THE MAILER FAMILY

BARBARA MAILER WASSERMAN,
SUSAN MAILER, JOHN BUFFALO MAILER

On October 25, 2013 three members of the Mailer family attended the Eleventh Annual meeting of the International Norman Mailer Society. Mailer relatives included Barbara Mailer Wasserman (Mailer's younger sister), Susan Mailer, and John Buffalo Mailer (the oldest and youngest siblings in the Mailer family). The panel was moderated by J. Michael Lennon, whose authorized biography of Mailer, A Double Life, was published by Simon & Schuster in 2013.

J. Michael Lennon: Welcome to a panel discussion with members of the Mailer family. We have several of them up here. At the end is someone that you all know, John Buffalo Mailer, who's been on the board of the Mailer Society for many years, since its inception, and is a regular panelist. Susan, the oldest sibling, whom you have all met, and Barbara Mailer, Norman's sister, another charter Board member. We are going to talk a little about the Mailer Family. I will start with a question for whoever wants to grab it, as they say. The question that I get all the time about the Mailer Family is: With the number of times that Norman got married and the number of children he had, and the moves of the family and the many residences where the family lived, did the Mailers get along with each other, given their family history . . . do they all get along with each other now? And if they do, what's the secret, the family dynamic?

Barbara: At the risk of being terribly disappointing by saying that it's amazing to me how well everybody gets along. I think, oddly enough, my own interpretation of . . . the reason for this is because Norman had so many different wives that there was less sibling rivalry among the children than there

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might have been if they all had been the product of one father and mother, for whatever that's worth. I think for me it's a wonderful thing that everyone gets along so well because it's just an incredible family . . . well, it's a fun family . . . to live with. (I don't know what else to say.)

Lennon: That's fine, a good start. Sue? Want to add anything to that?

Susan: Yes, I've also been asked about this many times and I'd like to add something to what Aunt Barbara said. I think it was a work in progress that lasted through Dad's life. Don't forget—he married six times. I was an only child for eight years but by 1978 there were nine children in the family born of six mothers. I believe that Dad inherited from his mother, our grandmother, a very strong sense of family. Added to that he expected his wives to be in charge of the household, to take care of us when we visited and provide a family setting—meals and laundry, that kind of thing. He just expected it. And we got it. But there was something else as well. Right around the time that he wrote *The Prisoner of Sex*, which is in 1968 . . . '69?

Lennon: 1971.

Susan: 1971? Then before he wrote *The* P*risoner of Sex*, because it was before Maggie was born. So in 1970, was it then we all went to Maine?

Barbara: Yes.

Susan: In 1970, Dad, Aunt Barbara and the six of us (Susan, Danielle, Elizabeth, Kate, Michael and Stephen) went to Maine, to Mount Desert Island. Dad was already thinking about *The Prisoner of Sex* and he decided he would have us all for a month solo, no wives, no friends. For the next fifteen years more or less, all the siblings gathered in August for one month with Dad and first with Carol, later with Norris.

Aunt Barbara would come for a week or so and from 1971 Myrtle, Maggie's and John's nurse joined us. Sometimes Grandma was invited for a week but no friends were allowed. We would take care of each other because there was always a baby or young one around. We had kitchen duty, set the table, washed dishes, bought some groceries. We cleaned the house, usually with the help of a housekeeper. There was a group activity everyday or every other day. Dad would take off from writing, usually in the early afternoon. It could be sailing, or hiking, boxing, an art project such as a movie. It could also be jumping into the pond, which was freezing. In 1981 we stopped going to

Maine after a full month of nonstop rain, and congregated in Provincetown. In those years we learned to have fun together, depend on each other and handle our fights. We also protected each other. I think this is how the family developed. And, as I said, it was a work-in-progress. It kept getting better. Once Norris appeared (Dad and she were together for more than thirty years beginning in 1975) summers fell into a stable pattern because Norris herself loved having a big family. It was something we looked forward to every summer.

