

THE UNTOLD STORY BEHIND
THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG:
A CONVERSATION WITH
LAWRENCE SCHILLER

J E F F R E Y S E V E R S

LARRY SCHILLER IS JUST BACK from China. I meet him at his Los Angeles home on January 14, 2007, one day after his return from interviewing 17 contemporary Chinese artists and their families. Schiller's goal is to build from their stories an intimate history of China from the end of World War II to 2001. When completed, the book will join a long list of media projects he has created, usually in intense collaborations with co-authors and screenwriters, and often with controversy as his backdrop. After making a name for himself as a photojournalist while still a teenager in the 1950s, Schiller got Jack Ruby's deathbed interview, made headlines with his coverage of the Manson Family murders, and spent time with Timothy Leary. For his buying of exclusive rights to true-crime stories, he came to be regarded by many as "a world-historical ambulance chaser," in *Time* magazine's words. In forty years of journalism Schiller's collaborations have included a biography of Lenny Bruce (with Albert Goldman); W. Eugene Smith's photo essay on pollution in Japan, *Minamata*; and books on master spy Robert Hanssen and the Jon-Benét Ramsey murder. He has also produced or directed more than fifteen television films, winners of five Emmys.

But Schiller will likely be best remembered for his work with Norman Mailer. Schiller conceived of *Marilyn* in 1973 and *The Faith of Graffiti* in 1974, bringing together photographs and Mailer's text for each. More recently he did interviews in Belarus with Mailer for *Oswald's Tale*, and Mailer

wrote the screenplay for *American Tragedy*, from Schiller's best-selling book (with James Willwerth) on the inner workings of the O.J. Simpson trial. In between came Schiller's and Mailer's greatest achievement: *The Executioner's Song*. Over two nights in July 1976, three months after his release from prison, longtime convict Gary Gilmore murdered gas station attendant Max Jensen and hotel manager Ben Bushnell near Salt Lake City, making away with meager amounts of cash. When Gilmore, convicted, refused appeals and demanded to be executed, he attracted worldwide attention. Shot by firing squad on January 17, 1977, he became the first inmate put to death in the U.S. in ten years and the first since the lifting of a four-year national moratorium on the death penalty.

As readers of Mailer's Pulitzer Prize-winning "true life novel" know, Schiller sensed a great story in Utah shortly after learning of Gilmore's suicide pact with teenage mother Nicole Baker Barrett, his lover in the weeks prior to the killings. Schiller's quest, to buy the movie and book rights to Gilmore's story and interview him on death row, had its critics. In a 1977 profile, *Esquire* dubbed Schiller "Agent of Death" for his tactics. But in a consummate twist of Mailer's self-consciousness about media, Schiller's own deals would become the central conflict of the second half of *Executioner's Song*, itself a product of those deals. Schiller later directed a television miniseries from Mailer's screenplay, which was nominated for an Emmy. Tommy Lee Jones won the Best Actor Emmy for his portrayal of Gilmore.

In his afterword to the book, Mailer called Schiller's contributions "invaluable": "Schiller stood for his portrait, and drew maps to his faults. He ... not only delivered the stuff of his visions but the logic of his base schemes." Schiller's plan always involves incredibly thorough interviewing over weeks and months. He sometimes pays lawyers' fees if they must be present. "I tell people when I set up interviews that I'm not coming for a hit-and-run," he said. "I'm preserving history. You're an important part of my project, and I'm going to need a lot of your time."

He spends multiple sessions building what he calls a "dictionary" of a person's life. "A typical first question would be, what is your earliest memory of your grandfather? Then, a little while later: what's your earliest memory of death? With Nicole, before I got to Gilmore it was many days. To a writer like Mailer, that is the most valuable material in the world. It's more valuable than the facts of the event."

Schiller and I spent only six hours together, but in that time he revealed to me details of his often stormy relationship with Mailer, his encounters with Gary and Nicole, and the many deals he pulled off in making the book and film.

JS: You started your career as a sports photographer, correct?

LS: My younger brother and I were raised as athletes. We enjoyed playing tennis. When he beat me in the 11-and-under I realized that I was more heavy than he was. My way of participating in athletics from then on was to become a sports photographer. My father was a photographer and ran a portrait studio in San Diego and eventually opened a camera store in Pacific Beach. He gave me a camera when I was young, about 12, 13 years old. So I started taking pictures at a very young age of sports people because it was my way of taking part in athletics.

