

PATROLLING NO-MAN S LAND,
LIVING ON THE BORDER

B O N N I E C U L V E R

In Another Place With and Without my Father, Norman Mailer

Memoir by Susan Mailer.

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SUSAN MAILER'S MEMOIR *In Another Place With and Without My Father, Norman Mailer* is an unsentimental journey from childhood to adulthood, framed by the looming presence or absence of her literary lion of a father. Divided into three sections, her story is told in (mostly) chronological order, beginning with her birth and ending with her father's death in 2007. Family, marriage, love, celebrity, and parenting are some of the threads that hold this piece together as Ms. Mailer places herself on the metaphorical analyst's couch and delves into her relationship with her famous father. Indeed, Susan Mailer is a psychoanalyst by profession and her willingness to share some very painful and long buried feelings is the power of this vulnerable, funny, and tough memoir that pulls no punches on herself or her father.

Memoirist Beverly Donofrio says that effective memoir, like excellent fiction, rebuilds a life, "scene by scene until you have a story," a narrative. The effective memoir draws the reader in, by utilizing fictional devices of dialogue, action, description—showing rather than telling. Susan Mailer navigates that delicate balance all memoirists struggle with: how to show her experiences and; yet, how to use the opportunity to comment on that life.

In Part I, Susan Mailer takes the reader from her birth in 1949 until ap-

proximately 1969, letting the readers experience her ex-pat life from both sides of the border. First, she offers the backstory to her story.

The first-born child of author Norman Mailer and his first wife, Beatrice Silverman, Susan describes her parents as forces of nature and, from the outset, equals in their life's desires and ambitions. Bea was "an enthusiastic debater, a free spirit, and a champion of women's rights long before the Women's Liberation movement. She also believed in sexual freedom and practiced it." Norman, on the other hand, has little sexual experience, when they met, but it was his "personality, a combination of sweetness and shyness, together with a know-it-all attitude and intense drive [that] intrigued Bea" and soon they spend every moment they can together while Bea finishes her music degree at Boston University and Norman completes his engineering studies at Harvard.

World War II becomes the next chapter in their lives after they marry—Norman enlists in the Army as a private despite the fact that he could have become a commissioned officer; Bea joins the Navy's WAVES program and is commissioned as an officer. Afterwards, each sits down to write the great war tale. "We had twin typewriters," Bea tells her daughter. . . . "It was all very romantic; we were young and sure of the future. We would both be published and become known writers." However, Norman becomes a phenomenon at twenty-five with the *The Naked and the Dead* while Bea, after her book is rejected many times, boxes up her manuscript and gives up on writing entirely. Her celebrity ambitions remain, but, tied to Norman Mailer, instead of being a famous person in her own right, she becomes the "Missus" of a celebrated writer.

When Susan is eighteen months old, Bea leaves New York City and heads to Mexico with a new lover, leaving Susan and Norman behind. Norman, "not ready to be a father," leaves his toddler daughter with his mother Fanny while he heads to the Lower East Side to pursue writing and his soon-to-be second wife, Adele. It would be three months before Bea returns to the States to gather up Susan and move her to Mexico.

This searing memory, aptly opens the memoir in a single paragraph, "The Butterfly Effect," that awful belly sensation she has whenever she sees a photograph that captures that moment of separation from both parents. Ms. Mailer describes her relationship with her father, as "a burden of separation and longing." From then on, Susan Mailer's relationship with him includes

various separations: familial, geographic, and cultural—divisions that set up her life-long longing for a father she will not completely find.

Of her father's involvement in that time period, she writes, "I supposed my father must have made an appearance once in a while." Neither her mother nor her grandmother include her father in the family's retelling of Susan's early childhood stories. He is absent in their anecdotes and her life oftentimes, but that absence becomes a void she seeks to fill as the memoir explores their relationship more deeply.

