

INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN MAILER,
AUTHOR OF *IN ANOTHER PLACE*:

With and Without My Father, Norman Mailer

J . M I C H A E L L E N N O N

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1) As a practicing psychoanalyst, you have published professional papers, but this is your first creative work. Why did you decide to write a memoir?

SM: In 2013 I was invited to be the keynote speaker at the Norman Mailer Society Conference. I decided to write a personal vignette that would shed light on an unknown aspect of my father's life. Immediately, I remembered those months Dad had spent in Mexico when I was a small child and had taken me to the bullfights. I hadn't thought about the *corridas* in more than 40 years, but the images were all there, waiting to be retrieved: the music, the atmosphere, the smell of beer and Mexican snacks, people cheering, and most of all the black bull running, panting, fighting for his life, and finally dying.

Before the Norman Mailer Conference, I had participated in psychoanalytic conferences and written papers that were published in journals. Thinking about my life and setting it down on paper was a new experience. I dug into my memories, waited for my unconscious to work through the gray areas, and a piece of my life with Dad appeared. The writing flowed, and I enjoyed it. I thought *I want to do more of this*. And I also thought, *many books have been written about Dad, but few people know what he was like as a father*. I decided to plunge into unknown territory and began writing the memoir.

2) You have spent half your life, or more, living in Mexico and Chile. Can you talk about how your bifurcated life has affected your outlook, your perspective on things, and specifically, how it influenced the writing of the memoir?

SM: I've actually spent about 70% of my life in Latin America. I'm totally bilingual and feel comfortable in both cultures. I think growing up in two very different places, with two languages and cultures and with Mom in one and Dad in the other, gave me a sense of cultural colors and nuances from an early age. Home was Mexico-New York, but I still had to make emotional adjustments as I moved from one place to another. In order to belong, I only spoke the language of the land. So, when I was in New York, it was English, and when in Mexico only Spanish. All of this was part of my life and I didn't question it until I got married and went to Chile at the age of 30. It was not an easy change, but on the upside, this situation gave me the opportunity to look at the United States and Mexico from a distance and think about who I was and where I belonged.

While I was writing the memoir (in English, not Spanglish as I would've liked) I thought of my life with and without my father through the prism of my multiple identities. The title, *In Another Place*, tells the story. I was either with my mother and without my father, or with the Mailers and without the vibrant Mexican atmosphere I loved. While I was in one place, I wanted to be in another and when I went back, I dreamed of returning. I could never have the two at the same time. This split colored my life, gave me a sense of not quite belonging and at the same time belonging everywhere.

3) Did your professional work as an analyst affect the way you depicted your parents, and others, in the memoir?

SM: I've been an analyst for almost 30 years. Everything I've read, added to years of clinical experience, was an asset while I was writing the book. It's not that I psychoanalyzed my family. Rather, I would say it was a second analysis for me. And while I was going through it, of course, I had lots of new insights about my parents and our life together.

4) During the first ten or twelve years of your life you saw your father irregularly; please describe how much time you spent with him up to 1960.

SM: When my parents separated and my mother moved to Mexico when I was two, the arrangement was that I would spend half the year with her and the other half with Dad. What actually happened was that for at least four years, until I was about six, Dad spent three months in Mexico City and would take me back with him to New York, by car, for another three months. Those road trips were his way of strengthening our bond. When I was seven, my parents considered I was old enough to fly alone. From that moment on, I took a plane to New York at the beginning of November and left at the end of February. Sometimes Dad, Adele and I lived together, others I stayed with his mother, Grandma Fanny.

5) Tell me about your immediate family—your husband, children, and grandchildren.

SM: Marco, my husband, is Chilean born from Sephardic parents who arrived in Chile in the early 1920's from Turkey. We met in Mexico where he was exiled, during the Pinochet dictatorship. Later in 1980 we moved to Chile, in large part, to live close to his three children, Max, Daniela and Ivan, who were eleven, seven and five years old at the time. Soon my first daughter, Valentina was born, followed by Alejandro and Antonia. Unlike me, our three kids were born in Santiago and grew up in the same house. Yet, I suppose the wanderlust is in their cultural DNA. Valentina lives in Valparaiso, is married and has two girls. Alejandro's wife is Colombian, they live in Cali and have two boys. Antonia has become a New Yorker. So, my gypsy life continues. All my kids are now in another place.

6) Tell me about your relationships with your eight siblings—you are the eldest, the senior sibling.

SM: Actually, I am the eldest of nine siblings. I have a brother, Salvador, born to my mother and Salvador her second husband. We grew up together until I was 18, so we have the easy familiarity that comes with living in the same house during all our childhood.

My Mailer siblings are eight. I am eight years older than Danielle, the next in line, and 28 years older than my youngest brother, John. I spent fragmented time with all of them during my childhood, adolescence and adult-

hood. Yet, thanks to my father's efforts, we are close as a family. Nothing to sneeze at considering we're the offspring of 6 different mothers.

My father had many faults, and too many times he wasn't the most supportive father. But, eventually, family became very important to him. Starting in the mid 60's Dad gathered his children to spend a couple of months in Provincetown. In the early 70's a month in Maine was added. I wasn't always present, but I was there enough times to feel a growing tie with all my siblings. In Maine we were thrown into communal living, had to share with the house-hold chores and only had each other for entertainment. And it was this summer month every year which bonded us as siblings. I suppose that as the oldest, some of my siblings looked up to me. But, on the other hand, I wasn't around enough in their everyday life to know them intimately. I think it wasn't until I was living in Chile, that I fully grasped how important they were to me.

