PUT EVERYTHING IN

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Norman Mailer: A Double Life
By J. Michael Lennon
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MANY PEOPLE BELIEVE THEY KNOW MUCH OF NORMAN MAILER'S LIFE AND WORK. Virtually no one knows it all. This long-awaited volume does much to close that gap. J. Michael Lennon, Mailer's archivist and confidante of many years, armed with his access to all Mailer's letters, interviews with virtually all the intimates and principals in his life, and all the weighty Mailer papers which Lennon himself was instrumental in collecting and categorizing, does an exemplary job of presenting Mailer, the man and the writer. This is no puff piece or hagiography: Mailer told Lennon toward the end of his life, to "put everything in," and he has: triumphs, disasters and all the warts.

An example: "[F]ew individuals who argued with Mailer felt that he welcomed rejoinders. Sometimes he did . . . but he could also be immodestly self-assured and dismissive . . . he was also terribly opinionated." His eldest child, Susan, said: "[I]t was tough because he easily got impatient. I don't think he was really interested in what I had to say; he wanted to talk and be heard. . . . If you ask me what I regret, I'd say the lost opportunities are close to the top of my list."

Another interesting revelation is that although Mailer was proud that he had never undergone psychoanalysis, he did reveal many deeply private feelings to his close friend, psychoanalyst Robert Lindner, including "a buried fear that under everything I'm a homosexual. That was always a fear." This concern, based on occasional episodes of impotence, was repudiated by

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Lindner, who said "[Y]ou're not. What you're suffering is latent homosexual anxiety, which is common to all of us."

On a more important level, the subtitle first appears in a letter from the young adult Norman Mailer to his father, Barney, and refers to the latter's "double life" as father and husband versus compulsive gambler and dapper ladies' man. It is later applied several times to Norman himself as in this early passage: "Unfaithful in all of his marriages, Mailer was a serial philanderer. His affairs caused him and his family much misery over the next fifty years," and in this later one: "[Mailer's] infidelities are, in fact, the vices to which he refers. . . . They are also the reason he believed he was exactly like his father: he was also a secret addict, not to gambling, but to women. . . . Barney's double life gave Mailer a model and even sanction for his own."

Mailer had a dual vision of himself between egotism and insecurity, at least in youth, as this passage from an early (1952) but post-fame journal indicates: "In social life I have a crutch, I am Norman Mailer, and I get a false sense of ego, but to be alone on a train, eat in a train diner, and everything intimidates me, including the hostess, the waitress and the other passengers. Once again I am little and ugly." And, "I, who am timid, cowardly, and wish only friendship and security, am the one who must take on the whole world. I, whose sexual nature is to cling to one woman like a child embracing the universe, am driven by my destiny to be the orgiast . . ." These contradictions were later resolved, I believe, by the disarming announcement of a new modesty in *The Armies of the Night* (1968) when Mailer recognizes that he would, at 45, no longer be capable of being an armed revolutionary, because he was too old, fat, and well-known; and again in *The Fight* (1975) when, after a riff on how the lion he hears on returning alone from late night roadwork with Muhammad Ali must be "Hemingway's own lion" waiting for a suitable surrogate, he realizes that the animal is a caged one in the local zoo, but puts the self-deprecating story into the book nonetheless. Thus, it is again shown that "Mailer was a lifelong autodidact," who, as Norman Podhoretz wrote, "must always work everything out for himself and by himself, as though it were up to him to create the world anew over and over again in his own experience." Strangely, Mailer in a flight of what he probably considered hyperbole rather than the prescience it seems to have been, once wrote a friend, "I'm often convinced I'll be married six times in my life." He was still in his second marriage at the time.

