WORDS WITH FRIENDS

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Norman Mailer: A Double Life
By J. Michael Lennon
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Mind of an Outlaw: Selected Essays
Edited by Phillip Sipiora
Introduction by Jonathan Lethem
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FULL DISCLOSURE: J. MICHAEL LENNON, author of *Norman Mailer: A Double Life*, and Phillip Sipiora, editor of *Mind of an Outlaw: Selected Essays*, are good friends of mine, as were Norman and Norris Mailer, though I did not know them nearly as long as did Lennon or Sipiora. But as I learned in reading Lennon's scintillating and thought-provoking new biography, it was not unusual for members of New York's literati establishment "family" to review their friends' works, and the assessments were not always favorable. It seems that quite a few literary feuds had their origins in bad reviews from friends, transforming many a wine-sipping Upper East Side salon and drug-fueled Greenwich Village bacchanal into literal blood sport.

Happily, from my reaction to both volumes, I expect from Professors Lennon and Sipiora no such head-butting, drink-splashing, invitations to step outside or extended periods of malign silence—all favored techniques of the author in question. *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* is as close to a de-

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finitive biography as is likely possible from this close and recent a remove. And *Mind of an Outlaw* is a virtual casebook of the nonfiction essays that exemplify and explicate the narrative of Mailer's protean life.

What emerges from both books is a vivid and engrossing portrait of the artist as a young, middle-aged and old man, who never abandoned the courage to keep trying new things no matter the success of previous ones, who spent a long literary lifetime as a public intellectual and *agent provocateur*, breaking old molds and recasting new ones; continually venturing into new subjects, wholly new styles and ways of seeing things, very much a literary equivalent of his art world icon Picasso.

In his Editor's Preface, Sipiora calls the task of shaping the collection "daunting" because of the sheer volume and gamut of Mailer's nonfiction. "For Mailer, the essay, even more than fiction, provided him a forum to unrelentingly confront the social, political, and cultural crises of the day. In the essay, Mailer's relentless curiosity, coupled with his discursive prose, engages, opposes, clarifies, complicates, and rigorously challenges whatever subjects he takes on."

Jonathan Lethem's Introduction puts it even more directly: "Norman Mailer was a writer who never met a corner he didn't wish to paint himself into."

The subtitle *Double Life* resonates on many levels. And Lennon knows what every good novelist and playwright discovers: that our best qualities and our worst qualities coexist side-by-side. Sometimes, it is difficult to tell them apart.

So may it be with Mailer. The title of a 1993 essay states it in the context of boxing: "The Best Move Lies Close to the Worst." As Lennon tells the story, Mailer's God-given talent and unlimited range of interests send him off in all directions and often keep him from concentrating on arguably more literary and important projects, such as the oft-promised but never delivered second volume of *Harlot's Ghost*, in which he introduces the concept of the "alpha" and "omega" of every life, or "the big novel" to which he referred so often as an almost mythic vision.

It is impossible to regard either Mailer or his work without reference to the other, or both without reference to the time and cultural ferment in which they coexisted. It can even be difficult to distinguish his fiction from the nonfiction. His two Pulitzer Prize winners, *The Armies of the Night* and

The Executioner's Song, are labeled, respectively, *History as a Novel/The Novel as History* and *A True Life Novel.*

In a 1963 essay Sipiora includes, Mailer elucidates the artist-artwork duality: "A man lays his character on the line when he writes a novel. Anything in him which is lazy, meretricious, or unthought-out, or complacent, or fearful, or overambitious, or terrified by the ultimate logic of his exploration, will be revealed in his book."

Speaking to that duality in his nonfiction work, Lethem cites "the impossible space Mailer's gestures carved for himself in postwar American culture: always promising more than he could deliver, always inserting his own brooding self-consciousness between his audience and his ostensible creative task—and then, providing captivating evidence of how, at its best, the obtrusive presence could be as much an artistic opportunity as it was a disaster area."

Lennon's biography intermixes the man and the work in varying balances. Early on, he quotes Mailer's own advice to him that when in doubt about his motives, *"Cherchez la femme."* Mailer was married six times, and even Lennon can't seem to quantify how many affairs and single encounters he had. He seemed to regard each one as a learning experience and something to build on. In fact, one time when I was conducting a public interview with Mailer at the Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C., he commented that he believed he had had six distinct writing styles, each corresponding to one of his wives.

