

WHERE IS NORMAN MAILER WHEN WE NEED HIM?

ROBERT J. BEGIEBING

*Norman Mailer: Four Books of the 1960s
and Norman Mailer: Collected Essays of the 1960s*

Editor J. Michael Lennon

New York: Library of America, 2018, 1439 pages
Boxed set, Hardcover (ISBN 978-1-59853-558-7 &
978-1-59853-559-4) USD \$80.00

THE LIBRARY OF AMERICA and editor J. Michael Lennon's choice to begin its Mailer collection with two companion volumes of Mailer's work in the Sixties is perspicacious. Mailer underwent a deep psychological and creative transformation beginning in the mid-Fifties, during which he kept a private journal (*Lipton's Journal*) of unflinching self-analysis. As a result, Mailer's work of the Sixties reveals the "real Norman Mailer" emerging from a decade of work he looked back on as insufficiently original and rebellious. Moreover, the Sixties was a period of political and cultural rebellion (grounded in the civil rights and anti-war movements) in a nation more divided than any time since the Civil War, a time not unlike our own in the second decade of the 21st century. Could this boxed set, especially the two books of political reporting, reach beyond *The Mailer Review* readers to become the cornerstone for a broader Mailer revival? Do we again need reminders, from a writer who pulls no punches, of how our negligence threatens fragile democracy?

In 1959 the publication of *Advertisements for Myself* revealed Mailer's new consciousness and voice. So much so that Library of America might have included that tome in this collection as Mailer's launching pad to the Sixties.

That, of course, would have made for an unwieldy set, yet *Advertisements* is the transitional book in Mailer's oeuvre. The collection of essays from the Sixties in this handsome, durable set will help readers understand Mailer's ideas and theories embodied in the two controversial novels collected in the companion volume. (I did, however, miss two important "essay-interviews," as I'll call them: "The Political Economy of Time" and "The Metaphysics of the Belly"). But my sense is that a reader might well have difficulty fully understanding (or fully appreciating) the first novel, *An American Dream* (1963, 1964), absent familiarity with *Advertisements for Myself*, and, dare I add, without some familiarity with *Lipton's Journal*. The future publication of a large portion of that private journal will be a bold and remarkable event for Mailer studies. It will also pose some further risk for Mailer's reputation. Imagine what your own uncensored private thoughts would do for your reputation—even among friends.

If one reads *Advertisements*, *Lipton's Journal*, and Mailer's letters regarding *An American Dream* (see *Norman Mailer's Letters on An American Dream 1963–1969*, edited by J. Michael Lennon), one comes to understand not only how autobiographically motivated the novel in many ways is, but how much it is a continuation of *Lipton's* self-analysis, of Mailer's quest for renewal as a man and novelist. Because he came to believe by 1955 as he composed his journal that *The Naked and the Dead* was a derivative "imposture," that *Barbary Shore* "collapsed into a . . . political debate," and that *The Deer Park* was "an enormous lie," Mailer wrote *An American Dream* as an innovative work of fiction that would continue his own deep dive into the unconscious (as he put it in a June 3, 1965, letter to his Japanese translator Eiichi Yamanishi) by depicting a protagonist in his extreme state of "emotional exhaustion and existential disorientation" on his quest for redemption. Mailer went on to describe the novel as his attempt to write "the dramatic history of a man's soul over thirty-two hours . . . a time of intense despair." But for contemporary readers, especially without sufficient biographical background and a quickening sense of the early Sixties, the novel will be the hardest sell of the books collected here. *An American Dream* is steeped in the violence and hallucinatory horror of nightmare as much as in the visionary's dream of healing from disease and disorder. It draws symbolic consistency and power from mythological roots, especially the archetypal journey of the hero's eternal return. Read literally, *An American Dream* could seem to readers in 2018 a mishmash of marital misogyny, violence, cowardice, courage, satanic/ an-

gelic dream-figures, strutting grotesques, and soulless American cityscapes. If there was ever a book that will require literature instructors to issue trigger warnings and duck and cover should they dare assign it, this is it. I'm afraid Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard won't help an instructor's defense anymore, either. In our time is even tenure sufficient safeguard for those assigning discomfiting texts? Outside academe, however, and with the help of some of these collected essays ("The Saint and the Psychopath," "Introducing Our Argument," "Our Argument at Last Presented," and "Foreword to *The End of Obscenity*") the novel might be somewhat more readable, perhaps less readily burnable.

