

MAILER TAKES ON AMERICA: IMAGES FROM THE RANSOM CENTER ARCHIVE

CATHY HENDERSON, RICHARD W. ORAM,
MOLLY SCHWARTZBURG, AND MOLLY HARDY

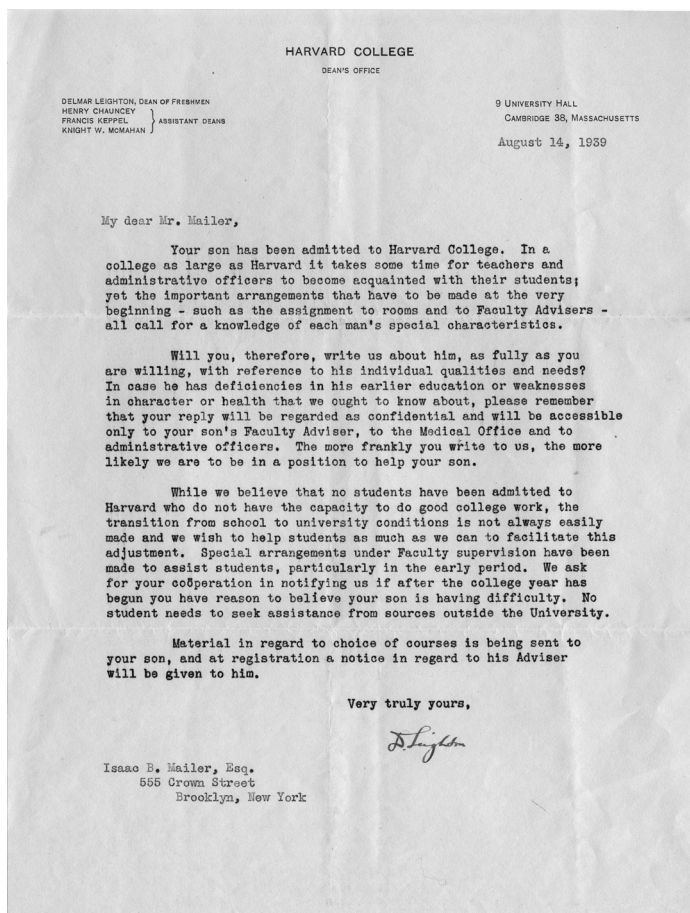
In May 2005, the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, announced the acquisition of the entire Norman Mailer archive. In response to the question "Why Texas?" Mailer commented, "the major part of my decision (and pleasure) to have this archive go to the Ransom Center is that you have one of the best, if not, indeed, the greatest collection of literary archives to be found in America. What the hell. Since it's going to Texas, let's say one of the best in the world." Since then, a team of four archivists has been hard at work organizing and cataloging the 900 (give or take a few) document boxes worth of material chronicling every phase of Mailer's life and career from the 1930s on. The archive will open for use at the beginning of 2008.

Because of widespread public interest in the acquisition, Thomas F. Staley, the Center's Director, asked that the authors of this article mount an exhibition based on the archive in the fall of 2006. We therefore had the challenge of encountering the Mailer papers in their "raw" unprocessed state, in the original folders and cartons. For those of us who savor the experience of handling original documents largely untouched since their creation, it was also a privilege. The exhibition could not have come together without the considerable assistance of J. Michael Lennon, Mailer's unofficial archivist, who knows these papers better than anyone.

"Norman Mailer Takes on America" placed Mailer and his works in a political and cultural context and traced the central role he has played in our awareness and understanding of what critic Morris Dickstein has called the "shocks of history, politics and contemporary life" that shaped the latter half

of the twentieth century and continue to unsettle the twenty-first. The exhibition was the public's first opportunity to sample the Mailer archive and more than 200 items spanning the full range of Mailer's career, examined in the context of the cultural and historical events that sparked his imagination. With this pictorial essay excerpted from the full exhibition, the curators hope to convey a small sense of its scope for those who were unable to view it in Austin.

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555 Crown Street
Brooklyn, New York
September 5th, 1939

Dr. Delmar Leighton, Dean of Freshman
Harvard College
9 University Hall
Cambridge, Massachusetts

My dear Dr. Leighton:

This is in reply to your letter of August 14th, 1939, and from the nature of it, it is very gratifying to know the splendid interest Harvard University takes in its Freshman student body.

Concerning my son, Norman, as far as I know, there are no deficiencies in his earlier education. As to his health, he was recently examined by our family physician, who stated that he is in excellent health.

Some of his characteristics may perhaps be briefly summed up in the following manner.- He has a keen sense of loyalty and fairness; is sincere and appreciates sincerity in others. Shows the proper deference and respectfulness to elders. While never seeking praise, I have found him, however, to react favorably to it by striving for higher accomplishments. Participates in and has the average boy's love for various outdoor sports.

His short-comings, if such, are that at times he displays shyness and is inclined to be sensitive.

I naturally appreciate the opportunity to write to you about my son and I feel confident that he will prove to be a worthwhile student at Harvard.

Very truly yours,

I. B. MAILER

IBM:LN

A 1939 form letter (preceding page) from the Dean of Freshman at Harvard College asks Mailer's father to comment on his son's preparedness for higher education. Isaac Mailer lists loyalty, fairness, and sincerity among his son's qualities and sees early signs of his adult son's love of the limelight.

The Greatest Thing in the World

Inside, out of the rain, the lunch wagon was hot and sticky. Al Groot stopped in front of the doorway, and wiped his hands, and ~~shook~~ wrung his hat out, and scuffed his shoes against the dirt-brown mat.

He stood there, a ^{small} ~~lean~~ old wrinkled ~~boy~~, with eyes ^{dark and mysterious} ~~that~~ ^{incredible} ~~that could never look at you, unless you were~~ ^{seemed incapable} ~~that~~ in back of him. He stopped at the door, and waited, ~~as if~~ not sure of his reception, examining the place carefully, as if he might have need of this knowledge soon after. It was a little fancier than the ordinary lunchroom, having ^{dark, old-wood} booths at the left that fronted the sharp, glittering stools and counter of well polished chromium. A clock on the wall showed that it was after ten, which might have explained why the place was almost empty. There was no one at the counter, and ^{the} ~~few~~ truck drivers, ~~that~~ sprawled out on two adjoining booths, to catch a late dinner, were tired, and very silent, engrossed only in their sandwiches and hamburgers. Only one man was ^{left?} left behind the counter, and he was ~~carefully~~ carefully cleaning the grease from the frankfurter griddle, with the motions of a man who has a great deal of time on his hands, and is desperately afraid of finishing ~~his work~~ to face the

"The Greatest Thing in the World" was Mailer's first story published in the *Harvard Advocate*. It won the prestigious College Short Story Contest in 1941 and helped convince Mailer's family that he might indeed be able to pursue a successful career as a writer.



A snapshot of Norman Mailer, ca. 1944–1945, taken while stationed in Japan. This photograph was probably sent to him by another soldier, Ralph A. DiLella ("Me").