Another excess for Mailer was, of course, his drinking. At a time when he

felt that many of his New York friends were dropping him for being too radical, Lennon points out that "Mailer was obstreperous when he drank, and he was drinking a lot. . . . The booze sanctioned crazy behavior. He took on accents—an Irish brogue, a British one . . . and the Texas drawl he had learned in the army, his favorite. Asked by Dwight Macdonald why he assumed these roles, he responded that "he lived 'in a perpetual stagefright, going to so many parties,' and therefore 'assumed the accents as a kind of mask.'" In the 1950s, for other reasons (notably the insights it gave him), he added marijuana, "the beginning of a long love affair with the drug." His use of Seconal and Benzedrine were of short duration during the stressful period in the mid-fifties when he had so much trouble with the publication of *The Deer Park* (1955) because of what was then considered its borderline obscenity, a judgment laughable by today's standards. (Similarly, the *Esquire* serial version of *An American Dream* was almost canceled by Arnold Gingrich because of the graphic passage of anal intercourse between Rojack and Ruta.) In any case, Mailer's disapproval of recreational drugs other than alcohol and marijuana was strong and final after the fifties, as most clearly illuminated in *The Armies of the Night* when he condemns LSD as a satanic drug because of its deleterious effects on the chromosomes. He goes on to sympathize with the younger protesters at the Pentagon, those "jargon-mired, drug-vitiated children."

Armies, of course, announced the beginning of the ten-year period during which Mailer would become "the preeminent insider/outsider of American culture." The decade would also be marked by his sometimes parodied but almost universally acclaimed use of the third person to describe himself as narrator/participant in the events discussed. The other salient characteristic of this period was the prevalence of biographies of prominent Americans: Marilyn Monroe, Muhammad Ali, Henry Miller. This remarkably seminal period concluded in 1979, when Mailer published *The Executioner's Song,* often considered his finest book. It was biographical, yes, but Mailer was decidedly *not* a presence in the book, which was masterfully written largely in third person limited to convey the thoughts and style of its many characters.

Lennon is clearly conversant with all the pertinent texts, primary and secondary, but he resists the temptation to go into too much depth in either. Rather, he treads the thin line between too little and too much, succinctly treating each of Mailer's forty-four books briefly and incisively as it occurs

chronologically, and citing the major critics sparingly in terms of each. Cumulatively, this method provides a comprehensive overview. Thus, the work will appeal to virtually all literate readers. An intelligent novice, innocent of but interested in Mailer's body of work, would find the biography a fine introduction and guide to the canon.

In terms of the four previous biographies by Hilary Mills, Peter Manso, Carl Rollyson, and Mary Dearborn, and the memoirs by Adele Morales Mailer, Carole Mallory, Dwayne Raymond, Norris Church Mailer and others, Lennon does not demean his mission by arguing detailed points with them. Rather, he presents his well-grounded version of the truth, and quotes the earlier biographers when their information meets his high standard of veracity. In fact, Lennon's work reminds one of the strengths of the now classic *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (1969) by Carlos Baker.

Lennon has had unprecedented access to interviews with the main actors in the Mailer saga, notably Mailer's sister, Barbara Mailer Wasserman; his sixth and last wife, Norris Church Mailer; his frequent collaborator Lawrence Schiller; and above all Mailer himself. Of the innumerable interviews Mailer gave in the course of his life, Lennon is apparently familiar with all, and quotes sparingly but pertinently from many.

This book rivets one's attention like a good novel. One reason is that Mailer lived his life on the edge like many of his protagonists, such as Stephen Richards Rojack of *An American Dream* (1965) or Tim Madden in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1984). And like them, he embraced not only creativity but violence and sexuality. In fact, it is precisely these three preoccupations that led to the three major crises of Mailer's life: the 1960 stabbing of his second wife Adele, the notorious Jack Henry Abbott episode (fueled by Mailer's belief in Abbott's potential as a writer), and the near breakup of his marriage to Norris because of his many infidelities. If this biography is built around an armature, it is these behaviors and crises.

Another primary quality of Lennon's biography is his own fine, cogent prose style. In dealing with the best known and most controversial of Mailer's essays, "The White Negro" (1957), he concludes: "The division of opinion on the essay continues; it is regularly used as a club in the continuing race-gender-power debates of academics. It rasps, it elates, it confuses, but it is unforgettable."

