitation to the L. B. J. White House, it was on the front page of *The New York Times*. Mailer's 1962 debate with William Buckley was also on the front page of *The New York Times*. That doesn't happen now. They were the last.

How did you research the book? The fact gathering...what was the process?

I had a lot of material when I began. I had published a bibliography of Mailer that annotated every essay and interview, so I had that huge stockpile and it was organized. He must have given seven or eight hundred interviews and I have them all, categorized and indexed. Second, I had his letters. I am the only person beside him who has read them all, 45,000 of them. My wife did an index of 3,500 of his best letters for the bio. I think I quoted from about eight hundred. The third source was the Mailer circle. I knew all the family fairly well. I knew the wives, the girl friends, all nine children, and I have a good friendship with Mailer's sister. I knew many of his buddies. I know Schiller, and I knew his oldest friend, the late actor, Mickey Knox. I got to know author Gay Talese, and novelist Don De Lillo, both of whom Mailer liked and admired. George Plimpton, another good friend, was always around and I worked with him on some projects. I also had the



Norman Mailer and J. Michael Lennon, 2008

public record, including many obscure profiles in college newspapers. They'd send them to Mailer after an appearance. He made some memorable statements at college campuses. He must have spoken at hundreds of them. I had all that to go on. The fourth major source was a series of interviews I did with him in his final years, the interviews for his final book, *On God: An Uncommon Conversation* [2007]. I also interviewed him about the people in his life when I was editing his letters: "Let's talk about Jean Malaquais [his intellectual mentor]. What was he like?" Mailer would give me ten minutes on various friends and family members... beautiful material! Finally, there were his papers at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas. My wife and I helped catalogue them, and we visited the Ransom Center a half dozen times. While there, I listened to the cassette tapes of him dictating his letters. Thirteen hundred cassettes, forty years of cassettes. I did it to help the people in Texas figure out who he was writing to and the dates of letters.

They were a tremendous resource and listening to him compose his sentences was fantastic. I was Mailer's archivist, succeeding Bob Lucid. Also, I am fortunate in that I never had to worry about being a biographer until I was really ready (laughing). I was sixty-five when I started the biography. One of the problems facing a biographer is selection. You can drown in your sources. Carlos Baker almost did in his biography—what I Hemingway had for lunch every day, and how many bottles of wine he drank. I also benefited from Lucid's work. Mailer wrote thirty or forty short stories at Harvard. Lucid had long discussions of almost all of them in his manuscript. You're not going to put all that in. I don't think he realized the problem, as it was his first draft. Bob wanted to do three volumes on Mailer.

So you mentioned seven years writing the book...did that entail hours of sitting in a chair? What was the process?

It was pretty dull. I wrote almost every day for six years.

Did you write it chronologically through the years?

The first thing I wrote was a chapter on the early Sixties. I began with the stabbing and took it up to the publication of *An American Dream*. I wrote that to get the contract, about 10,000 words. My agent ran an auction for eight or nine publishers who were interested. It was very exciting. Simon & Schuster won. Then I just wrote every day. I'd start at 9 o'clock in the morning and I'd write until 4:30 in the afternoon, make a big drink, go back up and read what I'd written for the day, and knock off after a few edits. Donna and I went for a long walk every morning. Didn't talk. The wheels would be turning. I'd get to work after that and it was 500 to 1,000 words a day. The final manuscript was about 415,000 words.

What was the final number?

About 325,000. I cut 75,000 and thought it was tight as a drum. My editor, Bob Bender, said, "Well, let me take a look at it." He cut another 15,000, a beautiful job. My wife read it. Mailer's sister read it. My agent, Ike Williams, read it. My brother read it. Bob Heaman, a colleague, read it. Six people read the chapters as I wrote them, and I was getting their feedback. They told me what worked and what was dull, and I listened. I think it went through four drafts, all told, then came the copy editing. For six years I wrote and then it was a year of editing,

which is a lot of fun after the writing. Writing is hard. What did Mailer say, "Anything is easier than writing." But it was also enjoyable; I loved those years of writing.

I'm interested in the art aspect...Were you consciously thinking of a story arc or was the story arc just his life?

