

ON THE STATE OF
MAILER STUDIES:

A Conversation with J. Michael Lennon

PHILLIP S I P I O R A

J. Michael Lennon is the author or editor of several books, including A Double Life, the authorized biography of Norman Mailer (Simon & Schuster, 2013). Lennon was a founder of The Norman Mailer Society and has served as President of the Society for most of its existence. His deep, long-term friendship with Mailer has inspired a number of works by Lennon and he is currently co-editing, with Susan Mailer and Jerry Lucas, Norman Mailer's Lipton's Journal, a reflective, introspective journal focusing on Mailer's marijuana experience, written in 1954–1955. Lennon is also writing a memoir, "Getting on the Bus: Mailer's Last Years in Provincetown," which chronicles his experiences with Norman Mailer.

Phillip Sipiora: I would like to begin by thanking you, Mike, for meeting with me and talking about the state of Mailer Studies, which is obviously a critical issue, and not just for Mailer, but of course for all authors, societies and significant writers. So, let me begin by starting with a small question. You knew Norman Mailer for nearly four decades and you served as founding president of the Norman Mailer Society. I'm not aware of anyone alive who knows more about Norman Mailer as friend, major literary figure, and public intellectual. What is your most powerful and lasting memory of him?

J. Michael Lennon: It's not an easy question. I have so many memories of Norman. But one of the things that has always impressed me about him, right to the very end, is *work ethic*. Norman was always devoted to the literary arts, which took a toll on other relationships. Yet it was it was something that drove him. For example, when he entered the hospital for his last round of operations and treatments, he brought with him a half dozen books on Adolf Hitler. I was just stunned by that! I thought, oh, my God, when is he going to give it a break? No, he just didn't give up.

As a writer, he was devoted to the notion that the novel was the art form that had the greatest capacity for understanding society and human psychology. He believed the novel made the world more understandable, made it a better place to live in.

The other issue that comes to mind is his identity as an insider/outsider. Norman knew a lot of famous people, of course, including Muhammad Ali, Jack Kennedy, Bill Clinton, John Lennon, and practically every one of his major contemporaries in the United States: Bellow, Mary McCarthy, Robert Lowell, Dwight Macdonald, the Beats—Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs—Bill Styron, Henry Miller, Lillian Hellman, Bill Kennedy, George Plimpton, Diana Trilling, James Baldwin, Gay Talese, John Irving, Joyce Carol Oates, Philip Roth, and James Jones (his dearest friend), and Don DeLillo (with whom he had a special kinship), and Gore Vidal and Truman Capote, with whom he had off-and-on friendships with—I could name more. He also knew many major writers around the world, including Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Carlos Fuentes, Romain Gary, Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis, and Günter Grass. But he never really wanted to be a conspicuous part of the literary establishment. He wanted to maintain a modicum of distance from it so that he could criticize it; he was resolute about not losing his independent perspective, and so he backed out of many activities. However, he was president of PEN for a couple of years, and yes, that is certainly the establishment. But he got out of there after only two years. He called it his “church work.” With Norman there was always the sense of “I want to be an outsider. I do not want to be trammled by my affiliations with any literary, political or what-have-you establishment to the extent that it will dampen my independence, or constrict my perspective.” Norman felt that one must be there to speak to one's time on the planet. He was also exceptionally devoted to his family and his friends; there had to be at least fifty people who thought of themselves as “Norman Mailer's best friend.” He had a kind of openness,

candor, and generosity of spirit with his friends and his family, a personal magnetism.

PS: Do you feel that this duality of insider and outsider hurt him at times? Did it accelerate tensions or create conflicts that perhaps someone with a more stable identity of either insider or outsider might not encounter?

JML: Oh, I think that there were definitely losses that came from him jumping back and forth across that fence. But, overall, I think that it was a plus. It enabled him to maintain his singular critical perspective. For example, giving up two years of his life leading PEN meant he wasn't writing much during that time, and he had regrets about that. But once he was in it, he stuck to his commitment, including organizing and hosting the 1986 International PEN conference, and rewriting the bylaws of the organization. Gay Talese told me that Norman came in and organized numerous committees, and this required rewriting the bylaws. They were needed, so Norman just sat down and personally re-wrote them. Gay Talese could not believe it. Well, that was Norman; he threw himself right into things.

He lost a lot of time, however, doing things like that. Another example was running for mayor of New York with Jimmy Breslin. He gave away a big chunk of time in 1969 on that campaign. He said that, if elected, he would give up writing. I think he must have had his fingers crossed when he said that. All of these forays, including filmmaking, cost him a great deal of lost time and he had regrets. But, on the other hand, there was a part of him that rebelled against the grind of writing six hours a day, six days a week, and felt the need to get out in the world and get roughed up. Right to the end he was seeking new experience, which he once called "the church of one's acquired knowledge."