Lennon received cooperation from the four ex-wives still living, as well as his sister, Barbara Mailer Wasserman, whose influence on her older brother was as profound and far reaching as anyone's. Like every other aspect of Mailer's double life, the bio shows her to be a vital part of the artist and the art.

Within each of those styles and each of those relationships, the double life makes itself manifest. It can be defined as one of loyalty and deceit, truth and fiction, love and hate, morality and violence, order and anarchy, patriotism and protest, familial obligation and prodigal recklessness.

Perhaps it is *Armies* that best demonstrates another recurring Mailer dualism: his gargantuan ego (he could think of no one better qualified than himself to be mayor of New York City), along with his equal-size capacity for self-appraisal and lacing criticism. By the time he had reached his third-per-

son narrative persona in the late 1960s, he was placing himself in the middle of the signal events of his time, both as champion of justice and right, and political buffoon. In *Armies*, for instance, next to ending American adventurism in Viet Nam, his character's greatest concern is whether he can get back to New York in time for a party he wants to attend.

Seven hundred pages in, Lennon quotes Harold Bloom's praise of Mailer's massive 1998 anthology *The Time of Our Time,* claiming that Mailer "is above all the author of 'Norman Mailer,' his most persuasive fiction." Bloom goes on to declare that few other serious writers of the time have been "so endlessly sensitive to the phantasmagoria that is American reality."

As far back as his fourth book, *Advertisements for Myself*, Mailer was already bringing the reader not only into his world but also into his psyche, to a degree few other writers either wished to or dared. Throughout that vast range of styles, forms and subject matter, with all of his nonfiction and much of his fiction, every work is part memoir.

Sipiora states, "readers enter a transaction that allows—and requires—them to meet Mailer personally." Another way of saying this is that he not only makes you confront his thoughts, feelings and prejudices, but your own as well. Like him or not, agree with him or not, reading Norman Mailer is always a total immersion experience.

Lethem writes, "you'll be forced to argue with Mailer's thinking, and it is certain in many cases you'll want to reject it—but to do so, you must enter the ground of his thinking as it is enacted, here: enacted with genius."

What Lennon's life survey and Sipiora's concentrated dose of the world according to Mailer made me realize—or at least bring to a conscious and critical level—is that metaphor and spiritual significance are integral components of reaches both profound and prosaic in Mailer's universe as well as the actions of which all of its inhabitants daily partake. In that cosmos, every act, every sound, every smell (no writer is bigger on smells), is infused with meaning.

Cancer may be Mailer's most all-embracing metaphor, standing for just about everything wrong with society and the individual's relationship to it. Even his television experience (Who can forget that night on "The Dick Cavett Show" with Janet Flanner and Gore Vidal?) is spoken of in terms of cancer, with *Of a Small and Modest Malignancy, Wicked and Bristling with Dots.*

In the 1966 essay "Our Argument as Last Presented," he argues for metaphor being a necessary component of scientific experimentation and laments the fact that scientists are no longer poets.

And yet metaphor is a prickly subject with him. He preaches that we cannot live our lives without metaphors, but don't be too sure you'll know one when you see one. We were once having dinner at Norman and Norris's house—Mike Lennon was there, too—when we got to talking about the concepts suggested in the Mailer-Lennon collaboration, *On God*. I commented that I thought their approach was a powerful metaphor for approaching the notion of a supreme being, whereupon Norman jumped down my throat and declared, "This isn't a metaphor! This is what I really believe!"

Lennon's book covers as much of the vast Mailer landscape as possible without making the book into an encyclopedia. He even mentions Mailer's annoying habit of substituting "which" for "that," explaining both that he liked to create his own rules of grammar and that this literary giant really didn't understand the difference in usage between the two words until he was well along in years.

Among the most intriguing, touching and, at least on one occasion, horribly misguided notions we discover in Mailer is his inspiring yet naïve (there's that duality again) view that literature has the capacity to actually redeem life. In an essay from 1958 (which he quotes in a 2003 essay included in Sipiora's collection), he has the temerity to write, "I am imprisoned with a perception that will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time," echoing Stephen Dedalus at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist*: "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race."