Dear Mr. Mailer

Asmara, September 8 '48

For months I've been meaning to write you about *The Naked and the Dead*. What struck me more than the execution was the amplitude of the plan and the scale on which the characters were conceived. The scenes of combat on the river and the whole story of the patrol came out magnificently. You seemed to me to have started from a much profounder and broader base of knowledge of people than we did when we tried to write about war in the early twenties. ~~The~~ Every time has its theme and in attacking the problem of power you aimed at the central theme of our time. I felt you lost momentum there because when you dove into the general you weren't able to get away from the fashionable Purist and New Masses attitudes - but after all nobody can be expected to do everything at once.

Congratulations.

Sincerely,
John Dos Passos

A letter from John Dos Passos to Mailer, 8 September 1948, in which Dos Passos compliments the young novelist for *The Naked and the Dead* and singles out the core element of Mailer's first novel: "every time has its theme and in attacking the problem of power you aimed at the central theme of our time." Published with the permission of Lucy Dos Passos Coggin.

-4-

or at least the unconscious mind. For example if one goes to bed without an alarm clock and knows one has to get up at six, it is enough to tell oneself this, and one is awake within a few minutes of six. Of course, sleep is troubled, but the sense is accurate. Therefore the capacity to measure time does exist. From there I decided that time is the measure of responsibility, and we are usually unable to measure time accurately because we resent responsibility. The first attempts to measure time mechanically (sun-dial) are roughly synonymous with the birth of civilization and the birth of responsibility, just as the clock heralds the beginnings of capitalism with its productive responsibilities. Time is service which leads to death and we hate it.

Danny told me about Ed wanting to horn in on him and Rhoda to set up an orgy. Ed couldn't sleep in the next room, and kept coming back to talk and show pornography. Another time Ed was trying to make Danny make a homosexual advance. It's fantastic how many people hold the same needs, particularly the orgiastic ones.

Idea for a novel. About Adele written in first or third person, somewhat in the manner of *The Woman of Rome*, about a Greenwich Village girl, and what happens to her, the milieu she passes through, the qualities and lacks she feels in her life. There would be not so much a story as an attempt to have the book full of life.

The Partisan Review symposium piece. Might emphasize that at no time in the last fifty years has the artist felt alienated more for he has lost the making of pre-world-war I, the lost generation of the twenties, the social sense of the thirties, and the war collectivity of the forties. The feelings of unity come mostly from the top—a *la Time Magazine* which now disseminates the manifestoes and the polemics (on as hopeless an unrealistic a level as the Stalinist manifestoes of the thirties). The young writers and artists can rise to eminence only as barbarians, because only the barbarian writer can express the anarchistic confusions of the mass of youth, without being hung on the intellectual consequences. vis Mailer and Jones. Once the barbarian develops he is in trouble. America is a deteriorating society in the final crises of world capitalism (which taken as a whole is certainly deteriorating) and it is therefore almost impossible for the artist to enter vigorously upon the life of his time—in deteriorating periods almost all action is corrupting, yet all inaction leads to sterility. Albridge who said approximately these things in other ways could come up at the end with only one prescription—a genius is needed. What should be emphasized earlier is that the writer does not need to be integrated into his society, and often works best in opposition to it, destroying values rather than affirming them. The crisis occurs when he loses belief in the efficacy of attack his society, and has nothing to replace it. It is a mistake to misread this period, a period of crisis, as one of convalescence, merely because a core of intellectuals have moved politically to the right.

Drank in a bar with Harvey, John Elbert, and Danny. First with Danny at McSorley's where a bunch of Poles and Ukrainians were getting drunk for Ukrainian New Years. In the men's room, I read Red Kennedy—Potential Dan scribbled on the wall. A bunch of Cooper Union students came in, and looked like tourists, all dressed up. I needed a shave and was wearing a plaid shirt and my old army coat—I felt completely at ease and tough. It's so ridiculous. With alcohol I can shed my middle-class fears of violence merely by changing the uniform. One thing which struck me last night was the need of community. There was community at McSorley's, at the San Remo where the Bohemians know each other all, and finally at Pierre's the candy store around the corner, where Red was talking about an installation at his lodge and the refreshments served with a petty-bourgeois couple. Everybody finds his home, man cannot seem to live without it.

The journal that Mailer kept briefly in the early 1950s reveals much about his early days in Greenwich Village. As this entry (14 January 1952) shows, Mailer was formulating a vocabulary of violent rebellion years before he fully articulated the concept of the underground in "The White Negro." The text also gives a glimpse into Mailer's early relationship with his second wife, Adele.

AFFADAVIT

Norman Mailer,
I am contributing this affidavit ~~gratuitously~~ ^{assumption} on the ~~theory~~ ^{assumption} that my father,
I, ^{Paul} Barnett Mailer, can hardly "clear himself" without my participation.

It seems to me that any "defense" must be separated into two compartments: 1) have I ever influenced my father, directed, cozened, implored, ~~seduced~~ or otherwise sought to ~~in~~ ^{try} control him by our "continuing close association"? and 2) does the "reliable information" that I, B. Mailer's son is a "concealed Communist" possess any reliability or information?

I will answer them in order.

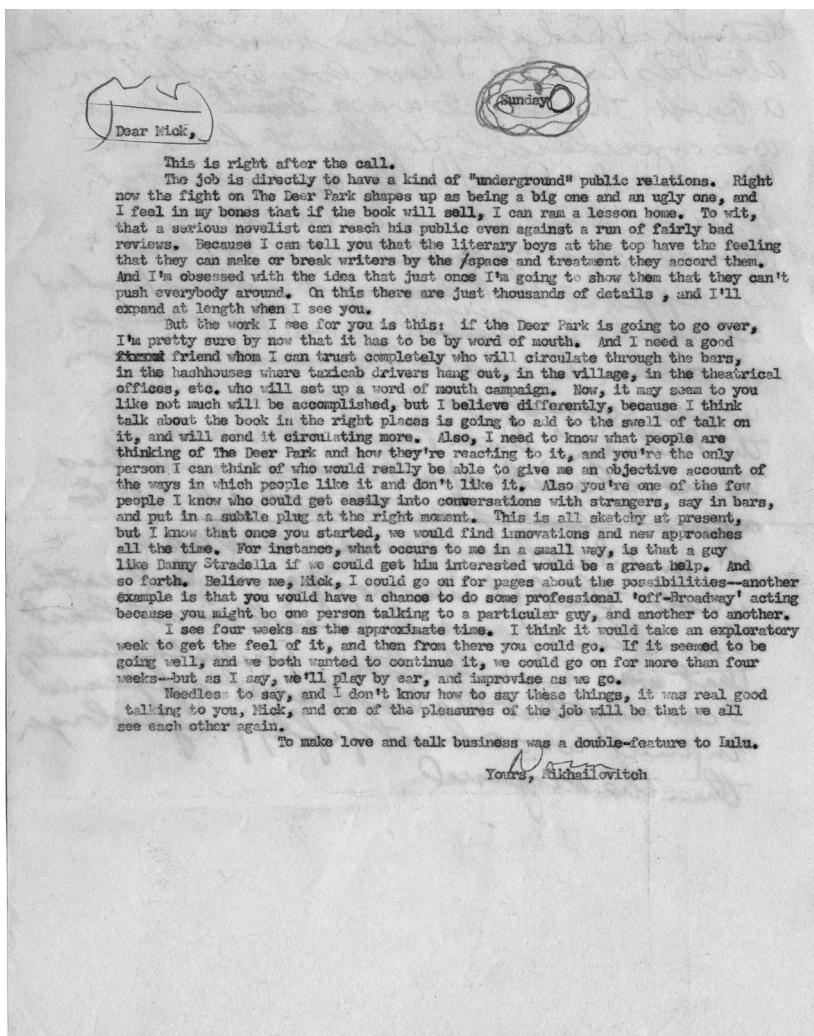
My father is a man of conservative stable temperament, and though we have many of the relations proper to a father and a son, I think I may say with some assurance that he has never had any political influence upon me nor I upon him, nor for that matter have I ever made any attempt to so influence him. He is not in the habit of ever speaking about the details of his work, nor have I ever had any interest in asking him about his work. ^{our political} ~~our~~ ideas are in great disagreement, ^{and} I should like to submit to the members of the Loyalty Board, the notion that disagreement between fathers and sons is a human phenomenon which has been long remarked. Indeed if one may be so bold as to cite a Russian novel, Fathers and Sons by Turgenev has long been a classic of world literature for, among other things, its sensitive perceptive grasp of just such paternal and filial relations. To put it another ~~xxx~~ way, may I be so forward as to ask ~~the~~ ^{those} members of the Loyalty Board who have children to consider how much influence and authority they have over ^{the} ~~their~~ children, or what is much more to the point, how much influence, authority, ~~advantage~~ indoctrination, ~~in~~ ^{dissemination}, and control, their children possess over them.