After I married Marco and went to live in Chile we would go to Provincetown every year with our growing family. There were times when 15 Mailers gathered in the summer house. Again, it was a given. I didn't ask. I expected it. And Dad expected it as well. I wouldn't be surprised if Norris groaned and thought, "Oh my god, what am I going to do with all these people?" But she was gracious about it and also enjoyed having us around. I would say that's how it happened. I also agree with Barbara that the fact that we didn't have the same mother made us get along better. We just had to share a father.

Lennon: John?

John: I second all of that. It's really almost obscene how much fun we have when we all get together. We can be borderline rude at a party. When we find ourselves together at a party, the nine of us tend to huddle around each other, exploding in fits of laughter, and everyone's like, "What's up with these Mailer kids, man? They're so anti-social!" But it was always a fairly unique experience for me because on the one hand I was the only child of Norris and Norman, while simultaneously being the youngest of nine siblings. So, in a way, I really had the opportunity to understand both childhood experiences. I would so look forward to those summers when all of my siblings would be there. It's hard to describe the level of familiarity and love we all share. There are other families I know that have similar kind of dynamics, multiple marriages, half-siblings and step-siblings across a number of generations, but I have never come across a family that is quite as large and diverse as ours. I never thought about it before, but perhaps it is all having different mothers that makes it easier for us to get along so well. Less rivalry and competition between us, than one might find in a family this large that all comes from the same two people.

It's funny, now that my mom has passed, I find myself feeling much more appreciative of the time that I get to spend with my siblings' mothers. Be-

cause they are the mothers of my brothers and sisters, even though I have no direct blood tie with them, there is a kinship and a certain shared knowledge of the life we all have lived thus far that I feel with them. It's comforting.

Audience member: Can I add some things?

Lennon: Yeah.

Audience member: What Susan said, you have also passed it down to your children. Because when I see all of the great Norman's grandchildren together, it's fabulous. They have just as much fun themselves together as you have.

Susan: That's true.

Lennon: They're close. The grandchildren.

Susan: Yes, there are two sets of grandchildren. There are Danielle's, Betsy's, and my kids, all close in age. And there are the younger bunch, all pretty tight. Our kids spent summers in Provincetown. Now, these little ones are having a ball on the beach in Provincetown, too.

John: I don't have any little ones, yet. I'm the little one. (*Laughter*)

Lennon: You're the hinge.

Lennon: Since Barbara's at the microphone, could you give a little bit of background on where the Mailers and where the Schneiders came from, and how that plays into the family dynamic? Well, anything you want to say about the family's overseas root.

Barbara: Well, stop me if I'm going way too long. Thank you. My grandparents all came from a very small area in Lithuania when it was still part of Russia in the late 19th century. One side came here and the other side went to South Africa. It had always struck me as absolutely astonishing that I'm here at all as a result of that. They were both Orthodox Jewish families. My mother's father was an ordained rabbi; although, he never cared to practice it unless he could have a congregation that couldn't afford a rabbi and he would do it for nothing, but other than that he didn't.

My father was in the First World War as a part of the South African army. I don't think he ever saw combat. He never talked about it. Yeah, I think he was mustered out in England at the end of the war and came here to visit his

oldest sister who had come here with her husband before the war and settled here. I might say that he came from a family of ten children or eleven children. And my mother came from a family of five. Anyway, as I said, it was an Orthodox family. My parents met in Long Branch, New Jersey. I'm sorry. They met in Lakewood, New Jersey. My mother's family was in the hotel business in the summers in Long Branch, New Jersey. My mother, I think, was getting on a bit and she was bored spending the winters in Long Branch, so she induced her parents for that one winter to take a small hotel in Lakewood, which was a winter resort, and my father, having just arrived in 1919, he suggested to his sister that they take a weekend in Lakewood. He didn't even accompany them the first time, but then they went back again the second time, and he went with them. He spent his time with my mother and her slightly older sister. At the end of it, after he left, he wrote them a letter thanking them for the good time they had given him. My mother said that she was eager to get her older sister married because she didn't think she should marry first. So she suggested to Rose that she send him a thank you note for the letter. Rose did not want to do this, so my mother did it. And they started a correspondence.