As a novelist, he was an ethnographer, and studied the *ethos* of a society, the main currents and obscure corners of its identity. That was something that he never stopped doing. He felt the need to out there, get immersed, and get roughed up, and then he'd jump over the fence, hide away and write. If you look at all the places where he lived, you see that New York City was always his primary residence. But he also had Provincetown, Vermont, New Hampshire, Stockbridge, and Bucks County, country places to which he could retreat when New York was driving him crazy with all the demands for him to appear on talk shows and go to social events. At a certain point he

would get sick of that scene, and had to get away to get some work done. The insider-outsider identity was something that he cultivated. When he was living in Stockbridge, in western Massachusetts, with his fifth wife, Carol Stevens, he would get bored and say, “I have to go to New York City. I need some action.” Consequently, he moved fairly regularly between New York City and quieter, bucolic places, where he could write in peace. For a writer of his sensibilities and ambition, this alternation was a wise strategy.

PS: The past few years have surely been pivotal for Mailer Studies. After the publication of *A Double Life*, you and your wife, Donna Pedro, returned to *Works and Days*, a groundbreaking resource that not only chronicled what Mailer said and did from the beginning of his creative life, but also cataloged commentary on him and his work, as well as his numerous appearances. You published the first edition in 2000 (Sligo Press) and then, in 2018, you, Donna and Jerry Lucas brought out an expanded, revised edition. But let me go back in time. How did you become acquainted with Norman?

JML: At first, it was an epistolary relationship. In December 1970, I wrote to him after he appeared on *The Dick Cavett Show* where he had his infamous encounter with Gore Vidal and also interacted with Janet Flanner (and Cavett, of course). I wrote him a long letter about the show, and about the ideas in the dissertation that I was then writing, and right away I received a long letter back. I was very surprised that he answered me so quickly. That led to a series of letters with him before I actually met him in the flesh in October 1972 (parenthetically, the same month he first met Larry Schiller), when he was on a speaking tour during the McGovern-Nixon campaign. He was speaking at Western Illinois University, and I was teaching at the University of Illinois, Springfield, about 100 miles away, so I took my Mailer seminar up there to hear him speak. I met him, and he remembered our correspondence. After he spoke, we spent the whole evening at a bar talking and closed the bar down about 1:30 in the morning. That meeting established our relationship. In the summers after that, when my wife and my family would go back to New England, we would visit him either in Maine or in Provincetown. This went on for many years until finally in 1997 we bought a condo in Provincetown. So, our relationship began in a scholarly way, with my writing about Vidal and Cavett, and about my ideas about the

shift in his writing to what we now call creative nonfiction. Over time, it grew into a personal relationship, a friendship.

PS: How did your scholarly interest and then your personal relationship with Norman evolve into archival work, which you have been known for over many decades?

JML: Well, I'd never thought of myself as an archivist. I never knew much about what it entailed. But I found myself, even before I met Norman, collecting virtually every reference to him that I ran across. At first, I bought all the scholarly books and essays in journals that I could find. But then, it dawned on me that a lot of the most interesting things he was saying were spoken in public forums, and in interviews and profiles, a lot of it spontaneous, candid, and playful. His 1963 *Paris Review* interview with Steve Marcus is still crucial for understanding how he became the kind of writer he was. He said much in that interview that still resonates, his comments about E.M. Forster and the architecture of the novel, for example.

I began to realize that these public utterances were just as important to understanding Norman's work as the analyses of his work in professional journals. I realized that if you wanted to understand Mailer, you had to hear him, see him up close, and observe his public speaking off the cuff, where he revealed himself in a way that was quite profound. And so I began collecting all those resources, which came at the same time I developed a friendship with his then-authorized biographer, Robert Lucid, a University of Pennsylvania professor. I began helping Bob collect manuscripts and materials that were piling up in Mailer's study, his basement, and in his mother's house.

Donna and I would go down to New York with our station wagon, fill it up with manuscripts, and take them over to the storage vault in New York City. We did that for a long time, beginning in the late 1970s. That storage facility, a big steel locker, was about four feet high and ten feet long, and it was completely packed. When we didn't know what to do with all those manuscripts, galleys, letters, research materials, I suggested that we leave the primary resources in storage, and I'd take all of the secondary materials, the reviews and interviews and magazines containing pieces on him, quite a pile. The primary materials were obviously the most important, including manuscripts that had not been published, marked up galleys, and things like that.