Why Are We in Vietnam? (1967), the second novel in this new collection, is more coherent and efficient, so to speak, but would also no doubt spark trigger warnings across the academic preserve. The book's pedagogical salvation, it seems to me, would be to present the novel in a classroom (perhaps graduate students?) where readers have a healthy sense of satire in Rabelais and Swift as well as familiarity with the bawdy moments in Shakespeare and the Old Testament. Moreover, the novel's anti-war, anti-military-industrial-complex themes should help as well. Such themes are urgently "relevant"—to use that Sixties word—to our own time. Outside academe, again, our legacy of free speech, one can still hope, might justify the book.

From my point of view, *Vietnam?* is one of Mailer's finest novels, a highly metaphorical tour de force set wholly outside Vietnam but that nevertheless exposes the deepest roots of the national psychic dysfunction and inverted values that got us into a costly, horrific, unnecessary war in a far off Asian jungle. A war whose arrogant purpose was to prop up a series of collapsing, corrupt regimes we believed would stave off the great Cold War Hobgoblin—Creeping Global Communism. Our fear convinced us at the time that "The Hobgoblin is true; everything is permitted." In both Hemispheres we interfered in other countries by way of coups deposing elected leaders, assassinations, proxy and undeclared wars (on the books and off), and all manner of support for dictators and their torturers, so long as such people and regimes were anti-communist. The lessons of the Vietnam War finally might have ended such hubris after 1975, but if the lessons tamed our hubris for a few years, especially as to massive ground-troop invasions, the lessons didn't eradicate such practices, even after the Hobgoblin was crippled. Other Hobgoblins soon arose. (See William Blum's *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II*).

As a daring, profane, satirical, and original work of fiction that confronts our hubris, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* might be the book in this collection that Library of America (editorial policy aside) could have best prepared readers for by employing a brief introduction as a preemptive antidote to misunderstanding and wrong-headed reading of a major American writer now so militantly out of fashion. J. Michael Lennon's painstaking and ample notes are helpful in this case as they are with the other three books and with the collected essays, Mailer's preface to the paperback edition of *Vietnam?* (here added as an appendix) offers a little further enlightenment regarding the novel's genesis, and the inclusion of the *Partisan Review* symposium "A Happy Solution to Vietnam" in the companion volume adds a tad more. But to my mind some sort of critical introduction would do a real service for teachers, students, and common readers. (The Library of America has, for example, a voluminous "online companion" to their 2015, two-volume set, *Women Crime Writers: Suspense Novels of the 1950s*, see www.womencrime.loa.org. Come to think of it, both of Mailer's novels from the Sixties would benefit from a similar resource.)

It may not be the best of Mailer's four books contained in the Library of America's volume, but the book I found most resonant with our contemporary politics two generations later is *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968). It seems, therefore, to be worth spending on it a balance of my reviewer's time and the reader's patience. Deploying in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* what he called his "orotund" style, Mailer, like some nineteenth-century prose-prophet—say a Melville or a Ruskin—doesn't so much convince readers as sweep them along, beyond agreement/ disagreement, in cataracts of prose. Lengthy catalogues of detail, quick-changing sequences of metaphor, startling aperçus, quick and revelatory character sketches, and sonorous rhythms are all on full display, as they are in *Armies of the Night* (1968), a fourth book in this two-volume set. This is the prose Mailer was developing during the late fifties and launched in *Advertisements for Myself*.