By the time of the 2003 essay, "Social Life, Literary Desires, Literary Corruption," Mailer was forced to admit, "And I certainly failed, didn't I?"

Yes and no.

He never came close to approaching the sweep of human grandeur and defeat that plays out in his favorite novel, *Anna Karenina*. But there is a compelling argument to make, as Professor Bloom suggests, that over a span of more than 60 years he was at least a prime chronicler of that revolution in consciousness, as well as the uncreated conscience of his race. In Mailer, it is all there—from World War II to the Cold War and the specter of nuclear annihilation, McCarthyism and communism, Marxism and Freudianism,

Christ and Satan, artistic expression and totalitarian repression, civil rights, women's rights and gay rights, capital punishment and abortion, the Kennedy administration and the Kennedy assassination, each president and the political culture surrounding him, art and movies, murder and suicide (Hemingway's and Monroe's, especially), Vietnam and Iraq. We don't have to hunt far to find a trove of writing and personal participation on each of these issues, and so many more.

"I was reminded how adaptable Mailer was to new times and new challenges," Sipiora writes, "and how he was able to engage so effectively with so many different audiences. He demonstrated an unparalleled intellectual flexibility while never losing his edge and his sense of urgency."

Take any significant topic and the chances are overwhelming Mailer has an articulate and important insight. He can sometimes destroy his own argument, such as by suggesting that women should be kept in cages. But my guess would be that a reader a century or two from now would get a pretty good and accurate sense of our times from Mailer's oeuvre.

Plus, both what he writes and the way he writes are just so damn interesting. He can be hard-muscled and florid at the same time, the taut sinews of his logic serving as a base for flights into the speculative and philosophical stratosphere.

The fiction presents a more complicated critical challenge. Lennon is very candid that most of the novels—*The Naked and the Dead* among those excepted—are not wholly successful. Most of the others are plagued by flaws a lesser writer, or a lesser ego, might not have affected. Lennon recounts the story of Random House publisher Gina Centrello trying to get Mailer to delete an entire section from his final novel, *The Castle in the Forest*, because it seemed like an intellectual digression.

"If I delete it, the book will be more of a page-turner," said Norman.

"Feeling encouraged, I responded, 'That's right, Norman, it would be much more of a page-turner.'"

"Then, with a twinkle in his blue eyes, he announced, 'Gina, I hate page-turners.'"

It is interesting to track Mailer's growth and evolution through the twin prisms of Lennon's biography and the selections Sipiora has made in Mailer's own words. In most cases, from the time Mailer achieves fame with the publication of *The Naked and the* Dead, the two accounts mirror each other in

both subject matter and assigned weight, making them effective companion pieces.

And that evolution is real, fulfilling the observation in *The Deer Park*, "There was a law of life, so cruel and so just, which demanded that one must grow or else pay more for remaining the same."

That is not a rap you can pin on Mailer. In his 1955 essay for *One* magazine, "The Homosexual Villain," considered revolutionary at the time, Mailer shows himself to be well intentioned but painfully ingenuous by today's standards. He is relieved that an acquaintanceship with a gay artist neighbor has not brought out any latent desire in him, and that his homoerotic anxiety is baseless.

"Close friendship with homosexuals had become possible without sexual desire or even sexual nuance—at least no more sexual nuance than is present in all human relations."

Throughout his career, he seems to take the homoerotic impulse far beyond its rightful place in nature, implying that it is something every honest man struggles with—one of those dubious ideas he evidently adopted from his equivocal hero-worship of Hemingway. It is his alpha and omega again, as if he can't responsibly deal with his obsession with heterosexual lovemaking (or sexual combat and conquest, as it is often portrayed in Mailer stories) without confronting its own reverse image.

Other naiveties and failures of follow-through had more concrete consequences than a revolution in the consciousness of our time. Around the time Mailer was writing *The Executioner's Song*, he received a letter from and began a correspondence, evolving into literary infatuation, with imprisoned killer Jack Henry Abbott. Abbott had spent much of his adult life behind bars and wrote about that experience with a raw passion. So struck was Mailer by Abbott's intellect, sensitivity and evocative descriptions in what came to be *In the Belly of the Beast*, Abbott's published book, that he joined the effort to have Abbott paroled and released into his virtual custody and support.