And Norman's letters! Boxes of them containing every incoming letter of any consequence he'd received from the time he was at Harvard, and carbons of all his outgoing letters. We left the correspondence and all of primary manuscripts and I took everything else, which was a substantial trove. For example, Mailer regularly spoke at colleges and universities, and many other symposia and conferences. He would speak on a campus and then the college newspaper would write a story on it, usually with pertinent quotations. They would mail a copy to him and he would throw it in a pile and it would wind up the archive. Initially, I took all of those materials in order to make room, but, really, I wanted to examine, preserve, and mine this material as well. In effect, we solved two problems. We began to collect records of the public presence of Norman Mailer from local magazines and newspapers around the country, and we also created new space for his ever-burgeoning primary collection. So, little by little, I became an archivist.

As I collected, I began to categorize things and organize them chronologically and thematically, putting documents into archival boxes. I was basically feeling my way and creating my own referential system. But I didn't know what I was doing. As an aside, I would note that most Ph.D. programs in that era offered little in the way of archival instruction. All I knew is that I didn't want to discard these resources, and I wanted to use them in my writing. The first journal article on Mailer I published, back in 1977, in *Modern Fiction Studies*, was a survey and analysis of his presence in popular media. Along the way I learned, by hook or by crook about archival and bibliographic methods. The first book that I did with Mailer grew out of his archive, a 1982 book called *Pieces and Pontifications*, which I first suggested to Norman in 1977. It took five years to put it together, and my part was selecting and editing 20 interviews with him, which was a great experience. Perhaps, I thought, we should also include, in addition to the 20, excerpts from a number of minor interviews in a kind of montage. I argued for doing that for a while, and Norman gave it some thought. We finally threw it out the window.

But then Norman decided to add a dozen essays that he had written over the previous decade. He came up with a number of titles, one of which I remember: "After the White Negro." But after he read the entire manuscript he supplied the final title, which I've always thought to be wickedly clever. In 1982, *Pieces and Pontifications* became my first book, and that propelled me into me collecting materials of all sorts: invitations to publication parties, sample dust jackets for his books (Mailer designed many of these), audio

interviews, and videos of television appearances, reprints of various essays and stories in obscure publications, promo materials from his publishers, etc., etc. This was really the beginning of *Works and Days*, which grew as a manuscript through the 1980s and 1990s. Donna and I completed it during my sabbatical in 1998, and it was published in 2000. Norman liked it, having forgotten so much, and contributed a short preface.

I'm an archivist, but not because when I was a young man I said, "I'm going to grow up to be an archivist." I just fell into it, and then I found that it was a suit of clothes that fit me pretty well.

PS: Well understood. Speaking of archival evolution, the entire world seems to be becoming become digitized. And the electronic reconfiguration of Mailer resources has surely become a central part of contemporary Mailer Studies. Can you comment in general about this evolving and complex configuration of scholarly and popular access, digital access, and how it relates to making Mailer's life and work more accessible, not only for scholars, but also for interested readers?

JML: Yes, we are clearly part of the revolution. I think that Jerry Lucas has proved to be a superb digital humanist, steering the ship with the work he's done for *Project Mailer*, which is one of the main activities of the Mailer Society. Jerry knows much more about digital technology than anyone I know, and it has been a pleasure collaborating with him. A critical aspect of digitized Mailer is access, which is easy as the software is programmed to remember your previous searches. In earlier times we all had to go to libraries, locate microfilm copies, and read them on blurry screens. I well remember, when writing my master's thesis, reading old microfilms of the *New Republic*, *Dial*, *Vanity Fair*, and the *New Yorker*, dating back to the 1920s. It was very laborious and difficult, but now digitization has made the process much easier. *Works and Days* is now available in a digital as well as a print format and I like the fact that there are both. Having the book right next to me on the shelf, I can find what I need much more quickly than I can by going online, but if I'm doing deep searches, for example, word searches, I can't use the book. But it is going to be a long time before the digital world catches up with all of Mailer's public appearances. Jerry and I have discussed putting all my archive on line, about 1500 items.

Much has been lost because many college magazines and newspapers

have never been digitized. There is always going to be a print component until, sometime in the distant future, *everything* is formatted digitally. People contact me all the time for copies of obscure profiles and interviews with Mailer. Hardly a week goes by without someone asking me where Mailer said this or that, or where did something appear. I often respond by saying, “Have you looked at *Works and Days*? Have you looked at Jerry Lucas’s index to *Works and Days*? Have you looked at the date that your item appeared, and then checked contemporaneous items in *Works and Days* to see if they are pertinent?” Mailer would often hold a press conference and there would be a half dozen newspaper and wire service reporters there, and they would all write a different story. So if you read one of these stories, you ought to read the other ones because if you put them all together you’ll get a much richer sense of what he really said. For example, his news conference when *Harlot’s Ghost* came out. And the one for *Ancient Evenings*. You can’t get it all just by reading the *New York Times* story. You need to read the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and the *Minneapolis Star* and all the pieces by the other reporters who were in the room. I’m regularly steering people to *Project Mailer*, where they can access these things. In the old days, I would copy and email articles to people. I still do that.

