

CHILDREN OF FAMOUS WRITERS

GREGORY BELLOW, KAYLIE JONES,
AND SUSAN MAILER

The following panel discussion took place at the Fourteenth Annual Norman Mailer Conference, held at Monmouth University in Long Branch, New Jersey on September 30, 2016.

The panel was organized by Susan Mailer and moderated by J. Michael Lennon

J. MICHAEL LENNON: Today we have the “Children of Famous Writers” panel, and we have three speakers: Kaylie Jones, Greg Bellow, and Susan Mailer. I’m going to ask each of them if they would speak briefly about when they first became aware of the fact that their parent was indeed a famous writer, when they were old enough to understand what being a famous writer meant, and how that affected them. I’ll start with Kaylie.

KAYLIE JONES: I was born about ten years after *From Here to Eternity*, and my mother was my Dad’s second big relationship. Although he didn’t marry the first woman, they were together for a long time. He was pretty much at the height of his fame, and people asked me, “Why are you in France? Why are you living in France? Is your father in the government?” “No.” “Does he work for the Church? For the American Cathedral, what does he do?” “Oh, he’s a writer.” And they kind of look at you strangely. Well, what did he write? And all I had to say was *From Here to Eternity* in whatever language I knew how to say it in, which was about seven languages. [LAUGHTER] I was in an international school, and they would all go “Oh . . . oh . . .” like that. So, that was my first experience, and I thought that was normal. And I thought that anybody that wrote a book, that was at our house had that same fame. So I grew up like that, but I didn’t read the books, because I was little. Not until I went to college, and I realized that the “Twentieth Century American

Literature” class, and the “War as Told” class, had books by everybody I knew. And I’d argue with the teacher, which did not get me an “A,” I promise you. When you argue with PhDs about their dissertations, about what they’re saying about writers that you know didn’t mean what they say they meant, it’s not a good idea. So I dis-recommend that to all the children of writers, or grandchildren of writers. I helped my daughter with a paper and she got a C minus. [LAUGHTER] So, dis-recommended.

My Dad died when I was sixteen and my memories of him are, of course, colored by the years of mythology I’ve piled on top of that. But he was my ally and my friend, and he was the one I went to when I had a serious issue—not my mother—always. And I remember weighing . . . weighing those things, because he said, “don’t come up and knock on my door unless it’s an emergency.” I weighed what that meant. Was getting a new pair of shoes an emergency? If you had a hole in your shoe, then yes, but if you didn’t have a hole in your shoe it was not an emergency. He was a Depression era child. So, you really had to think about that. Three of my fish died in the fish tank—I only have three fish left. Is that an emergency? I think I veered on the side of not bothering him, even when it was important, at least to me.

For example, on one of my Barbie dolls, her knee came apart and her leg was dragging, and my father said, “I can fix that. Four o’clock tomorrow, bring her upstairs, and I’ll fix her.” I brought the doll up and knocked on the door. He had laid out his tools on his blotter and, with his pocket knife, he cut open her knee, put the piece back together, sewed it up, and said, “This is like a real leg, it’s two pieces, they just need to be hooked back together.” He sewed the knee back together and he said, “Now she has a knee just like me,” because he had this huge scar on his knee from surgery. Now that was an emergency, and he understood that that was an emergency, and so did I. So that was the kind of relationship we had.

JML: Let’s not get into the death yet. Let’s do the early years.

KJ: I’m done then, [LAUGHTER] Because I only had lived . . . one-fifth of my life. I was sixteen and I’m now fifty-six, I counted it yesterday. Actually, you helped me figure that out but that’s because I can’t count. [LAUGHTER] But that’s four-fifths of my life that I’ve lived without him and every major decision that I’ve ever made, I have made with that thought, what would he think? What would he think about this? And I still do that.

I remember, for example, him saying that he loved Science Fiction, which

always was amazing. He'd get the magazine every month, the whole thing, and he'd say things like, "They're going to find, pretty soon, other planets circling suns, that can hold life." And I thought he was completely out of his mind, because in school that was not what they told us at all, and he'd say things like, "Dinosaurs are more like birds than like reptiles." And I thought this man was absolutely crazy. [LAUGH] If I'd said that in school, they would have thrown me out. And imagine the day that they discovered a planet going around a sun that was like the earth. It made me cry. He was a visionary in that sense, and that's the kind of stuff that I think about, when I think about him.

JML: Greg?