My father, very soon after that, went down to New Orleans for a job. He was an accountant. I think it was, more or less, understood that he should not go back to South Africa because he had a gambling problem. He was somewhat persona non grata there at the time. So he decided to settle here. Anyway, they started a correspondence. At one point—I have read their letters, or rather—my mother saved all of my father's letters. He did not save hers until they got engaged. So I'm not absolutely sure of what happened, but I surmise that, at one point, she must have told him that she had fallen in love with him. It was all by mail. He wrote back and also, she had, I think, told him that she was much younger than she actually was. He wrote back and said . . . I think he panicked. [laughter]. He said, "You're too young to know what love is." My mother was so offended that she stopped writing. But I guess he was sort of intrigued because he then came back to Brooklyn and wrote to her and said he would like to come and visit again. He spent a week in Long Branch and by the time he left there, they were at least, unofficially, engaged. He then went off again to a job in . . . I think it was . . . Wisconsin. They continued their correspondence and eventually he came back, and they got formally engaged and then married. Anyway, that was how it all started. You should ask another question.

Lennon: Barbara, both of your parents were Jewish and they were observant. Two of Norman's wives, Bea and Carol Stevens, were Jewish. But not everyone in the family is Jewish. Yet, there's obviously a Jewish tradition of sorts in the family. I know that most of those people in the family know some Yiddish words and use them fairly regularly. I learned a few by being around the Mailers. Can you talk a little bit about—Susan and John—about the Jewish culture, the Jewish heritage of the family, and how that's persisted over the years.

Susan: Being Jewish was a given, at least for me. It wasn't something we talked about and it didn't have much to do with religion but it was important. When I met Marco—Marco is from Chile—Grandma probably thought, "Oh no, a Latin. She's going away again. " But when I said he was Sephardic, she was excited. She said, "Oh! That's wonderful! Spinoza, Maimonedes! The Sephardics are so cultured, they're cultivated, they're sages, and I want to meet him." She wasn't cooking much at the time, but she made him gefilte fish and matzo ball soup. She approved that I was going to marry a Sephardic Jew even if it meant I would be going to live in Chile. I had no religious education and my parents never talked about it until much later, when they were older, but it certainly was part of my identity.

John: Well, being half-Jewish—as I like to put it: Jewish from the waist down—it's odd, because to me, being Jewish has always felt like being part of race more than a religion. Culturally, I feel we all grew up with a Jewish feel around the house that our father was probably not even aware of, as some of the elements were so engrained in him that they would come out instinctively, even though he never took an interest in being a practicing Jew. Do you disagree?

Barbara: I was going to say, though, I think what happened to both your father and myself was that . . . you know, as we got into our teens we became very anti-organized religion. As a fact, I used to have these funny arguments with my mother because I would—her father—I didn't know my grandparents. They had died about the time I was born. But her father was really revered and she always told me that he was a great believer in the ideals of Spinoza. So when I began to know a little about Spinoza, I said, "Spinoza was a pantheist. He was ex-communicated. What do you think God is?" She would give me a rather pantheistic version, and then I would say, "You're a

pantheist. Spinoza was ex-communicated, so how can you be a Jew?" She would say, "You can call me anything you want. I'm still a Jew." And I think that's true. I think Judaism was much more historical even then . . . racial. I mean, it was a sense of: This is what we are.

Mark Olshaker: I was going to say a number of years ago from the early to mid 2000s, I was working . . . I had been asked to work on PBS on a documentary series called "The Jewish Americans" and I told Norman about it and I said, "I'd like to get your advice on this." And his response was, "Uh! What would you want to do something like that for?" And I said, "Well, you know, this is gonna be a big series on PBS." And he said, "It's nothing, but a can of worms." He said, "I could tell you about it, but it would be nothing." He said, "I would tell you to probably go talk to Norman Podhoretz, who probably has more . . . interesting views." But the sort of the kicker of the story goes back to what John was saying, which is when we started actually working on the program and all of our various academic and corporate type advisors, first thing they said to us is: "Don't try to define a Jew. Talk about them, but don't say what they are."