A master of metaphor and scene setting, Mailer in the sweltering Floridian tropics of August, 1968, starts by registering the physical evidence of the vital "vegetal memories" of an American jungle dredged, paved, glitzed-over, and kitsched-up to become Miami—a handy correlative for the Republican psyche's admixture of garish taste, pinched Christian rectitude, cupidity, and righteousness we are about to witness as the convention unfolds. Likewise, later in August, we are taken to the Democratic convention in Chicago, first,

by way of a tour of the stockyards and slaughterhouses worthy of Upton Sinclair, worthy of making Teddy Roosevelt toss his breakfast for a second time. "The air of circus was also the air of the slaughterhouse," Mailer writes. Chicago's honesty in its bestial violence, its corruptions, its powerful financial engines is as forthright as it is corollary to the coming spectacles of the Democratic psyche, just as spectacles in Miami were to the Republican.

Does anyone write like this anymore? Mailer's insights—intimate, original, not always unsympathetic—about the candidates and their entourages penetrate surfaces in ways conventional press coverage does not.

"The other daughter, Julia [Nixon], brown-haired, apple-cheeked, snub-nosed, was healthy, genial, a perfect soubrette for a family comedy on television. She was as American as Corporate Bakeries apple pie. And now engaged to David Eisenhower . . . who had a pleasant face, more than a hint of innocence in it, not only small-town but near to yokel, redeemed by the friendliest of simple smiles. An ambitious high school dramatics teacher might have picked him to play Billy Bud."

Eugene McCarthy's wife Abigail is "a warm-colored woman with a pleasant face full of the arch curves of a most critical lady of the gentry. Something in her expression spoke of uncharitable wit, but she was elegant—one could see her as First Lady." As for the candidates themselves, one feels as though one has seen something of Reagan, Rockefeller, Nixon, Humphrey, McCarthy, and McGovern, one would otherwise not have quite seen, yet feels exact.

[Nixon's] half-smile while he listened was unhappy . . . and his full smile was as false as false teeth, a pure exercise of will. You could all but see the signal pass from his brain to his jaw. 'SMILE,' said the signal, and so he flashed teeth in a painful kind of joyous grimace. . . . [T]here had never been anyone in American life so resolutely phony as Richard Nixon, nor anyone so transcendently successful by such mean But he was less phony now, *that was the miracle*, he had moved from a position of total ambition and total alienation from his own person . . . to a place now where he was halfway conciliated with his own self. . . . The

Old Nixon was never wrong. Now he exploited the shift in a move to his political left, pure New Nixon. . . . [T]he tension still persisted between his actual presence as a man not altogether alien to the abyss of a real problem, and the political practitioner of his youth, that snake-oil salesman who was never back of any idea he sold, but always off to the side where he might observe its effect on the sucker. . . . SMILE said his brain. FLASH went the teeth.

Even the tiresome hoopla, schmaltz, and circus of the conventions are displayed, with considerable humor, as if, in Miami especially, we are on hashish watching reruns of *The Lawrence Welk Show*.

Reading this book in the fiftieth-year anniversary of the Tet Offensive—the bloodbath that broke the illusion of a winnable war where no other foreign power had been successful (see also Afghanistan)—is a bracing reminder of the blundering incapacities of post-World War II American politics. It is a reminder of all the ways we would have to grow up—nay, evolve—as a people to create a humane and salutary system for informing the public and choosing candidates. “[P]olitical power of the most frightening sort was obviously waiting for the first demagogue who would smash the obsession and free the white man of his guilt. Torrents of energy would be loosed, yes, those same torrents Hitler had freed in the Germans when he exploded their ten-year obsession with whether they had lost the war through betrayal or through material weakness. Through betrayal, Hitler had told them: Germans were actually strong and good. The consequences would never be counted. Now if suburban American was not waiting for George Wallace, it might still be waiting for Super-Wallace.”

Mailer’s vision of the political conventions and characters makes one feel rather like a primatologist (no doubt with an ape tethered to his own soul) observing the rites of bi-pedal anthropoids, chained to their primordial impulses, doing the best and the worst they can. Which is not to say Mailer always takes a superior attitude; he finds moments of courage or endurance in flawed candidates. And he is even-handed toward both parties. But this is a “New Journalism” seeking intimate truths, so Mailer is not about to avoid reporting his perceptions, often leavening his more uncompromising candor with self-abnegating humor and confession, as he did even more vigorously in *Armies of the Night*. If the Republicans “had every power but the

one they needed—which was to attach their philosophy to history,” the Democrats did not yet understand that “the world could not be saved by technology or government or genetics, and much of the Left had that still to learn.”