GREG BELLOW: My experience was very much the opposite. If there's one biographical fact that's important about me, it's that I was 21 when my father became famous. I was a sophomore in college, the year *Herzog* was published. So I was the son of a starving artist. I think somebody had quoted me that I was raised by Augie March (*The Adventures of Augie March*) and then my father became Mr. Sammler (*Mr. Sammler's Planet*). I'll leave the Mr. Sammler part for later. So, we lived a hand to mouth existence. Until I was six years old, we lived all over the world . . . well, at least the United States and Europe. I call it a sort of a Gypsy existence, and then, finally, my mother said to my father, "The kid has got to go to school," [LAUGH] and my father said, "Well, that's fine but I'm outta here." So, when I was eight, he moved out.

The emotional relationship between your father and you, and my father and me was very similar. He was much more of a sort of sympathetic soul to me. I think he was really kind of liked a kid like him . . . a very grown-up child himself. I knew he was a writer from the beginning. There was something different about him.

I ran into a friend from my junior high school days who told me this wonderful story. He came over to my house after school one day. My father and my mother were divorced, but Saul was in and out of the house from time to time. Steve came over and there was my father writing at 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon. He told me that he said to himself, "What a slacker! Doesn't this guy have a job?" [LAUGHTER]

He had a wonderful affinity for kids, he had a very special feeling for children, and so being his son was very important. And having a child in his life was very important to him, as it was with my brothers too.

JML: Okay. Sue?

SUSAN MAILER: You could say that I had a double life, because, when I was in the States I had a famous father and in Mexico no one knew him. My father was famous at 26, before I was born, and he was not too taken with the idea of being a father at that time. He wanted to have sex with all the women who were falling at his feet. And there he was, saddled with me, and my mother. They broke up soon after that. My mother met a handsome Mexican man and went to Mexico, and I went with her. So that was one half of my life—Mexico, Spanish, and anonymity. Norman Mailer, who is that guy? I would go to New York and suddenly become the daughter of someone who was important. How did I know this? From an early age, say three or four years old, grandmother said to me “Your father is a very important man,” and I would say, “Yes grandma.” “Do you know what he does” she would ask me. “Yes! He writes.” Now, I think that one of the main qualities that children of famous writers have in common is that we know that what our parents do is very important. Very early in our life we internalize that we can’t bother them. We cannot interrupt them, ever. I would wake up in the morning when I was just a little kid, say four or five, and I would say “Hi, Daddy, Good morning,” and he’d say, “Don’t interrupt me, I’m thinking.” [LAUGHTER]

When I was thirteen, I went to school in New York. My friends’ parents would ask me “Oh, you’re Susan Mailer . . . Susan Mailer . . . are you Norman Mailer’s daughter?” And I’d say “Yeah!” half proud and a little anxious, thinking, “Oh, they know who my father is.” The next line was, “Oh, isn’t he the one who stabbed his wife?” I’d say embarrassed “Uh, Yeah.” “Was she your mother?” “No, she wasn’t my mother,” and felt compelled to go into a long explanation. “No, my mother was the first wife, Adele was the second wife. She was the one who was stabbed.” “Oh.” That was it. [LAUGHTER]

And then I would meet other people who would be very taken with the idea that I was his daughter. When I went to college, I certainly had the sensation that I was the daughter of someone who was a major figure in American life, in American politics, and in American letters. But up until then I had a very shaky feeling of being the daughter of a man who was, in Mexico unknown, and in the United States, sometimes ridiculed, not very much liked, and very much criticized, but famous.

JML: One of the other things that you also have in common is that through your famous fathers, you met a number of other interesting people, writers,

famous people. Could you talk a little bit about your fathers' circle of friends? Kaylie?

KJ: Well, I don't remember this too well, but I have vague, vague memories. James Baldwin carried me on his shoulders through the first Civil Rights March in Paris, and they marched from the American Embassy to the *Arc de Triomphe*, up the *Champs Elysees*, and he carried me on his shoulders, because I was too little to walk that far. And every time I'd see him, for the rest of my life, even the last time I saw him, he said, "Remember when I carried you on my shoulders?" And he turned me into the crazy complete knee jerk liberal I am. [LAUGHTER]

William Styron was a good friend of my Dad's at that time. Norman and my father had a fight before I was born, or not long after, and he acted like a broken-hearted wife, I swear to God. He was so upset whenever anybody would bring up Norman, or talk about Norman, my father would go into a complete rage, and he really acted like a heartbroken lover. It was incredible. I think that he really adored Norman, and that was a big loss for him.

JML: To anybody who had close relations with your father . . .

KJ: You know who he loved? Mary McCarthy, of all people. My Dad and Mary McCarthy were very, very good friends, which I always thought was really interesting, considering that she was considered such a brute by a lot of the male writers of that generation, and they were kind of hard on her in many ways, but my Dad adored her. He thought she was absolutely awesome, and she had a very quiet husband who was much less loud, and much more sort of in the background, and he loved him too, and he thought he was really great as a supporter of her. And that was an unconventional relationship, to say the least and my father seemed to think that was absolutely great.