Much of Mailer's life was informed by violent conflict: he once struck his beloved sister Barbara and broke her glasses during a period of great stress;

he wrote a poem about how the first cancer cell developed in his body when, by an act of will, he refrained from striking his mother, the person who Lennon shows loved him more than anyone else in the world; he had his eyes gouged in a fight with a street corner hoodlum who called his poodles "queer." Yet he was also a loyal friend whose love and generosity was experienced by many, as when he forgave his long-time friend Bernard "Buzz" Farber for wearing a wire in an attempt to entrap him for federal authorities, or testified on behalf of Richard Stratton in his drug trial and for William Burroughs, supporting the redeeming value of *Naked Lunch*. He cried over the death of Richard Adan, Jack Abbott's stabbing victim.

Particularly exemplary of the tension between Mailer's warm friendship and tempestuous rage were his problematic relationships with fellow contemporary novelists, notably James Jones, William Styron, James Baldwin and Gore Vidal. After a night of drinking with Mailer and Jones shortly after they had achieved their early fame, Styron exuberantly remarked: "Here we are, the three greatest novelists of our generation." The joy and confidence were later to be replaced by conflict.

"Although it would be brief, his relationship with Jones would be the most intense male friendship of his life," writes Lennon. Of their early and similar success, Mailer said "we felt like the touchdown twins." In *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) Mailer would make the probably ill-advised choice to comment, often acidly, on twenty-one of his contemporaries. Of Jones, he wrote, "he had come out of nowhere, self-taught, a clunk in his lacks, but the only one of us who had the beer-guts of a broken glass brawl." Jones inscribed a copy of *From Here to Eternity*: "To Norman—my most feared friend; my dearest rival." After decades of fallings-out and reconciliations, Mailer ran into Jones, then seriously ill with the congestive heart failure that would kill him, and offered to remedy their differences outside on the street. Jones was too sick to accommodate him.

Of Styron, Mailer wrote in *Advertisements*, "[He] has spent years oiling every literary lever and power which could help him on his way, and there are medals waiting for him in the mass-media." More intimately, he wrote Styron a letter upon hearing a rumor that the latter had gossiped about Mailer's wife Adele, promising in part: "So I tell you this, Billy-boy. You have got to learn to keep your mouth shut about my wife, for if you do not, and I hear of it again, 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." Styron was said to be "scared, really scared." The two were never really friends again.

Baldwin, whom Mailer had met in Paris at the home of Jean Malaquais, was a man he respected for his "fantastic and varied" life experience, but whose work is often "sprayed with perfume. [He] seems incapable of saying 'fuck you' to the reader." This ability, of course, was one of which Mailer himself was capable as early as his *Village Voice* columns.

Gore Vidal was a good enough friend to offer Mailer sanctuary after the stabbing of Adele, and late in life they did public readings together of *Don Juan in Hell*; but in between they had a terrible feud in which, after Vidal compared Mailer to Charles Manson in print, Mailer subsequently punched and head-butted him. This came to a head in as public a forum as can be imagined, when they appeared together with Janet Flanner on the Dick Cavett show. Drunk and combative, Mailer was made to seem as contemptible and ridiculous as in any public appearance of his life. This made even *Time's* hateful description of him as quoted in the opening of *The Armies of the Night* tame by comparison, although the 1971 public debate that came to be known, in Germaine Greer's words, as "Town Bloody Hall" rivaled it in vitriol towards Mailer.

A further note on Mailer's relationship with his mother, Fanny or Fan, is in order. She doted protectively on him not only in infancy and boyhood, but throughout his life. About Adele, she wrote, "I felt very antagonistic to Adele. . . . How could she measure up to my son, a Harvard graduate, a famous author." And Carol Stevens, Mailer's fifth wife, recalls how Fanny "lectured me on the merits of her genius son, explaining how unusual he was, and how he needed more love than other men." When Mailer learned that he was considered the archenemy of the women's liberation movement, he was surprised because, as he explained it, with a loving mother and strong aunts he could not help but love women.

