

IT TAKES A THIEF TO
KNOW A THIEF:
FOUR BIOGRAPHIES OF
NORMAN MAILER

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BIOGRAPHY, AS A GENRE, HAS BEEN CALLED GOSSIP, cannibalism, history, blood sport, a voyeur's dream. When I proposed to review the four central biographies of Norman Mailer to date, I got this response: "Well, it takes a thief." I am that thief, a biographer who slides in, snatches every bit of fact, innuendo, and proof. Biographers voraciously read the subjects' letters, calendars, journals, marginalia, books and articles, spending hours in dark archives, riffling through pages and pages, seeking treasure. She also talks to any who will talk to her, adjusting claims, negotiating hundreds of voices claiming the truth. And then, of course, a biographer thinks and dreams, inhabiting that biographical subject's spirit in order to write. But biographer as thief? I like to think a good biographer is a soul-catcher, moving to a person after death, inhabiting his mind, entering his body, becoming a "keeper of the breath." Thus, the biographer brings a subject to life on pages of their own so readers can better know the subject, and in doing so, can better know themselves. This soul-catcher does not work to empty a life of meaning, as Janet Malcolm contends, or to "burgle" a life for personal gain—but to assist readers in understanding the humanity, the talents, the devastating fears and failure—and as important—the worth of the life lived. The thrill for a biographer is finding and knowing the human at the center of the writing: his secrets, his passions, and his interests. In writing biography, she

brings to life someone who perhaps has more life, more intensity, than the writer or the readers of biography.

Norman Kingsley Mailer certainly warrants biographical attention. Fiery intelligence blazed in his blue eyes, and the American public watched as his slight frame became thick and muscular; only in recent years did his canes foreshadow a frailty strong enough to bring death. The full force of his mind shows in the numbers of over forty books, including eleven novels. Before he died on November 10, 2007, he had written myriad essays, nonfiction narratives, miscellanies, hundreds of articles and interviews, and thousands of letters. The Norman Mailer Collection at the Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities is the largest there of any single author. Mailer is compared either lovingly or with hostility to Ernest Hemingway, John Updike, and F. Scott Fitzgerald; clearly Mailer reigns as one of the foremost writers of the twentieth century. His years of writing, experimenting, philosophizing, brawling, interviewing, and womanizing in both private and public arenas fascinate. He certainly hasn't escaped biographers' attention. Four thick, fact laden and rumor intensive biographies have explored the man and the myth of Mailer. He warranted America's attention and he got it. Through biography a man or woman lives, bestowing greatness or acclaim or ignominy on the biographical subject. In Norman Mailer's case, biography does all of these and more.

Biographers have differing motivations for building a life in biographical text: market considerations; respect for a person's work; the chance to live in the reflected glory of the biographical subject, to interview the famous, to gathering some of the acclaim. Respect for Mailer's writing certainly drove Mailer scholar Robert Lucid's attempt to write the "authorized" biography of Mailer, but Lucid's illness and life circumstance stopped his work and he did not get beyond Mailer at twenty-eight. I do not know what drove Peter Manso, Hilary Mills, Carl Rollyson and Mary Dearborn to spend years researching and finally writing thick biographies of Norman Mailer. I hope that each biographer tried to penetrate the mystery of Mailer—a man so open, so verbal, so ready to engage the public. But that hope diminishes in light of the biographies themselves. Mailer said biographers "present me as if I have no inner life" and thus far, he was right (Lennon). This isn't to say that the four published biographies do not bring something of value to Mailer scholarship. Each does.

In taking on the reading of four biographies of Norman Mailer, I expected to read as a professional biographer, looking for comparative data,

accuracy, the biographer's sense of the man. What happened was more startling, indeed. I read them as a reader: in airports, on airplanes, during jury duty, in my office, in dentists' waiting rooms, on sandy beaches, by bedside lamp. And I changed my reader-character as each book seemed to dictate. Each biography moved from Mailer as child to student to acclaimed writer to public celebrity. I followed the biographers' rhythms, presentations, innuendos—awaiting Mailer's resurrection into a life I recognized as whole and human. I learned a great deal about Norman Mailer, and much, too, about the effect of the biographer's shaping of material to form the man.

I approached each biography as if I did not know Mailer—and after the first two books I knew him very well indeed—at least the external Mailer, the shell. In the first of the published biographies, Hilary Mills' *Mailer: a Biography* (1982), Mailer came to life suddenly as scandalous celebrity. Mills reaches out to the *National Enquirer* reader who tut-tuts her way through the slime-sheet to feel the rush of a misspent life not her own. Mills let a public avid for scandals sway her as she wrote this workmanlike biography. Next came Peter Manso's *Mailer: His Life and Times*, the 1985 version and a 2008 edition. The two editions are virtually the same, except for the sixty-page screaming screed of biographer's remorse attached to the latest edition. As I read Manso's oral biography, I transformed into a member of a wake or funeral, sitting at attention as everyone told stories and remembered anecdotes. When Mailer occasionally spoke, I felt the astonishment of someone who sees a ghostly presence by the funeral home drapes and hears the spectral voice amending the record. When Manso first published the book, Mailer was very much alive, adding to the irony of the book comprised of over two hundred remembrances. Still, it both fascinates and confuses. Moving to Carl Rollyson's 1991 *The Lives of Norman Mailer*, I approached warily. Rollyson and I both wrote biographies of Lillian Hellman, and we disagreed about Hellman. A lot. I was suspicious of him, expecting failed insight, but I was wrong. Although derivative and a bit mechanical, his Mailer biography is clear, detailed and insightful about Mailer's writing and the man himself. Mary Dearborn's 1995 *Mailer* amped up my interest, turning my reader persona into a Mailer wife or mistress, following the sleek, sexual Mailer in parties, seductions, threesomes and multiple marriages. Dearborn led me to engage in Mailer's life and work in vicarious excitement. Dearborn's literary sense made for smart reading, but she relied too much on Mailer's ex-wives for much of her material, and it

shows. As reader, scholar, and voyeur, I found at each biography's center, the wild, multiplicitous, complex Mailer. What I and other readers miss is Norman Mailer himself—his generating spark, his soul so essential to his conception of living and dying.

Mailer's first biographer, Hillary Mills, is a thorough and seemingly objective writer, serving up "just the facts—substantiated, attributed, credited, quoted, dated, sorted and indexed" (Kendall 1). Additionally, she weaves many narratives to depict each aspect of Mailer's life, ultimately creating a fully detailed—if not always complex portrait. Yet something prurient lurks in the presentation of the material. Her narrative power does justice only to Mailer the Celebrity—Capital C celebrity. She never misses: Mailer "the provocative figure" (Mills 38), Mailer the "Ego" (380), Mailer "The Celebrity Writer" (411). The biography makes enthralling reading—a comprehensively researched *National Inquirer*. Some might argue that Mailer created a public persona that took over the literary power in the eyes of the world. Mills' Mailer may just be the result—with no one more at fault than Mailer himself. What gets lost in Mills' *Mailer* is the writer.