JML: And you became good friends with a friend of your father's, Willie Morris, right?

KJ: Yeah, well, Willie was later. We moved to Sagaponack on that one road, I was telling Greg earlier, on Sag Main Street, they all . . . every writer, practically, that we knew, lived on that road at some point. Starting with Peter Matthiessen up towards the beach, and then Vonnegut's house was like three doors down, and then Truman lived right there, and then John Knowles lived

there, Irwin Shaw lived in fancy South Hampton, they said, he's too fancy for us because Sagaponack was all potato fields at that time. So they all lived on that road, John Knowles, Jack Knowles was there. There was not much to do, so they would hang out a lot, and drink in the local bar. That was when we moved to the States, so from '75 to the time he died, which was '77, it was only really two years that we were there, but Willie was a huge part of our lives at that time.

JML: Greg, how about you? Did you meet many of your father's friends?

GB: What struck me when I became older and more aware of it, I realized who some of these people were in their public life. James Baldwin was in Paris between '48 and '50, and according to my father and my mother, he was just poor as a church mouse and lived in a place with no shower. He would come over for a shower, but very pointedly, my father said, he always showed up around dinnertime. [LAUGHTER]

Ralph Ellison was in and out of the house all the time. My parents were friends with Ralph, and Fanny, and Ralph, and Saul and I would go fishing, but these were childhood activities. And then I'd turn around and find out he was putting the finishing touches on *Invisible Man*. Wright Morris was in Tivoli where my father had a house. Wright used to give everybody haircuts. It was ordinary life to me. There was nothing particularly special about these people but I grew up and I found out that Philip Roth and John Berryman were incredibly well known. I didn't live with my father after I was eight, except for summers. The reason I knew Ralph as well as I did is partly because he was staying in the house near Bard through my adolescence.

They were the "Who's Who" of literature, political science, social science. They all knew each other at various universities. At Bard, there was a tiny woman named Hannah something who was married to a man named Heinrich Blücher. It turned out she was Hannah Arendt who, later on, became very famous, but it was her husband who was the better-known person in the late '50s. At Bard, Ted Weiss was a famous poet. We go over at dusk and he would insist on sitting in the dark. But again, it didn't make a big impression on me at all.

JML: Susan?

SM: It's odd. I also remember James Baldwin. I remember him walking into the house, into the apartment, and I remember being very struck by him,

and reading him after that, but I was a little bit older by that time, about twelve or thirteen. I remember him going to the Brooklyn apartment. When I was a kid, I don't think I was aware of any of the famous writers or people that my father was friendly with. Afterwards, when I was in my teens, I became very friendly with José Torres and his wife, Ramona. He went to Mexico with a friend of his, Genaro, and spent something close to two or three weeks there.

When I was thirteen, Dad came in with a beautiful blonde woman, an Irish guy and another woman around 7:00 am, right before I was about to go to school. The Irish guy turned out to be Brendan Behan, the poet, a very funny guy, and the beautiful blonde was Beverly, who later became my father's wife, not famous, but certainly a striking woman.

I'm pretty sure that when I visited my father in Bridgewater in the '50s I met Bill Styron, but I don't have any recollection of him. I would say that most of the famous people I met were later on, when I was in college. John Lennon, who totally wowed me. I remember Kurt Vonnegut and Woody Allen.

JML: Bob Dylan?

GB: Yeah.

SM: Bob Dylan? No, I didn't meet Bob Dylan. It's not something I would forget easily.

JML: John Lennon came to your . . .

SM: Actually, John Lennon did not come to our engagement party. I met him at one of my father's book parties. Woody Allen, and Kurt Vonnegut were at our engagement party. We were standing by the door welcoming the guests with my husband and my father, and in comes Woody Allen. I pumped his hand, "Oh, I'm so happy to meet you. I admire your work very much." When he walked into the apartment, I immediately felt so embarrassed. I was totally taken aback by my behavior, especially because he looked so uncomfortable by my admiration.

I wasn't around, just like Greg said, I wasn't around that much. But when I was in New York my father took me to dinner parties. I remember those occasions with fondness. I was around fifteen or sixteen, cute and well read. I was a novelty for literary critics like Diana and Lionel Trilling and Stephen

Marcus, I was their little darling. I could talk about books and music and had opinions. I don't think I ever felt as comfortable at a dinner party again. (LAUGHTER) I stopped being sixteen.

JML: And you weren't cute any more.