I learned the skill of anticipation. To be a good sports photographer in those days, you had to, because there were no motorized cameras. If you throw a ball in the air there is a moment in which the ball is motionless before it starts to come down. And if you capture it at that moment, even at the slow shutter speed needed for shooting in color, it will be needle sharp.

I started to shoot professionally as a photojournalist before I went to Pepperdine College in late '53. In the summer of '53, when I had just graduated high school, I worked with Andy Lopez, as his assistant, at Acme Newspix [which later became part of United Press]. He later won a Pulitzer. And I remember covering the Rosenberg Death March from Union Square to Knickerbocker Village and other events that summer. It wasn't long before I started to work for United Press myself.

At Pepperdine I didn't allow myself much of an education. Thursday night, I'm leaving to cover some sports event somewhere in the world. Saturday, I'm covering another event. Sunday, I'm covering another event. I don't get back in school until Monday. The only way I stay in school is by dreaming up things for the school to give them publicity and promotion. Like a photographic ballot for student elections, with the candidates' pictures—I proposed that my freshman year, and I think Pepperdine was the first school to do it.

JS: So you were well on your way to your chosen career at that point.

LS: It wasn't a career. It was the only thing I knew in life.

JS: When do you have the idea to add tape-recording to your journalism?

LS: In the mid- to late-'50s, I'm already publishing in magazines like *Sport* and *Life*. But somewhere around '59 or '60 I get upset. The writers writing stories to go along with my pictures—to me the stories seem shallow compared to the experience I had taken pictures of. I'm not smart enough to understand that the stories communicate something different to the public. I'm saying, oh, this is the personal experience and it's the personal experience that you need to publish. I'm not thinking of what pure, good journalism is.

So around 1961 I start to use a wire recorder to either preserve what's going on or to do little interviews with the people involved. And around 1962 I start to give these interviews to the writers writing the stories, hoping not that they'll use my information but that they'll see something beyond what they already know. By '62 and '63 I'm using the recorder quite a bit. Norman, in *Oswald's Tale*, ends the book with a piece of my interview of Marguerite Oswald, which I may have done in '63 after Lee killed President Kennedy—or was it in 1976? I don't remember just now.

I'm not being a reporter, not being a writer. But my recorder is preserving something that I think somebody else is totally missing. I know I can't write it. I don't know grammar. I don't know how to spell. When I talk to my mother about it she says, "They were doing experimental teaching when you went to high school. Don't feel bad. There are other things you are better at."

JS: Where would you say your sense of storytelling comes from, then? What stories are important to you? Are they films?

LS: Number one, you have to learn storytelling to be a photographer for *Life* magazine. You've got four pages to tell a story in pictures—beginning, middle, and end. If *Life* sends you halfway around the world and you go out and take a thousand pictures, some picture editor is still going to figure out how to tell the story in six pictures. That teaches you a lot about storytelling. When you're out shooting the story, you better figure out how to tell the story. And that's what leads me into movies later on more than anything else—the training I had as a journalist, not storytelling in books.

- JS:** If there's a theme or pattern in the types of stories you eventually start covering, crime is a major element. *The Executioner's Song* is, of course, no exception.
- LS:** I would use a different word: anti-social behavior.
- JS:** Okay. Is there any experience you have with crime or anti-social behavior as a young man that leads you in that direction?
- LS:** It's hard to trace why I'm interested in anti-social behavior. Certainly it can be published; people have an interest in it. It's a better commodity than something else. But I wasn't thinking in those terms as a young person. I think the only place I can trace it is when I started out in the early '50s—it's in Mailer's book, I think—to earn money I would try to photograph automobile accidents and sell the pictures to the insurance companies. I would listen to the police radio on a little shortwave ham radio, and then I either went to the accident on my bicycle or I'd convince my father to drive me there. Usually I'd get there after the cars were towed away, and I became an expert on photographing skid-marks. I knew how to backlight or sidelight them, and I knew where to stand in relationship to the sun so that the light would bounce off the oil. And I made money. That's not anti-social behavior, but it's a little bit in that direction.