This cut no ice with feminists, whose antagonism towards him peaked in 1971 at "Town Bloody Hall." Mailer had recently published *The Prisoner of Sex* and he was asked to moderate "A Dialogue on Women's Liberation" at Town Hall in New York City. One of the four women panelists, Diana Trilling, said "It would be difficult to exaggerate the disorder of the evening: the raucousness, the extreme of polemic, invective, obscenity." Many prominent feminists in the audience attacked Mailer vitriolically, supported by the panel, with the notable exceptions of Greer, "who wanted to meet Mailer and go to

bed with him" (a desire which was to be thwarted by Mailer's refusal shortly thereafter); and Trilling, one of Mailer's closest woman friends, who called him "the most important writer of our time." This, despite the fact that when they first met at a dinner party, Mailer's opening remark to Trilling was, "and how about you, smart cunt."

And regarding women, who has not heard (as Mailer might say) the story of how the author of two books on Marilyn Monroe (*Marilyn: A Biography* [1973] and *Of Women and Their Elegance* [1980]) never met her, although Shelley Winters maintained in her autobiography that she introduced the two when she and Marilyn were roommates and starlets. The most evocative part of this legend occurred when Arthur Miller and Marilyn lived five miles from Norman and Adele in Connecticut; when the invitation to visit finally came it was while Monroe was absent. Mailer's poignant reaction in *Marilyn* was: "Nor could the novelist in conscience condemn the playwright for such avoidance of drama. The secret ambition, after all, had been to steal Marilyn." He went on to write that although, in his vanity, he thought that of all men he was best suited for her, "It was only a few marriages (which is to say a few failures) later that he could recognize how he would have done no better than Miller and probably have been damaged further in the process."

One of those painful marital failures was with Mailer's third wife, Lady Jeanne Campbell, killed in effigy soon after in *An American Dream* which she termed "the hate book of all time." *Dream*, in addition to being Mailer's most autobiographical novel, is in many ways the most recognizably Mailerian. Here are the codifications of his preoccupation with cancer, odors, anal intercourse, and above all his subsequent lifelong Manichaean vision of God and Satan.

It is edifying to novices in the world of Norman, but no surprise to veteran Mailer watchers, that the author gradually but finally came into his own. His presidency of PEN, the international writers' organization, his subsequent courageous defense of Salman Rushdie, the numerous awards and honors, made it clear that he was, in the last decades of his life, a senior statesman of American letters. Mailer himself wrote disarmingly of this transformation in a letter, telling of "the one solid benefit of old age, which is you come to know at last who the hell you are. And so you are at peace with what you did and what you failed to do."

What else is here? Virtually everything else: Mailer's fascination with box-

ing, both as chronicler and participant; his obsessive preoccupation with cancer, feces, Manichaeism; his movies, notably *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987) for which he was both screenwriter and director; the vast plans for multi-volume works following *The Deer Park, Ancient Evenings, Harlot's Ghost,* and *The Castle in the Forest,* all left unfinished. Norman Mailer died with enough planned projects streaming from his inexhaustible imagination to fill ten more 84-year lifespans.

In an effort to uncover lapses in this biography, I could find only one. In *Advertisements*, Mailer compares his *Deer Park* protagonist, Sergius O'Shaugnessy, to Nick Carraway of *The Great Gatsby*, and remarks that Nick went to Princeton. Nick actually attended Yale. I commented on this minor error some years ago in a footnote. J. Michael Lennon repeats the error. That's all I could find wrong in his book. The exception proves the rule.

Lennon concludes his massive study with this observation on Mailer's death: "Norman Mailer, singular, unprecedented and irreplaceable, was prepared for his next voyage." I would have liked to conclude my appreciation of the biography by quoting Joan Didion's review of *The Executioner's Song*: "This is an absolutely astonishing book." Instead, I will say that Lennon has done what he was asked to: he put everything in.