

CONVICT DOPPELGANGERS

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*Jack and Norman: A State-Raised Convict and the Legacy of
Norman Mailer's The Executioner's Song*

By Jerome Loving

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IF YOU WANT TO KNOW THE REAL STORY behind convict-for-life Jack Abbot's role in the composition of Norman Mailer's Pulitzer Prize winning opus *The Executioner's Song* and the role Abbott and Mailer played in one another's lives during the 1970s and 1980s, this is the book for you. A common reader will find out many surprising things about the relationship between these two authors and their work; Mailer scholars and aficionados will discover less new or surprising material, but they will see a sharp, intelligent, and revealing focus on the story of these two men who helped and damaged one another. Most readers will learn a good deal about the system of incarceration and about prison literature in America. Admirably researched, *Jack and Norman* is also indispensable for anyone looking to fully appreciate the provenance of *The Executioner's Song*.

It was Abbot's sudden epistolary intervention, so to speak, beginning in February of 1978 in the middle of Mailer's composition process that, as Mailer himself admitted, made *Executioner's Song* the true and successful book it turned out to be. Mailer never met Gary Gilmore, his convict-as-found-object who is the center of Mailer's "true life novel," but he was given insight into prison life and into Gilmore through Abbott's correspondence. In fact, Professor Jerome Loving traces numerous parallels between

Gilmore's and Abbot's lives from earliest childhood through their time (most of it) behind bars. One might almost be forgiven, I've come to believe, for occasionally confusing Abbott and Gilmore all these years later. There is a striking synchronicity about Abbott's sudden arrival in Mailer's life as Mailer was in the middle of writing his book, just as there is in the weirdly similar, violent journeys that make up Gilmore's and Abbott's stories. Loving calls them "seeming twins" and "doppelgangers." Reading Loving's book feels at times like reading a fictional—rather than factual—tale from one of Mailer's own complicated, coincidence-rich, magical-metaphorical novels.

These synchronicities are reflected even in the structure of Professor Loving's book, where whole chapters are devoted to Gilmore's story, more or less interrupting the central running narrative of Abbott's story and of Abbott's essential yet fraught relationship with Mailer. Still, such interruptions are as illuminating as the main focus itself.

Loving does not shrink from addressing the major problem with the Mailer-Abbott relationship—that element of the relationship played out, or hyped, in the press for its sensational drama and for the opportunity yet again to treat the all-too-public Mailer as an outlaw figure himself, as a famous man who had an insufficient idea of the dangerous character he was promoting as a talented prison writer with a book about his life story in prison (mostly) and out—*In the Belly of the Beast*. An incarceration story Loving calls "one of the most powerful prison narratives in American literature." But Abbott was a dangerous man Mailer helped to get released and who, wrapped in his prison-paranoia, would stab to death an innocent young writer named Richard Adan, who happened to be waiting on Abbott in a restaurant. To say this episode in Mailer's life was one of his most misguided seems an understatement. Two late chapters analyze the best-selling *In the Belly of the Beast* itself and detail Jack Abbott's flight from the law after killing Richard Adan—the publication of the book and the flight occurring close together. After Abbott was captured and went on trial in January of 1982, "Mailer went on trial as well" in the press. Loving develops Mailer's media trial in Chapter 16; he looks unsparingly at the controversy Mailer got himself embroiled in, what Loving calls "the second great error of his life" (the infamous stabbing of his wife Adele being the first). After trying to make a literary comeback in the late 1980s with his second book, *My Return*, and failing, Abbott finally died in prison in 2002, either from suicide or from

something more sinister, a convict once again whose literary fame was as fleeting as his brief taste of freedom.

Chapter 10 of Loving's book stops the Gilmore-Abbott stories cold to consider Mailer's relevant literary roots and the structure and reception of *Executioner's Song*. Loving puts a proper emphasis on the influence, too often inadequately acknowledged, of James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* on Mailer. Loving then offers worthy insights on the relationship between *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Executioner's Song* (the chronicling of Farrellesque characters' lives, the naturalistic determinism, the inversion of the American Dream, the spiritual poverty of social milieus) and on the novel's success as the result, in part and as with *Naked*, of Mailer's rare self-effacement from the text. Loving is also clear on the significance of Larry Schiller's role in the procurement of rights and in the massive research project seeking Gilmore's story. Mailer's masterful deployment of his narrative materials, the book's importance as an historical, cultural, and regional artifact, and its uncovering of a world (and people) lost to our dominant culture—all add up, for Loving, to the enduring book that is Mailer's masterpiece.

Jack and Norman is an important and eminently readable book, more appropriate perhaps for the common reader than for the Mailer scholar. If it contains more minor repetitions of fact and phrasing than necessary, its details and insights are worthy and informative, its pace praiseworthy, its structure clarifying. It is a noble accomplishment.

As I read *Jack and Norman*, two things struck me about my own relationship to Mailer. The first is that in the 1970s it was *Cannibals and Christians*, not *The Naked and the Dead* or another book, that turned me on to Mailer, just as it was *Cannibals and Christians* that most generated Abbott's interest in Mailer. (I still think *Cannibals* should get more consideration than it seems to get today.) The second is that when I first met Mailer in his Brooklyn apartment in 1982—the year Abbott went back to prison for the murder and the year of lingering media fury with Mailer—I never once mentioned the furor or the whole Jack Abbott tragedy. After the interview came out in *Harvard Magazine*, Mailer wrote to me that he was “chagrined” that he was guarded with me as we talked “because I’ve been had before.” I hadn’t noticed that he was being especially guarded, but I see in the light of Loving’s book that I had stepped into Mailer’s life at a moment even more troubled for him than I had realized. Good thing I kept my mouth shut about Abbott.

A further connection I felt with *Jack and Norman* has to do with Loving's fine historical analysis of prison history in the United States, especially as it relates to Gilmore and Abbot. I too was caught up in the prison reform movement of the 1970s, as Loving describes it, when Pell grants and other federal resources emphasized education/ rehabilitation in prisons across America, before the resources and the wish to rehabilitate dried up in the 1980s. In 1972 and 73, I taught college English at the "Alcatraz of the East," Portsmouth Naval Prison (think Jack Nicholson in *The Last Detail*), where I worked with those convicted of everything from second degree murder to theft and drug use. Some were incorrigible; others appreciated my being there to help. But that stint was my brief look inside. It gave me a real sense of the claustrophobia of incarceration Gilmore and Abbott describe and of the deracinated vulnerability men in prison feel. My experience also gave me, all these years later, a deeper appreciation than I might otherwise have had for Jerome Loving's *Jack and Norman*.