

THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG

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FOR THOSE WHO DO NOT HAVE KNOWLEDGE OF MY BACKGROUND, I think that it is important to understand that I am dyslexic. Even today, I still have a difficulty with words like “they’re” and “there.” But when I was growing up, my mother said, “Well, you don’t have the best teachers but everything will work out.” It was not until I was fifty and some odd years old, and having spaghetti with Norman in Belarus, that I said something to him about my condition. He turned around from the stove where he cooking and said, “Have you ever been tested for dyslexia?” And I said, “What’s that?” He replied, “Well, I think that one of my kids may have it and you’d better be tested.” And, of course, months later back in the USA I discovered that I was dyslexic. But it goes back to the fact that I could not read well, and I could not write or spell even common words. Back in high school that may have led me to becoming interested in photography and joining the debating squad, to becoming an extemporaneous speaker. At the time it seemed to me that there was no reason in being in class, or even thinking about college. When I graduated from high school, I had seven scholarships for my photography, but only one college would take me because I had a C minus average.

This information is important to understand my association with Norman. Over the years from those college days at Pepperdine, I became educated by talking to people, listening to their stories, and I would spend more time as a photographer talking to people rather than taking pictures. I

remember that when I photographed Konrad Adenauer, I spent almost two and a half hours talking to him about what it felt like for him growing up in Germany. I did not realize it at the time, but I was being educated. And my inquisitiveness led me in the early 1960s to become a successful photographer at a young age. When John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, that was the first time that I had actually used a tape recorder to interview someone when I interviewed Marguerite Oswald for several days after the assassination. And that was the first record that I have of doing an actual interview. She and I started talking about Abraham Lincoln and many other things. The interview was very insightful about her thinking as a mother toward her son. From then on, I started to use a tape recorder on every photographic assignment. Even when I would take someone out to dinner I would often put a microphone on them and a tape recorder in their pocket, recording our conversations even as we drove together in a car.

As some of you may know, I fell deeper and deeper into photographing what I call anti-social behavior. When Susan Atkins confessed the Tate-LaBianca murders I published it on the front page of the *L.A. Times*. Charlie Manson was already in jail for the Gary Hinman murder, but nobody really knew that he was the ringleader behind the Tate-LaBianca murders. By the late 1960s my interest began moving away from photography into interview. Alan Livingston, the president of Capitol Records, who was known for distributing Judy Garland and Frank Sinatra, decided to modernize Capitol, so he hired me away from *Life Magazine* to do documentary records that Capitol would provide to FM radio stations. I had done a story in *Life Magazine* on the indiscriminate use of LSD and he hired me to turn that photo essay and other stories that I had done into interviews for a series of documentary records. The first one I did was *LSD* and then *Homosexuality and the American Male*. And then I did *Why Did Lenny Bruce Die* for Capitol Records, moving Honey Bruce into my home for maybe three months, which did not go over well with my first wife.

It was interviewing Honey, not about the sex, nor the humor, but everything else from what type of socks did Lenny wear? Or did he snore at night, or all the little things, you know? How did he feel about his mother, Sally Mar, stripping at the place on Sunset while he is out there in public making sexual jokes? So, in the process, I was learning about a subject's many lives, the culture in and around them, to touch on a few aspects of my interviews.

I remember when I was about 19 years old, photographing the film *Anatomy of a Murder*, being directed by Otto Preminger, and he said something to me: "If you're going to be successful, Larry, you'd better start to learn to surround yourself with people that are more successful than you." And that always stuck in my mind. You know, surround yourself with people, and it wasn't just a matter of making money. In those days, I couldn't care less about money. So I always surrounded myself with people that I felt were better than me, that had more insight, had been run over, as Norman wrote at one point, had been run over by enough trucks in their life that they understood what life was about. So, I first hired Richard Warren Lewis to write a book about Lenny. I didn't like what he wrote, too patronizing, and not giving up, I hired Albert Goldman to write the book, whom I had interviewed about Lenny. He is the first writer that I ever worked with to write a book because I wasn't capable of writing. And, of course, Norman was a writer like that. In my opinion, he had been run over by a lot of trucks in his life. So, as I'm getting deep into publishing with *Ladies and Gentlemen, Lenny Bruce*, I then hire a writer to write a book on Minamata for the photographer Eugene Smith. Eugene asked me to produce a book for him and that led to me generating a series of books for *Book of the Month Club* on photography. In those days, I was simply not capable of writing a book. The whole series. *Masters of Contemporary Photography*, the first book with Mary Ellen Mark and Annie Liebovitz, Dwayne Michaels all followed this.

In the mid 1970s, I start to reflect on some of the events that I had experienced so far in my life. And the first thing was, as many of you may know, was an exhibit and a book with 24 photographers who had photographed Marilyn Monroe. But what I knew was that the only way the book was going to sell was if I had the cover of *Life* and the cover of *Time Magazine*. And in my wildest dreams, if I could get the cover of *Atlantic Monthly*, then I could reach a wide audience of people. I remember Random House publishers almost throwing me out of the office because I wouldn't accept a journalist from *Life* to write the book. I said, no. I needed somebody controversial. Another publisher came to me. And Harold Ross, the publisher of Grosset and Dunlap, said to me, "Well, who do you want to write this?" and I had not even thought about the two writers that I was about to suggest. I said, "I don't know. Get me Gloria Steinem or get me Norman Mailer." And that's exactly what took place. Bob Markell, one of Ross's editors walks out of the

office, and a half hour later, he walks back in and he says, “You have Norman Mailer.”