Mills revels in bad-boy Mailer. The book begins with an introduction entitled "The Paradox of Norman Mailer." She jumps into 1981, with the fifty-eight-year-old Mailer's nearly violent press conference at the trial of Jack Henry Abbott, the convict-writer who Mailer lobbied the criminal justice system to release. When prison authorities granted Abbott parole, arguably without Mailer's influence mattering, Mailer tried to ease Abbott back into New York society; he offered him hospitality in New York and Provincetown, and sought housing and employment for him. But Abbott went his own felonious way almost immediately, killing a hapless waiter within months of his release. Mills explains in detail Mailer's testimony during Abbott's trial, but her emphasis is on the post-trial press conference where the press went for blood, accusing Mailer of "lionizing violence." Mills uses the Abbott case as one of the extravagant motifs which hold the book together—to hype Mailer the violent, whose life reads "like a bad novel" (Lauerma 1).

After Mills' opening segment, which introduces Mailer's violence and ambivalence towards women, Mills returns to chronology, moving to Mailer as Harvard-man. Only then does she regress into his childhood to explain the man he was fast becoming. In this segment of the biography, Mills writes less salaciously and more analytically about the young Mailer, struggling to

find his identity as a writer at Harvard. She interviews, for example, George Goethals who noted: "The bow-tied, velvet-slippered, three piece-suit types that made up the *Advocate* found Norman hard to take" (Mills 52). Importantly, Mills gets much insight on the young Mailer through an interview with Mailer's first wife, Bea Silverman whose blazing intelligence shines real light on the young Mailer—man and writer. The only biographer to interview Bea, Mills makes much of Bea's candor: "I think he just liked me because I went to bed with him ... [i]n those days it was very hard to find someone to do that." Mills reflects that Bea and Mailer's public, loudly proclaimed affair before their marriage was "the beginning of a personal myth of sexuality which he has been willing to encourage ever since" (67). This section on Mailer's life at Harvard and his experience in the Army, leading to *The Naked and the Dead*, is the most solid, insightful part of the biography. Subsequent chapters on the "failure" of *Barbary Shore* and *The Deer Park* seem summative and murky. Once Mailer begins to "create a public persona so vivid and outrageous, so seething with frustration at what he viewed as establishment repression," then Mills is once again on shakier ground, more attracted to "The Incredible Hulk of American letters than to Mailer the author" (Blades 2).

Mills predicates her sense of the anti-hero Mailer on what she calls "The Stabbing." She first introduces this motif in the chapter on Abbott, noting that "Mailer's own violent past, specifically his stabbing of Adele in 1960, was implicit in the uproar" (Mills 32). Mills uses the 1960 stabbing of Adele as central to her conception of Mailer the man. Placed in the center of the book, the chapter fully exploiting "The Stabbing" follows "The Messiah and the New Journalist," recording Mailer's late 1950s rise to fame in his publishing of *The White Negro* and *Advertisements for Myself*. Mailer as messiah plays to the greatness of his escalating legacy, and sets him up to fall tragically. Ready himself for a 1960 run for Mayor of New York, a remarkable act of well-intentioned hubris, Mailer's drinking, drugs, and fragile psychological state lead to his stabbing his second wife Adele at the end of a debacle of a party meant to gather support for his up-coming campaign. Mailer belligerent, the party "rough," by 4:30 a.m. few remained to see Mailer take a two-and-a-half-inch-long penknife and go at Adele. Mills seems oddly sympathetic to Mailer, but nevertheless records in excruciating detail the horror of the wounds and the now-classic battered wife syndrome as Adele defends Mailer, telling doctors she fell on glass. The subsequent tale of Mail-

er's stint in Bellevue and his recovery from his own collapse focuses more on Mailer's cover-up and his legal machinations than on Mailer's psyche.

Not that Mills forgets the paradoxical nature of Mailer with which she begins, setting up juxtapositions of behavior to highlight his chameleon-like quality. Mills seems awed by it—as well she might. She mentions, for example, in the chapter on *The Armies of the Night*: “By moving from the drunken, obscene-talking revolutionary provocateur of Thursday night to the man of action stepping boldly across the police line on Saturday to the humble lover of Christ on Sunday, Mailer had managed to encompass the spectrum of American sensibility within himself” (319). She skips a thoughtful analysis of how Mailer can do all this, and why. She merely calls Mailer, “the most expansive, sensitive—and egotistical—of American writers” (319) giving the reader the public Mailer with the barest of insight. Returning to her themes of violence and aggression that tie her Mailer biography together, she tells the reader about the “rage in Mailer,” saying the “slumbering ‘Beast’” was awakening (341). It is as if she fears our avidity for scandal might be waning. Oddly absent in Mills’ narrative is reflection on Mailer’s character, the why of his actions. Given to summaries to catch the reader up, Mills in every section, without analysis, replays Mailer as part of Abbott’s *In the Belly of the Beast*, finding an intrinsic part of Mailer more Beast than writer. Mills tells the Mailer story in extravagant detail, with wonderful interviews, lively anecdotes. But it is not enough.

Given the keen precision with which she regales the reader with Mailer the violent, she observes the sexual actions of Mailer with an almost lady-like aloofness. Mailer’s sexual prowess is always in evidence throughout the book, but Mills does not seem intent on remarking on every single woman Mailer was said to have bedded. Rather, Mills takes on Mailer’s “personal myth of sexuality” as another aspect of his own mythmaking. Mailer’s wives and lovers become fascinating interviewees that permit readers to see his chaotic and expensive domestic life, his subordination of women, his serial womanizing. Curiously, Mills lays the failure of each relationship on the competitiveness of the women and the outrageousness of Mailer, not on the complex sexual dynamic of a man and a woman—or in Mailer’s case, man and his women, plural. In her reporter’s style, she relates the public nature of each relationship: “Beverly had her first affair that summer, and on Labor Day Mailer suggested she travel for a while to think things out” (356). Mills reports, rather than develops a theory of Mailer’s desire—what he really

wanted, how it worked in his life and his literature. Unsurprisingly, Mills' Norris Church is a curiously flat portrayal. Mills seems to have bought into the young, model, trophy-wife theory of Church without looking carefully at her character and her role in Mailer's life. "The competitiveness of Mailer's previous wives seemed absent in Norris," the woman Jose Torres says is "'a nice lady' and the best of his women" (417). While true, the centered, beautiful, sensible wife with a strong sense of herself is nowhere in the book. Of course Mills wrote in the couple's early days; she couldn't have known that Norris and Norman would live together for thirty-three years, ending only with Mailer's death. By the time Norris came on the scene, Mailer's financial difficulties of five ex-wives subsumed sexual interest—at least for Mills—who depicts in great detail the debts, alimonies, divorce court proceedings, IRS negotiations. Mills' emphasis on Mailer's raucous public life makes reading her biography both fascinating and disappointing.