Jerry Lucas is doing magnificent things in *Project Mailer*, which he founded, that I couldn’t even dream of, especially digitizing all of *Works and Days*, and posting other resources like all of the Prefaces, Forwards, and Introductions that Mailer wrote for about twenty-five books by other writers. Many of them appeared in obscure books, in some cases going back to the 1960s, and were out of print. Justin Bozung has been posting podcasts related to Mailer, another valuable resource.

The Walt Whitman Archive at the University of Nebraska is another exemplary website. I grew up in American Renaissance studies and taught Whitman for years. The Whitman Archive is magnificent; you can access, for example, the contemporary reviews of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman’s different editions came out over a forty-year period. Every new edition was reviewed and now you can read the reviews. The same thing is being done with Emerson at the New York Public Library. I don’t know if they’re doing the same thing with Hemingway.

PS: Yes, Hemingway Studies are digitized. You bring back some wonderful archival memories. When I was a young graduate student, I recall spending

days looking at microfiche records. I referred to those days as my “fishing time.” What you say, Mike, about the digitizing of Mailer Studies is striking. As you know, I have worked with Jerry Lucas for a long time.

JML: I know, you were his mentor. Jerry is exemplary and his knowledge of the digital world is phenomenal. And he continues to evolve unabated. He’s constantly working on things that are new.

PS: I certainly join you on that and I continue to turn to Jerry for technical advice related to all kinds of research activities and electronic teaching strategies. Some things never change.

My next question relates to the importance of the establishment of the Mailer Library at Wilkes. When was it chartered, why is it particularly important, and what will it hold?

JML: In about 2005, Norman became affiliated with Wilkes University in a formal way. He became chairperson of the advisory committee for the new MFA program in Creative Writing. In the decade before that, I began donating first editions of his books and various magazines and memorabilia to Wilkes. In 2005, Norman said that we could display all of his major awards, including his Pulitzer Prize, his National Book Award, the Emerson Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, as well as all of his other medals, awards, and honorary degrees. Everything was enshrined in a room called the Mailer Room, which is in the E. S. Farley Library at Wilkes University. The centerpiece of the room is his former dining room table, a huge, beveled glass and wrought iron table.

PS: A very impressive, eclectic donation.

JML: When Norris and Norman donated the table, and his awards and memorabilia, we arranged for a truck to pick it up. There are now photos on the wall, glass cases with all his awards, and bookcases that contain virtually every major critical book about him and every one of his works. And most of them are signed and inscribed to the library. That was the start.

When Mailer died, Norris donated all of his library to the Norman Mailer Center, which had been established by Larry Schiller. Larry’s hope was to establish Norman’s library, of approximately 7,000 volumes, at a university where they would take good care of it. For years Larry tried to find a good

home and he struck out. Harvard didn't want it. The Ransom Center at University of Texas, where Mailer's papers are located, didn't want it. Finally, Bonnie Culver, the director of the Maslow MFA Program, and I worked with the Farley library at Wilkes, where we already had a foothold, and they were very interested. All of Mailer's library will eventually be there; three quarters of it is already there. About four or five thousand volumes have been transported, waiting to be catalogued. Larry also packed up Norman's study in Provincetown, including his desk, chair, lamp, pencils, pens, and various paraphernalia, as well as all the books, dictionaries, and thesauruses that surrounded him in his third-floor study in Provincetown. Bonnie organized the moving of these items from where they were stored in Massachusetts, got them trucked to Wilkes. Donna and I were there for a day helping. His study has now been re-established in a room in the Farley, one approximately the same size as Norman's study in Provincetown. When you walk in you see the bookcases, the books, the desk, and photos on the wall, including the green Bellevue sign, which was Norman's reminder of the 17 days that he spent in Bellevue Hospital in 1960 after stabbing Adele, his second wife. The Wilkes collection is a great adjunct to what is archived at the Harry Ransom Center, but it can never exceed it, because Texas has all the manuscripts. Wilkes, however, has the complete Mailer library, which one might say represents the contents of his mind.