Norman didn’t know about the deal for five months because he owed his agent Scott Meredith money he had advanced Norman. And Scott was making the deal so he could get some of his money back. So that’s how Norman and I met. He was supposed to write 18,000 words.

J. Michael Lennon: Did you know that Norman was obsessed with Marilyn Monroe?

Schiller: No idea. I knew in the back of my mind that he was a provocateur. The other writer I suggested, Gloria Steinem, eventually wrote a book on Marilyn Monroe, as did Joyce Carol Oates. All I was sure of was that Mailer on Monroe that would generate a cover of *Time Magazine*. And maybe a cover of *Life* magazine. I’m commercial, so my interest was—How do you get people to the newsstand to buy the magazines?

So Norman and I started to work on the book and we had tremendous battles. On Marilyn, we didn’t really talk to each other. At one point, Bob Markell had us meet at the Friendship Lounge at United Airlines at the airport to try to patch up things. Norman didn’t like the pictures that were going with this text. I tried to explain to him that when people buy an art book with little text, they thumb through it from the back forward. So the pictures have to have a kind of opera unto themselves. “No, I want this and that.” And, of course, he didn’t write 18,000 words. He wrote one hundred and fifteen thousand words. And Markel then cut it to ninety-five thousand words.

So that’s how our relationship started. And, on that book, it ended with Norman screaming at me over the phone when he saw the *Time Magazine* cover: “I’m never going to win a Nobel Prize for literature with that cover,” I remember him saying to me on the phone. And after the book *Marilyn* by Norman Mailer was a best seller, I asked him to write the text for a photo book on an emerging art form that a photographer had shown me pictures of at the Frankfurt Book Fair when I was selling foreign rights to *Marilyn*. It was a book on graffiti, which later we would call urban art. And, since Norman was controversial, *Marilyn* was successful. This time, I called Norman directly and not through his agent Scott Meredith. I said, could you write about subways and these kids and this and that? And he said, let me meet a few of them and I’ll come back and I’ll tell you. So he starts hanging

with them, makes a visit to the Museum of Modern Art, and then calls me back the next day and says, "Call Scott, make the deal." He then wrote the text for the second book, *The Faith of Graffiti*. Yet we had no real relationship at all. He went and did his thing alone, without saying a word to me. This time, he didn't even ask to see the book's layout. All I did was promise him that the text would not have Jon Naar's pictures next to it. We would print his text on a letter press on a different type of paper, so that the pictures would stand alone. In that way, we wouldn't have any fights over that book. So, in the mid 1970s, the book came out successfully.

A year or two later I read an article in the Los Angeles *Herald Examiner* about a convict in Utah who had attempted suicide and had convinced his girlfriend to take her life at the same time. But her two children, under 2 years of age, were found crying at the foot of her bed when she was discovered unconscious. I had three kids at that time but older. And I thought, "God, is that the definition of evil? Is this man, Gilmore, that evil that you know?" So I went to Utah. At the time I had a contract with ABC to make a TV motion picture, and they gave me \$75,000 so that I could acquire rights to this story. I was already being labeled by some as a yellow journalist, using money to buy stories. I always felt that I used money to buy exclusivity. And I still had the responsibility to find out what the real story was. So I went to Utah and I didn't know whether I was going to do a movie or whatever. Then, all of a sudden, I saw an incredible book. I said, this is really something. And I immediately knew that I'd have to spend time on it, at least a year or so. I'd have to ingratiate myself with the principals in the story. I'd have to figure out how to break into a prison, not how to break out, in order to get to Gilmore, who was waiting to be executed. All of this. I also had learned since *Ladies and Gentlemen, Lenny Bruce* that, like in a boxing match, I needed a corner man.

I would go to Utah five days a week, do my interviews, and then come home on weekends to be with my family. I hired a corner man to read my interviews to tell me what I was missing because, again, you have to remember that I don't like to read, that I'm a very insecure guy because of my dyslexia.

And then I called Ed Guthman, Bobby Kennedy's right hand aide in the Justice Department and his number two man, whom I met in photographing Bobby in the 1960s. Ed was now editor of the *L.A. Times* at that time and he had arranged for my Susan Adkins interview to appear on the front page.

I told Ed that I needed a corner man. He said, "I know a guy at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Dave Johnson." But he was unable to come out to Utah. I then called Joan Didion. "Joan. I need a corner, man." Oh, she said, "Barry Farrell, your friend from *Life* magazine. He'll be perfect for it. He needs the money." So, Barry Farrell said he would if he could write a magazine article about me, which he did and then he became my corner man and came to Utah where I was working. And I can't tell you if it was six months or nine months since I'd have to look at the calendar. But I started doing all these interviews. I used the money to acquire rights to ingratiate myself. But no matter how much money you give somebody or how little money you have, you still have to find the story. And I started running out of money at a certain point.