Now obviously, in the '60s I'm involved in a lot of stories that are anti-social behavior. There's a trial in L.A.—I don't even remember whose—and the judge had barred the jury from being photographed or their names being used in the newspaper. But the jury was brought to the courthouse in a bus. I believed that while on the bus they were covered by the judge's order, and in the courthouse or on the courthouse property they were covered. Whether I was right by the law or not, I figured out that if they stepped in the public street, they weren't covered. They would step off the bus and be in the street for one or two steps and then get on the courthouse property. I photographed every single juror when they hit those steps. And the pictures were not only published in the French magazine *Paris Match*, they were published in the *Herald-Examiner* in L.A. I was cited by the court. I wasn't punished or anything, but that's the earliest I remember doing something in which I went to the edge of the law. I didn't have the experience to think these things all the way through in those very early days.

I don't know what type of journalism you want to call that. But it's a very important moment for a different reason. Usually corporations or management make decisions about what employees should do. Editors sit around: "All right, we'll go this far. We read the judge's order. Speak to the lawyers at the newspaper." It's a company decision. But when you are a freelancer you're making your own decision. I've never been an employee of an organization that made the decisions. That's very important to *The Executioner's Song*.

JS: *The Executioner's Song* is ultimately thought of in the genre New Journalism. Mailer calls it a "true life novel." *In Cold Blood*, to which it's often compared, starts appearing in *The New Yorker* in 1965, around the time we've been discussing. Is there any awareness on your part of wanting to do a new kind of journalism—if not capital-N, capital-J, New Journalism?

LS: I didn't know the term New Journalism. I don't know if anybody knew the term in those days. But I remember reading certain articles. I would experience them, you know? I remember reading an article on Katharine Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart in *African Queen*. It was like the journalist was *right there*, and I remember it excited me.

I did a story for *Life* on LSD, then a soft cover book, in 1966. Around the same time I went to sell *New York* magazine—which was published by a newspaper at that time, not the *New York* magazine you know now—another story on LSD, on the Acid Test, Ken Kesey, the Merry Pranksters. The editor, Clay Felker, says, I got a writer interested in that. And maybe we'll use some pictures. He might call you and interview you. So he turns down the story from me, and one day I get a phone call. I'm in the bedroom with my first wife, and she's asleep. I remember taking the phone into the bathroom and sitting on the floor next to the toilet so as not to disturb my wife. "My name's Wolfe," this guy says. "And Clay told me that you had this incredible experience. Tell me about it." And he interviews me for about two hours on the phone. My wife comes into the bathroom, takes a bath, I'm still sitting on the floor talking to him on the phone. And that was the end of it.

And then this book comes out in '68, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. And there's a chapter about the Merry Pranksters and me doing the *Life* magazine cover of them. And how they get paranoid because

they'd seen me use black and white film. That's the first time I really saw the power of an interview. I saw what a really skilled writer like Tom Wolfe could create from a fucking telephone interview; he didn't have to be at the event. The book is a knock-out. And it made me understand a little bit more about writers. If you had the skill and the intellectual capacity and you knew how to write, you could really do something. You didn't have to be there.

I also feel more confident that I have the ability to do something with interviews. That's when I decide I'm going to do the biography of Lenny Bruce. I say to myself, I'm going to find a writer. But I really don't have the faintest idea where this is going to lead.

JS: You're known for doing incredibly in-depth interviews, far more in-depth than Wolfe did of you. Tell me about the techniques you start to develop.

LS: I listen more than I ask. I take this approach: I know nothing about the subject. I want you to educate me about it. What color socks did you wear that morning? When you walked into the house, you know, draw me a picture of where the house is, where's north, where's east. Was it August or was it September? Were the leaves on the tree or off the tree? I begin to see how important detailing is.

JS: As a future filmmaker, are you thinking about detailing cinematically?

LS: No, not at all. I just know that I have to ask people a lot more questions than I'm asking. And I've got to figure out ways of asking so I don't stop the flow. I also have to figure out when is the detailing important? When is it not important?

JS: Let's move on to your relationship to Mailer. You first work together on *Marilyn*, a book of photographs of Marilyn Monroe that you create and Mailer writes the text for. You've said in a few places that you made mistakes with *Marilyn*, that you had a tense relationship with Mailer over it. Tell me about that.

LS: That would take an entire interview, so maybe we should leave that to another time. But let's say for now that for *Marilyn* I didn't supply him with any interviews; he did his own, and his own research may not have covered all the bases.

I rely on the security blanket of facts as told to me by my subjects. I'm not saying that's the truth, not saying that's what's interesting. But my security blanket is getting it from the horse's mouth.