^{the philosophy here is to}
Now to the statement, to the "reliable information" that I am a "concealed" Communist. I will state absolutely and unequivocally ~~(in that phrase which may yet give its name to our historical era)~~ that I am not and never have been a member of the Communist Party, open or concealed, nor have I been ever, at any time, a member of ^{those} ~~any~~ so-called "splinter group." ^{anything with (and dozens of) persons etc.} The "reliable information" by undisclosed person or persons is false, perjured, slanderous, libelous, and absolutely without foundation. Nonetheless, I suspect that it is not the easiest thing to clear oneself of the charge that one is a concealed Communist. The questionnaire submitted to my father contains the following sentence: "For

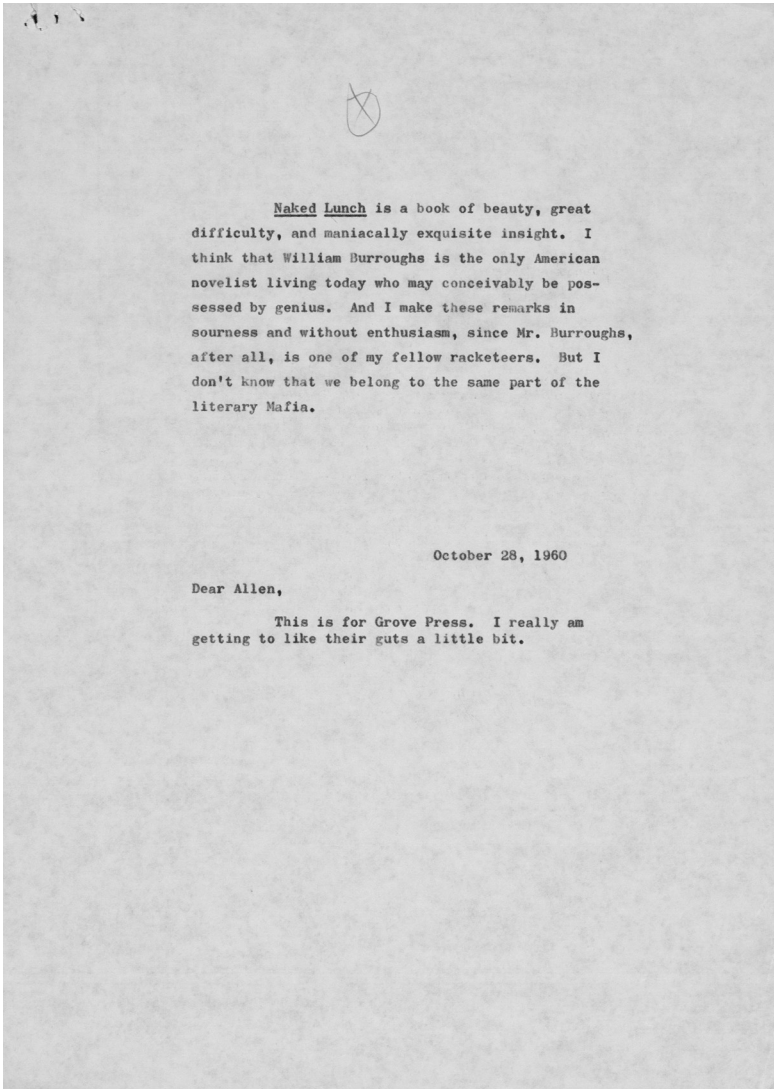
In 1952, Isaac Mailer was called to appear before the U.S. Civil Service Commission's loyalty board because of his association with his son, "who is reported to be a concealed Communist." This draft of the letter Mailer and his lawyer prepared and submitted to the commission has Mailer's corrections in pencil. Mailer's father was ultimately cleared without a hearing.



This photograph (ca. 1957) offers a rare glimpse of the hipster goatee Mailer sported for just a few months in the late 1950s.



Mailer asks his close friend Mickey Knox to help him create "buzz" for *The Deer Park*. His view was "that a serious novelist can reach his public even against a run of fairly bad reviews" by having friends "circulate through the bars, in the hashhouses where the taxicab drivers hang out, in the village, in the theatrical offices, etc. who will set up a word of mouth campaign."



In October 1960, Allen Ginsberg wrote to Mailer asking him to defend the literary value of William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*. The first two sentences of Mailer's response appear as part of a blurb on the back jacket cover of the Grove Press edition of the novel. A month later, Mailer gave a statement in court defending the novel's honest portrait of America's "own potential Hell" of "monsters, half-mad geniuses, cripples, mountebanks, criminals, perverts, and putrefying beasts."

1960 NOVEMBER 1960
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6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31
A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

from NOVEMBER 21 to NOVEMBER 24
Monday, November 21 328 THURSDAY, November 24 329
TUESDAY, November 22 327 FRIDAY, November 25 330
WEDNESDAY, November 23 328 SATURDAY, November 26 331 SUNDAY, November 27 332

Mike Wallace
3:00-4:30
11:58
Studio 56
1st floor

Bellevue

Evening

Tuesday, November 22 327
CBS-Radio
3:00-4:30
Village Vanguard
3:00-4:30
1st floor

Bellevue

Evening

Wednesday, November 23 328
CBS-Radio
3:00-4:30
Village Vanguard
3:00-4:30
1st floor

Bellevue

Evening

Thursday, November 24 329
CBS-Radio
3:00-4:30
Village Vanguard
3:00-4:30
1st floor

Bellevue

Evening

Friday, November 25 330
CBS-Radio
3:00-4:30
Village Vanguard
3:00-4:30
1st floor

Bellevue

Evening

Saturday, November 26 331
CBS-Radio
3:00-4:30
Village Vanguard
3:00-4:30
1st floor

Bellevue

Evening

Sunday, November 27 332
CBS-Radio
3:00-4:30
Village Vanguard
3:00-4:30
1st floor

Bellevue

Evening

Several days after he stabbed his wife, Adele, in the early morning hours of 20 November 1960, Mailer was committed to Bellevue Hospital for observation. The entries in his appointment book for the week of November 21–27 include an interview with Mike Wallace a few days before Mailer entered Bellevue.