So then I called Hugh Hefner. I used to shoot playmates when I was in college and thereafter. And I sold him a *Playboy* interview with Gilmore to be published two months after his execution or his stay.

Hefner gave me the rest of the money I needed to finish all the interviews. After the execution of Gilmore, I went to Chicago to edit my interviews. Barry was a great corner man. He would pick up on things that I just hadn't thought of at all and said, "you've got to start to think this way." And I had a dinner at Hef's house. Then Barry said, "When are we going to start on the book?" He assumed that he was going to write the book. And I said, "Well, Barry, I don't think I'm capable of writing the book."

In my mind, I started thinking of Joan Didion to write the book because she had written *Play It As It Lays*, which had a feeling of the West. I hadn't read it, but I had seen the film with Tuesday Weld and so Barry got real mad at me because Joan was a close friend of Barry.

I had to start and think about who could write this book, after the *Playboy* interview came out. And, you know, whether this is good or bad to say, and I say it with reservations.

Gilmore's murders, as I looked at them at that moment, were a knee jerk reaction to something that had happened between him and his girlfriend. Nicole had left him. And that allowed the violence within Gilmore to explode. And within days he killed two people while looking for Nicole.

So, obviously, Norman's stabbing one of his wives came immediately into my mind. Was it also a knee jerk reaction? I didn't know anything about Adele. I didn't know a thing about their personal lives or anything.

I got the galleys of the interview *Playboy* was about to publish and I sent them to Molly Cooke, who was Norman's assistant, secretary, and friend for many years. And Molly read them, from what I understand, and walked into Norman and said, "I think that you should read this."

Lennon: The *Playboy* interview.

Schiller: And I remember just so much. I'm 82 now, so I don't remember everything perfectly and chronologically. I remember Norman calling me and saying, well, when can I meet Nicole? I don't remember exactly when that took place, but he said, I think I want to write a play. "A wall in the center. You on one side and Gilmore more on the other side."

We'll call it the *Inquisitor* or something like it, Norman said. The play was actually written into our contract for the project, believe it or not. And then he started to read my interviews. One day he called me up and he said, "How do you dream up these questions? I have never seen these questions ever asked in an interview." And I said, "well, it's my education. I'm learning." And he says, "you ask the same question to all the people you interview, but it is at entirely different times and you get entirely different answers." And I said, "it's just organic. I don't write questions down, Norman. I don't go in with preconceived ideas." And the question he was focusing on is this question that I used quite a bit. "What is your earliest memory of death?"

I have lots of questions like that that opened up the floodgates sometimes to people and you discover things not about the facts of the story you're doing, because that's all known. What is not known and what is needed is what is under the veneer of these people's lives.

And that's what a writer, a novelist needs more than anything else. Norman was a journalist. I don't know if he was really a great fiction writer, but I think that he was a damn good journalist and that maybe some of his journalism was told his through his fiction. He started asking me on the phone, well, what about this question? Why did you ask this and that? And sometimes I said, I don't know. It just came to my mind. Then he said he wanted to meet Nicole. So, she and I went to New York in April and we all went ice skating in Central Park. And we went to Trader Vic's restaurant and then we went out, bought a chess set, and Norman sat down and played chess with her. And that was the beginning of Norman's relationship on *The Executioner's Song*. I never asked him what he was going to write. I never asked him at that time what the book was going to be about. That was his job to

build a house on the cement that I was pouring into a foundation. That's the way I looked at all writers I've worked with, whether it was Albert Goldman or screenwriters writing screenplays for me. For example, Ed Anholt, who wrote the film *Peter The Great* for me, had won Oscars and awards like that. When it came to the writing of books, those books were their creativity and I didn't want to impose anything more than just my interviews. Sometimes we had arguments about the facts and I can tell you about a big argument that Norman and I had. But getting back to Norman and the writing of *The Executioner's Song*. Scott Meredith, Norman's agent, says, "Well, Norman needs a half a million dollars to write this book."

I didn't think that was very much because I'm in the movie business, producing and directing films. However, it doesn't take me long to discover that nobody at that time wants to publish Norman. He wasn't writing narratives anymore. And I find that everyone I speak to about the project turns me down.

At the time, Norman was writing articles and essays for *Life* magazine, etc. And then he would expand the articles into a 60-thousand-word book.

So, all the major publishers weren't ready to give a half a million dollars or more for an expanded Gilmore story. For example, when Norman was writing a major article for *Life* magazine on the moon landing, he would then turn it into *Of a Fire on the Moon* with a 60,000 or 80,000 word book, or maybe even 100,000 thousand words. And then it hit me. Well, the backup for book publishing at the time was the paperback rights. So I said to myself, why don't I sell the paperback rights first and get a holdback (a window) to publish the hardcover first and Norman would, in fact, be writing the hardcover on speculation, but I won't tell Norman that.