The Texas archive does include Mailer's research volumes and papers for several of his books, a few hundred books. Mailer also had about 1500 books in a writing room he had in another building in Brooklyn, all of which will eventually be located at Wilkes. The only life portrait ever been painted of Norman is now also in the Farley collection. It was painted by a fine Cape Cod artist, Nancy Ellen Craig, when Norman sat for her in the late 1960s. It is very large, four feet by four feet, approximately. Mailer's daughter Danielle and her husband Peter McEachern bought and then donated the painting. I recently received papers associated with Mailer's house in Brooklyn, ownership papers, remodeling papers, permission forms from the zoning boards, and documentation to allow them to sell the house. These also came from Danielle and Peter, and are going to Wilkes. So not only will we have his study from Provincetown, but we will also have documents related to his Brooklyn residence, which accumulated over the half-century he lived at 142 Columbia Heights.

PS: That is quite a chunk of authorial history. In relation to the archival work that you have already mentioned, there is the forthcoming publication of his *Lipton's Journal*, written in 1954–55 and edited by you and Jerry Lucas, and Susan Mailer. What can you tell us about the gravity of *Lipton's Journal*?

JML: The manuscript is in the Ransom Center. I have the carbon copy, which Mailer gave me years ago. *Lipton's* is a 110,000-word marijuana journal. He wrote it over a four-month period from the end of 1954 to the beginning of 1955. It is a pivotal piece of work, yet it was never edited or published. He just wrote it and put it away. It became the clearinghouse for his mind in that period, and a stalking horse for *The White Negro*. It also anticipates many of the ideas in his columns in *The Village Voice*, the newspaper that he co-founded in 1955. Most important, it is the last remaining major piece of Mailer writing that has not been published (there are two very brief excerpts from it that appeared in small magazines back in the 1970s and 1980s). Susan Mailer, Norman's eldest child, a practicing psychoanalyst, became very interested in it, because it is, among other things, Norman's self-analysis. Once she read it, she recognized its importance. She and I then began editing it, eliminating considerable repetition, adding clarifying notes, to turn it into a readable document. As written, it is quite difficult to read. The repetitions and abbreviations are maddening. There are about 600 numbered entries, but they are mis-numbered and disordered. Susan and I did a preliminary edit and cut it down by approximately forty percent.

Jerry Lucas is now going through the manuscript, editing it as needed. He will be a co-editor with Susan and me when it is ready for publication. Accompanying it will be Mailer's contemporaneous correspondence with psychoanalyst Robert Lindner, who Mailer sent copies of many of the journal's entries for comment. Some of Mailer's letters to Lindner, who was a close friend, have been published in my edition of Mailer's letters, but not all. Donna located Lindner's daughter, who also happens to be a psychoanalyst, and Susan got in touch with her and obtained permission to publish her father's letters to Norman. They will be in an appendix to the journal manuscript.

PS: It's great to hear that you are winding up the *Lipton's Journal*. When do you anticipate publication?

JML: I'm not sure. Much of that will be up to Jerry and his editing, after which Susan and I will go over it one more time. It has been held up a little because Susan was immersed in completing her memoir, *In Another Place: My Life with and without My Father, Norman Mailer*. We would like to publish *Lipton's* in Mailer's centenary year, 2023.

PS: After a long, long time, the Library of America finally began publishing Norman Mailer. Why is this development so important for his stature in the future?

JML: It is recognition that Mailer is a canonical author. It is a recognition that his work is going to be kept in print and available in scholarly editions for the foreseeable future. The Library of America, which was founded in the 1970s, publishes only a small number of books. In fact, only about three hundred and twenty-five books, all told. Early on, they published only long-deceased authors. However, over the past ten years or so, they changed that policy. Now, Updike, Roth, Sontag, and Didion volumes have come out, all Mailer contemporaries. The first two Mailer volumes, published in 2018, contain four of his books from the 1960s, and about 35 of his essays from that decade. The question now is whether to go forward into the 1970s or go back to his earlier work, like *The Naked and the Dead*. We are having discussions on the schedule, although no conclusions have yet been reached.

I think that there is merit in publishing a volume in 2023, and *The Naked and the Dead* strikes me as perhaps the best choice, especially if we can include supplementary materials by Mailer that bear on the novel. By that I mean two prefaces that he wrote for later editions of the novel, and some of the unpublished letters that he wrote during the war. When he was in the Philippines, he wrote numerous letters home to his first wife, Beatrice. I included about ten of them in *Selected Letters of Norman Mailer*, but there are many more. They are important because they were essentially planning documents for *The Naked and the Dead*.

Mailer wrote about four hundred letters during this time and it will not be difficult to find twenty good ones that could accompany a new edition of *The Naked and the Dead*. My wife and I are going through all those old letters right now, reading copies of the original letters, which have to be transcribed. I had not looked at them for over ten years, and was astounded at how good they are. Norman had some wonderful insights about his wartime

experiences, his reading, his plans for *The Naked and the Dead*, and his time in occupied Japan. He also talks about his family, reading *The Razor's Edge* by Somerset Maugham, *The Decline of the West* by Oswald Spengler, Thomas Mann and others. Norman was a voracious reader, as you know.