From the beginning, I sensed it would be a mistake to go beyond his death. One of his children said, "You know, you should put in another chapter about the Carnegie Hall memorial." He wanted to hear the summative things that were said about Norman after he died, but that opens a can of worms. Which encomia does one choose? What about the nasty things said about him? How would including post-mortem statements bear on contradictory statements that preceded them in the bio? So, I decided to end the book with his death. Another issue was determining the turn points in his life. The great crises in his life invariably followed a great success. He wins the Pulitzer Prize for *The Executioner's Song*. A year later, his protégé, Jack Abbott, kills an innocent young man. He finishes *Harlot's Ghost* to general acclaim. His wife leaves him. He becomes friendly with Jackie Kennedy and Jack Kennedy. It looks possible that Kennedy wants him to be part of the Camelot round table. And then Mailer stabs his wife. I knew that these would be the three masts of the ship. Once I had the double life as a working principle, everything fell into place. It became patently obvious to me that he was of two minds about everything in his life.

FICTION

Ruinations

by Luke Bartolomeo

i.

The sheets of the bed were always tight under the mattress, and they were very crisp and starched, and the pillows, too, were always kept clean, everything white. And when you went into her room, it had a sacred space in it, the Holy Ghost trembling like heat waves about it. It had that sort of energy. Like being in the sea and feeling the great shaking waves breaking over you, and just as they broke, afterward, how there was this wet and cold shock to your system, and there was also this strange peacefulness in seeing them off in the distance, the greatness of them over with. It had this sort of feeling too. Of the aftermath of a great shock.

ii.

You would see on her walls little drawings and sketches, candles on the drawer that were half-whittled down, and there was also the ash left over from incense. It stayed there in a little broken piece of earthenware that she said

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Book Review

The New York Times

OCTOBER 20, 2013



R. KIRK J. HENSON

Towering Figures

By Martin Amis

By Graydon Carter

ROTH UNBOUND
A Writer and
His Books
By Claudia Roth
Pierpont
353 pp., Farrar, Straus &
Grosz, \$27.

AMERICAN ANTI-SEMITISM, WHICH was running high throughout the 1930s, steadily increased after the onset of war. During the entire period, polls showed, well over a third of the populace stood ready to back discriminatory laws. Nor was this a mere offshoot of the general xenophobia spawned by isolationism. Every synagogue in Washington Heights was desecrated (and some were smeared with swastikas); in Boston, beatings, wreckings and defilements had become near-daily occurrences by 1942. The

IT COULD BE SAID that Norman Mailer was a man and a writer halfway between fame and infamy and yet with little in the way of middle ground. He was, in varying combinations, a world-class drinker, feuder, provocateur, self-mythologizer and anti-feminist. He was a war protester, a mayoral candidate, a co-founder of *The Village Voice*, as well as a wife stabber, a serial husband (of six wives), and a father (of nine). He was a boxer, an actor, a filmmaker, a poet and a playwright. He was also a journalist and a

NORMAN MAILER
A Double Life
By J. Michael Lennon
Illustrated, 947 pp.,
Simon & Schuster, \$40.

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cure about that thing called "good taste" (in fact a shallow consensus of the bien pensant), Roth, dismayingly, ceased to care about literary value. "Our Gang," written in "a mere three months," is a grimly unfunny satire of the Nixon administration ("Trick E. Dixon"?); "The Breast," written in "a few weeks," transforms its hero into a giant mammary gland (an abnormally unpromising donee); and "The Great American Novel," 382 pages about baseball, is a hobbyist's exercise in virtuoso facetiousness. It was, you might say, remarkably bold: in tight succession, 1971, 1972, 1973, Roth — clearly something of a genius — pulled off three unqualified duds.

The lurid light surrounding Lucy Nelson, the five-year hiatus, the sense of an unhealed wound, the mad cackle of "Portnoy," the revolt against high seriousness and the embrace of frivolity: now the answers started coming in with "My Life as a Man" (1974). This tells the tale of Roth's "horrible" first marriage and its aftermath, a relationship that began in 1955 and ended only with an accidental death in 1968. It is a novel you read between the fingers of the hand you keep raising to your face. The central puzzle is that Roth evidently colluded in his own entrapment; and the explanation, as his proxy, Peter Tarnopol, puts it, is that "literature got me into this." The attraction to difficulty, to complexity, even to agony is real enough in an intensely bookish young man. There are numerous instances of writers who hunt down the most fantastic entanglements; they make misery their muse, or they try.