Mind of an Outlaw includes a 1981 essay, "Discovering Jack H. Abbott," in which Mailer writes, "if he gets out, we may yet have a new writer of the largest stature among us, for he has forged himself in a cauldron and still has half of the world to discover. There is never, when we speak of possible greatness in young writers, more than one chance in a hundred that we are

right, but this one chance in Abbott is so vivid that it reaffirms the very idea of literature itself as a human expression that will survive all obstacles."

The account of what happened within weeks of Abbott's release is well known, a true-life morality tale with a tragic ending. Eating in a neighborhood restaurant with two women he had just picked up in an East Village bar, Abbott got into an argument with 22-year-old waiter and aspiring actor Richard Adan over use of a toilet, went outside with him and stabbed him to death.

Abbott's first call after the murder was to Mailer.

Over a long lunch many years later, Mailer told me that his role in what happened with Abbott was the worst mistake of his life, even greater than his drug and booze soaked stabbing of his second wife, Adele, in 1960. He confessed that among other oversights and missteps, he simply came not to find Abbott that interesting as a free man and was unwilling and unable to give him the constant time and supervision he needed.

Lennon's take is typical of the precision and elegance of style he brings to this work: "Mailer never stopped believing that art can ennoble, and that it is possible to rise above one's errors and crimes, but the 'Abbott business' challenged his deepest beliefs in human nature. It forced him to recognize the folly of believing that sinners and criminals could *invariably* be saved by art, could move forward into greater humanity rather than retreating into less."

Mailer's fascination with Abbott is not surprising, given his career-long obsession with violence—from the capricious, wartime violence of *The Naked and the Dead* up through the various manifestations of personal violence in *An American Dream*, *Why We Are in Vietnam, The Executioner's Song* and *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, the politico-religiously based violence of the terrorists, to the ritualistic violence of *King of the Hill, The Fight*, and *The Bullfight.*

Let us consider this last entry first. Anyone who attends to Mailer closely enough will likely find something to offend him or herself. For many, it is his apparent anti-feminist stance, though I think part of that is he doesn't explain himself very well on the subject. One of my particular bugaboos is his glorification of the bullfight and its implied apotheosis of bloodlust into something with deep cultural meaning. From my own perspective as someone who writes regularly about crime and violence, cruelty is cruelty, and it

is offensive to clothe it in the trappings of anything more spiritually elevating.

He admits in "Footnote to Death in the Afternoon," the essay accompanying the 1967 "photographic narrative" *The Bullfight* (originally titled "The Crazy One" in Sipiora's anthology), "The bullfight is nine-tenths cruelty. The bullfight brews one's cruelty out of one's pores—it makes an elixir of cruelty." But, he claims, "It does something else. It reflects the proportions of life in Latin hands," thereby, I suppose, investing it with proto-religious significance.

For a literary lion of this order, it's all too facile; too posturing, and way too recycled Hemingway. In my line of work, cruelty to animals is an indicator of nothing but an incipient violent sociopath. If you want genuine meaning in bovine slaughter as a societal allegory, I suggest that you read fellow Harvardian James Agee's short story, "A Mother's Tale."

So besotted is Mailer of bullfight symbolism that his short story, "The Time of Her Time," Sergius O'Shaugnessy, the narrator lifted from his third published novel *The Deer Park*, opens a bullfighting school in lower Manhattan. I can image he must have been filling a real void for such services in that neighborhood. This work from 1959 features one of the most compellingly graphic and aggressively competitive sexual bouts in modern American letters, and one wonders if Mailer is just so enamored with the metaphorical imagery of the bedroom as *plaza de toros* and "plunging in his sword for the kill" that he has fashioned this unlikely profession for Sergius just to make it work.

I have no such problem with Mailer's embrace of boxing. For one thing, boxers make a choice about what they do, which seems to me at the heart of his particular brand of existentialism. For another, there is no intentional killing, though his firsthand report on "The Death of Benny Paret," included in *The Presidential Papers*, is not only heartbreaking but truly does rise to the level of existential meditation.