SM: And I wasn't that cute any more, right?

JML: Tell them who your instructor was at Columbia, in English.

SM: Oh, my freshman English teacher was Kate Millett. [LAUGHTER] I didn't know who she was. But I remember she gave us a poem by Dylan Thomas. She said, "Read this poem and write what you think. You have half an hour." I was right off the plane from Mexico, I hardly knew how to write English and I had never read Dylan Thomas at that point, so I read the poem over and over and over again, and then my heart sank, I didn't know what the poem meant! So I wrote her a note. I said, "Dear Miss Millett, I don't have any idea what this poem means. Maybe you can help me. Thank you. Susan Mailer." She was very nice about it. She said, "Well, you know, you're about the only honest person in this room. I don't think anybody understands this poem." [LAUGHTER] And she took me under her wing. She was wonderful. Later I found out, lo and behold, who Kate Millett was. She went to Mexico in the early '70s, invited by a TV program where I worked in PR and Production. It was a cultural program called *Encounter*. I showed her around Mexico City and we had a very nice three or four days.

JML: All three of you went into somewhat different professions. Well, Sue, you and Greg are in the same profession. Can you say something about how your father, and your mother too, about how they affected your professional life. Did they help you? What has carried over into your own life?

KJ: I was talking, interestingly, about this with Susan Cheever not long ago, and she said that she wanted to put together an anthology of essays by the children of writers, like ourselves, and she wanted to call it "Circus Folk," because, she said, basically when you grow up in the circus, if your Dad's the lion tamer you learn to tame lions. And if your Mom rides the elephants, you learn to ride the elephants, and if they're acrobats, etc., and that's what we are, basically, is circus folk.

I thought that was a really interesting way of thinking about it. Because if you grow up in a house where they're reading works aloud, and quoting

works, and talking about works as if they were real. They would discuss whether or not a character was morally justified in an action in a book, and I didn't know they were talking about a book. I thought that they were talking about a real person, because that was the way they would talk about it, as if it were real, and then they would go pull the book off the shelf, and read passages, and I was little . . . I mean, I was young. When I was older, I started to understand this better, but when I was small, it was just very entertaining.

But I think that if people around you are good storytellers, you learn to tell a story well. I think that's a kind of talent that you need to have as a writer, is to be able to tell a story in a correct order. And I think that's what they were so good at. I never wanted to be a writer. It was terrifying to me that my Dad would get up by himself in the morning, nobody woke him up, and he'd go trudging up to his office upstairs, six days a week and I thought that was a terrifying profession. Especially because he was always complaining that he was broke, and that he had to work, and he had to work more, and he had to work harder, and it just seemed like a very lonely, and difficult existence. But after he died . . . I'm back to after he died again, is that okay?

JML: Yep.

KJ: After he died . . . what happened was . . . like that wasn't enough of a shock, to watch him actually die. *The New York Times* gave his obituary to Herbert Mitgang, who was a critic and he hated . . . hated my father, only slightly less than he hated William Styron, who apparently had taken off with his wife at some point [LAUGH] and they hid out in my Dad's studio office, and my Dad was terrible. He was probably condescending and mean to him, I imagine, I don't know. But he wrote an obituary that was so scathing and so horrible, dismissing him, saying that his work would be irrelevant and he'd never be remembered and so on, that I called *The New York Times* at sixteen and complained to them about this obituary. And I decided right then and there, I said to myself, I'm going to read everything I can read, I'm going to read everything they read, I'm going to read everything he read. I'm going to read everything I remember anybody talking about, and I will decide myself whether or not he's going to be dismissed by American literature, and that's what I set out to do, and that's what I did. And that's how I became a writer.

JML: Great story.

SM: Great story, yeah.

JML: Greg?

GB: My mother was a social worker and I'm a social worker by profession. But my mother was mostly interested in questions of social justice, and she worked for HIP, which is still in business. As far as she was concerned, that was socialized medicine. She ran a Planned Parenthood clinic when I was in elementary school and I used to go and stamp birth control literature on days when I didn't have to go to school and she had to go to work. I was the only eleven-year-old I know who knew who Margaret Sanger was. [LAUGH] That was the ethos in which I was raised on the Goshkin side of the family. My father was, at that point, very much of the same political and social point of view. Definitely, the ethos in the family is you have a responsibility to be a good person, a moral person, and to do good in the world.

So that was one thing. The other thing is, my father was a great observer, paid attention, and was very interested in what I later learned was contained in the phrase, one's concept of Man. In other words what makes people tick? But probably the most formative thing is when I was about ten or eleven years old, my father began to ask me, well, Gregory, how's . . . what's your inner life like? [LAUGH] It took me three or four years to figure out what that meant, which is a remarkably short period of time given the fact that I'm 72, and I'm still trying to figure it out. It meant that the important things are what happen on an internal stage, inside of yourself.

