MAILER IS BACK

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Harlot's Ghost was published by Random House on October 2, 1991. The following interview, which took place three months earlier on July 7, was the first one Mailer gave on the completed novel. When it was published, under the title "Mailer's America," in *Chicago Tribune Arts* on September 29, the editors had reduced it by approximately one-fourth. Before it was submitted, Mailer read the transcript and made a number of small but not insignificant changes, expanding his comments in one place and cutting them back in another, his invariable way of dealing with interviews from the 1950s on. This version is the one he approved before it was submitted.—JML

My wife and I are expected in Provincetown, the resort town at the very tip of Cape Cod, at eleven AM; we arrive close to the hour and are met by Norman Mailer and his wife Norris. After greetings, he asks, "Have you finished it?" referring to *Harlot's Ghost*, his huge CIA novel due out in October from Random House. It is an unusually cool day in early July and we are standing in Mailer's living room, a large room six steps from Cape Cod Bay. Norris's striking paintings cover the walls. The three-story, red-brick, ivy-covered house stands in a long row of beachfront homes a couple of miles from the end of the last conch-shell curve of the Cape. From his study window on the third floor he can see the full 180 degree curve of shore and bend of bay. The guides on sightseeing buses point out the house and his study window, usually open, to tourists. Mailer has summered in P-Town for more than forty years.

I answer that I finished the bound galleys, all 1344 pages, while riding

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through Orleans, less than an hour back down the mid-Cape highway. The book's length, I offer, may be an American record, surpassing James Jones's *Some Came Running*, which weighed in at 1266 pages. Mailer, a longtime communicant in the church of organic form, shrugs off length, but notes that Random House may add a line to each page, thus trimming this novelissimo to a few millimeters under 1300 pages. Part One, that is. Part Two will continue the story of Herrick Hubbard, CIA agent, his father "Cal," also a CIA agent, his godfather Hugh Montague, another CIA agent (code name "Harlot"), and Montague's wife, Kittredge. She too is a CIA agent and, as we learn in the first pages of Part One, later marries young Hubbard. His memoir of the 40s, 50s and early 60s makes up the bulk of *Harlot's Ghost.* The novel ends with the words "TO BE CONTINUED" and Mailer explains that Part Two will cover the period from 1965–1983. In other words, the time frame of the completed two-part novel will correspond to the span of Mailer's writing life up to the publication of his 1983 novel, *Ancient Evenings*, set long ago and far away in Egypt. The year that the Egyptian novel was published Mailer said that he thought it was impossible to "write an all-encompassing novel about America." His next novel, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1984), a murder mystery set in P-Town, clearly lacked this ambition.

With the possible exception of *Barbary Shore* (1951), it received the worst reviews of any of Mailer's books. Then there was a seven-year silence, the longest such stretch in his writing life. Now, at age 68, Mailer is back and, while *Harlot's Ghost* cannot justly be called an all-encompassing novel of American life, it does provide a privileged perspective on some of the most cataclysmic events and fabled figures of American life after World War II. Like a long freight train, Mailer's story of WASP agents at the heart of intrigues at home and abroad (Berlin, Uruguay, Russia and Cuba) picks up speed and momentum as it snakes through postwar American life, accelerating tremendously as it moves through the CIA's failed invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, the attempts to assassinate Castro and the Cuban missile crisis, and the assassination of J.F.K. Some of Kennedy's extra-marital love affairs comprise another strand of the byzantine plot of deception, betrayal and heroism. Mailer has said that this was a period when individuals were willing to die for an idea, and in *Harlot's Ghost* many get the chance. Given the novel's stupendous length and ambition, and the fact that it is saturated in the horrors and aspirations of the American century, it seems likely that

it will be measured against Mailer's 1959 statement that he wanted to "try to hit the longest ball ever to go up into the accelerated air of our American letters."