Mills' solipsistic take on Mailer may be a response to a publisher prodding to deliver a warts-and-all biography calling into question Mailer the writer in favor of Mailer the self-promoter. The publishing game in much intricacy is played out on Mills' pages, and her information and insight about publishing is one of the most interesting aspects of the book, another light-motif as it were. She begins with the struggle for control of the style and tone at the Harvard *Advocate*, and works this tension throughout the book as Mailer negotiated with publishers about his projects, their motivations. Publishers ardently worked to get Mailer on board, relished his potential and his professionalism, but not always his time-line or his finished product. In trying to publish *The Deer Park*, for example, Mailer met much resistance over the lascivious content. Mills details the fascinating intricacies: Alfred A. Knopf's initial rejection, Mailer's efforts to get Blanche Knopf to reverse the decision, editors Phil Vaudrin and Harold Straus agreeing to publish, only to be stopped by lawyers. As Ted Amussen of Rinehart reflected: "It was a time when publishers just wouldn't consider that kind of book. It was another world" (155). Mills, married to Robert Loomis, William Styron's editor at Random House, knew this world of publishing from the inside. This makes for great literary gossip and intrigue, heightening the drama of this important part of Mailer's life. But knowing the publishing game as well as she did, she knew what sells. Mills depicts Mailer the obsessive: fighting, boxing, women, politics, drinking, drugs, writing, spiritual inventions and wacky medical explorations. When she finally gets to the

“Celebrity Writer” in her next to the last chapter she puts heavy emphasis on the “Celebrity.”

Mills’ lucid, nearly lurid narrative of Mailer’s life subordinates his own sense of himself as first and foremost a writer. He proved that over and over again in the breadth of his subject matter, and the consistent shifting crafting of his style and content. In Mills’ biography, the Mailer who takes a swing at McGeorge Bundy and head-butted and thumb wrestled all takers subsumes the man who published what some critics called the greatest war novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, at the age of twenty-five, helped found the *Village Voice*, took literary journalism to new heights, and won a Pulitzer apiece for *The Armies of the Night* and *The Executioner’s Song*. To her credit, Mills gives the reader a great read of an utterly mesmerizing life, supplying “enough graph points of narrative to chart Mailer’s path whole”¹ (Carson 10). Mailer, the whole man, remains absent. Absolutely different in form and tone than Mills, Peter Manso’s nearly contemporaneous biography *Mailer: His Life and Times* regrettably, also failed to locate a coherent sense of Mailer—the man and the writer.

Let’s give the devil his due—in this case Manso—for this remarkable book of biography, and for a biographical experiment of compilation that worked wonderfully on many levels. There is the cacophony of voices, over 150 of them. Nearly everyone—from Fan Mailer to Norris Church to Andy Warhol to Gloria Steinem—gets their say about Mailer, telling stories, remembering relationships, giving voice to a man who was so multi-dimensional, written so much, bedded and wed so many women, loyally forged friendships, seduced publishers, broke with all of them only to come back later a more reasonable, or a more furious combatant.

Mailer complained that Manso’s biography turned him into a “gargoyle,” (Letter to Jean Malaquais) and Manso’s collection of stories didn’t really make Mailer an ornament, or a grotesque, but a corpse at a wake—an interesting corpse to be sure, and the eulogies and stories about the “dead” fascinating, detailed. The many stories that make up this biography are absolutely essential to any study of Mailer, but curious considering that Mailer was still much alive and “kicking” in the year of its first publication, 1985. Manso does occasionally include a comment or a story from Mailer himself, though they seem like echoes from the grave, clarifying, remedying “faulty” perspectives of those who surrounded the figure in life. If I, as reader, often felt like the outsider at the Wake of a particularly interesting man, sitting stiffly in the

back while others brought the subject back to life in memory—and momentarily—I remained riveted to this “rough, synoptic gallimaufry” (Burgess 103).

Nowhere in the other biographies do Mailer’s relationships, for good and ill, come forth better. His best friends, his wives, his sister, his sister’s friends, his literary combatants, his publishers, his boxing combatants—all tell of their Norman Mailer. One or two examples simply won’t suffice; the book is so packed with themes of Mailer’s life, so crowded with the people who surrounded him. George Plimpton explains Mailer’s energy: “Even sitting with him when he’s absolutely at ease, the energy is there, something almost palpable, and I’ve never known a person who had it to such a degree” (Manso 577). Fan remarks after Mailer stabbed his wife Adele: “If Norman would stop marrying these women who make him do these terrible things” (334). Jules Feiffer reflects: “[T]wo people I venerate very much, Norman and Izzy Stone, seemingly take occasions when people are there to honor and adore them and make certain that the crowd ends up hating them” (532). Mailer’s appeal, his energy, and his paradoxes burst from the pages as Mailer’s family and friends, literate people with an eye and ear for detail, tell Mailer stories, one after the other, a comment here, and a remembrance there, not a dull word for over 700 pages. Some tellers are surprisingly candid. Alan Kapelner details zestfully his lust for Mailer’s second wife, Adele. Paul Kassner vividly recollects their “falling out” in 1967. “There’s stuff here you never knew even if you’ve read everything that’s ever been written by or about the man” (Lehmann-Haupt 20).

Manso included bits from reviews of Mailer’s work, an occasional Mailer response, and quite wonderfully, excerpts from the letters to and from Francis Irby Gwaltney, Mailer’s army friend, a writer himself. The letters, oddly enough, seem fresher than many of the voices. Perhaps because the letters were not transcriptions of interviews or recollections, they retained the vigor of immediacy. Gwaltney writes in anger: “You seem to think that anything you say—no matter how insulting and crassly adolescent it is—must be taken for an utterance of God ... So let’s just stop this second-coming-of-Christ routine. It bores me” (Manso 239). And Mailer’s voice is never clearer than in the letters he writes to “Fig” or his wife Ecey. “I like a fight between friends, I mean a quick honest one. Maybe I’m pugnacious, but it’s the only thing that relaxes me...” (279). Gwaltney doesn’t want anything, really, from Mailer but his friendship, one who gives undisguised affection and brutal

commentary without fear. The letters also provide a narrative line that is easy to follow, and which is lacking in the biography as a whole. The Mailer at the center of Manso's biography is diffuse—shot out in brilliant sparks that never quite come together—not quite man, not quite spirit. But the people and the stories in Manso's *Mailer* deserve a hearing.