His account of the Ali-Frazier (*King of the Hill*) and Ali-Foreman (*The Fight*) bouts are among the best sports books of the era. They capture the humor, drama, sordidness, media frenzy and the many dualities of an athletic pursuit Mailer often used to test his own—as well as his friends' and sons'—masculine prowess, courage and strength of character.

Mailer's preoccupation with personal, as opposed to ritual, violence is more problematic and challenging, and more elusively nuanced.

In what is undoubtedly his most famous essay, "The White Negro," first published in Irving Howe's *Dissent* magazine in 1957 and soon put out as its own stand-alone treatise by Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Books, Mailer dazzlingly established himself, in Lennon's words, as "a philosopher of hip." This highly controversial piece posited the urban black male as the avatar of societal alienation and existential self-awareness and conduct, set against the lengthening shadow of the Nazi death camps, Hiroshima, the ensuing nuclear arms race and rampant post-war consumerism. While many white and black critics and intellectuals took serious issue with this characterization, including Mailer's erstwhile friend James Baldwin, the most troubling and best-remembered section has to do less with race than with an apparent justification of psychopathic violence as an act of courage, personal purging, and quest for the ultimate climax:

> The psychopath murders—if he has the courage—out of the necessity to purge his violence, for if he cannot empty his hatred then he cannot love, his being is frozen with implacable self-hatred for his cowardice. (It can of course be suggested that it takes little courage for two strong eighteen-year-old hoodlums, let us say, to beat in the brains of a candy store keeper, and indeed the act—even by the logic of the psychopath—is not likely to prove very therapeutic, for the victim is not an immediate equal. Still, courage of a sort is necessary, for one murders not only a weak fifty-year-old man but an institution as well, one violates private property, one enters into a new relation with the police and introduces a dangerous element into one's life. The hoodlum is therefore daring the unknown, and so no matter how brutal the act it is not altogether cowardly.)
>
> At bottom, the drama of the psychopath is that he seeks love. Not love as the search for a mate, but love as the search for an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one which preceded it.

The callousness of this declaration is breathtaking, particularly for a writer who came to extol, and practice, what he called Tolstoy's "severe compassion" and believed "that life is like a gladiator's arena for the soul."

As Lennon interprets, Mailer's hipster has rejected subservience in favor of rebellion, and is "opposed to the repression of instinctual urges that are

noble and natural." But where it gets fuzzy, for me at least, is the relationship between the hipster and the psychopath. At times, he seems to suggest that they are one and the same and the psychopath—again, Lennon's interpretation—"is in more direct contact with his unconscious than ordinary neurotics," which, presumably, constitute the rest of us.

This abstract rationalization of murder in "The White Negro," of course, finally slams into its own tragic reality with Abbott.

Having decried Mailer's *apologia pro vita hipster*, I recall a time he spoke at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., not long after 9/11. I further recall that he was roundly booed when he asserted that whatever manifestations of evil they embodied, the hijackers were not cowards. He explained that to come to grips with this threat, we had to understand the minds and motives of the people behind it, and we did ourselves no service by mislabeling them for our own emotional comfort. I like to think this showed an evolution over the years in his definition of courage.

Going back to "The White Negro," Lennon notes "Mailer was never able to satisfactorily answer such objections [to the idea of courage and restoration in the candy store owner's murder], yet he never relinquished his belief that there were morsels of redemptive gain in all risk-taking acts, even when they were criminal."

I find this passage particularly illuminating because it encapsulates so much that is significant to the interweaving of Mailer's life and work. The stabbing of Adele transmogrified into the novel *The American Dream*. Unlike the circumstances of the actual event, in *Dream* Stephen Rojack not only kills his wife, but also gets away with it. What he does not get away with is the psychic and karmic toll, which is always palpable in Mailer's universe.

This comes into play profoundly with *The Executioner's Song*. In a gripping narrative rich in dualities, from which Mailer's own personality all but disappears, murderer Gary Gilmore ironically pushes for the imposition of his death sentence amidst a parade of conflicting forces trying to stop it. Does he do this because he is a primal thug who just doesn't want to rot in prison, or because he is one of life's flawed and damaged underdogs who comprehends the moral dimension of his acts and knows he must sacrifice his body to save his soul? Mailer allows for both possibilities as well as a combination of the two.