250 West 94th Street
New York City
November 3, 1960

Esquire Magazine
488 Madison Avenue
New York 22, N. Y.

Gentlemen and Various Sirs:

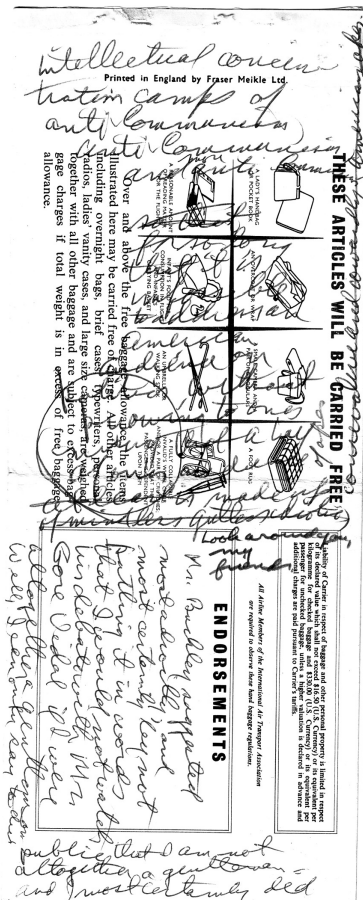
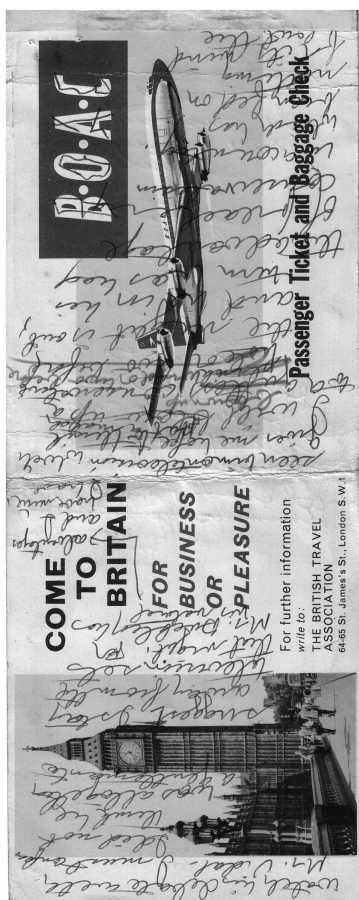
The title of my article in your November issue was "Superman Comes To The Super Market." Two months before publication I was sent a check to the amount of the modest sum you originally contracted for the piece, and was obliged to notice that the invoice attached to the check had the title: "Superman Comes To The Supermart." I called the proper editor. He assured me the word Supermarket would be replaced. Weeks went by. Three days before the piece came out, he met me at a party. He had lied to me, he told me sadly, he had not changed the word back to Supermarket because he did not want to rock the boat. Your boat tips too easily, Gentlemen. You lack good keel. I don't know that I care to sail with you any more. Other reasons follow to decide my course:

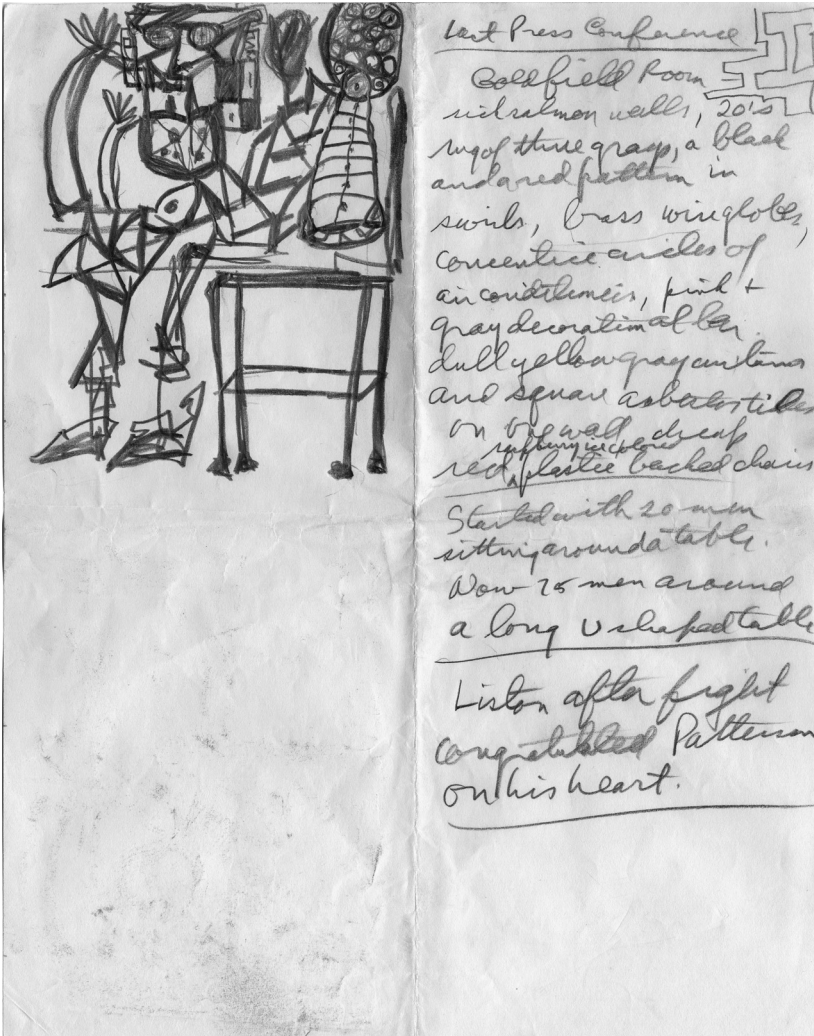
1. I sat across from Arthur Schlesinger during a particular lunch you mention in Backstage With Esquire (Nov. '60). In reference to that lunch, one of you writes: "At the end two huge tears rolled out of his (Schlesinger's) eyes and down his cheeks, possibly in memoriam for the might-have-been of Adlai Stevenson. . . ." I will here testify that Mr. Schlesinger did not weep, he did not shed a tear. He merely spoke most intelligently and reasonably about the positive qualities and temperament of Adlai Stevenson and Jack Kennedy.

2. The photograph you used of me is ten years old. There were several other pictures taken only six months ago (by your best photographer, Bruce Davidson) which were sitting in your files. Sometimes, I don't understand you, gentlemen.