PS: Yes indeed. It is surely so critical to keep Mailer's work and memory alive as authors, even major writers, seem to come and go. Melville, as I recall, was not resurrected until the 1920s and F. Scott Fitzgerald was brought back to life by Malcolm Cowley as a result of his work on *Tender is the Night*. There was also resurrection for Kate Chopin a half-century ago.

JML: Yes. It was a slow, slow process for Melville. The Library of America does a fabulous job. They have a wonderful format and they meticulously check to make sure that their editions are carefully researched. Textual errors are noted, Library of America and the volumes include a life chronology. Lately, they started including introductions, which they did not in earlier years. It is possible that there would be a new introduction to *The Naked and the Dead*. Furthermore, they include notes. They do a beautiful textual job, and they have this wonderful Smythe binding, a sewn binding. The Norman Mailer Society made a contribution to underwrite the first two volumes, for which I am very grateful.

PS: Serving the primary mission of the Society.

JML: Yes, certainly.

PS: Let me ask you about Maggie McKinley's forthcoming Cambridge University Press volume on Mailer. Can you tell us a little about your contribution?

JML: Sure. Maggie's volume will be an important reconsideration of Mailer. I believe she has over 30 contributors. I know that you've done the chapter on Mailer as a literary and film critic. She asked me if I would write on Norman Mailer and John F. Kennedy and I was happy to agree. I was surprised at how many places Kennedy shows up that I had forgotten. In my essay, I try to survey all of the major depictions of Kennedy in Mailer's writing, approximately a dozen.

I looked for the pattern of how his view of Kennedy evolved. His admiration for Kennedy went up and down a little at the beginning, but in the

early 1960s, it was always strong. He had a rich, complex view of JFK, and was intrigued by the question of how his Hollywood leading-man appearance affected his political chances. I don't think that there is any other historical figure that Mailer wrote about as often, and with greater penetration, than Kennedy. He wrote about him, beginning in 1960, and continuing right up through *Harlot's Ghost* (1991), and even later. Oliver Stone made a movie, *JFK*, which Mailer reviewed in a long essay in which he revisited all his earlier ideas about Kennedy. And then, of course, he is a key figure in *Oswald's Tale*. Another key text is *An American Dream*, where he has an off-stage role. Kennedy is also in *Cannibals and Christians*. In fact, he is in all of Mailer's political books, and two of his novels. Mailer identified with Kennedy to a certain extent; they also had much in common. They were both of the same generation—World War Two vets—and they were both fascinated with American politics. Mailer is also the first major writer who wrote about JFK, back in 1960, in a major essay, “Superman Comes to the Supermarket.”

PS: I find Norman's review of *JFK* to be quite interesting and Mailer only wrote two film reviews, the other one examining, in full unexpurgated rigor, Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*. So, reviewing *JFK* is obviously of paramount significance, which I discuss in my Cambridge essay that examines Mailer's criticism. You also mentioned Susan Mailer's recent memoir *In Another Place*, in which she addresses her relationship with her father. Can you talk about the significance of her book?

JML: Yes, it is a very important book because it is the first memoir by one of Norman's children. Susan, the oldest, knew him longer than any of the other eight. She was born in Hollywood in 1949 when he was living there with Jean Malaquais, writing scripts for Sam Goldwyn. Susan's memories go way back. She saw her father in a range of contexts because he visited her often in Mexico, and he visited her later in Chile, where she eventually married and lived. I should add that it is not just a story of Norman Mailer—it is also a story of her own life, which has been bifurcated. Half of Susan's life was and is spent in South America, and half of it in New York City. She lived with her father when she was a student at Barnard in the 1960s, and took part in his mayoral campaign. Susan worked on the memoir for a long time, over four or five years. Its genesis began with her memorial tribute delivered at Carnegie Hall, published in 2008 in *The Mailer Review*. Susan continued to write a piece

here, a piece there, and she finally decided that she wanted to write a book about her life. She had never written a memoir before, so, it was quite a learning experience for her. She recently gave the keynote address at Wilkes University's MFA graduation ceremony in January 2020, and talked about what she had to learn in order to become a memoirist. She has done a superb job and her book has received excellent reviews. There was a recent profile article about her in *The London Times* and her book has been written about in *The Wall Street Journal*. I am very happy to have had a finger in Susan's book, encouraging her, and helping with some factual references.