So is this an adequate response to the question of Mailer's attitude toward violence? Like so much else about this provocative author, there is no

easy answer. In one of his dualisms on the subject, he asks, "Who could separate the safety valve from the trigger spring?"

Even Mailer's description of himself as a "left conservative" is more tantalizing than definitive. One thing for sure, as Sipiora reminds us, is that he forces us to confront our own ideas and attitudes. And nothing is ever wrapped up in a neat little box, not even at the end of a book. Mailer is always far less interested in simple answers than he is in difficult questions.

This brings up one of Lennon's most penetrating and intriguing literary insights: Mailer didn't like endings. It wasn't so much that he had trouble with them, although that certainly might have been part of it. It was that he didn't believe in them. For Mailer, the only real ending was death, and as he grew older, he became less and less certain even about that. Everything else was an ongoing story.

Perhaps the most telling line Lennon quotes is, "Plot is the enemy of the great novel. I'm interested in plots that do not have a resolution. Life is like that."

Neater still is a line from a poem entitled "The Executioner's Song" that Mailer wrote nearly 20 years before his book of the same name: "*You see: I am bad at endings.*"

This speaks directly to his comment to Gina Centrello about hating page-turners. It also explains the non-ending of the already mammoth *Harlot's Ghost*, *Ancient Evenings*, which circles back to where it began, and *The Castle in the Forest*, the first of three planned novels on Hitler, begun in his eighties, that Mailer knew he hadn't a prayer of ever completing.

Incidentally, now that I've read Lennon, I think I finally understand the motivation behind *Ancient Evenings*, arguably Mailer's densest, most abstruse and all around most peculiar novel. As Lennon explains it, Mailer wanted to evoke a time before advent of the western and Judeo-Christian sensibility and traditions that color nearly every aspect of our outlook and conduct of life. He creates a time and place sufficiently remote in which all of his favorite dualities—science and magic, rational verbal discourse and telepathy, all of his alphas and omegas—can live side-by-side.

For me, the unfulfilled promise of *Harlot* may be the greatest literary disappointment of Mailer's prolific career. The "first" volume is such a fascinating character study of the CIA mentality against the backdrop of the Cold War, the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban Missile Crisis and Kennedy assassination, that when it ends after well over a thousand pages—with new plot

points in play and new character mysteries to be solved—with the epitaph, TO BE CONTINUED, it is distressing to accept that it never will.

The one aspect of Mailer's double life that does have a formal and definable ending is his time married to each of his wives—with one notable exception. When he met Barbara Davis Norris during a visit to an old war buddy in Arkansas, he truly had found the love of his life. Under his tutelage, the beautiful, tall and willowy, divorced art teacher, 26 years to the day his junior, transformed into Norris Church Mailer, a professional model, actress, artist and novelist. Norris (he continued to call her Barbara) came to be adored by all of his seven children. He adopted her son and together they produced one more, whom they named John Buffalo because they liked the sound of it. When people asked Norris which of Norman's wives she was, she always replied, "The last one."

For Norris, Norman swore off philandering and kept his promise longer than he ever had before. As Lennon recounts, when she discovered his sleeping around and threatened to leave him, Mailer considered it one of the three great crises of his life, along with stabbing Adele and Jack Henry Abbott's murder of Richard Adan. Lennon quotes from Norris's own wonderful memoir, *A Ticket to the Circus*, and his reporting on the half-successful attempts of these two talented and iron-willed personalities to reconcile their lives together is among the most poignant in the book. Even more heartrending is his account of Norris's incredibly brave, grace-filled, decade-long bout with cancer. Lennon ends the book with Norman's death. Norris died almost exactly three years later.

Throughout his professional life, the one constant definition of Norman Mailer was "critic," in every sense of the term. And as a writer frequently savaged by critics, it is interesting and often entertaining to read Mailer's own brand of literary criticism. It ranged from his self-anointed appraisals of his literary contemporaries in *Advertisements for Myself*, up through his 1984 essay, "Huckleberry Finn, Alive at One Hundred," one of the cleverest, most adroit pieces of commentary ever written about American literature.