Despite the heady experience of listening in and sorting out all the exhilarating talk, there are difficulties enough to caution readers. One trouble is following Mailer's life and relationships with a cohesive clarity. Manso brings people in and out of the text to comment, scattering the central subject—Mailer—who seems at times like the “Lion in a Kaleidoscope” (Goldsmith 9). Manso breaks up the stories—dividing the biography's structure into time chunks of about four years—to better serve chronology, which on the whole is a smart move. He moves the story along, getting competing voices to tell the same story “slant,” in their own way. But the fits and starts of the chronology make the context somewhat confusing and unnerving. As one reviewer complained, “Mr. Manso frequently places opinions of an event before an explanation of what happened” (9). Another frustrating feature of the book is Manso's failure to identify the speakers within the text. Unlike a eulogy which usually begins, “Norman Mailer was my friend for forty years,” or “Norman was my great literary rival,” or I “lived down the block from Mailer as he grew up in Brooklyn” the reader is forced to sort out who speaks, asking “Who ARE these people? Sandy Charlebois Thomas, Charlie Brown, Ned Polsky, Glen Nelson or Shirley Fingerhood?” Reading nearly twenty five years after the initial edition, I found that names and persons have faded in the cultural memory, or at least my memory. Voices then seem “disembodied” from the overarching story, though a reader can—and must—check the list of characters in an alphabetized list at the book's end. As Diane Johnson writes, “Ignoring your general ignorance of the details, the speakers allude to events that you cannot quite pick up on Time periods converge. You aren't sure what happened when, or indeed, what has happened, but after a while you begin to figure it out” (147).

And then, unfortunately, suspicions and protests about Manso's handling of the interviews call the facts into question. Manso did all the interviews himself, miles and miles of tape and transcript. He has refused to release the transcripts, resulting in a cacophony of complaints that he altered key portions to fit his themes about both subject (Mailer) and speaker. Norris Church, for example, was appalled when the earlier galleys depicted her

swearing—with “shit this” and “fuck that”—and as Mailer said of Norris: “for better or worse, being brought up as a Baptist, she may think such words but she does not utter them” (Letter to Jean Malaquais). Apparently Mailer and Church prevailed on Manso to delete the swearing. But how it got there in the first place begs an important question. Just how much did Manso alter of others’ tales to tell Mailer’s story? Mailer said at least twenty people thought their words had been “coarsened, cheapened, rendered base, distorted” (Letter to Jean Malaquais). What is said is as widely varied as Mailer’s experience of life and people itself. But how it is said becomes strangely uniform in parts, a curious similarity of tone, what Elizabeth Hardwick called “sanitized diction” (3). Hellman interviews definitely sounded like Hellman, Plimpton’s like Plimpton, James Baldwin sound like Baldwin. But Cus D’Amato, Pete Hamill, Mickey Knox, Walter Minton, and Midge Decter sometimes similarly speak with a flattened tone. So a question that must be answered is how accountable to the truth of the stories, of the voices, is Manso’s book?

Another issue that haunts all biographers of living subjects is one of influence. In 1985, Mailer was not some embalmed body in the middle of the room. Mailer lived. And he had great influence. So while many like Jean Malaquais felt confident enough to criticize Mailer and did, others did not necessarily hold to unmoderated truth. Their complaints about the veracity of the transcript might be fueled by chagrin at what they had said. Few, apparently, wanted to make an enemy of Mailer for life. An example is James Atlas’ remarks about a critical review he wrote. He tells Manso: “I didn’t say enough about his career, lit-crit stuff, which I wish I’d done more of, because I didn’t make sufficient argument for how great I really think he is.... Maybe he wouldn’t hurt me, but that that should even cross one’s mind ... I’m not quaking in fear, I just feel it would be a very unpleasant experience” (599). Thus, the speakers had three important audiences—Manso and his public ready for a Mailer tell-all, the speakers themselves jockeying for position and aware of others doing the same, and Mailer lurking in the wings, still contentious, competitive.

Yet when all is read, the voices heard, the letters read, the absolute breadth of life and relationships revealed, I find Manso has done something extraordinary. He didn’t, as Mailer fumed, create “a study in squalid sound and fury” (Letter to Jean Malaquais). He creatively conceived of biography as a gossipy but zestful poke at speakers to get them to reveal what they know,

what they feel. By subordinating his own narrative voice, he lets his book speak—of intricacies revealed, jealousies explained, contradictions forthrightly delivered. If the book is too much a eulogy, too heavy-handed in its editing, too manipulative in its telling the Mailer story—it is still a compelling portrait of Mailer who dominates its center—perhaps a gargoyle, perhaps a corpse, perhaps a heavy breathing presence cajoling those that make his life to tell the “right” story. *Mailer: His Life and Times*—despite its flaws, its inaccuracies, its mean-spirited, poisonous new afterward, is nevertheless crucial to Mailer scholarship and the ethos of an age.

While I approached the other Mailer biographies with a sense of curiosity, wondering how the story of Mailer would act on Martinson the reader, I approached the third biography, Carl Rollyson’s *The Lives of Norman Mailer* (1991) with an attitude: I was the enemy. I had admired his thorough research in his Hellman biography, but despaired when I found no woman at its center. I assumed, then, that Rollyson had also written derivative, uninspiring facts that lead to little understanding of Mailer and his works. The Mailer photograph on the cover, a crabby fifty-something Norman, heightened my vindictive sense that Rollyson would treat Mailer as a cliché. Since he had written a scathing review about my own Hellman biography, I sharpened my knives, hardly the objective reader. After reading Rollyson’s biography of Mailer, however, I courageously, even valiantly, admit that I was mostly wrong; the book has its flaws, but in some ways it surpasses the other biographies in important ways. And it nearly kills me to admit it.

Before finding the stomach to actually praise Rollyson—and I will have to—I will attend to the reservations I have about the book. Critics have noted that the book is derivative. And that is certainly true. Rollyson himself admits it in his Afterword: “a very different biography could be written, almost carved out of Mills’s and Manso’s labors... [to] take a much closer look at Mailer’s writing than they had, and conduct additional interviews...” (370). Any biographer writing the third major biography of a public figure will rely partially on previous work. Rollyson openly does so—with correct citation. And he endeavors to dig for new material, adding new interviews, but none from Mailer (who declined) and none from other close friends or family members. He, for example, interviews Mailer Harvard friends, John Aldridge, William Styron, Norman Rosten—and others knowledgeable but peripheral to Mailer’s life. Rollyson perhaps accepts too readily

their view of events in order to give a new sense of Mailer, to write with a different spin.

