

THE TOUCHDOWN TWINS: JAMES JONES AND NORMAN MAILER

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

*Interview with Norman Mailer, Little Brown Offices, New York,
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J. Michael Lennon: When did you first meet Jones?

Norman Mailer: In late 1950 or early 1951, somewhere in there. My editor at Rinehart told me that there was a book that Scribner's was terribly excited about, a war novel by someone named James Jones. His editor, Burroughs Mitchell, wanted me to read it and if I liked it to give it a blurb. They thought that was very important. So I read it, and you know, it knocked me down and half knocked me out. I thought it was an extraordinary book. All the while I was reading it I had a sinking feeling, "Well, you're no longer the most talented writer to come out of World War II. You've been replaced." Extraordinary sensation. I've always felt I understood kings losing their crown ever since. So I gave it a blurb. It was a half-grudging, half-generous blurb, saying that it had marvelous qualities and serious faults, which of course it does, but that it was a terribly important book. Afterwards, I heard the title. I remember writing to Burroughs Mitchell and saying, "Bad title." I thought *From Here to Eternity* was a bad title.

But I didn't meet Jones until maybe a year later, after *Eternity* had come out and had its extraordinary reception. Then one day when I was living down on the lower east side, Vance Bourjaily called up and said, "I'd like to bring Jim Jones over." I said, "Sure." So he came. We met that day.

JML: You became friends pretty quickly?

NM: Yeah. For one thing it was like a joke. I once wrote a one-act play about Eisenhower and Khrushchev called *Buddies* [published in *Advertisements for Myself*, 1959]. They were the only equals in all the world so they had to become friends. In a way, Jones and I were the same. We were the only two people who had the same kind of experience, both young, both had written war novels, both had enormous receptions for their books. So in a certain sense we felt like the touchdown twins.

JML: You visited Jones when he was at The Handy Colony in Marshall, Illinois, in 1953. Is that right?

NM: I think it was 1953. I had a blue Studebaker. One of the last ones—marvelous model. I went there with my second wife, Adele, and we stayed there a couple of days and met Lowney Handy [Jones's mentor, who ran The Colony].

JML: What was the situation at The Colony?

NM: Well, you had some very serious writers there and some kids running a scam. They liked the idea of having free meals, a bed and a roof, and some good athletics. They saw it as an open-air prison, but they could get out. The warden was Lowney Handy and that was pretty easy. There were some who impressed me as being on the edge, kind of scuffling, you know, taking a free ride, and some perfectly serious people. Jones was serious as hell about it, and in a funny way, slightly defensive. I remember he said at one point, "I feel like a goddamn army officer now. Now I know how those army officers feel. If I wrote *Eternity* today, it would be a lot better and a lot different."

JML: What was his relationship to Lowney Handy?

NM: Love-hate. I hate using something so simple but it was the operative definition of it. There was a strong bond between them. They were very much like brother and sister who were fighting all the time, but have incredible family feeling. It never impressed me as a romantic relationship. I found out later to a degree it was. But it didn't seem that way at the time.

JML: Was she as tough and as overbearing as people have described her?

NM: No. Like all legends it was vastly exaggerated. She was terribly opinionated and, like all people from the Midwest, very proud of certain things, but a little uneasy about literary matters—probably because of that old tra-

dition in America that literature started in New England and never went far away from there. So she would protect herself; she would be tentative. She was very gentle with me and handled me with kid gloves. But I found her stimulating and fun. I liked her.

But she was terribly opinionated. I could see if you were under her and she didn't like your work, you could hate her. She had all sorts of interesting ideas, but she was kind of a tyrant about writing. She had these kids copy passages from great books for an hour a day before starting their own writing. A lot of people laughed at that, but I always thought it might be worth trying. If I were giving a writing course I might try it. There are worse ways to demonstrate that writing consists of an awful lot of dreary dull work and paying attention to small details.

JML: I don't think anyone has ever commented on the fact that both Hemingway and Jones were small-town Illinois writers who gained their particular vision by rebelling against overbearing mothers and then going off to war. And that their fathers, both doctors, committed suicide. Obviously, there are some connections there.