While her father chases the fame of his first novel, he also establishes his wifely routine of "one goes out and another one comes in," according to his daughter. Susan meets her father's next four wives—Adele, Lady Jeanne, Beverly, and Carol and their offspring, but she experiences this familial upheaval in limited ways, due to the custody agreement, which forces her to live much of her childhood in Mexico.

Her father's proclivity for women, his marriages to four other wives, and his becoming a father to eight other siblings brings further familial divisions between father and daughter. At nine, Susan lives with her mother in Mexico when "The Trouble" occurs—the infamous incident between Norman and Adele, who begin fighting after a night of heavy drinking and drugs and ends infamously with Norman stabbing Adele, sending her to the hospital and Norman to Bellevue for mental observation. This near-tragedy affects the entire family and eventually causes Adele to leave Norman. Afterwards, Norman pursues a new wife and life with Lady Jeanne Campbell.

But, after "The Trouble" Susan admits the resentment she carries for a father who places her in a public position of shame and ridicule. She writes, "until the late 1950s, my sisters and I were the daughters of a famous and celebrated writer . . . after 'The Trouble' that changed." She describes the oft-repeated moment when she meets someone and they realize she is the daughter of THE Norman Mailer. She knew the comments would be "Umh, uh . . . didn't he stab his wife? And then, 'Was that your mother?'"

She explores this family "stain" further, noting what it means to be a child of a "celebrity." Stepsister Danielle tells her that one of her friends says Danielle can't understand the issues of an "ordinary family," since the Mailers have a "pedigree." Susan comments, "the family stain, and the shame that came with it, made the idea that we had any sort of 'pedigree' seem absurd."

Knowing full well the escalating battle of wills between mother and father after the divorce, she learns never to answer questions about the other par-

ent and creates “a space as wide as the distance between Mexico and the United States to keep them apart . . . I built a wall between my parents and patrolled the no-man’s land in between.” The young Susan buries any ill will towards either parent and tries to become the “fearless” child both parents believe she is. However, Susan is also the physical target her parents use when they express their anger towards each other. Susan’s hair, her actions, her choices are all fodder for vicious fights between her parents. “You’re just like your mother,” is Norman’s favorite tagline when he is unhappy with Susan. Bea uses “The Trouble” as clear evidence of Norman’s danger, “it could have been me!” and keeps Susan in Mexico when she is supposed to visit Norman as per their agreement; yet, soon, she allows Susan to return to the States and her father.

Even when Susan lives with her father, he is absent. In the early years, Susan stays with her grandmother or aunt Barbara instead of Norman when she visits the States. When she does live with Norman and Adele/Lady Jean/Beverly, he remains apart from her—lost in his work or his drinking, his partying. As Susan grows older, she is often left alone, when she does stay in his apartment.

J. Michael Lennon, author of *Norman Mailer: A Double Life*, offers a blurb on the book jacket, saying he wished he had Susan’s memoir at-hand when working on his biography. Susan’s details time spent with her father that are not part of the biography. For example, Lennon describes one of Susan’s childhood memories, driving through the desert from Mexico to NYC with her father and Adele and she remembers being in the front seat, seeing stars, and stopping at a diner. The same event in Susan Mailer’s chapter, goes into great narrative detail, evoking the voice and mind of her five-six-year-old self. She tells her father she believes in “angelitos,” a notion her father dismisses, telling her he only believes in what he can see. The child Susan challenges her father with asking him if he believes Grandma Fanny is in her apartment in Brooklyn as they drive across country. When he responds that he is sure she is because she lives there, the precocious child presses him to know how he’s sure if he can’t “see her?” Her father tells her years later that conversation made him rethink his positions on God, and Susan wonders if she was ever that “smart again.”

She writes of other times with her father, not included in the detailed Lennon biography. For example, in the 1950s when Mailer visits Susan in Mexico, he takes her to the bullfights. Being the storyteller that he is, Nor-

man explains to the upset five-year-old, that the “bull is only tired” and that isn’t blood she sees, but rather red paint the “bad man” puts on the bull. Susan roots for the bull.