ROTH HAD FOUND his subject, which is to say he had found himself. And the self, seen through an intricate mesh of personae, doppelgangers and noms de guerre, would provide the framework (with a couple of exceptions) for his remaining 19 novels. John Updike once argued that although fiction can withstand any amount of egocentricity, it is wholly allergic to narcissism. There is no narcissism in Roth; the creature in the mirror is given merciless and unflinching scrutiny. Updike again: "Who cares what it's like to be a writer?" The short answer is, We care, for all sorts of reasons, when that writer is Jewish. (Jewish-American literature is above all new: it began with Saul Bellow, circa 1950.) And Updike appeared to concede the point when he created Henry Beech, giving his Jewish writer three full-length excursions (and wistfully awarding him the Nobel Prize).

"Portnoy" was described in Haaretz as "the book for which all anti-Semites have been praying," more toxic even than "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion." Over the years the animosity of Jewish has slackened — to be replaced by the coordinated or at any rate choric animosity of femi-

nism. Pierpont conscientiously deals with these objections as and when they arise, rightly pointing out that Roth's women cover a very broad range. But I think the charge of misogyny, etc., is just a straightforward category error. As with the rabbinical critique, there is some historical justification, but both are sociopolitical, not literary: they are in fact anti-literary. Besides, isn't women's fiction crammed with male louts and rats? Isn't men's? The right-on heroine (a violin-playing, corporation-running mother of five, say, with an enlightened husband and a virile young lover called Raoul) is of no conceivable interest to any genuine writer; besides, she is well-represented in any number of admiring narratives — and you can get them at the airport.

"Roth Unbound" is an authorized critical biography of the old school, though one invariably topped up with reported comments and judgments from the Philip Roth of today. Eighty years old, and "done" with writing (or so he says), he comes across as droll, spacious, sagaciously self-deprecating (of the early books and the early marriage), relaxed, high-spirited and warm. By the end one consents to the verdict of the Roth impersonator in "Operation Shylock," who says to the "real" Roth:

"But your eyes melt a little too, you know. I know the things you've done for people. You hide your sweet side from the public — all the glowering photographs and I'm-nobody's-sucker interviews. But behind the scenes, as I happen to know, you're one very soft touch, Mr. Roth."

The corpus, it seems, is now complete. Roth tends to divide opinion — because high originality is, and should be, fairly tough to digest. Apart from "Portnoy" and the balefully powerful "My Life as a Man," there are, by my count, three further magna opus. I am thinking of the lapidary burnish of "The Ghost Writer," the daunting intellectual rigor of "The Counterlife" and the lush Victorian amplitude of "American Pastoral." And, throughout, there are certain motifs that unfailingly ignite Roth's eloquence: Israel; aging and mortality; sickness and suffering; this whole business with parents; and, most surprisingly, this whole business with children.

In "Sabbath's Theater," the rebarbative hero is shamed after having once had a wife, and consoles himself with the thought that at least he never had a child — he's not that stupid. Novelists don't always need to try things out for themselves (and believing otherwise brought him his "Lucy Nelson," and 12 blighted years). Here we see the routine and elevatory miracle of fiction. Look at Swede Levov and Merry in "American Pastoral." You can write beautifully about children without having had any; you simply apply to the surrogate mother of the imagination. □

'Norman Mailer'



Mailer in 1969.

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novelist of enormous and singular narrative inventiveness and thrust, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, and one of the least boring and most tireless and tiresome public figures of the last half of the 20th century.