Lennon: We've been stressing family harmony, but as we know, in 1960s, there was an event referred to, at the time and still today, as "The Trouble." Susan and Barbara remember that, of course, very well. Susan, you told me that you were young enough to understand was going on and it was a great shock to you. Would you say something about it?

Susan: Sure. I was eleven when Dad stabbed Adele. I was in Mexico where I lived with my mother and her husband Salvador. Every other weekend, I'd go visit Lupita, his sister with whom I was very close. I arrived one Friday after school. "Susie," she said. "Susie, do you like Adele?" I said, "Yes." "Does your father get along with Adele?" I started getting a funny feeling like, "What's going on here? Why is she asking me all these questions about Adele and Dad?" She said, "Have you seen them lately?" I said, "Well, no, a few months ago." And then she told me she had heard on the radio that Norman stabbed Adele. It was such a shock that I felt almost nothing. I said, "Oh . . . Well, umh, okay, what are we going to do now? Let's go do something." I definitely did not want to hear about it anymore. About an hour later my mother picked me up. She was upset and also angry when she found out Lupita had told me because, naturally, she wanted to be the one to give me

the news. But I didn't want to talk about it, or to hear about it, I didn't want anything to do with it. That's the first reaction I had to the event—to the trouble—as you call it in the biography. After that there was a silence in the family. It wasn't that we never talked about it. We did. I did ask Dad about it. He would say to me, "When you're old enough, I'll tell you." I was never old enough. He never told me. Whenever I wanted to approach the subject, he'd say, "No. Not now. Later." A few months before he died, we were in his Brooklyn apartment, alone. We both knew he was very sick and probably had little time left. I thought, "I better ask him now about Adele or I'll never get another chance to talk to him about it." But I didn't say anything immediately. There was a quiet moment and he said, "You know what happened with Adele . . ." And he began to tell me. Now, the most amazing thing about this is I can't remember very much of what he said. I know he didn't add much to what I already knew, there were no new details. He basically talked about how much harm it had done to all of us and how sorry he was about that. And that's all. The rest is a blank. And, to me, it means that the silence that had surrounded "the trouble" was stronger than any words he could say. It also gives me a hint as to how powerful this was in my life. Though I wanted to know I also had to shut it out. I can't remember exactly what he said even though when he was talking about it I thought "I have to remember this."

Lennon: Maybe you need to talk to an analyst.

Susan: Maybe I need hypnosis! But I do think it speaks to the effect it had on me. On the other hand, whenever I asked Dad about his ideas he'd say "read my books." Yesterday when I heard that wonderful paper on *An American Dream*, I remembered something I thought about not so long ago. It occurred to me that in *An American Dream* Dad had expressed the kind of turmoil he was going through when he stabbed Adele. I'm not talking about the action, the way Rojack kills Deborah, but of the character's state of mind. In a way I don't really need to know what happened anymore. What has remained very clear is that moment in his Brooklyn apartment when he began speaking, knowing it was probably our last chance to talk about it.

On another level it's been like a stain in our family. A Roth type human stain. It's something you don't think about all the time, but it's there. When people found out who our father was it was one of the first questions we were asked. I don't know if that's been your experience John, but when I was

thirteen and living with him, I'd be at a friend's house and one of her parents would ask, "Oh, Susan Mailer. Any relation to Norman?" I'd say, "Yeah, he's my father." And they'd say, "Oh, was he the one who—are you—is it your mother he stabbed?" Danielle and Betsy, it was their mother who was stabbed, they heard this question all their lives. I was more protected than they were because I lived in Mexico most of the time. There not many people knew of Norman Mailer. (Turning to John) But I think it's something that even you've gotten once in a while.

John: Well, yeah. It's interesting because it has become one of the touchstones that people who have not read his books hear first. And it unfortunately colors everything else about Norman when that is the first thing one hears of him. It's very frustrating in that sense. When the incident happened, he was a very different version of himself than the man he was by the time I came around, when he was fifty-five. I don't want to say that they were two different people, but he went through an immense change after that happened. It was an event that haunted him in many ways throughout his life, and something I don't believe he ever forgave himself for. It certainly followed him for the rest of his life and, as Sue says, in its way has followed all of his children, though none quite understand it or were equally effected by it, understandably, as Danielle and Elizabeth. But I can say I've certainly had those awkward conversations with a stranger I've just met when they ask me nonchalantly, "was your mother the one he stabbed?" It's peculiar the licenses and restrictions that people feel when they meet someone who is connected to a celebrity they admire or feel judgment of. You really never know which way that coin will land.