The “fearless Susan” is the child Norman encourages, and she, in return, does her best to be that kid. Norman creates a clumsy tow line using a rope attached to his belt to pull the five-year-old up the ski slopes because she is too small to use the slope’s T-bar to ascend the mountain. She remembers the cold air in her face as she flies down the mountain, and if and when she falls, Norman is always there to pick her up and pull her back up the slope. At those moments in the memoir, he becomes the father she seeks. In Brooklyn, Norman builds a bedroom for Susan above the living room and she has to walk a plank to reach her tiny room. One morning, she falls the twenty or so feet to the floor of the living room. Her aunt Barbara and Beverly have to talk Norman into taking her to the hospital, but Norman refuses at first, saying, “She’s a tough kid, she’s okay.”

The geographic and familial divide she experiences is not only with her father, but also with her mother. Her mother has her own aspirations that distance her from her daughter. After having a son with him, Bea leaves Salvatore, a stepfather Susan adores, and pursues her own career ambitions, becoming a psychoanalyst, and spending time away in schooling and her practice. At those times, Susan is left to her own devices or sent to New York to live with her father. By sixteen, Susan is a willful teenager and fallen in love with a Mexican boy, Sebastian. Instead of talking with her daughter and educating her about her body choices, her mother forbids Susan from seeing Sebastian. The “fearless” Susan takes matters into her own hands and climbs out her bedroom window or lets Sebastian into her bedroom at night. Part I ends with a pregnant Susan being sent to Norman because her mother is done with dealing with the lovesick teen who is now in trouble.

It is Beverly, Norman’s current wife, and her aunt Barbara who deal with the teenaged girl who delivers a stillborn boy in her twentieth week; afterwards, her father takes her to the child’s grave and says, “Sue, I love you and I feel profound respect for the strength and dignity you have shown during this period.”

Geography and family are not the only divisions separating father and daughter; a cultural divide keeps them apart as well. Susan speaks of a loneliness, feeling apart, an immigrant in either country. She tries to assimilate

in Mexico as a light-skinned, “Gringo” child or she works to fit into the United States worlds her father inhabits. Most times, she fits into neither.

In Mexico, her mother tries to enroll her in first grade only to find the “better schools” won’t take her because she is too young, so her mother lies about Susan’s age and finds a school in a poor neighborhood. Susan arrives on the first day in her best velvet dress only to discover that all the other children have school uniforms. She stands out even more when the teachers can’t pronounce her name, so Susan renames herself “Susanita Sanchez” and assimilates herself as best she can on her own, something she repeats throughout her life. In one humorous story, she tells her mother she wants to be Catholic and goes through first Communion with her Mexican friends.

At seven, when Susan stays with Norman and Adele in their Connecticut home, Norman places her in a public school because Susan has difficulty with English. Norman tells her, “You’ll make lots of friends. Then you won’t be so lonely.” Instead, the school calls Norman when they discover that his daughter has head lice that she brought from Mexico. Even though her suburban schoolmates do not know that she is the one who caused them to have their hair examined, she says, “I felt like an illegal immigrant who’d somehow managed to smuggle herself across the border into White Man’s Land.” That land was her father’s land and she notes that Norman always had to “re-discover his daughter in the Spanish-speaking, ‘little Mexican girl’ who greeted him.”

Book II, the shortest section with just seventy-four pages, begins her adult relationship with her father. Their geographic separation ends when she comes to NYC to attend college. She no longer hears about Norman’s larger-than-life Life from a distance filtered by her mother’s reports on Norman. She witnesses major events in his life, many of which readers will think they know, but are now hearing those stories told from a new perspective—that of a daughter.