Like most legends, Mailer's was, as Geoffrey Wolff called it, a "self-cultivated" one. And indeed a veritable Norman Mailer cottage industry has burnished the legend and continues to carry it forward. No fewer than 15 biographies, quasi-biographies and remembrances, by admirers, literary historians, wives and a mistress, have been published since 1969, when the torrent of Mailer-centric scholarship began, almost four decades before his death in 2007. My rough calculation puts the total number of book pages already devoted exclusively to Mailer at more than 5,000. This month sees the publication of "Mind of an Outlaw," a collection of his essays, including such near masterpieces as "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," the dispatch about the 1960 Kennedy campaign he wrote for Esquire, and "The White Negro," a rumination that first appeared in Dissent, on what some now call "wiggers" — white hipsters who associate with black music and culture. More significantly — and adding another 500 pages to the canon — comes J. Michael Lennon's sweeping full-scale biography, "Norman Mailer: A Double Life." It is a mighty undertaking befitting Mailer's life-

time of protean output, which began in his 20s and continued right through the last decades of his life and up to the year of his death. Lennon is a fluid writer, and he's done his homework. There's not a paragraph in this enormous book that doesn't contain a nugget of something you should have known or wish you had known. Lennon has it all, and he has it down. And despite being his subject's literary executor, he has not sanded the corners of a career and life, each of which has plenty of texture and lots of sharp edges.

THE YEAR 1923 was a good one for writers: Paddy Chayefsky, James Dickey and Joseph Heller were all born that year. As was Mailer. He grew up on the outer fringes of New York City in a household dominated by women. A smart lad, he was shipped off to Harvard at 16, where he got his first taste of literary accomplishment when his entry for a college writing contest was published in Story magazine. He read voraciously, especially Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos and Henry Miller — and, in a way, his life and career became a meld of all four. As Lennon writes, Mailer liked to keep a bottle of gin on his mantel at school, "because he read that Hemingway drank it."

When America entered the Second World War, Mailer was drafted and sent to the Philippines. To young men of a literary bent, the conflict became the story of a lifetime, and on warships tossing in the Pacific or on troop caravans crossing the devastation of Europe, books about what they had just experienced began to germinate. Like his literary idols, Mailer went

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'Norman Mailer'

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to Paris after hostilities had ended, and finished "The Naked and the Dead." The book, which came out in 1948, the same year as Irwin Shaw's "Young Lions," is a brutal, naturalistic depiction of a single platoon in the South Pacific, with enough details about the sex lives of G.I.'s to bring a blush to the cheeks of not only Masters and Johnson, but a Kardashian or two. It landed on the best-seller list and stayed there for more than a year. Mailer was just 25. The Times gave it a largely favorable review. It's "not a great book," the critic said, "but indisputably it bears witness to a new and significant talent among American novelists."

For Mailer it was incontestable that two people — not two halves of one — lived inside every human: 'Every man is a marriage within himself.'

Mailer published continuously, but only rarely did he get to bathe in the pool of critical and commercial approval he experienced with "The Naked and the Dead," which some reports say is still his best-selling book. He wrote constantly, though, and with great catholic expanse, not only about the Kennedy campaign but also about moon shots, Marilyn Monroe, Lee Harvey Oswald, the war in Vietnam, the battle of the sexes, the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago and, later, the C.I.A., Picasso, Hitler and God.

As his books achieved varying levels of success, Mailer the public figure began to eclipse Mailer the writer. Back in those pre-feminist-era days, one of the more horrific, if effective, ways of making the transition from fame to infamy was to stab your spouse with a penknife — as he did to his second wife, Adele, in 1960. In keeping with the times, Mailer also became more overtly political. He was one of 31 high-minded liberals, including Jean-Paul Sartre, who signed an ad in The New York Times supporting the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, which counted among its members Lee Harvey Oswald (Mailer and many others quickly resigned from the group when Oswald shot and killed the president). He was a vigorous opponent of the war in Vietnam and in 1967 was arrested during the movement's march on the Pentagon.