They occur in the most private parts of yourself and in solitude. I think that was true of my father. But what I would say is the way he filtered it, by the time it got to be public, was very different than I think it was in private. There is a line in *The Dangling Man* where the narrator says that his heart was protected by brambles. And I think that's the way my father's heart was.

But he and I had a heart to heart connection and I could talk with him in a very honest way, the way I could talk with almost nobody else. And he, up to a certain point, was very candid with me. We differed mightily later in life but could always get back to some point of common ground, of shared family, of history, of our love for one another though sometimes it took a lot of retrieving to get there.

I would also say that he really didn't think particularly highly of Freud,

and I came to think very highly of Freud and of Freudian thinking. I don't think he trusted his own feelings. I think they were too Quixotic for him and I think he was still influenced by outer forces.

In contrast, I learned to trust my own feelings. I took "Gregory, how is your inner life?" to a different level than I think he did in his life. Through my training, my analysis, reading and passion for psychology, I learned to trust the messages that bubble up from inside-sometimes in the middle of the night—sometimes when you least expect. As I said to Susan in our first conversation, it doesn't happen often, but every once in a while I get a telegram from my unconscious, and I always pay attention to what's in the message.

JML: Terrific. Susan?

SM: I got a telegram from my unconscious for this panel, but I'll get to that later. I have an anecdote about my Dad. He went to Chile in 1986, and one day he asked me to take him to my office. "Don't tell me anything about anybody here," he said. "I want to figure out who's who in this office." I said okay. So he walks into my office and says, "Well this is easy, because there's a Danielle Mailer print over there, so this is your office." He walks into the next room and he says, "The woman who works here is very private, she's a private woman. She keeps to herself, she seems a little bit glum, maybe slightly, she's reserved and doesn't like to talk very much, but she's very smart. And she likes art." I was stunned. Then he walks into the other room and he says, "Now, this woman is very interesting. She's very interested in art. She might even be an artist, and there's something about her that's very sexy, and she probably has a very good sense of humor, and men like her." I said, "Dad, how do you know all these things? You don't know these people." Because he was right on the mark. He said, "Well, I'm a novelist, I should know what people are like from the places they inhabit."

I think that I became a psychoanalyst because my mother was a psychiatrist and was definitely a strong influence on me. She always told me, "You have to have a profession, not just a job. You cannot depend on a man. You should depend on yourself. Be self-sufficient. Period." At twenty-seven I had a very good job, but even so, she said to me, "Okay Sue, so what are you going to do with the rest of your life?" "What do you mean what am I going to do with the rest of my life?" I answered. "I have a very good job, I'm making very good money." "Yeah, but that's just a job, you have to have a pro-

fession.” I guess around that period I began to think seriously about what I wanted to do. I had always wanted to be a therapist. I considered medical school, but finally settled on Graduate school. I got a Masters in Clinical Psychology.

So, those are the facts, the steps I went through. But in the last few months I’ve been thinking about why I was drawn to becoming a therapist. When I was growing up in the ’50s, those three months that I spent with my father, he was going through a rough patch some of the time. During that period, when he was in the midst of *Lipton’s Journal* in 1954–55, I was living with him for about two months. And, as you know, he smoked pot heavily. I thought he smoked pot and wrote, but according to Mike, he smoked pot and then wrote the next day.

JML: Next day usually.

SM: He smoked pot, he drank a lot. He was not himself, and I probably picked this up the way children pick up these kinds of things.

I’m going to say something quite personal, but I think it will explain why I went into my chosen profession. Before *Lipton’s*, when I was four or five years old, my father lived on the Lower East Side in a cold water flat. It had a hole in the ceiling. And, at night, I would look at that hole. It was in my bedroom, and I would get a feeling of floating up towards the hole, getting lighter, and lighter, no weight, and then I would feel gravity pulling me down into my bed again and I would get smaller and smaller. In my bed I would become a tiny, little thing, and then again I would lose weight and float up to the ceiling.

Years later, when I studied child development, I understood that this is a dissociative mechanism children and adults use when under duress. So, I can only surmise that I was a distressed child. I don’t know what was going on during this time but I’m sure that Adele and Dad were drinking heavily and smoking weed and they had lots of loud parties. It was a charged atmosphere.

And then, during 1956, ’57, ’58, up until 1960, the time we lived in Bridge-water, my Dad was often in a funk. I could feel his moods. I could sense he was that he was tortured. That something was wrong. So I learned to tiptoe around him, be invisible, appear when he wanted me to be there, disappear when I could sense that he didn’t want anybody around him, and I could always tell when he was in one of his moods.