More importantly, Rollyson seems not to understand the central Mailer. Rollyson, better than the other biographers, provides a clear and compelling narrative sequence of Norman Mailer's life. But in depicting Mailer as having "lives," a cohesive Mailer eludes him. Rollyson's insistence that Mailer is a man of self-invention, is, of course, true of nearly everyone. The evidence he cites throughout the book of Mailer's slipping into his "accents," whether black-hip, Brooklyn or Texan does bolster Rollyson's claim. And it must be said, an occasional comparing of Mailer to nearly everyone he wrote about makes for some interesting, insightful if reductive Mailer analysis. Rollyson suggests, for example, that O'Shaughnessy of *The Deer Park* represents Mailer when he says, "I was never sure of myself. I never felt as if I came from any particular place, or that I was like other people" (qtd. in Rollyson 93). Less convincing are Rollyson's full blown Mailer identity swaps. Rollyson has a point in comparing Mailer with Mohammed Ali: "both aging champs with self-reflexive styles designed to triumph over their faults and weaknesses." (269). But Rollyson's suggestion, for example, that Mailer and Marilyn Monroe share identity characteristics is less convincing, as when he suggests that Mailer wrote about Marilyn Monroe "to respond to the qualities in her that he found in himself ... so Monroe paints herself into the camera lens as an instrument of her own will" (254). In insisting on Mailer's self-inventions, Rollyson misses finding the man the reader can love and hate and feel chagrin and victory for, a man alive in the muck of our society, and writing his way through it. Rollyson's depiction of the multiplicity of Mailer identities is interesting, but Mailer is more than the sum of his parts.

While Rollyson does not find the essential Mailer, Rollyson's narrative line is strong throughout, and his choice of anecdote is also perspicacious. He surprised me in his ability to tell a good story, using just the right bits to make Mailer and his circumstances come alive. Not one of the other biographers, for example, depicted better Mailer's life with Lady Jeanne who could "do the twist with great abandon and accommodate the meanest and wildest of his companions" (145). Mailer's comment that if had stayed with her he might have become "Mr. Lady Jeanne" perfectly captures Mailer in the moment. Mailer's life with Adele was told with subtlety: "Adele had neither the desire nor the power to check Norman's excesses" (93). Relationships seem more real than Mills' scandal-centered telling. Rollyson doesn't make

any apologies for Mailer's more egregious actions. When explaining Mailer's psychic break, Rollyson understood the man enough to avoid assuming that Mailer somehow stabbed Adele in pure experiment—though Rollyson quotes critics who do. Rollyson avoids hype, letting the action and the work or Mailer himself speak. This is particularly evident in Rollyson's analysis of the events—and the texts—of *Deaths for the Ladies (and Other Disasters)*, noting that Mailer worked for a narrative voice that “openly addressed this nexus between violence and individuality” (143). Rollyson makes no apology for disparaging Mailer's “wacky” medical ideas: his regret at his daughter Maggie's inoculation against diphtheria because it would enter her into the “technological chain of being” (238); his theory that cancer is America's concession to its own cowardice; his feeling that birth control is technological and theological anti-life. Rollyson presents Mailer's eccentricities without hype or understanding, but integrates better than the other biographers Mailer the father into the narrative in ways that show the love and care Mailer gave to his children, always a stable patriarch.

What Rollyson does best, and what turned me from an enemy combatant to a respectful fellow-biographer, making good on his labeling the book a “literary biography.” His thoughtful tales of the vicissitudes of Mailer's writing life give the reader—even an enemy reader—a greater sense of the writing professional that is consummate Mailer. Rollyson takes even Mailer's very early Harvard undergraduate works seriously, analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the texts, looking at their seminal nature: “The Greatest Thing in the World,” “Maybe Next Year,” “No Percentage,” “A Calculus at Heaven,” *A Transit to Narcissus*. In writing “A Calculus at Heaven,” for example, Rollyson notes that Mailer “found in the subject of war the crucible of his conviction as a novelist. In order to know what he really believed, he had to know what was worth dying for” (28). In Rollyson's analyses of “The White Negro” and *Advertisements for Myself*, he integrates Mailer, his philosophy, and his literary intent into the texts. Rollyson manages to look at the texts themselves, to see what is there. In *Advertisements*, for example, Rollyson writes “in a word, Mailer becomes his own critic/promoter, combining the seemingly contrary functions of creation and criticism” (117). Then he begins the detailed analysis of the work. I was most impressed with Rollyson's reflective and thoughtful analysis of *An American Dream*, as he connects the literature to its author. Devoting a full twenty pages to the novel, Rollyson strives for insight, using what he knows of Mailer, literary criti-

cism, and chunks of the book itself to address its complexity. Perhaps other critics deliver more provocative readings, or more innovative interpretations, but Rollyson writes sound literary criticism and has a respectful, intellectual sense of Mailer's work.

Rollyson evokes Mailer's range as a writer as no other biographer did. If his retelling of Mailer's involvement in The March on the Pentagon pales beside Mills' and Manso's lively accounts (and it does), his analysis of *The Armies of the Night* itself is first rate. A key assertion about part two of the novel is a telling example:

'The Novel as History' is indispensable, for Mailer is able to display his authority by assessing other sources, probing both their strengths and limitations, demonstrating an impartiality in his scrutiny of both the leftist and the establishment press. Thus Mailer achieves an objective historical voice that complements his third-person treatment of himself in the first part. (204)

This isn't brilliant analysis, but it is sound and analytical. He goes on to suggest that *Armies* and *The Naked and the Dead* are "maps ... metaphors" ... of campaigns and of armies moved by great conflicting forces of history" (204). Because he is a biographer as well as a critic, Rollyson is especially interesting in Mailer's relationship to Marilyn Monroe and his writing of her biography. Rollyson's Chapter 10: "Marilyn (1972–1973)" not only supplies a strong link in his narrative line, but reflectively looks at Mailer the man, writer, friend—focusing on Mailer's complicated relationship to his biographical subject, Marilyn, and her husband Arthur Miller. Rollyson seriously looks at Mailer's method and purpose in *Marilyn*, a work often dismissed or overlooked by both biographers and critics. Quoting Monroe's last interview, "'You're always running into peoples' unconscious,'" Rollyson suggests that "This is, in fact, Mailer's point.... Anyone who has read Monroe's last interview and carefully studied her movies realizes that Mailer is on very solid ground indeed" (256). To further emphasize Mailer's insight, Rollyson next regales the reader with the events and textual explorations of *The Fight* (1975) bringing Mailer the man to Mailer the writer in an exemplary way. As Rollyson says, *The Fight* "contains all of the virtues and none of the vices of his best work. As in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, there is his superb traveler's evocation of environment" (264). In retelling Mailer's jour-

ney in *The Executioner's Song*, (1979) he notes that Mailer "found he could not explain Gilmore and that it was 'more interesting not to.' Guided by the words of the witnesses, he used 'very little invention'" (286). Rollyson's subsequent analysis shows insight into the book and the writer. Rollyson delivers sharp critique through the entire Mailer canon (up to 1990), although he does give shorter shrift to Mailer's later work.