It takes Mailer nearly 70 pages to get to the 1968 Miami convention itself, a mild event compared to the 1964 convention with its “sense of barbarians about a campfire and the ecstasy of going to war which Barry Goldwater had aroused in ’64.” (See “In the Red Light: A History of the Republican Convention in 1964,” collected in the companion volume of essays). The mere circus romp in Miami will be eclipsed by the shocking violence and bull-headed crudity of the melee in Chicago. Only a closing mention of black people’s riots six miles from the Miami convention hall (“the first major riot in the history of Miami”) hints at the carnage to come in Chicago.

A parallel romp of idealism and corruption, the Democratic convention is bumped off the rails by any number of large forces, not least the destabilizing effects of Robert Kennedy’s assassination earlier that summer on June 5th. Beyond that, Mailer lists other bedevilements: Johnson forced into a televised refusal to run again; M. L. King’s assassination and the resulting riots; the Columbia students’ take-over of a portion of the university (echoing the embattled students of the Paris streets and the Sorbonne, among other European youth rebellions); the imprisonment of such middle-aged activists as Spock, Goodman, Ferber, and Coffin for their anti-war activities; Mayor Daley’s promise to “enforce the peace” when the party threatens to take the convention to another city. And then there is the coalition of mostly youthful protesters descending on the city by the thousands in protest of what had by then become the party of the Vietnam War (cue The Rolling Stones’ 1968 “Street Fighting Man.”)

A third of the way through his reporting on Chicago, Mailer offers his own lengthy analysis of the politics that brought the party to such a pass—a complex examination of politics in that most revolutionary of post-war years, 1968. Suffice to say for purposes of this review that it’s worth reading Mailer’s analysis for its continuing pertinence to our current political follies and foibles, for reminding us how high a mountain we too would have to climb if we hope to reclaim vibrant democracy in America. We are getting a lesson in not only how “the revolution” failed, but how ideals or hopes for substantive change failed too. It was “no small matter,” Mailer writes, “to have the Illinois delegation under your nose at the podium, all those heck-

lers, fixers, flunkies, and musclemen scanning the audience as if to freeze certain obstreperous faces, make them candidates for a contract and a hit . . . but the difference in this convention were the riots outside.” And the free press is—you guessed it—the enemy of the party. The one sign of a partially functioning system through the Johnson presidency by 1968, and through the Nixon presidency a half dozen years later, is that if your office is high enough and your transgressions egregious enough, you still can be turned out of office through the public revelation of your transgressions, a premise we may well be testing again between now and 2020.

Mailer finally turns his eye to the protesters outside: the students of the romantic New Left; the peace organizations whose holdings, unlike the politicians inside, “were almost entirely in moral property”; and the Yippies, a cohort of “Dionysiacs . . . mystical in focus,” reminiscent of the earlier march on the Pentagon, who brought to Chicago plans for a Youth Festival of “music, witchcraft, and happy spontaneous disruption.” All these, along with many journalists and bystanders, would be swept into the bloody maelstrom of Mayor Daley’s police riots over the course of three nights. These revels and confrontations make up some of the best, most harrowing descriptive writing in the book.

Mailer’s catalogue of the schizophrenic hypocrisies in American life—our warring internal dualisms—that brought us to such a pass seem still entrenched in our political psyche in 2018. One can’t help thinking that dissenting young people today, who might come upon this book as an historical curiosity/ reading assignment, will be surprised to find a startlingly familiar nation at war with itself. The key difference would be that minus a military draft, the politicians now are unfettered in their use of our volunteer standing army whenever, wherever, and for however long their ideological whims take them. There is no comparable countervailing, overarching anti-war movement (“We’re all at risk!”) to consolidate multifaceted dissent. There is not a sufficient focal point for that deeply personal skepticism the dissenting young people of the 60s expressed in their music and by throwing their bodies into the meat-grinding gears of the state. Which is probably why the Occupy movement more than forty years later petered out as soon as it did. Still, one can hope for a renaissance of our American tradition of more focused, risk-taking, non-violent direct action. And that brings us to the fault-line in Mailer’s book. Compared to *Armies of the Night*, *Miami* and *the Siege of Chicago* again has a confessional reporter