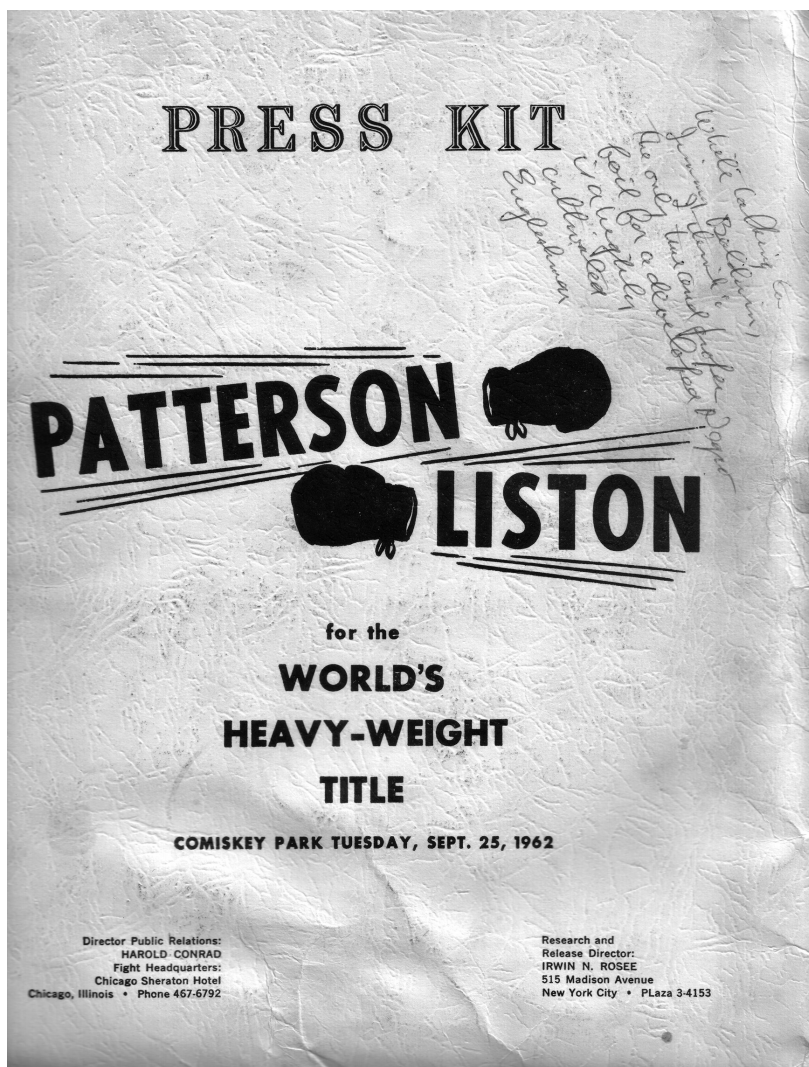
(next page)

In "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," Mailer perceptively analyzed Kennedy's cult of personality, his function as an "existential hero" who could satisfy a bored country's need for a mythic figure. *Esquire* Editor Arnold Gingrich had changed the last words of the title from "Supermarket" to "Supermart," a revision to which Mailer vehemently objected. The breach healed, and Mailer went on to become one of the magazine's big draws.

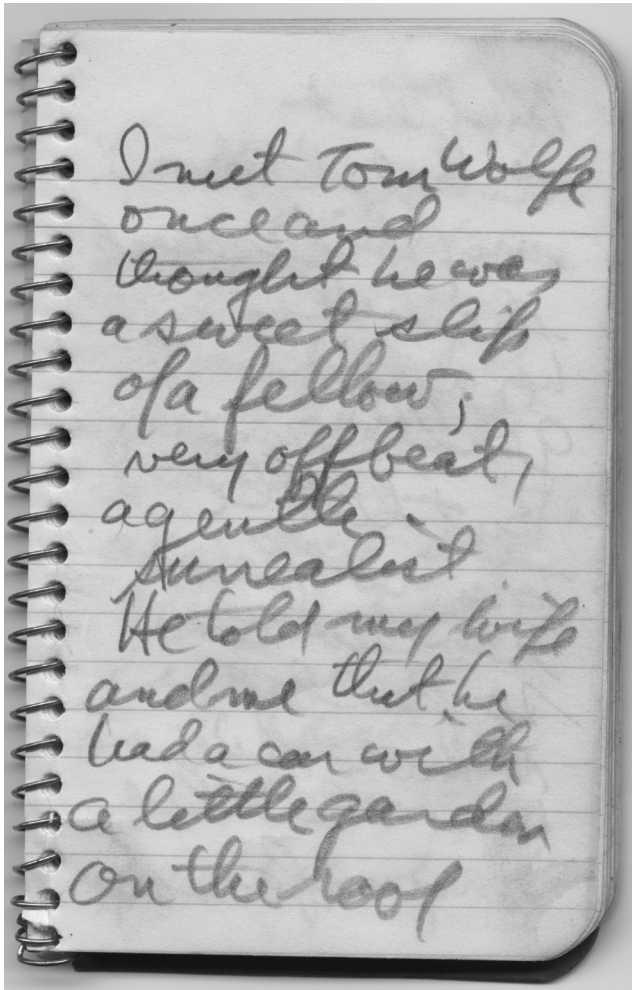




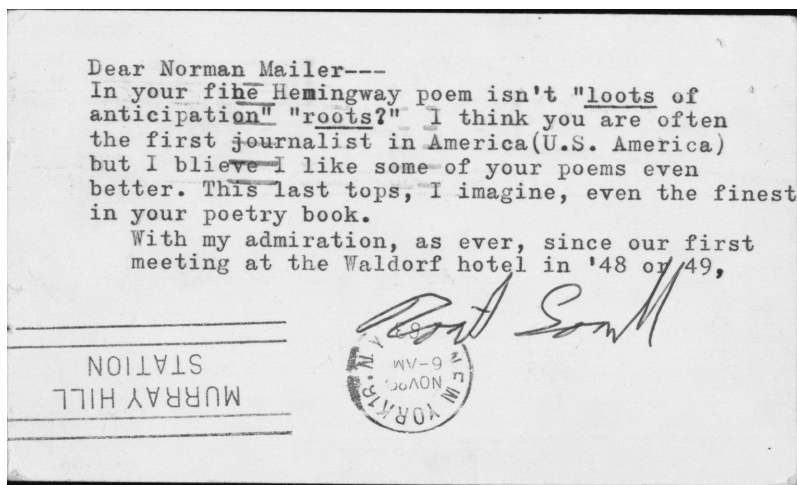
Mailer's notes for the Sonny Liston–Floyd Patterson rematch in Las Vegas on 22 July 1963. Mailer had covered the earlier Liston–Patterson fight and wrote about it in the seminal essay “Ten Thousand Words a Minute.”



Mailer covered the first (1962) Patterson-Liston fight in Chicago for *Esquire*. James Baldwin also reported on the match, and in “Ten Thousand Words a Minute,” Mailer describes a “bad feeling” between them at Comiskey Park. After one of their meetings, he scribbled a note to himself on his press packet: “While talking to Jimmy Baldwin, I think: the only true and proper foil for a developed Negro is a highly cultivated Englishman.” In a notebook from the same period, Mailer changed “cultivated Englishman” to “Limey.”