While I am unable to give Rollyson's *The Lives of Norman Mailer* a rave review, it is the biography I would recommend to the person wanting an overview of Mailer and his work; it is sound, fair, and readable. If I cannot give high marks for original material or startling insight, I can honor him for taking Mailer seriously on his own merits, and for endeavoring to give life to the man through his writing. Rollyson respected Mailer and his work and it shows. He writes, "Mailer, of all writers, has made his personality an issue, and his impact upon me has been profound—often dictating my choice of subjects and my approach to biography" (370). The approach of Mary V. Dearborn in *Mailer: A Biography* (1999) that followed Rollyson's, had a different edge, often more brilliant, but not as evenhanded. She wrote a biography where Mailer "struts like a Balzacian demigod, a harlot of high and low" (Birkerts 80).

Dearborn serves up the richest brew in her *Mailer*—a kind of witch's concoction of enchanting, theoretical analyses of Mailer's work coupled with a woman's sensual consideration of the man. Ultimately, Dearborn took me, the reader, on an erotic adventure. I put myself in the place of the wife or the mistress and I rode Mailer's excesses, hated his stupid infidelities with women who couldn't possibly have worked in partnership with him, despaired of his blinders, half-admired, half-despised his straight talk about nearly everything. Dearborn, however rough she rides over the Man Mailer, endeavors—for most of the book—to find Mailer in his work and his actions. And like a wife, she is disgusted, attracted, amazed—until she isn't—and then she just wants to finish it, and him. Dearborn, at book's end, does not seem to understand Mailer's on-going life as a writer. She cannot reconcile, nor does she try, Mailer's maturity, aging, shifting character, and personality. And if I, too, wanted to finish Dearborn—after all, this was the fourth biography I had read in as many months—I didn't quite want to finish with Norman. She did.

Dearborn definitely privileges the sexual interplay at the center of Mailer's psyche, and thus she foregrounds Mailer of middle-years, skating

through the first part of his life with narrative that seems plainly derivative. Her writing and information about family seems predictable—as if she herself would rather die than have Fan’s dinner of pot roast nearly every Friday night. She barely mentions wife one, Bea, and hurriedly gets rid of Jeanne Campbell, so she misses Mailer’s early hopes of making a family of his own. Both Bea and Jeanne women were tough and super-smart—so Mailer does have an attraction to brains. Both of them—and sister Barbara—were important people to Mailer and the how and the why of his relationship to Fan, Barbara, Bea and Jeanne are truncated. Adele holds sway for her raw sexuality played out in Mailer’s life. Strangely, with all Dearborn’s rapt interest in his ex-wives Adele and Beverly, his mistress-wife Carol Stevens, and later mistress Carole Mallory, Dearborn also doesn’t quite come to grips about why such talented, fabulous women were drawn to Norman Mailer. Why would they, and Norris Church, too, put up with Mailer on his worst days? This is a question Dearborn doesn’t ask, but it is important. Dearborn tarries long about Mailer’s numerous and outlandish hot man days: telling Styron to “shut up about my wife ... I will invite you to a fight in which I expect to stomp out of you a fat amount of your yellow and treacherous shit” (Dearborn 134); taunting the audience at the “infamous” poetry reading at the 92nd Street Y; biting Rip Torn’s ear in *Maidstone* (252); berating volunteers working on his Mayoral election: “You’re just nothing but a bunch of spoiled pigs ... sitting around jerkin’ off, havin’ your jokes” (267); and on it goes, until “only ego remained” (253).

Acknowledging his complexity, Dearborn doesn’t carry a cohesive view of him throughout. She dishes the dirt in some parts, then moves to literary analysis, with just bits of reflection on the man himself. To Dearborn, Mailer is a performer, a political provocateur, mystical Egyptian priest, sexually raucous bad-lover, bully, fighter for the underdog, law-skirting dangerous edgy near-criminal, slick elitist, head-butting ass. The reader is forced to agree that he is all of these things, but still wonders, who IS Mailer? Casting Mailer into these roles, surrounding him with beautiful women and sexual intrigue, Dearborn invites the reader into this erotic place of sizzling tension and taut curiosity. As a reader of Dearborn’s biography, I am attracted to Mailer, even if I am also often fed up, ready to throw the bum out, rolling my eyes at his excesses. I want to come back and see—what’s next? Dearborn gives us a great deal, but never the whole man.

Maybe it isn't the reader who appropriates the persona of the wife-lover of Mailer in getting through the biography, but Dearborn herself. She exhibits Mailer the professional writer by attending to literary analysis and his relationship to other writers. The "New Journalist" chapter, for example, illuminates Mailer's work in the early 1960s with rare insight. She begins with Mailer's "ladies" of the era, revealing his narcissism, yet his intricacy and energy, too. Then she moves quickly to his connection to Hemingway and his death, his relationship to *Esquire*, to *Playboy*, to the great writers of his time: Gay Talese, Tom Wolfe, Garry Wills, and more importantly, Henry Miller. Dearborn's reflections move from Mailer's relationships, to his virile physicality, to his work: *Advertisements for Myself*, *Death to the Ladies*, "Ten Thousand Words a Minute," the report of the Liston-Patterson fight. Dearborn calls the whole fight scene "one giant testosterone feast" (184). Despite this dismissive description, nowhere in the other books is this time of Mailer's life and writing better integrated. If Dearborn has an unfortunate penchant for burying her insights in the middle of chapters and paragraphs—at least she has them. In the midst of "The Fight" analysis she notes that Mailer had reflected: "[W]henever I was overtired, sensitivity to the magical would come over me" (185). At such times Dearborn's research leads her to a nuanced, complex discussion of Mailer. While Dearborn revels in Mailer's writing during this period, she also points out Mailer's more excessive assertions—that Patterson was beaten by the Evil Eye, a combination of Mob involvement and poor advisors. Dearborn writes: "This seemingly absurd theory had some basis in reality, and in fact demonstrated Mailer's instinctive understanding of the boxing world" (186).