Advertisements' "Quick Evaluations on the Talent in the Room" was an exercise in hubristic pretention sure to bring out the "Who the [expletive] does this little [expletive] think he is?!" in all the writers—many of them friends and/or soon to be former friends—he sizes up.

On James Jones: "*From Here to Eternity* has been the best American novel since the war," but *Some Came Running* is a "debacle" and *The Pistol* "a dud."

"Styron was not near to creating a man who could move on his feet, his mind was uncorrupted by a new idea, and his book was without evil." "Algren skitters . . . away from the eye of his meanings," and "Calder Willingham is a clown with the bite of a ferret."

Yet while some of the judgments are gratuitously critical, such as his dismissal of Saul Bellow or the assertion that "James Baldwin is too charming a writer to be major," others are right on target, such as his consideration of J.D. Salinger:

"Salinger is everyone's favorite. I seem to be alone in finding him no more than the greatest mind ever to stay in prep school."

He goes from this damning-with-faint-praise to praising-with-faint-damn the author of *On the Road*: "Kerouac lacks discipline, intelligence, honesty, and a sense of the novel. His rhythms are erratic, his sense of character is nil, and he is as pretentious as a rich whore, as sentimental as a lollipop. Yet I think he has a large talent . . . To judge his worth it is better to forget about him as a novelist and see him instead as an action painter or bard."

Other assessments still turn out to be eerily predictive. Of Truman Capote he writes, "I would suspect he hesitates between the attractions of Society, which enjoys and so repays him for his unique gifts, and the novel he could write of the gossip column's real life, a major work, but it would banish him forever from his favorite world. Since I have nothing to lose, I hope Truman fries a few of the fancier fish."

It becomes clear from *Mind of an Outlaw*, though, that as Mailer grew in stature, he also grew in critical faculty. By the time he published "Huckleberry Finn, Alive at One Hundred," he was at the top of his game. The essay, originally written for *The New York Times Book Review*, praises the novel to the sky, but for one cloying objection: "It would be superb stuff if only the writer did not keep giving away the fact that he was a modern young American working in 1984 [the year of the essay's publication]."

His explanation for this "objection" is so good it is worth quoting a full paragraph:

> [Twain's] anachronisms were not so much in the historical facts—those seemed accurate enough—but the point of view was too contemporary. The scenes might succeed—say it again, this writer was talented!—but he kept betraying his literary in-

> fluences. The author of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* had obviously been taught a lot by such major writers as Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos, and John Steinbeck; he had certainly lifted from Faulkner and the mad tone Faulkner could achieve when writing about maniacal men feuding in deep swamps; he had also absorbed much of what Vonnegut and Heller could teach about the resilience of irony. If he had a surer feel for the picaresque than Saul Bellow in *Augie March*, still he felt derivative of that work. In places one could swear he had memorized *The Catcher in the Rye*, and he probably dipped into *Deliverance* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* He might even have studied the mannerisms of movie stars. You could feel traces of John Wayne, Victor McLaglen, and Burt Reynolds in his pages. The author had doubtless digested many a Hollywood comedy on small-town life. His instinct for life in hamlets on the Mississippi before the Civil War was as sharp as it was farcical, and couldn't be more commercial.

I would love to go on to the end of this, but suffice it to say that by the time you finish reading Mailer's 100th anniversary appreciation, he has completely documented Hemingway's famous comment from "Green Hills of Africa" that, "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*," and that a century on, it is still among the most "modern" and contemporarily consequential works ever written.

An example from the other end of the praise meter, Mailer's review of Bret Easton Ellis's 1991 novel *American Psycho* for *Vanity Fair*, is similarly penetrating. He ventures beyond the series of despicable and disgusting crimes to which its first-person yuppie narrator matter-of-factly confesses to show why it is actually an artless, bad book:

> The failure of this book, which promises to rise occasionally to the level of the very good (when it desperately needs to be great), is that by the end we know no more about Bateman's need to dismember others that we know about the inner workings in the mind of a wooden-faced actor who swings a broadax in an exploitation film. It's grunts all the way down. So, the first novel to come along in years that takes on deep and Dostoyevskian

themes is written by only a half-competent and narcissistic young pen.