At that early age I was already on the road to becoming a therapist. Because that's what we do as therapists. We learn to read body language, eye movements, we figure out what is going on by looking into someone's face. We become experts in detecting the mood in our office and I was already doing all this when I was a kid.

Now, something about the message from my unconscious. When I began reading Lipton's *Journal* and read my father's letters to Bob Lindner, his very close friend who was also a psychoanalyst, I realized a couple of things. One was that they had incredible conversations about Freud and Marx, about politics and philosophy. When Bob died in 1956, this was a tough loss for my father. In my teens I remember my dad drawing me into conversations about Freud. He was also interested in what my mother was doing, what she was reading. I didn't want them to meet anywhere in the universe, my mother and my father, because there was always an electrical current between them, so I would say, "I don't know." He'd say, "Is she reading Freud? You know I gave her, the three volumes of Freud's works, did she read them? Did she read Ernest Jones' biography?" "I don't know, I don't know." I would answer, but this stuck with me.

It seemed that he had a special interest in talking to me about Freud and psychoanalysis. When I found out about the close nature of his friendship with Lindner, of their intense conversations, I thought that maybe Dad wanted to have a conversation about psychoanalysis with me as a way of channeling Lindner. Maybe I picked up on that. Because I did feel that, for him, these conversations with me were important to him. My father considered me the intellectual daughter of the family. I was, as Norris wrote in her memoir, the only one who was not an artist, okay? And, finally, I think that becoming an analyst was a way of bringing my parents together.

JML: Ah.

SM: They had always been so far apart, diametrically opposed, that I felt that this was a way that I could bring them together in the things that had interested them when they were very young.

GB: Let me just add one thing that I left out.

JML: Yes, please.

GB: I said earlier that I had specialized in working with children, and that my father had a very special affinity for kids. He often said to me that I was a mo-

rose child. I was very depressed when my father left. I mean he was my playmate, my best friend. As I said, I was much closer to him than I was to my mother and I missed him terribly. I was very unhappy for years. He said to me, when I had established myself professionally as a child therapist, “You turned the misery of your childhood into your profession.” He was quite right.

SM: That’s true. Winnicott, a psychoanalyst, said we become psychoanalysts to cure ourselves. That’s the first reason we become psychoanalysts.

GB: And then secondarily to cure your parents.

SM: And then secondarily to cure your parents, that’s right. [LAUGHTER]

JML: Okay, we’d like to open it up to questions. Who has some questions? Chris Busa.

CHRIS BUSA: I’ve spent a long time studying the children of artists, growing up in the art world myself, more with visual artists than literary artists. But I’ve always felt that the children of artists have different developmental issues. It has to do with the identification with the parental figures. They don’t go through an Oedipal complex and want to hurt, destroy the father. They want to identify with the father. If you go to a psychiatrist, you say that this is my life’s story. I like this part, this part, and this part. But there’s two chapters missing, and I don’t like the ending, so help me rewrite my story. So that’s what you do as a therapist and that relationship that Mailer had with Lindner was a substitute for self-analysis in a kind of way. But the children learn to identify with the struggles, the honest struggles and the noble play of their parents. They admire it, they respect it, they admire the discipline, and they also grow up feeling alienated from the rest of the world.

JML: Is that your question? Did they feel alienated?

CB: In Provincetown everybody’s an artist and writer. You go to New York, and everybody’s doing something different. So it’s like the milieu you’re in, is it a normal activity, or is it a bizarre activity? And I think Kaylie experienced that with her father—well, my father’s a writer, but unless you’re famous, you’re nobody.

GB: I ended up in college with Aram Saroyan and we became fast friends very quickly and he said, “I know a lot of people whose Dads were dentists.

But you're the first person I've met whose Dad was a writer." I would add there's also the matter of my dis-identifying. My interest in writing and literature, what you've seen and heard today is mostly a product of the last decade of my life after I retired. It is a secondary interest that grew out of a combination of my life in psychology and an attempt to try to get closer to my father, first of all by writing the memoir.

KJ: Hmmm.

SM: Hmmm.

JML: Yes, right. Warrick?

WARRICK: Gregory and Susan, once you both became professionals, did your fathers ever ask you for advice, or talk to you about their own insights?

GB: [to **SM**] Well, you and I talked about this when we went to lunch.

SM: Yes, we did.

JML: Please tell us.