7) You write about the place where you father lived in Brooklyn, from the early 1960s until his death, Columbia Heights, overlooking the East River and the Manhattan skyline. You also paint a vivid portrait of Mexico City. How would you contrast the feel of life, the ambiance, of these two cities where you spent your formative years?

SM: I can't think of two more different places than New York/Brooklyn and Mexico City in the 1950's and 60's. Language, food, colors, smells, music, the people, and history. When I was growing up, Mexico was color and New York was gray. I usually went to New York from November to February, spending Thanksgiving and Christmas with the Mailer family. That meant roast turkey and sweet potatoes, pies, stuffing, a Christmas tree, snow and lots of presents. And many cold, gray days. Mexico was summer, dazzling blooming flowers, spicy food, tropical rain, playing outside on the street with friends. Winter was with Dad and Summer was with Mom. Like the myth of Persephone and Demeter.

8) Your mother Beatrice was a life-long practicing psychiatrist and you underwent psychoanalysis in Chile. These were two of the factors that led to your choice of a career as an analyst, correct? Were there others?

SM: My mother was an MD. She trained as a psychiatrist and was a therapist until she retired. When I was a kid, I'd use her doctor's stationary to play

therapist diagnosing a patient. My father was also interested in Freud. As a novelist he journeyed into his unconscious and created characters with complex emotional lives. We all know he was not afraid of the turbulence of aggression and violence. I would say then, that both my parents, each in their own way, influenced the professional path I chose. By the time I began my personal analysis, I had already decided to become a psychoanalyst.

9) You write that your father's status as one of the leading writers of his time thwarted any idea you had of becoming a writer. Can you comment on how his celebrity affected you and your siblings?

SM: I'd rather not speak for my siblings, although growing up in the shadow of a powerful father, who was also a celebrity, was not easy for any of us. In the memoir I mention how, during my young adulthood, I felt there was nothing I could do that would live up to his (or perhaps my own) expectations. I used to think being famous was the only way to measure success, so my eternal question was *why even try?* I was sure I did not want to be a writer, not only because it meant being measured against his talent and fame, but also because I didn't want a writer's life. I had watched my father labor over his manuscripts. I knew writing required many solitary hours with my thoughts, many tortured days without knowing if what I was doing was good enough. I figured, if you don't have a talent like his, it's not worth trying.

10) One of the most moving chapters in your memoir concerns living in Chile after your marriage to Marco, who you met when you were both in Mexico. Even though Chile, like Mexico, is a Spanish-speaking country, you found life there to be much different, and more difficult than in Mexico. Please explain.

SM: I was under the illusion that I'd be happy living in any Latin American country. When we moved to Chile, that bubble burst. Chile is at the end of the Southern Hemisphere, and at that time, 1980, it was under military rule. Pinochet, the military dictator, was *persona non grata* in most of the world, even in Franco's Spain. Living in Chile literally meant being stranded at the end of the world. I felt like a stranger in a strange land, uprooted and with practically no ties to the place. For the first time I realized with total clarity the pain of having been shuttled from one country to another, from Mom

to Dad, for most of my childhood. There was no escape, because now I was married and had a baby girl. I dived into therapy knowing the only place I had left to go was within myself.

11) “The Trouble,” your father’s stabbing of his second wife, Adele Morales, created much pain and suffering in the family. Was one of the purposes of *In Another Place* to finally come to grips with this event?

SM: When I wrote the chapter “Silent Spaces,” I had no choice but to face with considerable angst what this painful episode meant to me and our family. Somehow, even though I had been in psychoanalysis for many years, I had managed to avoid confronting it. Which is why I often say writing this memoir was a second analysis for me. Through writing about that time, I was able to better understand my fear of Dad’s drinking, his bad moods, his anger, his violent temper. Of course I was afraid of him; he had stabbed his wife, my stepmother, Adele. Was he capable of doing something like this again? I never put this thought into words, at least not those words, but they were floating in our family’s atmosphere for many years. Added to this, we had to deal with the shame of having a father who had almost killed his wife. A father who was famous enough so that no one ever let you forget what he had done.

12) Provincetown, Massachusetts, at the very end of Cape Cod, is the artists’ colony where your father and his wives spent the summers for decades. It is also a place where all the Mailer siblings gathered every August, and continue to do so. What kind of influence does this place have on you and your family?

SM: From the 1980’s on Marco and I spent at least two weeks in July in Provincetown with our three kids at Grandpa Norman’s house. The first time I saw my kids and grandchildren walking across the flats during low tide I felt I was watching an old eight mm home movie. Seeing our grandkids, buckets in hand, searching for hermit crabs, made me recall the same scene, 30 years before with my own children, and 50 years before with my siblings.

Provincetown has become a must meeting point for the Mailer clan. All my siblings and our children and grandchildren meet every year in August and spend at least one chaotic week together. It gives us a sense of belong-

ing, of family, of warmth and love. And remembering our father, who loved Provincetown, and is buried there.

13) I have heard you say several times that your father asked you, as his eldest, to take the lead in fostering family harmony and togetherness. The metaphor he used, I believe, was that of a tapestry. Would it be fair to say that your memoir is part of this effort?

SM: Without doubt my siblings and I have many shared experiences, and this time I was the chronicler. I'm sure each one of us has a different story to tell, and perhaps if we could put all those stories together, we'd have a written testimony of our family tapestry. *In Another Place* is my contribution.