She sits in the audience with sisters Danielle and Betsy, grandmother Fanny, and aunt Barbara through Town Bloody Hall where she is devastated and shocked by the treatment her father receives. Susan writes, “More than at any other time I could remember, at Town Hall there was no protective shield between the public and private personas of Norman Mailer. During most of my life I had tried to erect and maintain a barrier that kept these two separate. . . . I much preferred the father of our family dinners; the sage coun-

selor of our one-on-one talks I needed from the father. I tolerated the writer/character/provocateur.”

Norman drags Susan into his second attempt at becoming the mayor of New York. Suddenly, Norman views her ability to speak perfect Spanish as an asset in Spanish Harlem.

The familial separations she experiences before spending these years in States also fall away. Susan spends the most time with the women in Norman’s life, from the end of his marriage to Beverly to his involvement with Carole to finally Norman meeting and marrying “the last wife,” Norris. As a young woman, Susan reacts to these events, oftentimes angrily.

Ironically, one of her first intellectual awakenings in college is with feminist Kate Millett who was the midst of writing her classic text *Sexual Politics*, which uses Mailer’s life and work as one of the leading straw men to attack as the ultimate hateful male writers. Susan asked for help in her class. Apparently, they do not discuss Norman.

Meanwhile, socially Susan struggles with life on her own. From bad choices in roommates to boyfriends, her young adult life is filled the ups and downs of most twenty-somethings, but her doings are more public, having Norman Mailer as a father. She describes what she calls “the flowers on the wallpaper” syndrome—so-called friends who want to know her, but actually want to use her to meet her famous father. By 1969, the geographic and personal separation between Susan and her mother has also been erased. Her mother lives in the States and rushes to Susan’s side when she is hospitalized and undergoes emergency surgery following a gall bladder attack. Her father, who detests hospitals and the ill, resents having to come to visit her and shows up just when her mother does. When she sees her parents together in the hospital, Susan asks for a shot of Demerol to “blur and soften their presence,” a preview of sorts to the buried resentments, anger, and frustration that will eventually out themselves in the third section of the memoir. Again, the women in her life—Bea, Fanny, and Barbara—step into her life to care for her while her father acknowledges his “fair weather father” status.

Her four college years are the longest period that she is in contact with her father. It is also the time period where she comes to know and love her sprawling extended family mostly through the time the siblings spend together in summer, enduring Norman’s push for them to hike, sail, or master some new physical challenge he creates for them.

When Susan attempts graduate school in Colorado, Mailer is invited to Colorado to speak. However, he arrives with a girlfriend in tow, something Susan resents knowing that her father lives with Carol, but she says nothing to her father. She is distracted enough however to crash her car on their way to his speech after heavy drinking over dinner. Angry with her father, like times before, she buries it, naming it “a sleeper waiting to be awakened.”

The pent-up resentments, anger, and pain bubble up and, in some ways, she becomes her father, choosing to drink and party rather than to fix what she needs in her life. However, by the conclusion of Part II, she is engaged to Marco, her future husband, and is working on her masters in psychoanalysis at the University of Mexico. Things appear headed toward resolution and she seems to finally have found herself, a life, and career.

For Mailer scholars and historians, Susan Mailer offers a different version of the same events in Lennon’s biography of her father or Norris Church Mailer’s memoir, *A Ticket to the Circus*. Susan texturizes the reportage found in the Lennon work; however, her version of a story told by Norris differs greatly.

In *A Ticket to the Circus*, Norris writes of her first encounter with Susan, noting Susan’s difficulty in accepting her because they are the same age. But Norris believes their first lunch and trip to Bloomingdale’s cements a budding friendship: “There has never been any problem that couldn’t be fixed by two women bonding over shopping.”

Already furious with her father for bringing this Southern Belle, model beautiful woman into HER life, Susan abhors the outing with the beautiful Norris. She describes the Bloomingdale’s trip as a horrific event that places her “ugly self” on full display. Norris chooses outfits for Susan, and they look incredible on the nearly six-foot thin Wilhelmina model, but on the five-two Susan, they don’t work. Unsure of whether Norris is being “nice, or nasty, or simply didn’t see me,” Susan leaves Bloomingdale’s in a foul mood buying nothing while Norris is ecstatic over finding an outfit for herself. Susan describes being with Norris at any time. Walking into parties or even down the street, all eyes went to the gorgeous Norris: “I became invisible . . . I sort of got used to this, but it never stopped being painful.”