The key event of this whole period, and of the book, is the assassination. Later Mailer tells me that "Kennedy's death created a greater obsession in the thinking of Americans than Lincoln's assassination." He says, "It's a little bit like carrying a five or ten-pound impost on your back throughout the day, every day of your life." I ask why Kennedy was the great obsession.

"Because we don't know who killed him. And we don't know how it happened."

"Would knowing that dissolve the obsession?"

Mailer reflects on this for a moment. "Well, it may be too late now. I mean, a whole generation's been marked by it. And we have a new generation that doesn't care. But precisely because they don't care, they've also lost other things."

Mailer looks fit and happy, having shed a few pounds and finished his tenth novel and thirtieth book. A chrome steel exercise machine—weights, pads and pulleys—stands next to his writing desk in the attic and he has put in daily sessions for some time, often in tandem with his and Norris's son, John Buffalo (don't ask about the name; the Mailers won't tell). Taller by two hands than he was last summer, John resembles his father more than his siblings (eight in all). Indeed, at 13 John begins to look like the lean young man on the dust jacket of his father's first novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948). John joins us for lunch at the long glass-topped table that looks out over the low tide flats.

As he passes around the tuna salad and the fruit, Mailer gently deflects questions about the novel. He says he doesn't want to dissipate his comments before the interview, his first on *Harlot's Ghost*. He allows, however, that the novel is "one of my four best books," along with *The Naked and the Dead*, *The Executioner's Song* (1979), and *Ancient Evenings*. After lunch we continue talking in his study. A mock-up of the dust jacket for *Harlot's Ghost* lies on a table heaped with dozens of reference books on the CIA, Russia, Cuba and the 60s. Except for this table, the battered writing desk where he writes in longhand, and the exercise machine, the attic room contains only a small couch a few bookcases. Summer light streams in the third-floor window. Below, the tide is beginning to turn.

L: How do you describe your new book?

M: I start by saying it's a novel about the CIA. I emphasize that it's not a spy novel. The characters are people who live and work in the CIA and some of them complain that their lives are *not* like a spy novel. At one point, one character says to another, "You know, it's as if we come in at the fourth chapter of a novel and we don't know what the first three are all about, and we don't know what the rest of the book is!" My protagonist is a young man who years later writes the book in the form of his memoirs. All of my life I've wondered what it would be like to be in the CIA. But Hubbard is not me; he's a WASP. He comes from a very good family and he grows to be conservative in his political opinions. I could never have been in the CIA because I was too radical when I was young.

L: How did you handle your feelings of detestation of the CIA?

M: Well, I've never detested it. I detest sentimental movies like "The Sound of Music" that make 50 million dollars. I was in awe of the CIA; I feared it; I was paranoid about it for many, many years. My feeling was that if I gave the most honest portrait of the CIA that I could, it would be, *ipso facto*, critical. Completely accurate portraits are always critical. If I were to read a completely accurate portrait of myself, I probably would think it was terribly critical. But I didn't write the book with an edge. I thought there was no sense in writing a book that attacks the CIA.

L: What are your feelings about the CIA?

M: I think the CIA has done terrible things, while being an absolutely necessary function of the American empire. If you have a great, powerful country then obviously you're going to have an intelligence organization. What makes it interesting is that the American intelligence organization is different. There's a tendency, I think, for Europeans to compartmentalize their intelligence organizations. They expect very cold-blooded people to run them without a backward look, whereas we demand more morality from our intelligence officers. And so what you get are WASPs, who have been brought up to be incredibly ethical, out there doing naughty things, bad things, deceitful things, distorting history. And their sometimes delicate justifications come under the great umbrella of anti-communism. So there's a kind of implicit comedy of manners that goes on throughout the book. I don't mean it's a funny book, but there's a lot of smiles in it.

L: What about the FBI? You've had a lot stronger feelings about the FBI.