NM: Jones thought of Hemingway a great deal. At one point he was talking how Papa had never read his book and he hadn't heard from him, and he was slightly on edge and feisty about it. I think he thought more of Hemingway than anyone else. But I've always assumed that if anyone was ever influenced by Hemingway, it was me. I must confess I've never thought of all those connections. I didn't know, for instance, that Jones's father was a doctor.

JML: He was a dentist.

NM: There's a difference between doctors and dentists. There's also a difference between living in a suburb near Chicago and living in southern Illinois, a huge difference. Southern Illinois is not even Midwest but southern really, northern rim of the south.

JML: Jones was much more interested than you in the implements and the conduct of war, but his ideas about the ideological conduct of war were not really developed like yours. Can you say something about that?

NM: Jones was no intellectual. If he had an Achilles heel it was that. If you're going to keep living and working as a writer and you've got talents as huge as he had, you simply have to recognize where your shortfall is, and he

didn't. So he was always trying to beef up the intellectual side of his writing, which was lamentable because he was not an original thinker. He was a marvelously original novelist and he had wonderful flavor. And he caught the middle of America as maybe no one else did in that whole period. But his thoughts on war were banal.

JML: I assume you're referring to *Some Came Running*.

NM: Well, *From Here to Eternity*, *Some Came Running*, mainly the early Jones, which I know much better than the late.

JML: Jones never really changed his style as a writer. I've just finished reading *Whistle* and it has more polish than *From Here to Eternity* or *Some Came Running*, but his style remained almost the same throughout his books.

NM: I would think so. Unfortunately, I've never read *Go to the Widow-Maker*. I'm still looking forward to it. I have a hunch it's one of his most interesting books. I did start *The Merry Month of May* and quit it. I was depressed by it. It seemed like the style had burned out. I looked at *Whistle* and it looked pretty good, but my mind was not on that sort of thing at the time so I didn't finish it. But based on the superficial impression that I have of *Whistle*, I think he was going back to his roots, as I believe we all do in one way or another when we feel the end is pretty damn near.

JML: You said that when you visited Jones in 1953 it was in your conversations with him that you first really heard about Karma, or took it seriously. I don't find any references to any kind of mysticism, except on the battlefield, in Jones's writing. Did he hold those beliefs about Karma in a serious way, and did he continue to hold them later in life?

NM: Well, you know we stopped talking to one another for all practical purposes around 1957. So I don't know about his later life. I do know that I had that conversation with him about Karma. And I said, "Surely you don't believe in all that nonsense." And he said, "Of course I do. It's the only thing that makes sense." So I paid attention to it because he was such a tough-minded, practical Midwesterner. When a Midwesterner speaks of something mystical making sense you have to ponder it. I've been pondering Karma the rest of my life. I now have a great belief in Karma. But I'm bewildered by something you said about him being mystical about the battlefield. And I just said his ideas about war were banal. Maybe I missed something.

JML: Well, I'm referring to something you said. You said in one of your comments [in *Cannibals and Christians* (1966)] on *The Thin Red Line* [1962] that Jones was able to move back and forth between the mystical nature of combat and the practical problems of tactics. You said you admired that quality in him.

NM: Absolutely. I still do. I misunderstood. I wasn't thinking of his sensuous relation to war. I think his ideas about war were relatively ordinary. You know, war is hell. At the same time, war is kind of fun. War is a man's game. No war ever made sense. I think his attitudes about war can be summed up in a series of remarks, some of them half-sententious.

JML: What do you find most valuable in Jones's vision of men at war?

NM: Well, what we were just speaking about: his sense of the sensuousness of combat. I didn't see it again until *Apocalypse Now*. Remember the scene with the helicopters, the attack, and the way these men absolutely enjoyed the combat? Finally, it was more than just theater. It was the Theater of the Gods. It's one of the reasons why so many of us are drawn to war, willy-nilly, and don't know why. It's why there's an absolute opposition to war at all times in all governments. There is something extraordinary about the experience of war. Beyond all the fatigue there's a high in it, and that's why people who are opposed to highs almost always hate the very idea of war. That doesn't mean you go to war because there's a high in it. But you have to recognize this exhilaration before you can deal with war at all.

