

NORMAN MAILER: A PROLIFIC LIFE TO THE END

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UPON HIS NOVEMBER 10, 2007 DEATH AT AGE 84, the provocative, prolific Norman Mailer left behind a huge body of work. The two-time Pulitzer winner published more than 30 novels, biographies and nonfiction works. The rights to Mailer's *oeuvre* largely reside within two major publishing houses. Picador has *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967). Vice President of marketing and sales Darin Keesler said the house is doing a rush reprint of *Naked*. Meanwhile, Random—which will hold a memorial service for the writer in January—has hard-cover rights to *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1984), *Harlot's Ghost* (1991), *The Gospel According to the Son* (1997), *The Castle in the Forest* (2007) and *On God: An Uncommon Conversation* (2007), and Vintage has paperback rights to *Barbary Shore*, *An American Dream*, *The Executioner's Song* and other works.

And then there are Mailer's archives: a 400-square-foot repository of letters, short stories, fragments of unfinished novels, screenplays and notes at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Mailer's literary executor, Michael Lennon, who is a Wilkes University emeritus professor of English, said the archives contain 500 boxes filled with "everything Norman wrote from age 10 to 84." The Ransom Center houses works by James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Tennessee Williams and others, but Lennon said Mailer's is the largest author collection there.

Among the works in the archive are the many screenplays Mailer wrote that have not been produced or even read. And Lennon is currently whittling 45,000 letters down to about 750 for a collection of selected letters. The

collection will include letters Mailer wrote from his Harvard days in the 1940s up to the end of his life.

Lennon said Mailer had done a great deal of research for a sequel to *The Castle in the Forest* but did not begin writing it. “[*On God*] was really the last book he had worked on,” Lennon said. “When he finished *Castle*, he’d been working all along on Hitler’s life, but he put that aside because he wanted to do that God book while he still had life and breath.”

Jason Epstein, Mailer’s editor at Random on everything from *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* through *The Castle in the Forest* (but not *On God*, which David Ebershoff edited) recalled Mailer’s productivity:

“In his last years Norman took on three vast, metaphysical subjects: the possibility of transcendence in his book on Jesus; the faith that life is not meaningless even though its meaning may lie beyond our grasp in his dialogue on God; and the problem of absolute evil in his projected seven-volume novel about Hitler. His limitless ambition as a writer was not simply a matter of ego, though Norman had plenty, but of his commitment to the writer’s vocation to make sense of things for himself and the rest of us.

“Two years ago when he showed me a draft of Hitler Vol. 1—which he would eventually publish as *The Castle in the Forest*, as the first in a seven-volume series—Hitler had reached the age of 12 and I asked Norman how he was going to get his subject into the bunker in a mere six more volumes. I put the question to him in this way rather than remind him that he was now in his 80s and might have to think of putting his pen down long before Hitler’s undoing. But he had anticipated the question. He said he had now decided to pack the rest of the story—the Vienna years, World War I, the early Nazi period, the ’30s, the Holocaust and the War—into just two further volumes. He was, after all, in his 80s and was not sure he had time for the more ambitious project.

“This towering chutzpah in a man in his 80s and visibly frail was not a performance. This was no *Old Man and the Sea*. It was the real thing, combining the qualities that made Norman unique among his peers; dauntless to the end, ready to fathom the deepest mysteries, he walked the knife edge where rashness and courage become indistinguishable. His magnificence never faltered. Neither did his genius. It was only his body that failed him.”

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