Barbara: What's interesting to me hearing both of you talk about it is either I have forgotten or else it really did never happen. I can't remember anyone ever asking me about it.

Lennon: They knew better. They knew better.

Audience member: Can I ask John when he you become aware of that situation?

John: That's a really good question. I wish I had a better answer for you, but the truth is I don't remember. I think it was probably when I was a little kid, just through osmosis and hearing things that were not intended for my ears

at the time. But I was aware that something dark and terrifying, something that had even scared my father, was part of our family history. Although as I was starting to come of age and wrap my head around who my father was, there were so many fascinating episodes in his life, that it was always one of many to me, and not the central theme by any stretch of the word.

Audience member: I just wonder, that was one of the great errors/mistakes in Norman's life. You mentioned the other one, of course, the Jack Henry Abbott experience. And I was wondering, what was the impact of the family and what was their response after Norman had gotten out of jail and then he, of course, went back to jail. I'm reading the correspondence. They kept writing afterwards, but I was wondering, what the reaction was with the rest of the family? Was this . . . ?

Lennon: Would you like to comment on the impact on the family of the Abbott affair?

Audience member: Because Mailer was so blamed for that immediately.

Barbara: I think I may have talked about this already, but for one thing, I was angry that everybody else let him take the blame when there were a number of other people involved. But he felt he was the most responsible. So . . . he did not feel the way I did. (*Talking to Susan*) Do you remember?

Susan: I, again, wasn't in the United States. I was in Chile when this happened. What year was this?

Lennon: June, 1981.

Susan: We had just gone to Chile. I found out about it through the papers, and Norris, who called me. My Mom also called to tell me about it. Jack Abbott used a knife, didn't he?

Audience member: Yeah.

Susan: I felt that it was karma. It was something he was trying to resolve. And what's amazing is Dad had written about Gary Gilmore. He should've known better. You could say it was a blind spot. I think the stabbing—Adele's stabbing—was something that repeated itself with Jack Abbott, at least in the sense that Dad was probably trying to make amends for something that couldn't be repaired anymore. That's my interpretation of what happened with Abbott. And I remember that your mom, John, was angry and upset

because she thought he should've known better. I feel he had to do it, he had to reach out and help Abbott and in the process maybe change his and Abott's history.

Lennon: John wants to respond.

John: I was three or four when Jack got out and came over to the house for the first time. I immediately took to Jack and brought him on a tour of the house and explained which of my action figures were the good guys and which the bad. When a kid is that age, they have a built in radar for what's going on with an adult, even if they can't put it into words. You see somebody and immediately know if you think they're a good person or not. And for whatever reasons, I saw Jack and said, "Come on, man. Let's go hang out."

I think I could tell that he needed that, needed some innocence in what had been a very tough state raised life. My feeling as a small child was that there was a good soul in Jack, but that it had been so brutalized and beaten down by the prison system, and it was unclear as to whether or not he would ever feel the sense of security to let it out into the world again. Having grown up in a remarkably stable environment with both my parents, I have always been sensitive to what it does to a person's confidence and sense of whether the world is ultimately a more loving or painful a place to exist in. And I think what is really tragic about the whole relationship between my father and Jack is that people don't understand that my dad had an almost fervent belief in the power of art to bring redemption. He operated under the notion that the best in a person, if given the right opportunity, could shine through the worst and dominate in the end.

Audience member: Do you feel uncomfortable about having him around his children? I mean, it just seems naive. It didn't seem like Mailer would be like that, to that level of trust.

John: Nothing happened to any of us.

Lennon: Let's have some other questions for the Mailers. I've got one. Could you comment on the artistic sensibilities that we see in all of the Mailer children. None of the Mailer children went to the Harvard Business School.