SM: Yes, I think my father went out one on one with most of his children and, with me, every time I came to the States we would go out to lunch or dinner, and he was always worried about one of my siblings. Or he would be worried about his wife, or he would be worried about his life, something that was going wrong with his life, and he would talk to me about it, and I think those were the closest moments that we had, because whenever he talked about his ideas, he became a different person. Then what he needed was a sounding board, he needed someone to listen to him. But here he wanted my feedback. So yes, he did come. What else did we talk about at that lunch?

GB: I would say I had a different experience. My father did not like Freud. He did not like his determinism or what he had to say about culture and art in particular. One time he asked a question about it, and I gave him an answer with which he was very satisfied. The reason he was satisfied with it, as far as I could tell, is because it really made logical sense to him. It was about some friends of his, and their adult child had committed suicide. The child had drug problems and the mother and father were at each other's throats. He said, "I don't understand why this marriage, which was good, is breaking up after this." And I said, "Pop, they can't afford to blame the kid." Bingo!

“Thank you very much,” he said and that was it. But it is the only one time I can remember.

JML: Barbara Wasserman.

BARBARA WASSERMAN: Sue, just one correction or addition as to why you became a psychoanalyst?

SM: Yes?

BW: From the time you were a very young kid, you were always interested in what made people tick.

SM: What made people tick? [LAUGHTER] Yeah, I was always watching them. [LAUGH]

GB: We saw plenty, too, right?

SM: I saw a lot, yes.

BW: I just have one comment about Mary McCarthy. I once had the opportunity to ask Norman, who he liked as a woman writer, and he mentioned Mary McCarthy.

GB: Yeah.

KJ: Makes sense to me.

JML: Yes, he had a lot of admiration for her.

GB: Yeah, I remember her name also, and I think that there was sort of a grudging admiration. What do you call it?

JML: Yes, Alex Hicks.

ALEX HICKS: It seems so amazing that you could re-visit your parents through their books. So, I'm curious, which ones do you still go to today?

JML: Good question.

AH: Maybe, for you Kaylie.

KJ: Yeah, I have two different answers, and I'll tell you one strange story, which is that he wrote a very good book about Paris called *The Merry Month of May*, which is about the '68 riots in Paris, which he called the mini-Revolution, but there is a character in that book who's an eight-year-old child

called McKenna, and he told me, “That’s you.” So he’d ask me things about what it was like to be that age so he could put it in the book. I didn’t read that book for many years, and then one of my writing students, a lady who was much older, read that book and said to me, “You know, that’s a very interesting book, because in the book he’s not the father, he’s the godfather of the child. And throughout the book he worries about the child because she’s lonely and alone in this family of drinkers.” Our apartment and the Pulpit bar were in the book, and the parents are crazy drunk all the time, and the child is very lonely and he was, in the book, very concerned about this child. It’s so strange that he did not, in reality, show any of that concern or talk about that concern to anybody. But he put it in this book as a separate entity from himself. When I read the book again, and the wife ends up in a mental institution from having tried to kill herself, and she’s talking about the police coming to get her, and she’s tied down in the bed saying, “You have to let me go,” that’s what ended up happening to my mother, pretty much. She ended up drunk in a bed, tied down, screaming, “Let me out of here, why are you doing this to me?” And to me, when I looked at that book again I was totally, completely shaken up. I don’t think he knew what he was writing about, really. Do you know what I’m trying to say?

AH: Yes.

SM: Going back to that for me is a very difficult experience.

JML: What’s the other one?

KJ: The other one is reading *The Thin Red Line* again years later, because Terrence Malick made this movie and he was calling me constantly, asking me what I thought about this or that. So I read it again and I just think it’s one of the greatest novels I’ve ever read. About human behavior, you know? Human tragedy.

JML: Yes, it certainly is.

AH: Did you like the movie?

KJ: I did like the movie very much. It’s very different from the book. It’s not the book at all, it’s like an homage or an echo of the book, but it’s not the book. Yes. It’s absolutely not supposed to be a true representation of the book.

JML: Greg?

GB: I've been in a psycho-biography group for fifteen years and I'm quite interested in the relationship between the writer and the writing. I read my father's book from a filial and psychological position and I quite candidly can say that in some ways I see my father very clearly. I think that he was most honest on the page and I see him very clearly as I read. I know what was going on in his life, but I didn't really know what was going through his head simultaneously, until I read the books. He puts his thoughts and his feelings, always conflicted, always complex, into the mouths of his narrators.

I got lambasted in the *New Yorker* for crossing the line between life and art but it's an important question to ask, what kind of person wrote thirteen great novels? And they're all written by my Dad. It's legit to read the books for what they are and is perfectly okay with me. But it's dogmatic to say that's the only way to read them. I took offense at being dissed by the reviewer for inserting my filial prerogative which is to say that it is my Dad who wrote these books.