So Howard Kaminsky, at Warner Books, gave me a half a million dollars as an advance for the paperback rights. And I gave Norman the entire half million. He and I became 50/50 partners. And he started to write the book, which was basically, from what I remember, a kind of a love story in some ways. At first it was a play, then a love story.

And the next little war story is a little debatable because there's a couple different versions of it. But either Norman or I sent a draft of the book to Joan Didion to get her view on it. She was a close friend of Norman's. And the three of us scheduled a lunch at the Polo Lounge at the Beverly Hills Hotel, in California. So Norman came out, we had lunch and, from my memory, even though I think that Joan remembers it a little differently be-

cause Mike Lennon spoke to her. I remember her saying something like this: Norman, when are you going to grow up? When are you going to start writing books without your voice in it?

Norman was very quiet. She talked about some of the characters and Norman talked about some of the motivations. I don't remember the conversation in detail. And Norman calls me up like a couple weeks later and says, I need another hundred thousand dollars to rewrite the whole book. So, I had to go to Howard Kaminsky, and I get a hundred thousand dollars and Norman takes another year and a half to finish the book.

And during that year and a half I remember that we had one very big, fight, a tremendous fight. During the writing of the book, Norman would send me chapters to read. And in one of those chapters, a Dr. Woods had given, I think, Prolixin to Gilmore. And Norman had some thoughts in Woods' head that were not in my interviews of him or any other person.

I got really upset. I called Norman and said, "you can't put that in Woods' head. It doesn't exist in the interviews."

"Are you editing me?" Norman shouted on the phone. And we had this fight. He hung up the phone and for almost six months we only corresponded by faxes or telegrams through Norman's wife, Norris to my second wife, Stephanie. We didn't even send telegrams to each other.

And then one day he sends a fax.

"If I knew I had to kiss your ass, I would never have shaved," were the words that I read.

It did not take me long to pick up the phone, dial his number and say, "Hello, lover." And we were talking again, and we fell more madly in love.

Then, one day, he calls me up and says, "Do you mind if I go and interview Dr. Woods?" I said, "Of course you can." By then Norman and I had already interviewed the wives of the victims together and were working hand in glove.

A few days later he calls me back up and says, "Woods said he doesn't remember thinking what I put into his head, but he could have thought it because it was not far away. Is it all right if I leave it in?" Norman asks. And I said, "Of course Norman. You interviewed Woods. You can extrapolate from what he said." And from that time on we started an even deeper relationship.

I can say from that time he became like a second father to me. He was a mentor. He gave me my place, which I felt I never had. In time we had other

fighths, whether it was *Oswald's Tale* or Robert Hanssen or whatever, but I would give my life for him. I would take a bullet for Norman. That's it.

Lennon: This is 1979. After he's written eight consecutive books about himself in the third person, right? From *The Armies of the Night* all the way to *The Fight*. And after writing all those books, he was getting tired of doing it in that way, getting tired of using himself as a lens in all of his books. And so all of this combined with lots of the "take himself out of the story." And he is, as he said later, a quiet voice from the other side of the hill. And of course, it was an omniscient narrator, and he really went back to a point of view that he was using in *The Naked and the Dead*. He said later that he realized that he had this huge cast of characters. He never had a book like this before, this massive cast of over three hundred people in *The Executioner's Song* and half of them were speaking parts. So, it was even bigger than *The Naked and the Dead* and it was one of the two most important aesthetic decisions of his life. The first would be to write about himself in the third person in *The Armies of the Night*. And the next, to take himself out, completely, from his next book.

Schiller: It may interest you to know that, in working with Norman on *The Executioner's Song*, there are periods in the timeline in which there was no information within the interviews because people weren't around or there was nobody there to witness what took place in the story. And I'm not talking just about Gilmore. I'm talking about other characters, too. So Norman used the following word in conversation with me. "We're going to have to extrapolate during this period of time between 10 o'clock in the morning, five o'clock in the afternoon, we'll extrapolate what took place." I'm using this as an example. What took place at 10:00? What took place 5:00? So, you know, I'm not a writer. I'm not about ready to say. Fiction is one thing.

So, Norman writes the book and, of course, we decide to take it to Little Brown in Boston, his previous hardcover publisher who likes the book, because we have a six-month window in the contract with Warner paperback to close a deal with a hard cover publisher before they can come out with the paperback. So, we're on the train from New York City going up there. And I'm reading *The New York Times* and I see that Tom Wolfe expects the publication of his new book, *The Right Stuff*, at about the same time and we are, hopefully, going to publish *The Executioner's Song* and we are going to have a shot at some of the awards. We never use the word Pulitzer. But that is why

everybody is beginning to talk about *The Right Stuff*. I said to Norman, “What are we going to do?”

Norman didn’t say anything. So I’m going through *The New York Times* a little bit more. And then I see something about Tommy Thompson with a book called *Serpentine* about a male serial killer traveling through Europe.

And I said to Norman, “at Christmas time, there are so many true crime books they are usually reviewed in tandem. They’ll put a couple of them together.” And Norman says, “we can’t get lost that way. No way.” Something like that. I’m paraphrasing the dialogue now. And we have taken with us to Boston a cover design of the book, which we wanted to show to Little Brown.