M: The FBI has been a bit of a brute in American affairs, an ugly brute. I think J. Edgar Hoover was despicable and maybe some of my bias shows. In

fact, no one in the book refers to him as Hoover. They call him J. Edgar Buddha. Another thing is that relative to the CIA, the FBI had no manners. There was such a difference between the two organizations.

L: Your FBI agents are usually oafish, aren't they?

M: Yeah, they're crude. The CIA in the years I was writing about was very much an upper-class organization, and the FBI was lower middle class. Upper middle class people can put up with working class people, but they can't put up with lower middle class people.

L: Are you saying that one of your major intentions was to present a mosaic of American social life in the 50s and 60s?

M: I think it was secondary. Let's put it this way: if you're running a very long novel with a great many characters, you're going to have a lot of the social life of a period, willy nilly. I never thought twice about it. I knew it would take care of itself. My real interest was in the life of the intelligence man. At one point in the book one of the characters says to another, "Any man who has ever cheated successfully on his wife is equipped for espionage." What I'm interested in is treachery in human relations. As you can see, in this book there are endless permutations on that, endless studies, for example, of agents exercising other people, manipulating other people and yet still feeling moral.

L: One thing that struck me was how much, how indiscreet so many of the people were. Hubbard, the narrator, the protagonist, comments on it more than once. Won't certain people find fault with the level of indiscretion?

M: Oh, I think there will be CIA hands who will review the book and say, "This is ridiculous; this is absurd." But I tell you frankly I don't believe them. Maybe I exaggerated the indiscretion a bit, but not much. As one of my characters says, "Well, we have the same trouble keeping secrets that priests have keeping their sexuality under control. We often get obsessed with it and then we go off on a tear." This is a very unspoken drama in the CIA. Obviously no one from this organization is ever going to write about indiscretion in the ranks; they will *feel* it within the ranks, but it's never going to get out if they can help it. I've always been very amused by CIA novels that have this absolutely immaculate secrecy governing operations. Maybe there's one traitor, but he's absolutely uncharacteristic of the whole. But it seems to me that they way these things really work is with a mixture of high secrecy and violations of that secrecy.

L: Has this been corroborated in any way by all the research that you did?

M: No, it's not particularly corroborated. There are indications of it here and there but I can't . . . this is really my own secret thesis, if you will, and some people might say it's absolutely wrong. But I'll just say, "Well, you guys created an organization that's so secret that we can't know it from the outside. This book is my imaginative reconstruction of how you guys lived your lives." I talk about this in the "Author's Note" at the end.

L: Your hero is wonderfully placed in that his father, his godfather and the woman he loves are all high CIA officials. At one point he is sleeping with the same woman who sleeps with the President of the U.S., the head of the American Mafia and perhaps the most important American entertainer of this century, Frank Sinatra. So he is certainly—talk about sexus, nexus, and plexus—located where all the crossroads meet.

M: If you want a vast novelistic canvas you have two choices. You can make it absolutely disjunctive and just move around like dogs from spot to spot, as I did in *The Executioner's Song*. But I thought that a book like this had to have a point of view, and it had to be contained within one character's mind. Also, I was fascinated with something else, which is that Hubbard is in on everything that happens but not in the same way or to the same extent. One of my interests is epistemological—how do we learn what we know? And I think we could go through this book and find he never learns anything in quite the same manner.

L: I thought it was a most Jamesian novel in its epistemology.

M: I think it is. James frightened me forever with his dictum that one must never put information into a novel unless it is digested through the lens of a character's perceptions.

L: So you didn't want someone who could see everything like God could, as in *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Executioner's Song*, because you wanted to be able to show the effects of all the novel's happenings on one individual, the feel on the pulse.

M: Yeah, and that central individual is connected umbilically to the reader. If everything flows from one character to the reader, then there isn't that need for an intermediary, a narrator. Now in *The Executioner's Song* I felt I was entitled to a narrator because the information about Gary Gilmore and the other characters is received information; I wasn't making it up. If you go through my works after *The Naked and the Dead*, there is no book that is free of this kind of point of view. In fact, I almost strangled in *The Deer Park*

(1955) trying to get a double point of view. All my novels are that way, except for *The Executioner's Song*.