JML: Can you make anything out of the fact that a great number of Jones's best friends were literary people? Willie Morris, William Styron, James Baldwin, Irwin Shaw and several others. Jones spent many years in the Army and always wrote from an enlisted man's point of view. It's always puzzled me that in his social relations his friends were so consummately literary.

NM: I think it was a symbiotic relation. Writers were enormously drawn to him because he wasn't like other writers. It was like dealing with a redneck who was as gifted as Byron. I'm exaggerating now because Jim was certainly no simple redneck, and he was no Byron. Jones was like so many people whose mentality, finally, was to enjoy driving a car, people who liked the smell of gasoline, people who loved getting drunk and getting in a fight—win or lose the fight, that hardly mattered—but they loved the smell of bar

sawdust when your nose is bleeding and stuck behind a cuspidor. Jones understood all that. We were all agog by it. You know, there's something inextricably effete about the literary world of the East. So writers who lived in the east were drawn to Jones. And he in turn, with that terrible inferiority complex of Midwestern writers, was drawn to Eastern writers. It was symbiotic. But looking back on it, I don't think it did him any good. I say this because I've tended to stay away from writers. The insularity of that world, and the envies that it generates, are consuming. You live your life with blinders, and all you care about is whether so and so's book is selling or not selling. I don't want to get to the point where I live my life hoping that some competitor's book is not doing well.

JML: Someone said in an article on you and Jones that he was a realist and you were a romantic, which is simplistic, of course.

NM: Very. Very. Because you reverse it and it would still be true.

JML: So how would you characterize the fundamental differences between you and Jones?

NM: Jones had his inferiority, I had mine. Mine was ethnic and his was, as I say, coming from the Midwest. But his true inferiority, I think, was that he wasn't a college man, which is always half an asset and half a disaster to a successful novelist who reaches a high level without having gone to college. It means never being quite certain if you're bona fide. It's a little bit like coming from Brooklyn as I did, but very different. Another difference is that he worked from his instincts, while for many years I was working more out of my intelligence and my analytic abilities, such as they were. It was only later that I began to feel that one had to work out of what one felt rather than out of what one could comprehend.

JML: Jones seemed to write best about men at war, and when he wrote about other things, if not in his opinion at least in the opinion of many reviewers and readers, he just wasn't cutting it.

NM: I think he made a terrible mistake leaving America. It was the fundamental error of his life. His roots were here. He wrote about the country. At his best, he wrote about the country better than any of us. He had more claim to be called an indigenous American author than any one of us. And in going to France, I think he dried out his taproot. He got into the literary

world in the worse way. He was the literary celebrity of Paris for many years. You didn't account for anything in the literary world if you didn't visit his home when you went there. Jones had great gifts for social life. He was a charming man. You know, he could drink all night and get up in the morning and work. That was part of his doom. If you wake up in the morning and have too large a hangover to work, you recognize that you've got to give up one or the other. He didn't. He was somewhat stronger physically and in many ways, emotionally, than most people. That was part of what brought him down too early, I think. He had the confidence that he could do it all. And it was false confidence.

JML: Did he always see himself as a Midwesterner, or did he try to distance himself?

NM: He wasn't self-conscious about it. It just came out of him. If you meet someone who's got a strong Southern accent it doesn't matter what they're doing, they're a Southerner. Jim had a southern Illinois accent. It was part of his charm. Here was this man who was so smart and so funny and could say such unexpected things and sounded like a hick. That was terrific. But he didn't know it was terrific.

JML: From everything that I've read and heard about him, he was a generous individual and a gentleman too.

NM: He was a very generous man up to a point, very generous. And warm. You know, if you loved him, you loved him. He did inspire love, I must say.

JML: How would you sum him up as a writer, an American writer?

NM: Well, I'm afraid he falls in the great vein of great American writers—prodigious talent and died too soon.