However, Susan shares a previously untold story, about a time when Susan becomes the one front and center. She walks into a fund-raiser for Ted Kennedy with Norman and Norris, expecting to be ignored as usual, but Kennedy politely asks Susan what she does. Soon, they are in a deep con-

versation about Chile, totally ignoring her father and Norris who seems more than a bit miffed. Kennedy returns to talk with Susan and continues to ignore Norris.

In *A Ticket to the Circus* Norris does not share Susan's story, but she has her own Kennedy moment at one of Norman and Norris's dinners when Norris says Kennedy flirts outrageously with her. Susan ends her revelations noting that she not only learned to avoid going out with Norris and Norman, but she also "actively avoided social events with the rich and famous altogether." Eventually, due to Norris's persistence and genuine niceness, they do become friends; it may be not as easily earned as Norris believed.

In the last section of the memoir, she establishes a demanding career as an analyst, begins raising her own family in Chile while her father and Norris spend the next three decades together in Provincetown or New York. But, in Chile, she is once again the outsider and back in the familial, geographical, and cultural limbo she left behind in her childhood. Meanwhile, she realizes that the "sleeper has awakened" she's struggling emotionally: "I used to think of myself as a free spirit who could live in any place. In a private crevice of my secret being. . . . But often I also felt detached, in a nowhere place, as if I were observing myself, going through the motions, acting happy or faking interest, but not totally inside my body."

She literally places herself on the analyst's couch and discovers: "I recovered my love for my parents; a love that had lain dormant and muted for as long as I can remember. I began to see them in a kinder light, once I achieved enough distance to think about my own life and also about our lives together." Geography and her own adult responsibilities help Susan find this space, one she makes hers. Living in Chile, she works through her own *meshugas*; Susan Mailer is again separated from her father, but by her own choice, in geography, family, culture, and career.

Beverly Donofrio and Kaylie Jones, who teach memoir both extol their students to "show not tell," avoid any long reflections or "this is what it meant to me" expounding. In this memoir in Part III, such internal exploration works. Susan, now in middle age herself and watching her strong father face death reflects back. Again, she has drawn the reader into her thoughts through her analyst's eye and the reader is prepared at this point to be there with her, feeling the regrets, the cruelty of times lost, and the loss of things unsaid.

Shortly before his death, she is alone with her father who struggles to

breathe. He tells her he loves her and Marco, and says, “This family, our family, is a fine tapestry. I want you to make sure it doesn’t unravel.” In that moment, the loneliness, the not-belonging, or any lack of acknowledgement is nearly swept away. There is no Disney happy-ever-after ending, just a bittersweet brief glimpse of the accessible, more giving father she had longed for in this private moment with him, but admits that she is lost in how to be the keeper of the torch her father expects her to be. A year later, she finds herself still grieving, “We had lived together in spurts, our relationship intense but fractured in time and space. Many curtains had been draped between us, and many aspects of his life I had only been able to glimpse . . . Many times he had told me, ‘I cannot be the father you want me to be My mind is captured by my ideas and by the need to write them.’” Colum McCann, who also blurbs the book, notes this is a “powerful look at the literary world” and, in many ways, it is. A writer only would understand Norman’s explanation to his daughter.

Susan “finally understood his message.” She would write and write she does in a stark, non-varnished style that draws the reader in, even telling readers who thought they knew all of Norman Mailer’s life that there is still much to learn. Susan Mailer is the first Mailer child to write a memoir about her famous father. With eight more to go and Norman’s sister, Barbara Wasserman’s memoir already in-progress, it is clear that many more filters will be used to examine and reveal more about the complicated work and life of Norman Mailer.