L: Which is not really a novel.

M: Well I thought it was, relying on the old argument, "If it's written like a novel, it is one."

L: Which leads to my next point. You use a remarkable number of real people. There must be about twenty historical characters with speaking parts. Can you list them?

M: There's E. Howard Hunt, Bill Harvey, there's Allen Dulles, Helms, Kim Philby, Burgess, Bissell.

L: The Kennedy brothers.

M: David Phillips, the Kennedy brothers, all the Kennedy cabinet people. Gen. Lansdale is real.

L: That's the government world, but then you've also got the Mob.

M: The Mob: Giancana, Roselli, Mayheu, Santos Trafficante, Cubela is real, Cubela who was supposed to assassinate Castro. In fact, the episode at the end of the book, where Cubela received the poison for Castro, and something like an hour later Kennedy was assassinated, was one of the prodigious examples of serendipity in that world. And Castro's in the book.

L: Castro is a character, but it seems to me there is a difference in how he is seen as opposed to, say, Hoover.

M: There's no way that Hubbard can meet Castro; he only gets indirect, received information. People interpret Castro for him, tell him stories about their meetings with him. So I feel Castro becomes a character. One of the things I learned from *The Executioner's Song*—there would be these extraordinary people I met while interviewing for the book, and I'd say, "Why the hell didn't God permit these two fascinating people to meet?" With all my novelist's training, I wanted certain people to meet. Well, when they sometimes did meet, the meeting would be as disappointing as hell. I kept realizing that this does not diminish the drama, this increases it. Most of our lives is spent getting ready for dramatic moments that don't take place, or if they do, they're piss-outs, disappointing as hell. Or we say, "Well, nothing ever really big happens to me." Then, BAM, you get knocked down with something so much bigger than you expected. Also, our knowledge of people is always partial and imperfect. So, anyway, the characters in the book are all treated differently. Some of them you get very near to; some of them you hear about at some distance, like Castro; others come in and out of focus.

Some of the characters I treat with great historical respect. I hope, for example, that there are few exaggerations about Hunt, because I thought it was important not to go beyond his autobiography called *Undercover*, which is reasonably candid. I felt I was honor bound to try and see him through his own eyes, to give him a fair shot.

L: I think you were fair to Hunt, but you treated Judith Campbell Exner differently.

M: I felt if I used the historical Exner I would be absolutely limited by her privacy. So I created another character to take her place which enabled me to explore certain aspects of her relationships with Kennedy and Giancana that I couldn't have if I had used her.

L: Exner is called Modene Murphy.

M: But Modene Murphy is not Exner. Judith Exner gave me the sanction to create a woman who would be a little like Exner and very different. Exner gave me the line of the engraving that I could follow. But Murphy is different in all the coloration, different in the motivation, in her style of speech, different in a lot of ways.

L: I thought the lunch between Kennedy and Hoover to be one of the finest things in the novel, how they tip-toe through the tulip bed of Kennedy's love relationship with Exner.

M: It was like a ballet with each man holding a pistol. That's why Kennedy at the end says, "Give my regards to Clyde Tolson," who was Hoover's companion.

L: Did they really have lunches like that?

M: Historically, that lunch took place, and after that Kennedy cut off Judith Exner.

L: You said it is an epistemological novel, but it's also an epistolary novel to some extent. In fact, it probably has a higher percentage of letters and documents in it than *The Executioner's Song*, maybe 25 percent.

M: Maybe 30 percent.

L: Why did you commit so much information to documents?