A Mailer notebook from the early 1960s describes an early (and amicable) meeting between the two pioneers of "the New Journalism," who were far too different in personality and outlook to become close friends.



Packed with information about Mailer's relationship with Robert Lowell, this November 1963 postcard alludes both to their first meeting in the late 1940s and to Lowell's admiration for Mailer's journalism and (somewhat surprisingly) his poetry. The poet's qualified endorsement of Mailer as "often the first journalist in America (U.S. America)" looks forward to their exchange in *Armies of the Night*. The Ransom Center also owns a substantial Lowell archive. *Printed by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC on behalf of the Robert Lowell Estate. Copyright © 2005 by Harriet Lowell and Sheridan Lowell.*

0130-3

 **The Dial Press INC.**
 750 THIRD AVENUE NEW YORK 17, N.Y.
~~361 PARK AVENUE SOUTH NEW YORK 36, N.Y.~~

AUTHOR Norman Mailer SALES FROM Pub. date
 TITLE AN AMERICAN DREAM TO 6-30-65
 Scott Meredith Literary Agency RETAIL PRICE \$4.95

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OTHER EARNINGS				
BOOK CLUB RIGHTS	Mid-Century		\$	625.00
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TOTAL EARNINGS				\$ 24,633.12
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Partisan Review			\$	300.00
Permissions		~~XXXXXXXXXX~~	\$	150.00
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Composition			\$	21.60
Postage (Mailing galley for author)			\$	44.93
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Entertainment (Village Vanguard)			\$	
TOTAL DEDUCTIONS				\$ 27,790.22
NET EARNINGS				(\$ 103,157.10)
RESERVE FOR RETURNS				\$
* BALANCE				(\$ 103,157.10)

* () INDICATES UNEARNED BALANCE

Mailer received an unusually large advance of \$125,000 for *An American Dream*, originally serialized in *Esquire* and published as a book in March 1965. His aggressive new agent Scott Meredith was largely responsible for this, and the deal ushered in an era of big-money sales for major American novelists.

CLASS OF SERVICE		WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM		SYMBOLS	
This is a fast message unless its deferred character is indicated by the proper symbol.		W. P. MARSHALL, President		DL = Day Letter NL = Night Letter LT = International Letter Telegram	
The filing time shown in the date line on domestic telegrams is LOCAL TIME at point of origin. Time of receipt is LOCAL TIME at point of destination.					
SPB024 YC127 0A142 0 JDA100 NL PD TDJD BERKELEY CALIF 15 NORMAN MAILER 142 COLUMBIA HEIGHTS BROOKLYN NY WE NEED YOU TO SPEAK TOWN MEETING IN BERKELEY FRIDAY MAY 21 PROTESTING WAR IN VIETNAM EVENT SPONSORED BY STUDENT GROUPS AND FACULTY WILL LAST THROUGHOUT DAY AND NIGHT WITH LARGE CROWDS DON CARPENTER HELPING US WIRE COLLECT REPLY WE CAN RAISE MONEY TO PAY YOUR TRAVEL EXPENSE JERRY RUBIN 2502 TELEGRAPH (59)..					
<i>San Francisco</i> <i>late Friday or Saturday afternoon 22nd</i> <i>7000 people plaza</i> <i>when, what audience - all details</i> <i>830-70</i> <i>M452273</i> <i>1st class</i> <i>415-848-3158</i>					

The antiwar activist Jerry Rubin invited Mailer, as a “spokesman for our generation,” to speak at the Vietnam Day rally at Berkeley on 21 May 1965, attended by over 30,000 people. Rubin and Abbie Hoffman regarded Mailer as a mentor who had given them “permission to insult a father figure [i.e., Lyndon Johnson].”

CDC-116-4 V-911-000

Name Eldridge Cleaver

Box No. A-29498

Date February 27, 19 66

Norman Mailer
142 Columbia Heights
Brooklyn I, New York

Dear Norman:

This is thank you for adding your support during the recent attempt to rescue the residue of my skull from the Gentiles and the Jews, our brethren. The fact that we were unsuccessful does not lessen my appreciation of your kindness. In a way, the gesture means more to me than a parole ever could. I'll have another shot at the Streets come November, when I'll have served 8 yers & 8 mos.

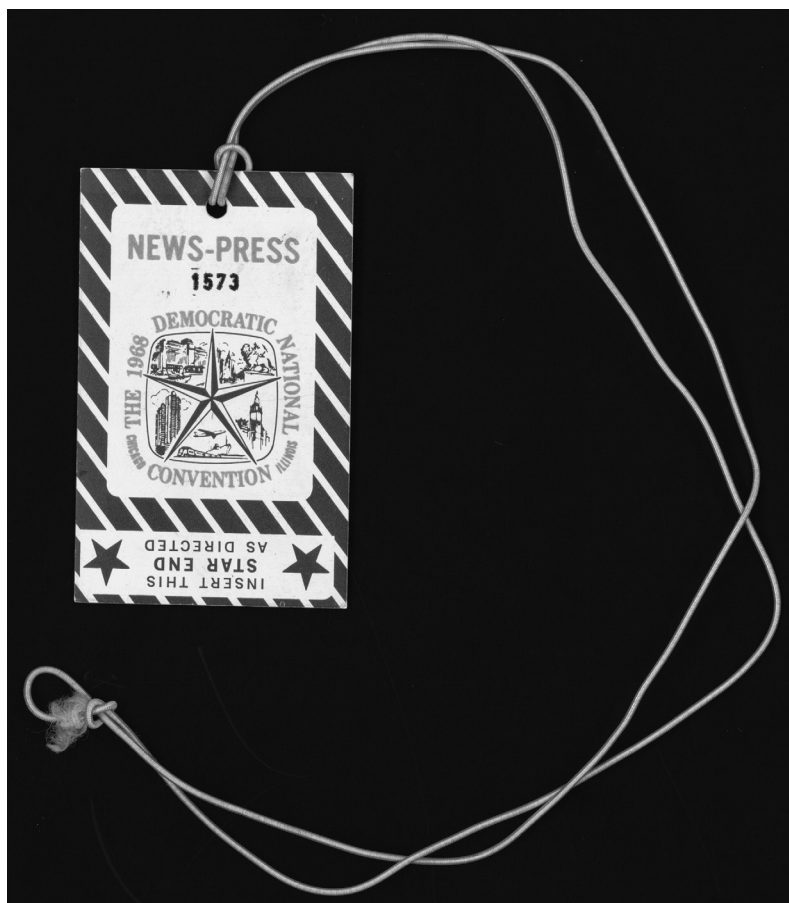
I also register here my still-surprised pleasure over your very encouraging remarks on my writing. Knowing you, I can stash blind faith that you meant what you said. I'm trying, for the sake of America's mutilated, knick-knack crotch - i.e., my own - to drain the spring water of an unsimpering prose from the mute stone of my prison cell. Nada.