Norman takes up a magic marker or a ball point pen. The cover had a subtitle: “a true life story” right across the bottom. And Norman just crosses out “story” and writes the word “novel” in its place. So, it then reads “A true life novel,” just like that. And Norman says that this is what we’re going to show Ned Bradford, his editor at Little Brown, and that will solve the problem with *Serpentine* or any other non-fiction book. And there is something to that, but I’m just paraphrasing the conversation. And of course, when Ned Bradford saw it hours later at the lunch meeting, he said, “well, what do you mean? It’s a novel, a true life novel?”

And then I think I may have joked, or somebody might have joked and said, do you think that Truman Capote really remembered all that dialogue in *In Cold Blood*. He made it up, half of it. It fit the picture. So Ned said, OK. And that’s why the book was called that. It just happened that way. And the book speaks for itself. There’s one other thing you should know about it, and that is that there was a major structural problem in the book, the second half of the book. What happened in the book after both Gilmore and Nicole attempt suicide, which is what drew me to the whole story. Gilmore is on death row and Nicole is no longer visiting him in prison because she has been committed to a mental hospital. So the two central characters at that point are separated. There is no linkage between them, no events that impact both of them at the same time.

I remember that Norman and I were having this discussion, how do we keep the interaction between them in some way? Because the book is going to go off into separate stories. And I said, well, we’ve got to get Noah Wooten. He’s the prosecutor. His job is to get Gilmore’s execution date set and, at the same time, he’s interviewing Nicole in the “nuthouse.”

So Norman asks that I go and interview Noah Wooten the next time I'm in Salt Lake City. So I go and I don't remember if Norman read the interview or if I told him. But the short and long of the story is that Norman says "Forget Noah Wooten. He doesn't have what we need, Larry, you know, boom, boom, boom." And next thing I know we're sitting on a plane flying back from seeing the warden up in Oregon where Gilmore was incarcerated. And I said, well, you know, I'm interacting with both of them. And I start telling him the story and I start telling him the good, the bad and the ugly, that is, Clint Eastwood.

I start revealing things to Norman about my encounters with those I've interviewed, even the fights with my wife over this book. The use of money, this and that, and everything else as well as all of the motives. And by the time the plane lands in L.A, Norman says. "Well, I think that you know that you're the linkage." And, as he writes, Norman says he was surprised that I revealed so much to him in those first hours on the plane because I was able to knit it all together.

Lennon: You are revealing things that aren't necessarily flattering.

Schiller: That's right. I was not thinking about what is flattering to me and what is not. I was thinking of the events that took place, the facts of each event. My second divorce basically came about because of a line in the book that I told to Norman, "You know, a second wife at that point was only interested in a stack of clothes. She was like a Jewish princess so she could jump off her clothes and commit suicide or something." I think that it's used in a certain way in the book, toward the end of the book. But, you know, I'm not saying that I'm far from perfect. I'm saying that, with Norman, I didn't mind just telling him everything, because at one point he said to me, "Why are you really doing this, Larry?" And I said that it was because I fucked up on Manson/Susan Atkins. Vincent Bugliosi's *Helter Skelter* is a great book, and I could have done that book. I had entree to everybody, and I made a mistake. I never did the big book. And this is my chance of doing something even better than *Helter Skelter*. I knew that this was my opportunity.

Lennon: That's why you have to have the book the second half.

Schiller: Eastern voices.

Lennon: Western voices is the first half of the book up until the time you come into the story and the second half is the story of the story. It circles around backwards on itself. Because the origin story of Larry's involvement overlaps with it. They used it to penetrate each other. But the second part of the story is really Larry's story.

Schiller: I'll tell you about it.

Lennon: How the story is going to be told that was put together.

Schiller: Right. So I'll tell you about the screenplay, because after the book comes out and it does very well and people are starting to talk about it. Of course we are going to make a movie out of it. I'm in the movie business at that time. I don't do books unless they're going to be movies. Every single book that I did was going to be a movie. For example, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, *Lenny Bruce* was a Broadway play and then becomes a film. For *The Executioner's Song* I go to see Jeffrey Katzenberg at Paramount and he says, "Oh, I love the book. This, that and everything else. However, I don't want Norman Mailer to write the screenplay."

That's the end of Jeffrey Katzenberg. I go to another studio, Warner Brothers, and Les Moonves was running Warner Brothers in those days. He says, "I want it, but I want so-and-so to write the screenplay." Well, that's the end of it, because I have a moral obligation to Norman.

So I keep on getting these closed doors. Finally, I call Brandon Tartikoff at NBC for whom I had just made a movie and the ratings were good. I said, Look, I want to do *The Executioner's Song*. This, that and everything, please. He says, I'll only do it if we can hire Tracy Keenan Wynn. I don't want Mailer. Tracy Keenan Wynn had just written *Diary of Jane Pittman* to great reviews.

Lennon: Tell them why these people were all against Mailer. Why were they against Mailer? All basically because of what they thought he was. Well, as you say, the words are easy, but he is difficult.