Susan: When it comes to a line of work, probably my mother was more influential. My mother is a psychiatrist. She studied medicine in México after she divorced Dad, and then became a psychiatrist. Her message was: "You

have to have a profession." I finished college, and had many kinds of jobs, some of them very interesting, and then at a certain point, she said to me, "Okay, so what are you going to do with your life?" Slightly annoyed I replied, "Well, I'm working. What do you mean, 'what am I going to do with my life?'" But she insisted "No, no. This isn't your life. You've got to make something out of yourself. So what are you going to do?" It hit home and a few years later I became a psychologist, then trained as a psychoanalyst, which, by the way, does require some artistry.

Lennon: Yes, of course.

Susan: Doing therapy requires imagination. You have to put together discipline and theory with imagination and emotion. One has to be an observer, and, at the same time, has to be present. I would say that Dad influenced me in the kind of psychoanalysis that interested me. There are many types of psychoanalysis, and I was always drawn to the kind of practice in which the analyst is more present as a person with his or her subjectivity, and not as a person who is outside of it—an observer or a blank slate. So I think that in my own way I discovered a psychoanalytic version of new journalism, although, I didn't invent it, of course. But when I found it, I said, "This is what I've been looking for. This is the way I want to do my work." I think with me, it was a mix. Both. What about you?

John: I think a lot of the reason why all of Norman's children are artistic either professionally or in their own personal pursuits is because of those summers we spent together, when he would have all of us together for three months. Each summer he would create a project for the entire family to work on together. One summer we would all make little movies on 8 millimeter cameras. Another summer we put on an in house production of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, each sibling assigned a different part, with Norman playing James Tyrone and directing us. We were overtly encouraged to go into the arts. In truth, rebelling against your father when your father is Norman Mailer would have been going out and becoming a lawyer.

Crowd: Laughter

John: When you grow up in a family where the patriarch is such an omnipresence, and also the Lion of American Letters for the second half of the Twentieth Century, in so many ways it feels completely natural to go into

the arts. If you grew up in a football family, you throw the ball around. If your dad is a legendary quarterback, there's always going to be a part of you that feels you can't get any closer to him than by understanding the field he played on first hand. So, personally, I can't imagine trying to make a living doing anything but telling peoples' stories in as many different outlets as I have access to.

Lennon: Time for one more question.

Audience member: John, I've known you quite well over the years, and Susan, it's my pleasure to get to know you this weekend. But I'm just wondering, as the oldest and the youngest, do you all have the same father or not?

Susan: Yes and no. I recognize John's father as my father even though the father I had when I was growing up was more intense and scary. He definitely could be scary. Up until I was eleven, he was a pretty good dad, in some ways even a devoted father. For example, for several years he and Adele spent a couple of months in Mexico where I lived with my mother and stepfather and took me back to New York on road trips that lasted eight to ten days.

But after what happened with Adele, after the stabbing, he became a scary person. He was a tortured man, he drank a lot. In those days everyone drank but I think he had more than his share. He could be morose. He lived in dread. Remember you asked me about dread? He lived in dread. He paced the floor, he was out every night. For a few months in 1963 we lived alone together in his Brooklyn apartment. Jeanne had just left him, and almost at the same time I arrived from Mexico. I was thirteen. I was miserable and so was he. I'd go to school, come home, he would come in at around six or seven to see what I was doing, exchange a few words, and then he'd be out again. Also, when he drank, he certainly was a force to contend with.

On the other hand, he could be gentle. He really was alpha/omega. He was very gentle, he was loving, and when he could, he gave you his full attention. Of course, he wasn't the school activities type of dad, as he'd say to me "Look, Sue. I'm never going to be the kind of father you want me to be, but I'll give you other things." And he was right. I think that when you were born, he was much calmer. He was more settled. Most of the turbulence had passed. So you have a different father; although, there were times when I saw

him interact with you that I was reminded of the Dad I had in my adolescence. The tough love kind of attitude. He was critical, mostly in a good way, but at times, he could be brutal. Then I would recognize the "old" Norman.

Lennon: Please give them a round of applause.