The next year Mailer published both "The Armies of the Night," his novelistic work of nonfiction about the march, and "Miami and the Siege of Chicago," his reported novel about the 1968 Democratic and Republican conventions. Lennon writes gratefully, but every once in a while the academic in him bursts forward. In his description of Mailer's constant



Mailer for mayor: Campaigning in Brooklyn, May 1965.

struggle with voice — first person, third person — particularly in "The Armies of the Night," he writes: "The paradox of his achievement is that in a narrative that sunders the protagonist into Mailer-now and Mailer-then, he was able to unite all the actors, currents and rich particulars of the march, seeing them through the oppositions of his psyche. This division of self by fiat, the resolution of 20 years of point-of-view uncertainties, was a masterstroke and the most significant aesthetic decision of Mailer's career." If you don't fully comprehend that passage, you're not alone. The two books came out nine months apart, and both were nominated for the National Book Award. "The Armies of the Night" won — and it took home a Pulitzer to boot.

Mailer was on a book tour for "The Armies of the Night" when he received a fan letter from William Inge, the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright. Inge told Mailer he'd seen him on television and thought he was good-looking enough to run for office. Lennon says Mailer had considered a political career before, but thought the wife-stabbing incident might have

hampered his chances. (How times have changed.) With the whole Adele business in the more distant past, in 1969, Mailer took Inge up on his suggestion, and with his pal, the columnist Jimmy Breslin, ran for mayor on the general platform of New York becoming the 51st state. Fortunately for the city and the nation, John Lindsay won that one handily.

LENNON IS THREELESS on the domestic aspects of Mailer's life, both on Cape Cod and in Brooklyn Heights. He goes into considerable detail with regard to Mailer's morning toiletry habits. I don't want to give away too much here, and this is a family newspaper, but it's enough to say that the morning ritual culminates with a long session behind closed doors and a few hands of solitaire, to, as Mailer puts it, "comb my mind." Like all writers, Mailer was constantly short of funds. In part, this was due to the oversupply of ex-wives. There was Beatrice, then Adele, then Jeanne, then Beverly, then Carol and finally Norris. That's not counting the serial encounters with dozens upon dozens

of mistresses. ("Infidelities of" account for no fewer than 56 page mentions in Lennon's index.) In Peter Maiso's oral biography, "Mailer: His Life and Times," Shelley Winters claims that Marilyn Monroe had Mailer's name on her list of "fantasy lovers." Norris Church, a wise, cool drink of water who had once dated Bill Clinton and who was Mailer's wife at the time of his death, said in her 2010 memoir, "A Ticket to the Circus," that he "had a great time playing Henry Higgins to my Eliza Doolittle." Indeed, it was Mailer who suggested that she change her name from Barbara to Norris. At one point she became fed up with his constant womanizing. Mailer's sister, who witnessed Norris's fury, wondered why he continued to play around. "Why did you do it?" she asked. Because, he replied, "life was getting too safe."

When Mailer's finger left the pulse of the zeitgeist — which it did with some regularity — it more often than not settled on the third rail of intellectual discourse: sexual politics. In 1959 he delivered this sweeping assessment of books written by women: "At the risk of making a dozen devoted enemies for life," he said with majestic

understatement, "the sniffs I get from the ink of the women are always fey, old-hat, Quainty Gynsy, tiny, too dykily psychotic, crippled, creepsy, fashionable, frigid, outer-Baroque, *maquille* in mannequin's whimsy, or else bright and stillborn." He wasn't done. Sticking his other hand into the wood chipper, he ended by saying that "a good novelist can do without everything but the remnant of his balls." And with this brisk appraisal came the enmity of half the American reading public. Mailer believed that because he was surrounded by women from birth — a commanding mother and two sisters, six wives and five daughters — he could get away with his dips into misogyny. He grew up, he said, in a "family with a lot of wonderful, adoring women. . . I look it for granted that I could say anything I wanted about women because they knew I loved them."

As feminism became the law of the land, Mailer seemed to relish his outlaw status. As with much of his public bawling, he pushed boundaries largely for effect. When he suggested that women "should be kept in cages," Norris said, "you couldn't see the twinkle in his eye. . . Norman was not against equal rights. He just liked to be funny and ironic." At the same time, Mailer could be hopelessly self-involved. After the stabbing incident with Adele, he told an interviewer: "I lost any candid purchase I had on the right to say what is happening. I'm *parti pris*. Now when I argue the times are violent, they can say, well, look what he did. I destroyed forever the possibility of being the Jeremiah of our time." It's a rare stabber who can play equal victim to the person stabbed.