Schiller: Provocateur. He's going to get in the middle of a fight, but we're never going to see him.

Lennon: Who is going to sit down and do the work?

Schiller: You've got a thousand-page book. You know who's going to bring this out? So I finally relinquish and I tell Norman that, in making the deal

with NBC, Tracy Keenan was going to write the screenplay. And NBC requires me to hire Tracy Keenan Winn and Norman goes off to do the film *Amadeus* in London. Maybe six months later I get the first draft of the screenplay and I read it and I see that Winn has really condensed the book, but it's everything I know. And if I'm going to direct the film, I have to have something that's a new experience for me. So, as I remember, I was going to Yugoslavia or someplace. I stopped in London at the Athenian Hotel, which I think it was on Piccadilly Road in Mayfair.

I tell Norman the screenplay is in and we're going to make it. I'm not too excited about it and I then go someplace for a week or two and then back to the States. When I arrive home, in my mailbox there is a paperback version of *The Executioners Song*, which has just been published. Norman doesn't remember it being a paperback, but I have a paperback that he tore the pages out of. He had edited it and put the pages in a slightly different order. And there was a little note that said "type it up." I went immediately to Perry Lieber the head of Mini-Series at NBC, because, with the Writers Guild, you can't have one writer writing behind another writer, so I said, what am I going to do? Because the Writers Guild is going to think Norman has been writing this and the Writers Guild and Winn haven't been notified that a second writer is on it. And there is the presumption that the second writer has had access to the first writer's work.

Perry Lieber said to type it up. I had it typed up and I read the first three pages. It was a whole new experience for me. It was the same scenes and there was nothing different except that Norman had, through dialogue, made the characters come alive. I'll give you an example. There is an opening scene in the film after the jet plane lands, which is supposed to represent evil coming into the community. Tracy wrote the scene just as the book said: Gilmore emerges from the airport, comes through, stands on the curb. Brenda drives up to the yellow car. Gets out one side. "There he is. There he is." Her husband gets out on the driver's side. I'm paraphrasing the dialogue a little bit. Hold up. Hold up. Tightening my belt or my pants or something.

And then Gilmore and Brenda hug and kiss.

That was Tracy Keenan Winn. Norman writes the same scene. Gilmore comes and opens the sliding glass doors, and he is playing with the doors. He's stepping out, he's stepping back in, he's stepping out. Immediately I saw, as a director, that this is a metaphor for going in and out of prison, in and out his entire life. All of a sudden, I saw something that Tommy Lee

Jones could play as the actor. Then Brenda gets out of the car. “There he is. There he is.” Her husband Johnny says, “I’m tightening my pants.” And Brenda as she runs toward Gilmore says, “Who gives a shit about your pants?” And the whole scene comes alive with Norman just adding those words. He has defined her character in just a few words.

I didn’t have to read any further, even though in every goddamn scene he writes, he just adds some texture to the scene or dialogue that defines each of the characters with their own dialogue. And that’s when I really started to learn about how dialogue defines the characters. I had already made three films by very successful screenwriters, but with this film, I was able to see the difference between Tracy’s screenplay and Norman’s.

And then of course, there was a Writers Guild arbitration because of Mailer being the second writer. Tracy Keenan Winn writes a whole long letter to the WGA comparing every single scene that he wrote. This is what Mailer did, and it’s the same thing I did preceding Mailer screenplay.

Lennon: You say Mailer copied. That he wrote it and Mailer just copied and made a few changes. It’s basically his.

Schiller: Norman writes something like a one-page letter to the Writers Guild, and I’m going to paraphrase it. I was in San Francisco and I had to drive down the coast to see a producer or director. So I asked the concierge at the hotel where I should stop for lunch and he told me where to stop going down the Pacific Coast Highway. And then, at that restaurant, I knew that I was going to run late, so I wanted to know where I should have dinner. They told me about this great place where I could have pea soup down by San Luis Obispo and so forth. His point was that anyone making the drive would have to take the same road, and make the same stops. Same with the Gilmore story. That was Mailer’s letter. There’s only one road you can take from San Francisco to Los Angeles, and only one set of key incidents in the Gilmore story.

Lennon: Well, there is only one road you could take with the material.

Schiller: Yes, with this book.

And just because Tracy had written all those scenes which were derivative from Mailer’s book, it wasn’t that Tracy had created those scenes. And of course, Norman was awarded a single credit on the film as the writer of the screenplay.

Audience Member: Did Tracy ever talk to you again?

Schiller: I saw him in Aspen not too long ago. He was very nice. So, Norman in so many ways irrevocably changed my life. And I think for the better.

Lennon: I love the story where Tommy Lee Jones asks you, as director, how he should walk, so you tell him.

Schiller: I met this great casting director, Lynn Stalmaster of the film *On Golden Pond*, years before and I asked Lynn to be the casting director on *The Executioner's Song*. He suggests Tommy Lee Jones, who had only made one important film, *Coal Miner's Daughter*, with Sissy Spacek. I'm supposed to meet him in New York City to have dinner before we were going to go to a play with Susie Kertz in it, who it was originally thought of to play the Brenda character before Christine Lahti. We go to Frankie's and Johnny's Steakhouse and we have dinner. We were walking down the street and Tommy turns to me and asks how did Gilmore walk?