Susan's book now joins all of the other important family memoirs about Norman, including Adele Mailer's memoir, *The Last Party*, which came out in 1997. Norris Mailer's memoir, *A Ticket to the Circus*, came out just before she died in 2010. John Buffalo Mailer has written about his father in various essays, and he also co-edited a book with his father, a book of interviews titled *The Big Empty*, which was published in 2006.

PS: I found *In Another Place* to be an impressive, exceptionally insightful memoir and I enjoyed reading it very much. Bonnie Culver (Wilkes University) has written a play, *NORRIS*, which portrays Norris Church Mailer, Norman's sixth wife to whom he was married for over three decades, as I recall. What does this play tell us—and not just about Norman, but also Norris?

JML: After Norman died in 2007, Norris Mailer took his place on the advisory board of the Wilkes Maslow Family graduate program in creative writing. She funded a scholarship and became close with people at the university. Bonnie developed a strong friendship with Norris. After reading Norris's memoir, Bonnie was very taken with it. Bonnie came up with the idea of a one woman play, using *A Ticket to the Circus* as the underlying structure. Norris thought that this was a great idea and then, sadly, she died, but Bonnie stayed with the project. Two versions of it have been presented at the annual conferences of the Mailer Society. The script has gone through many revisions, and Bonnie has received considerable feedback from members of the Society, from the Mailer family. *Norris* is going to be performed at a playhouses in Santa Monica and Anne Archer will play Norris. Anne is the right age, a tall redhead, and likes the script very much. So everything looks very promising and it appears that the opening of the play will take place in Santa

Monica. Bonnie is a professional playwright, as you know, and her work has appeared off-Broadway as well in other venues around the country. I believe that Bonnie recently wrote a review of Susan Mailer's book, right?

PS: Yes, a quite detailed, probing treatment.

JML: I should add something else that is clearly germane to Mailer Studies. *The Mailer Review* has become the hub of the wheel for all Mailer activities and studies. Thanks to you and your team for reviewing every book with any bearing on Mailer's life and work, and also publishing such a range of fine essays on virtually every aspect of his work, and unpublished Mailer stories and essays, interviews and much more. Each issue you publish contains a detailed annual bibliography on works by and about Mailer that keeps readers in touch with what is going on within and beyond the scholarly world. Shannon Zinck, the bibliographer for the *Review*, does a superb job locating all kinds of materials, stuff I never knew existed. She is an exemplary bibliographer. There is no question that *The Mailer Review* has become an indispensable journal for anyone interested in Mailer Studies. I have all volumes right next to me on my desk and hardly a day goes that I am not looking up something in the journal. Congratulations, Mr. Editor, for your perseverance over more than a decade of work. It has really born a lot of fruit.

PS: Thank you, Mike, for your kind words. The *Review* would not exist if not for your indefatigable support from the very beginning. We have not published an issue that has not been energized—and improved—by your critical eye and your excellent suggestions for topics, articles, historical projects, contributors, and so forth. The current volume is number 13, (bringing us to roughly 6,000 pages over 13 years), and we strive to do our best. As you know, we have faced many challenges over time, like all scholarly journals. We are an all-volunteer staff and we certainly make mistakes, mostly my errata, but we try to devote ourselves to produce an eclectic periodical that is an ongoing record of relevant developments in all things Mailer. We also include a range of other kinds of writing, including a section each issue of high qualitative, creative writing. We are very fortunate to have been able to publish work from well-established poets and fiction writers, who contribute significantly, we believe, to the overall quality and character of our journal.

I would like to wind up our conversation with two questions. One more

general, one more narrow. If you would gaze into your crystal ball, what do you see as the future of Mailer Studies? Are there things that jump out at you as being part of strategic evolving trends or new areas of focus?

JML: Yes, there are a few things. First, I think that there are strategic resources in the archives that have not yet been sufficiently explored. We have talked about *Lipton's Journal*, but there are other items that have not been examined in detail. There are also many letters in the archive that no one has ever read. There are approximately 50,000 letters in the archives, but only 700 letters were published in my edition. These letters reveal Mailer's thinking on his art and his personal relationships. Further, the archives contain all of the hard drives and floppy disks that belonged to his longtime assistant, Judith McNally, who worked for Norman for thirty years. These resources require advanced technical skills and equipment in order to retrieve a range of texts from long ago. My understanding is that these resources are now available. We can finally access the information that Judith had stored. Everything that Mailer ever wrote was on paper from the late 70s on passed through her hands—and she had copies of everything. Judith was a real pack rat.

If I had the energy, I would go to Austin right now and start reading as much of it as I could. I know that Nicole DePolo is very interested in researching these areas. Nicole is a member of the Mailer Board and she is quite interested because she wants to follow up her earlier work on Mailer's *Ancient Evenings*, which was the topic of her dissertation. Judith, by the way, was one of Norman's researchers for *Ancient Evenings*.