IF MAILER WAS the Sonny Liston of the literary feud, then Gore Vidal, two years his junior, was the Muhammad Ali. Vidal fought with everyone, including Truman Capote, Andy Warhol, Ayn Rand and, most famously, William F. Buckley at the Democratic convention in 1968. (Years ago, when I was at *Spy* magazine, we said that Vidal was highly litigious. He called me a few weeks after publication to say that if we didn't retract the statement, he'd sue. Years later, after he began writing for *Vanity Fair*, I reminded him of the incident, and gently asked if he saw the irony in his threat. He said he did not.)

The walk-up to the main event in the Mailer vs. Vidal rivalry began in 1971 when the two men took after each other on "The Dick Cavett Show." In a piece in *The New York Review of Books*, Vidal had said that Mailer's "Prisoner of Sex" read like "three days of menstrual flow." That wasn't what angered Mailer though; what really got his goat was that Vidal had linked him to Charles Manson. When the two authors met in the Cavett show greenroom, Mailer reportedly head-butted Vidal, and things just went downhill from there. Mailer had

been drinking, and it showed. He said that Vidal was "absolutely without character or moral foundation or even intellectual substance." At one point, Janet Flanner, who was the third guest, said how surprised she was they were doing this in public rather than in private, and that she was bored with the conversation. This brought down the house.

The main event itself occurred six years later at a dinner party Lally Weymouth had at her East 72nd Street apartment in honor of the publisher George Weidenfeld. Weymouth's mother, Kay Graham, was there. So were Bill Paley, Jackie O, Pete Hamill, Barbara Walters, Lillian Hellman, William Styron, Susan Sontag, Jerry Brown, Sam Spiegel — and Mailer and Vidal. "When I saw Gore," Mailer later told a reporter for *The Washington Post*, "I just felt like butting him in the head, so I did." As Lennon writes, "Accounts vary, but it seems that Mailer threw a pin and tonic in Vidal's face and bounced the glass off his head." Mailer didn't recall throwing a punch, but Vidal later told the columnist Liz Smith, "Then came the tiny fist! Weymouth began to melt with anxiety. 'God, this is awful; somebody do something!'" At this juncture, Clay Felker, whose nose for theater could not be dimmed by alcohol, turned to her and said, "Shut up; this fight is making your party."

MAILER WAS CONSTANTLY swinging for the fences, well into his late 50s and 60s. "The Executioner's Song," his reported but novelized saga of the life and death of the killer Gary Gilmore, won him his second Pulitzer Prize. He spent a decade working on "Ancient Evenings," which became a best seller. But by the mid-'80s the whole idea of what the American writer should be had changed. The brawling, boozing, womanizing train wreck that had characterized so many of the Lost Generation and postwar writers had gone out of style, replaced by weedy, thin-haired minimalists who had learned their craft at writers' colonies and lived in college towns teaching in master's programs. Mailer's bravura brand of life consumption was passé. What with feminism, gay rights and all the other incursions into the world Mailer wanted to surround himself with, Lennon says he lost his intellectual and political footing. The onetime liberal firebrand even wrote to the ghost in his later years. He drafted "Harlot's Night," a Pharaonic doorstep of admiration for the C.I.A. from the end of World War II to 1965. Worse, he cooped up to then Mayor Rudolph Giuliani for snorting "this sense of the poor encroaching on us."

As he moved into his later years, Mailer began to prefer the bourgeois comforts of home to the literary arena. To his kids, he became, says Lennon, "the gentle, accessible dad" they had wanted in their

childhoods. He loved family dinners at the house in Brooklyn Heights, centered at the dining-room table that even during meals was piled high with mail, manuscripts, books, periodicals and newspapers.

The title, "A Double Life," is a curious one, inasmuch as few members of the collective American creative engine have put so much of their private life out there for public consumption. But it goes to something more within than without. Lennon writes: "For Mailer it was incontestable that two people — not two halves of one — lived inside every human. As he put it: 'Every man is a marriage within himself.' The two people inhabiting him, referred to over and over as the saint and the psychopath, are linked by 'the apparently silly compromise of an overfriendly anxious boyish Jewish intellectual, seductive and inhibited by turns.'"