JML: And your favorite?

GB: I would say *Sammler*. It's a dark book and I have a great tolerance for dark books. My reading group thinks that there's something wrong with me because of it. But I think that he's at his most honest. It's a true confession of not attending to the implications of The Holocaust. When I got interviewed to be on the earlier panel, I was seeing a similarity between Dante's *Commedia*, and *Sammler*, *Humboldt's Gift* and *More Die of Heartbreak*. The parallel is that *Sammler* is about evil, *Humboldt* is about spiritual purification and *More Die of Heartbreak* is about love, which are the themes of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradisio*. And I'm talking about my father and Dante having a parallel spiritual crisis. If you look at those novels as a trilogy, which I don't think that he did, you see that's what's on the mind of a great man battered by life and looking at death.

JML: Susan?

SM: I don't think that I've studied my father's work but I've read most of his work. I love *The Naked and the Dead*, which I read when I was fifteen or sixteen, and I thought it was a great book, and one of the reasons that I thought it was a great book was that I forgot that my father had written it. I was so

taken by the story that I had completely forgotten. And I didn't get that feeling again, until I read *The Executioner's Song*, which I would say is my favorite work of his.

The Armies of the Night, which I think is brilliant, I found very hard to read, because he ridicules himself, because he's so much on the page that it just made me cringe. I haven't read it in a very long time, but I think I might be old enough to actually enjoy it now. Dad seemed to have no fear of ridicule, but I cringed when he made himself ludicrous. So all the books in which he showed too much of himself would make me uncomfortable. I don't feel that way anymore, so I think it's time for me to read those books again.

GB: One of the reasons that I love *The Armies of the Night* is that I was about two hundred yards away from the battle at the Pentagon and we were trying to levitate the Pentagon.

JML: Oh, were you one of those guys?

[LAUGHTER]

GB: It didn't work.

JML: Mashey Bernstein

MASHEY BERNSTEIN: The same thing happened to me after my parents died, when they came back to me in dreams, or I had conversations with them. I was wondering, is there anything that you regret not saying to your parents? Or have them come back to you and you've had these conversations and have they changed your perceptions of them, now that you're older and have different experiences?

GB: I'd say oh shit, yes. [LAUGHTER]

SM: I've had several dreams, oh yeah. My mother passed away this year, in April, and she's come back a few times. And after my father died, he came back a couple of times, two or three times, and one of the dreams . . . it wasn't a conversation, it was more like my being my usual indecisive self, like, Oh should I do this, or should I do that? And he said, "Just do it." And that was the dream. Just do it. I was at a crossroads in my life at that point, trying to decide something. And what he was basically saying to me, I figured, was, it doesn't really matter which way you go, but . . .

JML: Trust yourself.

SM: Yes, go one way or go the other, but don't keep waffling around. Yeah.

KJ: I took my daughter to college last year, to the University of Texas at Austin. My Dad's papers are there and the nice man who had organized the papers pulled out a few things for her to look at, some little journals of his, and some photos. And she cried like I never saw this kid cry, she just wept over these pictures. And we walked out of there and we're walking down the street looking for someplace to eat, and she said, "If your Dad walked past us right now, would he recognize us? Would he know us for who we are?"

SM: Wow.

KJ: And I thought about that for a second and I said, "Yes, yes, of course he would. He would know you. He would know you're his, he would know us." And then, as I kept walking, I thought no, he would not know who I am. He would not recognize who I've become, because I am who I am because he died. [CRYING] Sorry.

GB: I would just follow that up. His death was very freeing to me, to start thinking about him in a different way. And I would never have said the things I've said about him were he alive.

SM: I would second that. I think that, for me, my father's death was liberating. I miss him, I think of him constantly, and I felt deep, deep pain when he died. But it was liberation. I felt liberated to think about him in a different way, to think about myself in a different way, to write. I had never wanted to write. When he died, I felt like I could do it. And so, they're larger than life, and then when they die, they go into another place and you can become yourself, you can blossom. I don't know if you feel that way. I felt I could just be myself. I didn't have a shadow, I didn't have to compete with him, I didn't have to think about what he would think. He accompanied me in a way that made me feel more secure, instead of always being on guard.

GB: Well, I became surprised. I have two half-brothers and one is a book editor, one was a newspaper reporter, and I was supposed to be the son who didn't know how to write. [LAUGHTER] I fooled them all. [LAUGHTER]

JML: Well, I think we should give these folks a round of applause.

APPLAUSE



Blindness and Insight: Suzanne Dutchman (Demi Moore) shaving Bill Oakland (Alec Baldwin).