In rounding the corners of the square, I am

Feverishly yours,
Eldridge Cleaver
Eldridge Cleaver

cc: Attorney Beverly Axelrod
File

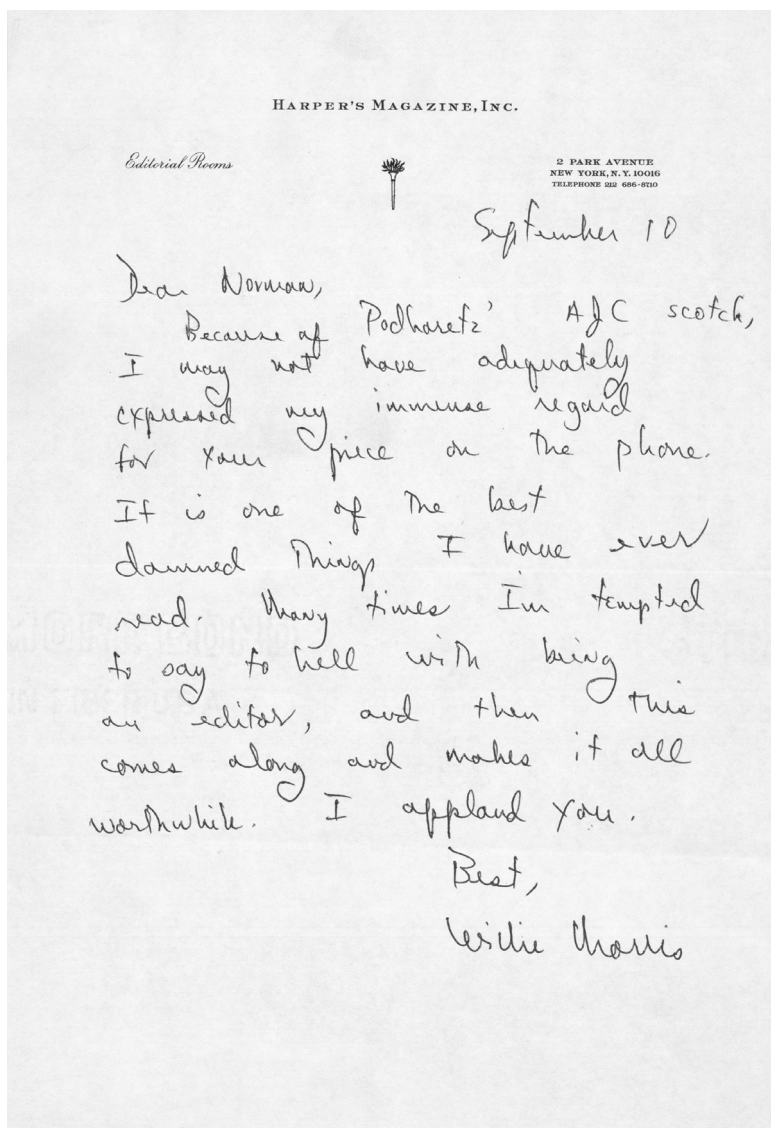
Eldridge Cleaver wrote this letter of thanks in 1966, toward the end of his second incarceration at Soledad Prison. Cleaver later attacked James Baldwin for his condemnation of Mailer's "The White Negro." For his part, Mailer concluded that he would not vote in the 1968 election—unless it was for Cleaver.



Mailer's press pass from the 1968 Democratic National Convention at Chicago, which he covered for *Harper's Magazine*. Mailer was sympathetic to the Yippies and other radicals, the descendants of the fifties hipsters, who gathered in the streets to resist the police. Yet Mailer had a surprisingly low opinion of the violent tactics and the political naïveté of the antiwar movement.



A greeting card from the Committee to Defend the Conspiracy, ca. 1969, and Mailer's contribution receipt. Mailer disagreed with the Yippie movement's tactics in Chicago but protested the Chicago Seven's indictment and trial on federal charges of conspiracy and inciting to riot. In 1969, he famously testified, "left-wingers are incapable of conspiracy because they're all egomaniacs." The trial, widely regarded as an historic clash between the forces of convention and radicalism, ended in five convictions, all of which were reversed.



Willie Morris, the energetic young editor of *Harper's*, devoted the entire March 1968 issue of the magazine to Mailer's "The Steps of the Pentagon," which later became *The Armies of the Night*. Morris's gamble in publishing what was then the longest essay ever to appear in a periodical paid off handsomely, as he acknowledged in this September 1968 letter. *Published with the permission of David Rae Morris and JoAnne Prichard Morris.*

142 Columbia Heights
Brooklyn, New York 11201

November 7, 1970

Gentlemen:

In your issue of November 2 you quote Gore Vidal as saying, "Norman Mailer often sounds like the deranged commander of an American Legion post, particularly about women, whom he doesn't like very much."

Vidal's indictment may possibly be enriched by the following statistics: marriages, Vidal-0, Mailer-4; children, Vidal-0, Mailer-6; daughters, Vidal-0, Mailer-4.

This of course proves nothing. It is most likely that Gore neither wed nor bothered to sire because he put womankind in such high regard that he did not wish to injure their tender flesh with his sharp tongue.

Cheers,

Norman Mailer

This 1970 letter to *Women's Wear Daily* responds to an article by Gore Vidal concerning Mailer's views on women. The simmering disagreement between the two writers continued for the next decade in print, in person, and on television. Later, they would appear together at the 1985 PEN Symposium and in Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell*, with Vidal as the Devil and Mailer as Don Juan.

8-13-78
Dec. 8, 1978
12/8/78

Dear Norman Mailer,

I have written you alot about prison. I have told you what prison does to us; what it does by design and what it does, not by design, but by unconscious blunder (?).

I can see you wince now at my language when I tell you, above all, prison can create in prisoners a kind of through-going paranoia until now called "revolutionary consciousness" in prisoners. That the "world of prisons" is "out to get prisoners" is an elementary truth only a fool would venture to deny. Since paranoia is a sickness, a way of misperceiving reality, why do I call it "paranoia"? I call it paranoia when the "world of prisons" for a prisoner is extended to the world at large — the world, for example, that you walk around in.

The works of George Jackson stem from this paranoia (to illustrate my point) especially when he discusses urban guerrilla warfare tactics. His notions of "economics" reflect the prisoner's "economy" within prison and his notions of "military affairs" reflect the terrain imposed by the confines of a prison (like San Quentin) and ~~sympathetic~~ his pre-occupation with the idea of a riot.

Prisons do not in essence create revolutionaries. The contrary is more true.

The state of the "new communist movement" (so-called) outside prison, there in America, has been deeply retarded and influenced by the (so-called) (over,

Jack Henry Abbott's letter to Mailer, 8 December 1978. Abbott was a career criminal with a literary bent who first contacted Mailer while Mailer was working on *The Executioner's Song*. Mailer began a long-running correspondence with him about *In the Belly of the Beast*, Abbott's collection of essays, as well as prison life and penal reform. The voluminous Mailer-Abbott correspondence is supplemented by an intriguing letter from Abbott to Mailer biographer Hilary Mills Loomis concerning Abbott's ambivalent feelings toward his mentor.