Equally represented in both volumes is Mailer's role as a social critic. His protests against the Viet Nam War are well known, but his opposition to the American adventure in Iraq is just as piercing. Had George W. Bush and his neocon pals heeded Mailer's warnings in "Immodest Proposals" that, "You cannot bring democracy to tyranny by conquest," for example, we could have saved thousands of lives and God knows how many billions of dollars.

Throughout his life, Mailer never shied away from friendships with people who did not share his views, William Buckley being a prime example. But even in his advanced age, the one class he couldn't abide were those who refused to think. In a speech before the Nieman Fellows at Harvard in 2004, he declared, "George W. understood stupid people well. They were not dumb, their minds were not physically crippled in any way. They had chosen to be stupid because that offered its own kind of power. To win a great many small contests of will, they needed only to ignore all evidence. Bright people would break down trying to argue with them."

Of my own criticism of *Norman Mailer: A Double* Life, I have little. The only element I found inartful and ingenuous in Lennon' writing was his attempt at objectivity regarding his subject by referring to himself in the third person whenever he appeared in the story. Granted, Norman did it himself to great advantage, but with Lennon, there is no irony, no attempt at self-analysis or even self-dramatization, and I wish he would have dispensed with this modesty and self-imposed negative capability. The fact is, Mike Lennon and his wife Donna for many years were integral to the lives of Norman and Norris Mailer and other family members, and Mailer spent considerable interview time with Lennon, wanting to get the story right rather than complimentary, knowing the bio in all likelihood would come out after he was gone. I think Lennon would have been better served to come to direct grips with this relationship, even at the cost of critical and authorial distance.

Aside from such nitpicking complaints, Lennon has done a superb job of recounting, illuminating and critiquing a larger-than-life life that is all but uncontainable. In simply reviewing the book and related anthology, I find myself frustrated that I cannot mention *everything* and have had to limit myself to several topics of particular personal interest while almost arbitrarily giving short shrift (Mailer's shrifts are always long and deep) to so many

others. I am full of admiration of Lennon's boiling it all down into so moving, eloquent and (at nearly 800 pages of text) compact a package. I don't see how anyone could doubt Norman Mailer's importance or impact after reading these two volumes.

Late in Mailer's life, my wife Carolyn and I had a conversation with him, sitting and drinking in the living room of his house in Provincetown. I don't recall how it came up, but he commented that he believed he had not, and would never win the Nobel Prize in Literature because he had stabbed his second wife.

I replied that I thought the reason he hadn't won was because of his prodigious output in so many formats, genres and subject matters that the Swedish committee found him impossible to categorize, not to mention his embrace of so many controversial subjects that just made too many people uncomfortable. Lennon's biography offers the intellectual ammunition to support either or a combination of these views. He shows Mailer to be one of the great literary shape shifters of all time, taking on some kind of new challenge with practically every work.

Sipiora quotes F. Scott Fitzgerald's comment that "[T]here never was a good biography of a good novelist. There couldn't be. He is too many people if he's any good."

Fitzgerald also noted, "I once thought that there were no second acts in American lives."

Taking nothing away from the estimable Jazz Age chronicler, I submit that *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* ably disproves the first premise. Together with *Mind of an Outlaw*, it fairly presents the outsized figure who gives lie to the second.

Perhaps the most appropriate descriptions of Norman Mailer come from two writers he deeply admired: himself and William Shakespeare.

Writing of Ernest Hemingway only two years after Papa's suicide (in an essay Sipiora includes), Mailer offered, "It may even be that the final judgment on his work may come to the notion that what he failed to do was tragic, but what he accomplished was heroic, for it is possible he carried a weight of anxiety within him from day to day that would have suffocated any man smaller than himself. There are two kinds of brave men: those who are brave by the grace of nature, and those who are brave by an act of will."

I think this is an accurate and fitting commentary for Mailer himself.

The other quotation is from the individual even he acknowledged as the greatest writer of all time. Through Hamlet's voice, and economically implying all the best and worst qualities, Shakespeare writes, "He was a man, take him for all in all, I shall not look upon his like again."

Take him for all in all, there has been no one else on the American literary, cultural, social and political scene remotely like Norman Kingsley Mailer. And I don't think there will be again.