PS: Nicole wrote her dissertation working with Christopher Ricks, as I recall.

JML: Yes, Christopher Ricks at Boston University. Nicole and John Buffalo have expressed interest in creating a kind of a graphic novel on parts of *Ancient Evenings* and the work that Judith did on *Ancient Evenings* would surely be very important. I should also note again that the Farley Library at Wilkes has Mailer's library for scholars to review and attempt to derive a sense of the contents of his mind. The Farley's archivist, Suzanna Calev, is doing a terrific job organizing the library and other materials.

There are some other projects that are in the works as well. Ron Fried has written a play based on John Mailer's *The Big Empty*. The name of the play is *The Two Mailers*. *The Big Empty* is comprised of a series of conversations between Norman and John in 2003 and 2004, when Mailer was in his early

eighties. I have been told that the play is projected to open on Broadway with F. Murray Abraham playing Norman Mailer. Julian Schlossberg, a film and theatre producer, will launch the production.

John Buffalo is also working on a TV script based on *A Double Life*, which he hopes to turn into a multi-season bio-pic series. He has been writing scripts based on the biography. So there are several spinoff projects that are out there, manifestations of Mailer's life, his work, and how he has touched so many people during the course of his life. Now we are starting to see the fruits of these interactions. There is an analogue in what happened in Hemingway studies after he died. Hemingway's children, siblings, and friends began generating out books, movies, and memoirs about Hemingway and his family. And that process continues with books coming out, including one written by his grandson.

PS: Yes, John Hemingway's, *A Strange Tribe*, which I was honored to review for the *St. Petersburg Times*. It is a superb memoir, recounting the trials and tribulations of a very complex multigenerational "tribe." John has spoken to our graduate students at USF and he is a particularly engaging person, infectious with his knowledge, wit, and acute sense of perspective.

JML: I think that the same thing is happening with Mailer. I should also mention how valuable your omnibus collection of Mailer's essays is becoming for scholars and critics (*Mind of an Outlaw*, Random House, 2013). It is a great resource.

PS: Thanks, Mike. Yes, *Outlaw* came out concurrently with your biography.

JML: Random House is publishing more of his books in paperback. Mailer's presence is clearly not diminishing. It is expanding—both in the scholarly world, in popular culture, and in the creative world of memoirs and profiles. So much is going on, including the forthcoming Cambridge collection, which is especially timely because it includes thirty-five different perspectives on Mailer's work *and* Mailer the man. I should also mention your project, in the *Review*, of launching a series focused on Mailer and other significant writers which, I believe, includes Bob Begiebing's essay on Mailer and Jung.

PS: Yes, the current issue launches this series and includes Begiebing's work on Mailer and Ellis, as well as Ray Vince's fulsome, comparative article on Mailer, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway. Future pairings may include Mailer and Conrad,

and we are thinking about Mailer and Roth, Mailer and Didion, Mailer and Science Fiction, and so on. We will not run out of topics, to be sure, and we are looking into reaching back in time, perhaps before the Nineteenth Century if Mailer scholars find topics and connections worth exploring.

JML: Yes, and there is Mailer and Whitman, Mailer and Melville, Mailer and Henry Miller, and Mailer and Mary McCarthy. I've been reading her lately and the similarities in their outlooks, their passions, are quite remarkable. I read an early draft of Begiebing's essay and it is a wonderful patch of writing.

PS: Thank you, Mike. I have saved my best question for last.

JML: Good.

PS: What does the future hold for you?

JML: Well, I guess that as far as Mailer studies are concerned, the first thing will be to get back to work on *Lipton's* with Susan and Jerry, and continue to collaborate with him on *Project Mailer*. Another project is my memoir about Mailer's last days, which will examine some of the things that I have mentioned in this interview: how I first became involved with Mailer, how I became connected to Bob Lucid, and how I served as a kind of apprentice archivist. And, of course, how I finally took over the job of becoming Mailer's biographer. My memoir will be based in part on the notes that I made during his last ears in Provincetown, his "table talk." I have about twenty-five thousand words written, but I have only just started to work on developing them. It is going to be a long project, but it is something I have wanted to do for a long time.

PS: Thank you, Mike, for an inspiring and deep reaching conversation. You have always been a most accessible, collegial encyclopedia of all things Mailer. And I'm so pleased that nothing has changed.

JML: Thanks, Phil. I appreciate it. It is always good to talk to you about Norman. I really appreciate the chance to address your pertinent questions.

PS: All fine, Mike. You discussed many things that our readers were not aware of but have a natural interest in and it is important for them to come out. I am very pleased by that.