From this world of male sweat, Dearborn moves to "Changing Partners" and "A Gamble and a New Direction." These shifts the reader's attention to Beverly, wife number four, and the heady challenges and competitions of the erotic that ensued—from Mailer's rivalry with Miles Davis to his crazy insistence on "no birth control," then back to the entirely male sensibility of *An American Dream*. The literary analysis in each section is informed by the dichotomous male and female sensibilities, as when Mailer tells Gore Vidal: "The novel is like the Great Bitch in one's life. We think we're rid of her, we go on to other women, we take our pulse and decide that finally we're enjoying ourselves, we're free of her power...and there's the Bitch smiling at us, and we're trapped" (198). In language, story and metaphor, Dearborn definitely engages in Mailer's evocative world. This sometimes results in disap-

pointing literary analysis, as Dearborn's work on *An American Dream* which she uncharacteristically analyzes as autobiography, resulting in some now clichéd assessments, as well as some that seem just superficial: "In killing his wife, Rojack feels himself cured of cancer—a feeling Norman had shared after stabbing Adele," then comparing the rest of Rojack's odyssey to times with Beverly, Carol Stevens, literary tropes, and Mailer's obsessions of sex, the Devil and God. Dearborn ends this section: "That Mailer manages to create a hero with many of his own bizarre beliefs and views without making him ridiculous is an extraordinary feat indeed" (208). The complexity of *An American Dream* escapes her—and this reader, too—but Dearborn is at her best in the throes of another kind of eroticism, one played out in public debate.

Dearborn's understanding of Mailer's clash with Feminism in the 1970s is extraordinarily insightful. Dearborn seems to abjure the hype and standard view of Mailer the Macho to give the reader a new understanding of Mailer, the thinker—a man caught in a revolution he doesn't understand and instinctively rejects, but endeavors to engage: "the more widely accepted principles of mainstream women's liberation completely eluded him" (283). Dearborn despaired at some of Mailer's most outrageous comments: "At their worst, women are low, sloppy beasts" (286); "they should be kept in cages" (286). She moves, however, to an insightful and careful recording of events which shows a real effort to come to terms with Mailer and "women,"—of the movement, of the times. Mailer had a yen for women, although he categorized them in one part of his brain as a sexual and subordinated species. In a more inclusive way, he shared their humanity. While Dearborn records his wholesale dismissal of women's talents, she took his generation under consideration. He had been raised in a male culture which embraced biological essentialism. Dearborn writes carefully and thoughtfully to show Mailer's giving women and the movement a chance to prove themselves. Reading Dearborn's Mailer, the reader knows that even if Mailer still could not seem to get beyond the breasts (looking from the feet up), he intellectually knows the head, with a brain, is there—thinking, judging. Dearborn's great feat is showing that although *The Prisoner of Sex* belittles women (an assessment I have come to disagree with), "it is to Mailer's credit that he tried to open a dialogue with the feminists" and "he takes individual women on their own terms.... Mailer aims to upset and agitate his readers, reminding them of the need to challenge authority and break rules. He

is at once a progressive—he favors sexual liberation and places sex at the center of our lives” (291). Dearborn’s analysis of the man and the literature and performance of the period is incisive, excellent. When he appeared in the famed “Debate” at Town Hall on West 46th Street in Manhattan, Dearborn notes: “Few feminists would thank him for it, but by commenting on the subject—however outrageously—he served notice that it was perhaps the single most important issue of the day” (296).

Mailer had always “come to terms” with the flesh and blood women because he liked women as well as lusted after them. Dearborn’s reliance on the interviews of ex-wives Beverly and mistress Carole Mallory seep through the whole of the book, revealing more of the sexual Mailer than the other biographies. Mallory makes her entrance in the chapter “A Mistress, A Patron, and A Thriller” which begins with tales of Mailer’s “familial stability.” Dearborn documents Mailer’s marriage to Carol Stevens in November, 1980 to make daughter Maggie legitimate, then his marriage to Norris days later on November 11. Dearborn set up Mailer’s proud patriarchal position with his nine children and quotes him in *Puritan* magazine: “There’s a spiritual demand in love ... more a demand than an obligation. Love asks that we be a little flexible. It means living on the edge more than we care to” (355). At that point Dearborn outs Mailer’s serious affair with the stunningly beautiful actress Mallory which began in 1983, undercutting Mailer’s status as reformed masher and nearly causing the death of his marriage to Norris. Dearborn explores the affair in some detail: “she had become a legendary bed companion ... he loved role-playing, playing doctor, masseur, or Hollywood director ... Carole tried to surprise him every time with new lingerie or new scenarios for them to act out” (379). Salacious and exciting, Mailer and Mallory stories entice.

When Mailer discovered Dearborn was going to tell-all about the illicit sexual experiments he and Carole had shared, he was furious—and much chagrined. As he told friend Chris Busa: “I’ve been a bad, bad, bad boy” (Busa). For her part, at least according to Dearborn, Mallory thought Norris knew about his bicoastal enchantment with Mallory, a relationship more than occasional, less than seriously threatening to Norris. She had not. Mailer was forced to confess to Norris who began packing to go back to Arkansas. Somehow, Mailer talked Norris into staying, and his remorse and her common sense and loyalty prevailed; they stayed married until Mailer died. Unfortunately, the really explicit detailing of Mailer’s affair with Mal-

lory did not inform Dearborn's analysis of *Ancient Evenings*, which came out the same year Mailer started his affair. She emphasizes that the book is "marked by an erotic indulgence of the senses ... linguistic extravagances," while noting the "sheer number of graphic sexual scenes and their originality" (Dearborn 366). Dearborn quotes many reviewers who seem disgusted by the book's flagrancy, but she doesn't make the attempt to tie the book to Mailer's internal eroticism. Both book and mistress point to a time of Mailer's life, a place of his consciousness; the text and the affair warrant exploration in understanding the man. Dearborn lets Mailer's actions suffice.

For a biographer who has such insight, it surprises that sometimes her perceptions about Mailer are just plain silly. In narrating his "drug smuggling days" with Buzz Farber and Richard Stratton, Dearborn writes: "Had Norman learned nothing from the Abbott case, or from covering Gary Gilmore's trial? He still glorified the criminal, and caused reviewer Caleb Crain to accuse Mailer with a failure to 'sympathize when a drug-related prison sentence pushed a long-time friend to suicide'" (377); Mailer refuted both Dearborn and Crain, remarking "I spoke at his funeral. To this day, I am haunted by his suicide"² (Mailer, "Just"). In another instance, Dearborn clearly didn't understand Mailer and his avid reading and thinking regime. She writes flippantly: "Just as he believed himself an existentialist without reading Sartre so he believed himself a Marxist sympathizer without reading Marx" (Dearborn 60). Even novice readers of Mailer would find that assessment off, and it drove Mailer to write: "Oh God! I spent nine months in the winter, spring, and summer of 1948–49 reading and brooding over *Das Kapital* and can also plead guilty to reading and arguing in my mind for many weeks with *Being and Nothingness*" (Mailer, Letter). Such lapses in Dearborn's judgment are not the norm, but they tarnish the book.