Anyway, we hardly even spoke when he wrote the text for *The Faith of Graffiti*, which was an art book I did for Praeger in 1974. Maybe on the phone once or twice. Between that and *The Executioner's Song*, I see Mailer at the fight, The Thrilla in Manila [in 1975]. We joke a little bit at the airport. We have a casual, polite conversation. We essentially fall out of touch at that point in time.

JS: Tell me about your first reactions to hearing about the Gary Gilmore story.

LS: By 1976 I've turned towards making motion pictures for television. *Life* is out of business for all intents and purposes. I've discovered that I can take my journalistic stories and convert them into motion pictures by hiring good screenwriters. I'm sitting one day here in L.A.—it's in *The Executioner's Song*—and in the *Herald-Examiner* I see this little article about this guy who killed two people in Utah and attempted suicide and convinced his girlfriend to take pills at the same time as him. I don't remember now the full extent of the article. But there was a line or two in it that said that she was found with a series of letters.

JS: So without knowing the content of the letters at all, you knew you were on to something?

LS: Well, I said to myself, how can a con convince a girl, in letters, to commit suicide when she's got two little children? *That*, I said—that's a movie. I'm not thinking of Mailer or anything else. At the very beginning, for the first week or two, I'm just thinking a movie.

But in Utah, I begin to see something that people haven't experienced before, something I've never read about in magazines, never seen in a movie, never heard published in a book. Here's a mystery. Can I use this as a window to look through at something greater? As *The Executioner's Song* says, when I read *Helter Skelter* and saw this fine book that had been done by the D.A., Vincent Bugliosi, I knew I had made a tragic mistake early on with my publication of an interview with Susan Atkins, a co-defendant in the Charles Manson case. [Schiller was called to testify at Manson's sentencing about whether his publication of a confession from Atkins violated a judge's gag order.] Bugliosi starts a chapter in that book by writing about me. So I knew, as Norman says, that if I was ever going to do anything right, I had to forget about the quick story, getting it out fast before

everybody else. I was making up for the mistakes that I'd been criticized for. I see something, and I don't know right away how to do it or even what to do. But I do immediately understand that, for a while, I have to use the movie as a cover for something better and greater.

JS: Do you anticipate at that point anything like the 15,000 pages of transcribed interviews that ultimately come to exist?

LS: Well, I don't think of 15,000 pages. I didn't even take a tape recorder on the first trip. But I do know from day one I have to go out and buy rights to some part of the story. As the book says, I use the initial money I get from ABC to acquire certain rights. I try to acquire them in a better way than I have in the past. I've been criticized at times for how I acquire rights—when I'm buying peoples' story, am I really buying the truth, or can you buy the truth? If you pay somebody, does that negate real honesty? And of course I have my pet answer to that: I'm buying the right of privacy, I'm not buying the truth. So I try and be a little more careful.

I convince the Utah lawyers that I should go in to see Gilmore as a consultant. Well, first I actually point out to Gilmore's criminal lawyers that there have to be two lawyers for Gilmore. I remember saying you have to have a lawyer for his criminal defense, gentlemen, and you have to have a lawyer for his personal and intellectual property and his civil matters—or there's a conflict of interest. And of course they know what I'm talking about; they just hadn't thought about it. I said to them, I can be a consultant for his civil attorneys. That's how I get in. If I was working for the *New York Times* or *Life*, that would be something that would be discussed at corporate headquarters. Do we do it, do we not? Is it proper? What're the ramifications?

That's one of the things I used to say to people: you're talking to the principal. I will give you the answer; I don't have to call anybody. One of the first things Gilmore says to me is I want so-and-so to play me in the movie. I say, what do you mean? You're not putting up the money, Gilmore. Somebody else is going to make that decision. You're not going to have control of that.

How could I talk like that to this guy who's in jail and that I've just gotten in to see? But I'm bold enough to say these things to people right off the bat. They wind up respecting you, because you're not bullshitting them. I tell them right then and there what the reality is.

I'm not saying Gilmore respected me tremendously. I'm saying he saw I wasn't somebody to bullshit.

JS: That documentary instinct that you have from early on, using your camera and tape-recorder—is this the project where it becomes all-encompassing?

LS: This is where all my abilities come together. All my feelings of anticipation as a photographer. I'm always taking pictures with a little camera so that someone can write about it later. I'm preserving everything, and I don't know what for at the beginning. But I know there's something here bigger, better than anybody can perceive. All my abilities to preserve like a sponge, my abilities as a salesman, to convince people that I should be the one doing it. Of course there's the famous line I say to Vern Damico about [television producer] David Susskind, who's bidding for the rights opposite me. Vern tells me Susskind has said to him, "I'm the Dallas Cowboys, and Schiller is a high school football team." So I say to Vern, "I'm suited up, I'm here on the playing field and ready to play. Where is David Susskind? I don't even see him in the stadium."