M: In the CIA half of what is learned comes from documents. I felt it would give a much better picture of the life there if documents with their almost unendurable bureaucratic language were floating through all the time. To me, this is part of the comedy of manners at the CIA. Let me say another thing. There are very few departures in the book from historical reality. Not everything is historical, but there is a paradigmatic curve of the horizon of

possibilities. I can name a couple of departures. One of them is where the CIA makes a facsimile of a Manta Ray, or a mantoid, to assassinate Castro. I felt I had written over 1,000 pages and I wanted to have a little fun. So that was one indulgence.

L: But not the fountain pen as an assassination weapon?

M: The fountain pen is real.

L: The pills are real?

M: The pills are real. The assassination attempts on Castro are all real. All the major events in the book are real.

L: Why did you feel the need to have two father figures, or really three, for Hubbard?

M: Usually, for purposes of economy, there's one father figure in a book. But I'm a little tired of the neat novel. They're jewels and gems and one admires the great craftsmanship. But what we have in America is this vast inchoate society that's almost impossible to define, and so I said, "Let me try to find some form that's much more open; let me not restrict myself to narrow limits."

L: Modene Murphy tells Herrick Hubbard at one point that he is the first one that has ever brought her to orgasm. It struck me that you were elevating Hubbard a notch above some fairly renowned lovers, Jack Kennedy and Frank Sinatra.

M: Well, you are assuming that Modene is telling the truth. All we have is her word for it; this is an epistemological novel. But this shouldn't seem extraordinary. I mean, I'm willing to believe her tale for the following reason, which is that women are not necessarily like men. A man can have an orgasm as quickly with a woman he despises as with a woman he loves dearly, in fact perhaps more quickly. Maybe Sinatra was a far better lover than Hubbard, but she might not be able to make it with Sinatra because she thought she would become his slave if she did. So in that sense I felt it was legitimate. Of course Hubbard takes it as a sign that he is a better lover than they are. Well, that's male vanity. To me it was part of the sexual game that men and women play all the time in their mutual confessions.

L: It seems to me that your characters in *Harlot's Ghost* have, to use one of your favorite words, have a really definable armature to their personalities.

M: The people in this book are much more *formed* than most of my characters and that's because they're in the CIA. That makes for people who are highly formed. On the other hand, a couple of people in the book

are not at all formed. Modene changes. Dix Butler, Hubbard's fellow agent, changes a lot.

L: I'm not sure if he ever totally comes into focus.

M: He may not. I'm kind of saving Dix for the second book.

L: Can you say anything about Part Two?

M: In a sense it's going to be about Watergate, about Vietnam and Watergate. Also about Russia; part of it takes place in Russia. And it will deal with the marriage of Kittredge and Hubbard.

L: But you're taking a break to write a book about Picasso.

M: I think I've got a book about Picasso, not a major book, but a good, interesting, short book.

L: But is it going to be a complete biography?

M: It will cover the life quickly, look at certain points.

L: How much will you look at his works?

M: I've spent six weeks looking at about 15,000 prints of Picasso's work, so I feel formidable.

L: This isn't going to be one of those Norman Mailer projects that starts small and takes over three or four years of your life?

M: I hope not; I absolutely hope not. There have already been a great many books about Picasso. And John Richardson is working on a four-volume biography. But I think I have an insight into him; there are a lot of parallels in our lives. He had many sides. He was a great pornographer; he was also a great sculptor. I know one very intelligent woman in France who says he was the greatest sculptor of the 20th century.

L: All you have to do is walk by the Cook County Building in Chicago. I have pondered the connection between the late Mayor Daley and that sculpture.

M: Which one?

L: It's right in Daley Plaza. It looks like a horse; it looks like a woman; it looks like Mayor Daley. It's a huge thing that he donated to the City of Chicago. It dominates the Daley Plaza. It's massive.

M: He donated it, gave it free?

L: I don't remember the details, but I think that he did donate it.

M: Why would he give it free? What did Chicago do for him? I'm just curious because it would not be like him to give it away. I mean, he never even visited America . . . Maybe he liked Chicago. I'll have to check it out when I'm there this fall.