At the New York Public Library's Literary Lions dinner a few years before he died, Mailer was seated across from a local television anchor, something of a legend himself. The man leaned over the table and asked Norman if he was working on a book. He said he was. The anchor then said he didn't have much time to read and so perhaps he could give him a one- or two-sentence summary of what it was about. Mailer didn't say a word, but gave him a look that, as Weymouth would say, could have opened a clam across a crowded room. Having once killed a story he wrote for *Vanity Fair*, I was familiar with the look.

Mailer never coasted, and he never sat back and let his fame do the work. Right up to the end, when his heart, his legs and his lungs had basically given up — he even had his teeth removed to avoid infection — Mailer remained in the game, always working on the next big book on the next big subject. The year he died, at 81 of acute renal failure, he published both "The Castle in the Forest," about Hitler's early childhood, and "On God," his final book.

THESE ARE A touching scene in "A Double Life" involving James Jones, who, like Mailer, saw his literary future forged in the caldron of war. As Mailer once said of the writer of "From Here to Eternity," he had "the wisdom of an elegant redneck." At a party at Jean Stein's place in the late '30s, Mailer bumped into Kaylie Jones, the author's daughter. He told her, "I loved your father. He was the best friend I ever had, and I've missed him every day of my life." Mailer recounted his last meeting with him some 20 years earlier. Jones was sitting alone at the bar at Elaine's. Mailer came in and challenged him to step outside for a fistfight. Women won't understand this, nor will most men, but fistfights were, says Lennon, Mailer's way of "cementing a friendship." Jones said simply: "I can't, Norman, I'm sick. I've got a bum heart."

According to Kaylie, Mailer whispered: "There was no bravado, no self-pity, no anger in his words. Just a fact, and the total exhaustion in his eyes." Jones died two months later. To the end of his life, Mailer regretted the challenge and the way it overshadowed his last moments with his friend. At the party, Mailer asked Kaylie if there was anything he could do for her. She said she had a novel coming out. Her mother, Gloria Jones, said she would perform a popular sex act on him if he gave her daughter a blurb. Norris was standing nearby and laughed at the offer; Mailer delivered on the quote he promised, but according to Lennon, passed on the quid pro quo.

As generous as he could be to younger writers, he "wanted his own pedestal" among his contemporaries, Lennon writes. And he certainly got one. But whether it's made of sand or something more lasting is a question to be answered only by future generations. Mailer's output was nothing if not admirable: tens of thousands of pages of thrusting, lapidary prose, both fiction and nonfiction, a *New York Times* best seller in each of seven consecutive decades; the myriad trophies and acclamations. Mailer's books were big — and they got bigger as he got older. But as much as they were filled with big writing and big thoughts, they never made it into the lasting vessel of what we might call upper-middlebrow popular culture. Unlike his contemporaries Salinger, Capote, Styron, Roth, Vonnegut, Kerouac, Heller and others, he produced no single volume that captured and continues to capture the hearts and minds of successive generations. He had no "Catcher in the Rye," no "Breakfast at Tiffany's," no "Sophie's Choice," no "Portnoy's Complaint," no "Slaughterhouse-Five," no "On the Road," no "Catch-22." In almost 60 years of writing, he created no Holden Caulfield, no Holly Golightly, no Alexander Portnoy, no Dean Moriarty, no Yossarian or Milo Minderbinder. Even his old sparring partner Gore Vidal had Myra Breckinridge. If Mailer is associated with any characters in particular, they are more likely to be Gary Gilmore, the convicted murderer and central figure in "The Executioner's Song," and Jack Abbott, the killer he championed and helped free, and who, after publishing "In the Belly of the Beast," went out and stabbed to death a 22-year-old on a New York street. In his review of Mansu's 1985 oral biography, Anthony Burgess said that inasmuch as the subject was still alive, the book was "no more than a kind of interim report. The subject of a life should sit still, or lie still." Twenty-eight years on, Mailer, who moved through life like a dervish, is now lying still. Lennon's glorious biography is the first of what one can only assume will be many final reports to come. □