Sept 20, 1991

Dear Norman

In the last 10 or 15 years I've become a restless and over-demanding reader; many of the old, slow pleasures seem lost to me now. So it has been a sweet experience to find myself moving so smoothly through Harlot's Ghost, looking forward to each new session with all the H-named characters, feeling the momentum and sweep of events. And the trick, of course, is that you have made a welcoming object ~~out~~ of a book out of all the rotten karma and bad medicine of the decades.

Naturally I've had a special interest in reading this one, and find the depth of your Agency penetration a remarkable thing. The details and techniques and dugout chatter -- I don't think you've done a more adroit book, and it must be that the mind of the Agency itself inspired a fresh ~~respect~~ respect for what is detailed and precise and painstaking. And then of course the men themselves -- Harvey and Hunt and Montague are compelling figures, and I can't imagine that Hunt, in particular, was an easy reality to absorb and anatomize.

The range of Agency language from churchly and sonorous to the boozy rants of Harvey. The line of inverted sexuality that runs through the book. The backward-looking head of the devil, from the frozen road in Maine to Manual Artime's remark about eleven hundred pages later. And the great set-pieces -- the JFK-Hoover lunch, the Harvey-Roselli dinner. Will there be half a dozen reviewers to remark this novel's comic bursts?

It is a deeply satisfying experience to watch a great writer find a specious arena in which to play out the themes of his life's work. And when the arena is the CIA, there is a sense of something so right and so fitting that the effect is a happy jolt to the reader's mind and heart -- something like a revelation.

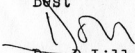
Intelligence agencies are supposed to resolve national obsessions, not cause them, but this is what gives a novelist something to do after breakfast.

A letter from Don DeLillo to Norman Mailer, 20 September 1991, about *Harlot's Ghost*. DeLillo considers it Mailer's most "adroit" book and praises, among other qualities, Mailer's skill in making "a welcoming object of a book out of all the rotten karma and bad medicine of the decades" it chronicles. *Don DeLillo's letters published with the permission of Mr. DeLillo.*

It's a powerful achievement, Norman, and something of an encouragement to this 54-yr-old writer who was beginning to ~~begin~~ suspect that the acturaries of the novel are correct when they say we get 20 years of top-flight work and everything after that is a sustained hum. This book makes every kind of noise from a cantata to a club fight and it has warmth and desperation and the high cunning of Herlot and the sometimes eerie keen of coitus epistolaris between Harry and Kittredge.

So -- looking forward to more and wishing you every good thing.

Best


Don DeLillo

May 1 / 95

Dear Norman

Many thanks for the signed copy. I'm happy to have it.

I've read the book with pleasure, and largely because of the material you developed in Russia and Belarus I found myself seeing the book to some degree as an Orwellian morality tale ("Orwell's Tale") about an ordinary man under unremitting state surveillance. Of course Oswald was never ordinary but they didn't know that at the time. And the horrible irony is that all this bugging and tailing and close observation, on both sides of the cold war rampart, turned out in the end to be justified.

Or, to spin it another way, they made him do it. Which is possibly what Oswald's defense team would have come up with, among other things, as a mitigating circumstance based on the defendant's response to FBI harassment.

The KGB material is wonderfully handled. It is also reassuring (to me, anyway) in the way it clearly turns aside any clinging suspicion that Oswald was a Soviet agent, tool or asset. But I still have trouble accepting their assertion that they wouldn't have had an intimate chat with a fellow who worked in Atsugi.

Oswald's code name, Valiant, is a nice touch because it brings to mind another Arthurian tag, Lancer, which is how the Secret Service referred to JFK. Two kinds of irony.

I don't think Oswald would have walked a block and a half to shoot at Kennedy. The President had to come to him. As to whether there was a second shooter, the force of history right now seems to tend against, but that will change, and then will change again.

We're all stuck with this guy, you and I more than most, and when I look at the cover photo of the Neely Street house I feel an eerie and complex

This sympathetic exchange reveals Norman Mailer and Don DeLillo's shared fascination with Lee Harvey Oswald. As DeLillo writes, "We're all stuck with this guy, you and I more than most." The two writers approach the Kennedy assassination from very different angles in their books—Mailer's *Oswald's Tale* and DeLillo's *Libra*. DeLillo puts particular emphasis on issues of privacy, surveillance, and paranoia, while Mailer focuses upon his own continually developing understanding of the facts of the case.

nostalgia for the time when I was following Lee's ghost in Dallas, Ft Worth and New Orleans. There was something particularly haunting about Neely St. and the Magazine St. house in New Orleans -- the sense of a marginal life was very strong.

The man endlessly scrutinized by the instruments of state security. This is where Oswald tends to resemble a Beckett character improbably dosed with politics. He's Krapp's last tape as it was recorded by the KGB without his knowledge.

It's very rich territory and I think you've done it every justice.

Good luck on this one and the next.

Best



Don DeLillo

9 May 1995

Dear Don,

It gave me a good feeling to receive your letter. As I hope you know, you're one of the few writers in this country for whom I have real respect.

I'd answer you now in kind with a long letter but this is being dictated in the midst of The Tour and so there's no time for anything, but I did want to mention to you that I began with the absolute conviction that of course the KGB debriefed *Conrad* him on Atsugi and only slowly over many months, as I got to understand those guys a bit more, *did* that I realized they were probably telling the truth. The reason being that if they debriefed him and anything went wrong, it was going to wreck a few careers, and the dominant passion by 1960 in the KGB was to protect oneself. When I did ask them how they could possibly have passed up a source as potentially rich as Oswald, they answered first by indicating that they were somewhat pleased by their resources in Atsugi and didn't think he'd have anything much to tell them. When Schiller and I countered with the next notion that you can never afford to decide in advance whether a piece of intelligence is worth receiving or not, they finally agreed, yes, they might lose some valuable bit here or there, but then they had sources all around him in Moscow debriefing him *they hoped* unwittingly, and moreover, it was the price they had to pay. They did not want a formal debriefing. Not if there was any chance he was a CIA agent and could eventually report back on how they had treated him. When we see each other I'll go into detail because I recognize it's hard to believe but, by God, hang around the KGB long enough and you do get some inkling of how their minds operate. Bypassing their specialty acts, the majority of KGB men struck me as bureaucrats first and secret policemen only secondarily.

As for the second shooter, let's discuss that too. My mind is not closed on that either although, as you can see, I lean to Oswald alone.

In any event, I look forward to next time we get together. I ought to apologize to you for never getting back with any news about the end of the Actors Studio project--it just didn't come off--but I still think you're a hell of a playwright and I want to talk to you ~~about that~~ sooner or later, about our new Actors Studio. *Arthur Penn is now President and he's brilliant.*

For now, my best.

Cheers
Norman



Norman Mailer and members of the Ransom Center Archival Processing Team. Back row, from left to right: Steve C. Mielke (Project Director), J. Michael Lennon (Project Adviser), Apryl Sullivan, Gabriela Redwine; Front row: Jennifer Hecker, Donna Pedro Lennon, Kathryn Hill. Photo by Pete Smith.