And I just I said that his ideas, well, how do you walk after you've been buttfucked for twenty-six years?

And Tommy, all of a sudden does this little skip and a hop and a dance. And then I knew he was going to play the role.

So that's how you see, that's how you know. Life just comes about. And then, of course, there was Christine Lahti. Everyone had heard that we were going to hire Susie Kertz's for the role. And then one day Christine dressed up like Brenda, snuck into the hotel in New York City that I was staying at, and knocked on my door. I didn't even know she was coming in. She wanted to play that role and she got it.

Lennon: I'm curious about what went into your decision to cast the actor that plays Larry Schiller?

Schiller: Well, this was really interesting because it was very difficult. I was more interested in him fitting into my suit and clothes.

This was the most difficult casting role, not because of any ego or me but, in fact, I wanted that character to be somebody different. And Norman and the studio felt it really had to be me. But I felt that it would be too confusing for the character to be called Lawrence Schiller when Lawrence Schiller is producing and directing the film. So we call him Larry Samuels, as you know, and it may have been the worst casting of the picture.

I've played in other movies and I think that I'm in one scene when they're coming down the steps. I'm a reporter asking a question. I couldn't play myself. I didn't have the experience. You know, this was my first big chance at directing a major film and NBC gave me four and a half million dollars to make the film. Freddie Francis came from England to be the cinematographer, and I had met him on the film, *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, and I wanted him to shoot the film during all four seasons. For TV movies, you just shoot it, And I wanted snow. I wanted summer. I wanted spring for the same locations. So, I needed \$6 million for the budget and I went to Viacom, who gave me the extra \$2 million as an advance against syndication. And my agent, Larry Auerbach, almost quit. He says, "Why are you spending a whole \$6 million? I would just make it and forget about winter and snow." I said, "But my name is on the film" and I made it for six million dollars.

Lennon: Does anyone else have a question?

Audience Member: Is there any controversy or scandal about picking the title? Because that was something that always bugged me about the book. It's such a great title and the poems in the beginning and at the end tell you that it's his poem. I know he took himself out of the narrative, but then he put himself right back in.

Schiller: Well, when he told me about the title, it was his decision. It's his book. So it's his title, not mine. He didn't tell me about the poem. I didn't know anything about the poem until I saw the galleys. And, to be very frank with you, I was so excited about the way he had written the book, it just didn't matter to me.

Audience Member: You couldn't resist it.

Lennon: It just doesn't fit at all. And it was written about something completely different.

Schiller: Yeah, completely.

Lennon: It had already been published. He just couldn't resist it.

Schiller: But it comes with the territory. That's Norman. You know, like certain things come with me in my territory.

Lennon: Yes, Carol.

Carol Holmes Alpern: It's not a question, but it is something haunting me and it is that Norman took himself out of the book? And he put you in. So you became Norman?

Schiller: Well, in a way, yes. You can look at it that way. But we were looking for another character. So me being in the book was because I was just the right person that fit both sides.

Carol: No, I'm talking mystic spooky.

Schiller: I understand.

Lennon: That's pretty well accepted.

Schiller: Yeah.

Lennon: Norman needed you as a surrogate.

Schiller: Yeah, he did.

Lennon: And so Larry was the surrogate. But Larry also had the great advantage that he really was going between Gilmore and Nicole. So there was justification for that on more than one level.

Schiller: People don't know that when she was released from the nuthouse, she was released in my custody. And I went to a psychologist or psychiatrist and I said, what should I do? He said, buy her a puppy dog, a Great Dane, and give her the responsibility to take care of somebody else.

I asked her to come to California for the interviews because I hadn't interviewed her until after the execution. I moved her and her mother and her kids into a little place in Malibu. We would go shopping for dog food, everything else, and drive in the car. And I interviewed her for four months, but I was told to get a dog, and that was her responsibility. She had to keep somebody else alive. That's the advice that was given to me. I see her, by the way, at least every six months and I saw her two weeks ago when she came to New York or I go back East. And I even helped her out in a divorce once. She may have married another con and then she had to get divorced. And then she married a potato farmer and learned to fly a plane to see to the fields and then she got divorced from him. And now she has a very nice guy as a

boyfriend. She has two children and she adopted two children. She is struggling but she is doing well.

Phil Bufithis: I was going to ask you what happened.

Schiller: Well, the first thing I did when I brought her to California was to send her to night school to learn typing. I told her that you have to learn a trade. And if you're going to get a job, you have to learn to type. I remember buying her a Selectric typewriter. So she went to night school for about four months to learn certain basic skills that she never had. Then she married the potato farmer, and she ran the business a little bit.

And I bought her an accounting program. I had a responsibility to not put her out in the street. I was doing all these interviews day and night. There wasn't anything in her life that I didn't know about because I didn't know what the writer is going to need.

