

OUR WOUNDED GIANT: *WORKS AND DAYS*

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Norman Mailer: Works and Days

By J. Michael and Donna Lennon

Edited by Gerald Lucas

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468 pp. Hardcover \$100, and Digital Version

DONNA AND J. MICHAEL LENNON HAVE REVISED AND EXPANDED their previous edition of *Works and Days*, originally published in a first edition almost twenty years ago now. As one might expect the new edition is much larger and more thorough. It is also more handsome and welcoming. These latter qualities are largely due to the fine editing of The Norman Mailer Society's Digital Magus, Gerald Lucas, including Professor Lucas's work with book designer Giles Hoover. The Society this time out is the publisher of the book.

The greatest change may be, however, that although the book is available in hardcover, it is also now a product of Project Mailer—the Digital Humanities Initiative of the Norman Mailer Society. (Go to ProjectMailer.net and scroll down to *Works and Days*; the techniques will take some getting used to after reading the book version only, but with a little effort the digital format reveals itself to you). Now every scholar can be his or her own magus with the digital text, a true breakthrough of convenience and accessibility. Simple key word searches can be done off every page, but more sophisticated, and ranked, searches will become available as the digital version evolves and improves. Gone are the days when one can only leaf through indexes and pages looking for a specific word, name, work, or event in

Mailer's life. Here we have an alternative (digital) passageway, beyond conventional biography, into Mailer's life and times.

The book's structure is logical and in large part chronological. The first section, "Works" is arranged by decade from the 1940s to the 2000s. The second part "Days," filled with biographical data and photos and arranged by year, starts even earlier in Mailer's life. "Days" reads like a helpful quick-reference guide to Mike Lennon's *Norman Mailer: A Double Life*. I was surprised by how many prizes, awards, and honors Mailer had received during his lifetime, as highlighted in this second section of the book. (What could be more appropriate than Mailer receiving the Emerson-Thoreau Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1989, yet how many Mailerians know about it?). The book's final part is a series of Appendices of secondary references: bibliographies, biographies, cultural references, key reviews and essays, and critical essays and books. One feature here is that the section on book reviews indicates whether a review overall is negative, positive, or mixed.

Mailer's own brief preface serves as the starting gun, followed by Mike Lennon's helpful introduction, which lays out the details of the structural and inclusive/ exclusive decisions made in putting the book together. The Lennons' ambition here is "to chronicle Mailer's professional career, to nominate, delineate, annotate and cross-reference every significant Mailer utterance in print in English . . . as well as the chief events of his life." Added to the original edition's 1110 entries for "Works" are about 400 more, including all Mailer's major works since 1998, with errors corrected and information on entries expanded. "Days" has been expanded by 38 pages, and more than 300 new photographs have been added. Descriptive annotations appear now in most of the items, making of the whole volume a discursive adventure whose cross-referencing technique creates a "mesh of craft and intentionality." Gerald Lucas then describes in his own introductory essay the role of this book in the digital curation of Mailer's works and days through this open resource that can now "expand and flourish in its digital form." The digital version also provides links to some full-text documents—a wonder of contemporary technological power that means many of the references found in the book that would be inconvenient to search out today can be read with the click of a mouse. For my money, the more of this kind of digital availability for old print sources the better.

Beyond the attractive, colorful visuals in the new edition, other less ob-

vious delights await the reader of *Works and Days*. Your discovery of Mailer “firsts,” for example, such as his first political convention, his first celebrity profile, his first appearance in *The New Yorker* or *The New York Review of Books* or *Harper’s*, his first major literary prizes, his first preface to a book by another writer, his first self-identification as a left-conservative, his first arrest, his first foray (1960) into what would become the New Journalism, and his first critique of “fake news” and “factoids.” You want to find the only available quotes from the court records regarding Mailer’s stabbing of his wife Adele? See page 40. When did Donald Trump and Norman Mailer attend the same luncheon fundraiser for PEN? See page 212.