immersed in events, but who, this time out, takes too few risks himself, by his own admission, compared to others (including such peers as Ginsberg, Genet, Burroughs, and Southern) and to the more courageous moments in his own life. In *Armies*, on the other hand, the narrator-fool turns heroic and suffers a rite of passage: "Standing on the grass, he felt one suspicion of a whole man closer to that freedom from dread which occupied the inner drama of his years, yes, one image closer than when he had come to Washington four days ago." In *Miami* the reporter wanders toward defeat: "He was defeated. He could put nothing together at all. Hung-over, drained, ashen within. . . . He had political lessons to absorb for a year from all the details of his absolute failure to deliver the vote."

Mailer saves some face by his self-deprecating humor regarding his incapacities and protective temptations in Chicago, by his honoring the young people and their adult sympathizers who squarely placed themselves in harm's way, and by his two well-received pep-talks to the embattled dissenters. He tells us early in his coverage of the Chicago convention that he did not find the justifications for participation he had found in the march on the Pentagon in 1967, reported so brilliantly in *Armies*. Right through till the end of the 1968 Democratic convention he saw no definite symbol against which he could act, no bastion of the military-industrial complex that had remained impervious to the scrutiny of the press and the people. He does try to mobilize two hundred delegates into a protest against police state tactics inside and outside the convention hall, but he fails. He is forced by shame to ruminate, mostly alone over drinks, about his own reasons for staying aloof and about his own fears. He will, finally, go so far as to confront the National Guard and come close to getting himself jailed again, but a genial Irish police commander lets him go, and he ends up instead going to a party at Hugh Hefner's mansion with fellow journalists Pete Hamill and Doug Kiker. Mailer is unsure of his readiness to give up his life and work for the chaos of the Yippie revolution against the alternative police state. Nonetheless, "The children were crazy, but they developed honor every year, they had a vision not void of beauty; the other side had no vision, only a nightmare of smashing a brain with a brick."

There is, alternatively, a more impassioned and artful shaping of *The Armies of the Night* into a narrative moment in history, an eternal battle and rite, a cathartic experience of collective ceremonial time in which Mailer actively participated by confronting serious risk head on and getting himself

arrested and jailed. A narrative, often self-abnegating, that pulls the reader in throughout with a power beyond anything in *Miami*. In *Armies*, Mailer develops the greatest commitment to his material. There is nothing in *Miami* like the final declaration in *Armies* that God's life (and therefore humanity's) is on the line. Mailer's final note in *Miami* is that he will probably not vote, that as for the revolution, well, "we may yet win, the others are so stupid. Heaven help us when we do." Because of the skillful passion with which Mailer engages the reader, and because of the fabulous torrent of prose and great humor in the telling, *Armies* is in my view the best book of the four collected here. It did receive the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award for 1968. For these reasons it is the book being most fully addressed in reviews of this Library of America boxed set (David Denby in *Harper's*, for example, devotes 99.8% of his space to *Armies*). The book is also the most familiar of the four, I expect, to the occasional Mailer reader.

Nevertheless, I would recommend especially to readers who were too young to read during the Sixties (or not born yet) *both* books of participatory political journalism; both a half-century later are full of rich and still-apposite data. (What are we to make, beyond historical nescience, of Harvard's Yascha Mounk reporting in *The People vs. Democracy* that less than one third of millennials believe it's very important to live in a democracy?) If readers or instructors want to connect Mailer's two nonfiction books from the 1960s with our America in the early twenty first century, they might read (or assign) two of Mailer's short books published before his death in 2007—*Why Are We at War?* (2003) and, with John Buffalo Mailer, *The Big Empty* (2006). The striking connections between the Sixties and our current political and global conundrums will thereby become clearer. Both *Miami* and *Armies* make for welcome and illuminating reading during our long national nightmare (to cop a former President's phrase) of America's current political moment.