Lennon: Tell them about the time when you were sending Norman the interviews he was working on. He's got this huge pile of interviews. And then he gets another full box. He called you up to say what?

Schiller: Well, at one point, I had already done a year's worth of interviews without Norman. And then we're doing follow up interviews. We've already gone there and done our dog and pony show meeting people, so that he could meet Verne and everybody. And, on that trip, we interviewed the wives of the two victims. And then he goes back and I decide that I want to do more interviews. And, as I said, he's already got it. He is screaming at me, I got enough. I got enough. Stop, stop. I don't remember the exact words now, but he was just so furious at me. What do I need? You just got to stop. I got enough to write two or three books. We had a lot of fun, I have to tell you. a lot of fun. I met Mike Lennon, too, by the way. Yeah.

Audience Member: Can I ask you a question about Utah? You must have spent a lot of time there.

Schiller: A year and a half doing the book, a year doing the film. And to show how the book was so positively received by the Mormon community, we shot in all the real locations. The execution is actually a set, but we shot in the real room where the execution took place. The state just loved the book. They felt that Norman was so honest and fair in everything he did

that when it came to the film, they didn't shut us out of anything. They just opened the doors.

Audience Member: How did you feel about it when you were there. The place, the environment.

Schiller: It was a learning experience. I was experiencing something that I didn't know existed on the planet. My whole life is a learning experience. When I went to China for the first time, it was a learning experience. I didn't read books in high school and college, so I know very little. Everything is from firsthand experience. I'm doing things right now for another writer's estate, Ray Bradbury, as some of you know. I've never read a Ray Bradbury book. I don't have the patience or the time or I'm not capable. But yet I can submerge myself enough and interview enough people and talk to enough people that I can probably tell you something about every book that he has written and what the themes are, because I've educated myself by talking to people. But I'm not saying that it's the right way to do it.

Lennon: One more question.

Audience Member: Larry, there is one of the things you haven't talked about, haven't given yourself enough credit for. I was very moved after reading *The Executioner's Song* when I read Michael Gilmore's book, *Shot in the Head*.

Schiller: *Shot in the Heart*.

Audience Member: *Shot in the Heart*. I'm sorry. At first, he didn't want to deal with you or be part of your book. And yet he clearly regretted it and has talked extensively in the book about your generosity. And you were helping him understand his own family. Can you talk about it a little bit?

Schiller: Well, what happened was during the actual event when Michael came to try to convince his brother not to fulfill his desire to be executed.

People should know that Michael is a respected writer of music. He worked for *Rolling Stone* as a byline writer, respected by artists and everybody. They grew up as Mormons. Gilmore was raised as a Catholic. So in the heat of the battle, the month before, which in the film is when Michael comes to Utah to try to convince his brother not to be executed, to fight it. And he meets me in the hotel and tells me, "You're only interested in my brother dying" and calls me a bunch of dirty words, which is only natural. I

have an argument with him, and I say to him, “I don’t want your brother to die. To me, it’s a better story if he lives, because then he’ll just fade away on death row like another number.” And I remember saying this to Michael, “I’m not interested in him being executed.” So, we leave the conversation as adversaries. Then *The Executioner’s Song* comes out and he decides to write *Shot in the Heart*. And one day calls me up and he says, “Well, you know, you interviewed my mother.”

Schiller: “You got into the trailer, didn’t you?” he said, and I said “well, Norman and I eventually did.” “And you have all those tape-recorded conversations,” he said. “I really didn’t know my mother very much.” And then he says, “Can I interview you about my mother?” And I said, “Michael, no, you can’t.” He says, “Why not?” And I remember saying this, exactly.

Well, come over and I’m going to give you all the tapes. Only listen yourself. And he came over the next day, and I just gave him the box of all the tapes of everything with his mother. I wasn’t about ready to paraphrase his mother. Let him hear it himself. Just like I gave to Norman. But I didn’t give Michael any transcripts. I wanted him to hear his mother’s voice. And then Michael and I became very close. Then when he lost his whole record collection in a fire, he came over and had dinner and we did some things together. He’s not too well right now.

Audience Member: What I thought was interesting is the image that has created a view in *The Executioner’s Song*, a kind of a hustler that Michael completely dispels in his own book.

Schiller: Yeah, he does, because I think that he was very surprised by the fact that I just gave it to him with no conditions.

Audience Member: Also, after the whole project you kept up with him. You really supported the people who were involved.

Schiller: Oh, yeah. Everybody. You don’t parachute into somebody’s life and then leave them. If you’re working for a media company, that’s what you have to do because you have to go on to the next assignment. If you’re an independent, you’ve got to go off to the next assignment. But I stayed in contact with Vern. We had some disagreements as time went on, but that’s only natural. I still speak to Brenda about every six or nine months. She’s divorced now and has another husband. And I see Nicole. I don’t see Barrett. For any

of my stories, I'm in contact with all the people involved and one of my wives just couldn't handle that, still dealing with everybody that I had worked with. I may have made some mistakes in that area, but these people gave me their lives and you just don't walk away and leave them standing on a street corner.