Thus, Dearborn assesses Mailer's work unevenly. Sometimes she is brilliant, sometimes obtuse. She muddles her comparison of *An American Dream* with *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1984). *Harlot's Ghost* she nearly writes off as a "ghost" of Mailer, and *Oswald's Tale* gets a paragraph or so. More disappointing was her less than critical look at *The Executioner's Song*—for which Mailer won the Pulitzer Prize. By the end of her book, Dearborn seems not to want to understand Norman Mailer's conflict with culture, his changes politically, his madness with media, his experimental fiction and auto/biography. The mid-1980s hold her attention for a bit. She rallies in her analysis of Mailer's relationship with Abbott and seems to understand, tying

his interest in writers to his role in the debacle, enjoying the “Mailerian provocation,” and the outlandish statements Mailer made to the press, calling the *New York Post*’s work “scumbag journalism” (Dearborn 361). She revives, too, in detailing the Mailer-Manso wars. But her report on PEN in the mid 1980s is absolutely dismissive of the role he played in that critical, contentious conference. Sadly, her efforts to understand the complexity of his family life just don’t solidify into more than summary. When she closes with an analysis of a 1998 party celebrating *The Time of Our Times* and his fifty-year career, she lets Mailer speak: “It’s either my living memorial or else it’s a chance to take a large part of my life and look at it before getting on with all I have to do ... For certain I’ll take the second option” (427). Dearborn uses Mailer’s own words to illustrate the strength of his intellect—and yes, his genius—and it grips the reader. But like a woman married to Norman Mailer all these long years, at book’s end Dearborn seems tired. She’s frustrated by Mailer’s “changes,” seeing them as hypocritical rather than growth or reconsiderations. She seems irritated by his body’s frailty, his continued machismo self, his celebrity, his problematic relations with women. While Dearborn delivers a fascinating, lusty biography, she, like the rest of Mailer’s biographers to date, presents us with an absorbing life, but she fails to give us a coherent sense of the man.

Mailer never stood in the way of his biographers, but he did keep himself aloof; they each ultimately disappointed him. Mailer’s chief complaint has merit: “They present me as if I have no inner life ... there’s a tendency to be seen too much from the outside ... no matter how odd the things were that I did, I had my internal logic” (Lennon). Early on Mailer was “cautiously respectful” of Mills’ biography, saying that she, for the most part, was accurate, fair, “honest” (Lennon), but he became less sanguine as he came to know more about this tough game of biography. As Mailer testily writes Mills: “you were upset that Peter Manso was getting favored nation treatment over you, and I can only repeat what I said ... I wouldn’t help you and wouldn’t hurt you ... it doesn’t take intimacy to write a good biography, but the right kind of imagination—a rare ingredient” (Letter to Hilary Mills). Mailer reveled in the pushing and shoving competition of Mills and Manso, writing to Abbott: “Peter hates her, and for good cause;” what caused this biographers’ tiff Mailer did not say (Letter to Jack Abbott). Later, Mailer turned on Manso, remarking “what a truly unpleasant piece of work the man” was. He despaired that Manso was turning the “damn thing into a

cockfight" (Letter to Jean Malaquais). Mailer might have joined the fray had he known that after his death thirty years later Manso would release a new 2008 edition of *Mailer: His Life and Times* which villainously trades on Mailer's reputation while airing the less than credible and dirty story of their break. As late as 2002 Mailer wrote to the editor of the *Provincetown Banner*, complaining about Manso's 1985 biography. In this letter, he labeled Manso "poison-drip." The Manso-Mailer biography war continues. In January, 2009 Manso wrote the editor of the *Wicked Local Cape Cod* complaining about a recent reviewer's "pus-filled agenda" in panning his Mailer biography.

What originally stoked the fires of Mailer's indignation were the errors and "shifted nuances" biographers inevitably make (Letter to Hilary Mills, 21 Jan. 1983). He noted scores of errors in the biographies of Mills, Manso and Dearborn, even complaining that Dearborn's errors may be more numerous than her facts (Mailer, "Just"). But Mailer's fury over Dearborn had more to do with her mischaracterizing his relationship with Harry Cohn and getting "spot on" his relationship with mistress Carole Mallory. Only Rollyson escaped Mailer's heated critique because by and large Rollyson wrote his book without Mailer knowing much about it; Mailer and his assistant Judith McNally had misplaced a series of letters and questions Rollyson had posed. Mailer finally granted Rollyson permission to quote from his works, but both he and the Scott Meredith Agency were miffed that Rollyson never specifically designated what parts of his works he would quote. Rollyson disputes that complaint but says "Quite a correspondence ensued about the First Amendment and unauthorized biographies." Rollyson got permission, with Mailer requesting "I be charged the smallest possible fee" (Rollyson 372).

Mailer merely skirmished with those writers who had the utter audacity to write his life—with the exception of Manso where it got personal: "He and I are now so much at odds that I'm afraid to be in the same room with him, for fear I would kill him with my hands, and he, I think, would come to such a room carrying a gun" (Letter to Jean Malaquais). Mailer—never opposed to drawing blood with either his pen or his fist—gave these writers a wide girth initially, letting them do what they would, and later decided "it may be healthier to read no biography about yourself until you are turning in the grave" (Mailer, "Just"). As a reader, I am grateful that Mailer did not stand in their way—no matter the later sparring. The scholarship within the books is invaluable. All four of these books—complete with errors, distortions, and

idiosyncrasies—nevertheless gave this reader, and thousands of other readers, Norman Mailer, a trace of the man I have come to know.

Of course, these early biographers were seriously hampered by lack of access to the 50,000 letters Mailer wrote, and, with the exception of Manso, access to Mailer's force of personality. Michael Lennon's newly contracted Mailer biography should remedy that lack of perspective and deepen the reader's understanding of Mailer. Lennon has for years been Mailer's bibliographer and has had an intimate relationship with the Mailer family. Until a biographer such as Lennon wraps his mind around all that is Mailer and furnishes us a long-awaited sharply focused but nuanced Norman Mailer, we have not read the quintessential Mailer biography. We await the portrait of Mailer who has an inner, private life as important to our understanding of the man and his *oeuvre* as his public life. This soul-catcher will confer an immortality of a sort, a lasting depiction of a whole human being named Norman Mailer who made his mark on our world.

NOTES

1. Carson found Mills' biography conscientious and avoiding "sensationalism" and "syco-phancy." I cannot agree that she avoided the sensational.
2. In reference to Caleb Crain's review.

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