Every researcher will find also striking moments that reflect either a personal connection to Mailer or surprising elements (some mere tidbits) of Mailer’s life and work previously unknown or simply forgotten. Some of my own examples include my discovery that it was Donald Hall who published Mailer’s early story “Maybe Next Year” in the *Harvard Advocate Anthology*. Upon first meeting Hall in 1980, I had a lively discussion with him about Mailer after I told Hall my own book on Mailer was about to appear. But Hall never mentioned publishing Mailer’s earliest work. Now I know. Another personal connection: When I was twenty-two, living in Boston, and writing my master’s thesis on Thomas Wolfe, Wolfe became my literary hero, just as when Mailer discovered Wolfe as a student at Harvard, Wolfe became, as Mailer put it, “a hero of mine.” I also was reminded by another entry of that evening (November 5th, 1982) when I drove to Boston with a friend to see Mailer showing and commenting on his film *Maidstone*, two months after I had first met him in Brooklyn. And then there was my continuous discovery here that by Mailer’s own testimony his work has a purposeful moral dimension. By “moral” or “ethical” I do not mean schoolmarm/schoolmaster maxims to live by. I mean something closer to what Mailer called “creative rage” expressed through God’s “Broadsword” of “Almighty prose.” Although Mailer’s ethical force too often seems to be buried under his misguided public antics and what some consider distasteful or obscene material, Mailer is, so to speak, not only “the one who struggles with God” and the Philistines (our Jacob/ Israel?) but our own Old Testament Prophet—our Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Amos, or Jeremiah. As Houston Smith reminds us in *The World’s Religions*: “The great writing prophets could sense God’s disapproval of injustices that . . . were perpetrated not by individuals . . . but that were concealed in the social fabric. . . . The Writing Prophets

challenged corruptions in the social order and oppressive institutions.” One might make a pretty good case that this prophetic tradition is the Jewish root of Mailer’s life and work.

There are life-long themes clarified and confirmed here as well: Mailer’s belief in the decline of the novel and American literature under the censorship of the publishing industry’s hyper-commercialism (“the enemy of good literature”); Mailer’s developing cosmology; his theories on technology, corporate capitalism, totalitarianism, and the hubris of America’s militaristic imperialism; his belief in the possibility of fascism coming to America; his theories on the fictive nature of nonfiction; his sense of the importance of visual arts and their relation to literary arts; his idea that true love of country is evinced by well-informed criticism more than by easy or “fascistic” patriotism; his inability to finish a novel if he plots it out ahead of time; and so on.

Should you be focusing your own writing on one or a clutch of Mailer’s own books or plays (and to some extent films), you will find here the complete references to each book’s editions, to criticism and reviews, and to the author’s own commentary. Even the most sedulous Mailer scholar is sure to find new material he or she missed before. In short, from now on you can’t avoid going to *Works and Days* before you begin to research your own articles and books on Mailer.

Since the digital edition of *Works and Days* is eminently susceptible to corrections, elaborations, and additions (to “*expand and flourish in its digital form*”), I would make so bold as to suggest a few tweaks along the way as the digital Mailer evolves. Having read every entry, I’d suggest the volume’s preface include an explanation of the use of occasional red numbers delineating various entries—red is used to indicate that a visual is connected to one particular entry, either on the same page or a nearby page. It took me a long time to figure this out, and I’m probably not the only old duffer who will use this book. I found one Mailer quotation attributed to one source that arises from another (see 83.39, which belongs in 83.10). I’m sure Jerry Lucas and the Lennons would welcome any such easy adjustments in the evolving digital version that scholars suggest as *Works and Days* gets used more and more. The index is a helpful tool to be sure. But would it be possible to improve the index by the very techniques of digital wizardry now available to us through the good offices of Jerry Lucas? The index is limited to the “Works” section only. That is a rational choice given some of the cross-

referencing, but one result is that as an active Mailer scholar you might well find that the index shows but one or two entries under your name even though there were a half-dozen or more of your by-lined items within the entire volume itself. It also means that you might miss a crucial reference to your specific research topic. Ameliorating any such issues in the digital version, of course, is the ability to word-search your desired information or datum. But a digital-wizard's more complex and thorough technique of creating a "general index" might help researchers as well. Nevertheless, one comes away from this volume with a new, enlarged sense of Mailer's literary accomplishment. No one doing serious work on Mailer will be able to avoid *Works and Days*—an impressive (and ever-evolving) monument to the man and his work.

David Remnick once referred to Mailer as "the American Balzac," an apt enough description. But it is Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in his citation at Mailer's induction into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1984, who seems to me to offer the Mailer Society and *Works and Days* their perfect epigraph: "In a career of living dangerously, he has shown qualities of passion, imagination, literary power and psychological subtlety that will surely make posterity regard him as one of the giants—if at times a wounded giant—of our age."