JS: Mailer had been saying throughout the '50s and '60s that he wanted to write a great big social novel. And then of course he writes much smaller books, on the scale of *The Deer Park* or *An American Dream*. So it seems there's this great fortune for him in your amassing all this material, filling out the social scene surrounding Gilmore, so that he then does get to write his big social novel. Did you think about why you were creating this big social panorama? What was your impulse?

LS: I think from *Helter Skelter* I saw how one could write a book about a period of time through an event. But *Helter Skelter* was written from a law enforcement point of view, not from a historian's point of view, and certainly not from the sociologist's point of view or the greater perspective. So I wanted to take it one step further—not to write about a crime in detail, but to write about the horizon, as I called it, the environment in which this crime was produced. Was there something about the environment that precipitated it? These were early thoughts—that it was not simply a direct result of Gilmore's criminal record, but of something other. So I didn't start with a preconceived conclusion, as a writer may have or even as Mailer may have at times in his life. I said, I'm going to go get the facts.

I knew I was involved in something now that wouldn't be published until after the event was over. And I don't mean the execution. Because really, from day one, I thought it was a great story if the guy's not executed. To me that is a great story. All of this happens, he rises to the occasion and wants to be executed, and then he just gets lost on death row like everybody else. No execution. He just becomes another fucking number, waiting out fifteen years, twenty appeals. After, as Andy Warhol says, his fifteen minutes of fame.

JS: Did you like Salt Lake City?

LS: I didn't like the Salt Lake City of contemporary, phony hotels like the Hilton and the "Little America Hotel" and places like that. They were out of place, all these hotels that had sprung up for all the tourists that were now visiting the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and the Mormon Temple. I liked it more in Provo or Spanish Fork or places like that, where the motels were smaller and you really felt still part of the landscape. And the bars—there was no drinking in Salt Lake City, you know. So I just got out of Salt Lake City and went to one of the small towns.

JS: What role do you think Mormonism played in Gilmore's story? Or is it merely tangential to the main story?

LS: In getting access to Nicole's letters I became close with Tamera Smith, a reporter for the *Desert News* who taught me a great deal about her faith. So from the very beginning I understood that Mormons believed deeply in the afterlife, and the next life is better for everybody. So there was, to me, this little natural conflict: if most of the law enforcement people and the prosecutors were Mormons, and they consider the next life to be the better life, how can you be punishing somebody by executing them? I joked about that with Tamera. But then I started to see this conflict between capital punishment and religion a little more seriously, and I spoke to Earl Dorius [Utah's prosecutor and devoted Mormon] and people like that and tried to get an understanding of it.

Then I discovered that Nicole and her mother were Jack Mormons, outcasts of the Mormon Church. I discovered everything in the social structure there was based around Mormonism. Every single day of a Mormon's life is planned—church meetings, activities, this, that, everything else. So if you're not a church member, if you've been

thrown out of the church or dropped out yourself and you've got kids who are growing up, where is their social structure? Who do they relate to? What do they do in the afternoon? Who do they have for sleep-overs? Those things don't exist. When you're outcasts of the church, you're outcast from all social activities except those in the public schools—which were very, very few. And that was the world in which Nicole lived, in which she was raised.

JS: The first tangible product of all your work in Utah is the *Playboy* interview of Gilmore you do with Barry Farrell, which appears in April 1977, two and a half months after the execution. How does that come about?

LS: The money I had ran out fast, and I saw it was going to be a long, long haul. So I get *Playboy's* interest and they fly out their interview editor. He reads some of the interviews I've done with Gilmore—they're written out long-hand by him on yellow paper, or they're tape recordings, because I'd done them in person, over the phone, many different conversations. And this guy from *Playboy* flips out. He's ready to bring in somebody to do the interviews of Gilmore. I said, what do you mean? I'm doing the interviews with Gilmore. Well, you're not a writer, Larry, he says. I practically threw the guy out.

But later, part of my thinking was I had to make *Playboy* secure. I knew they'd respect Barry Farrell. Barry wrote for *Life* and was a close friend. He understood me. He almost got me Harrison Ford for a movie of mine. Barry was an alcoholic. He died because of his alcoholism. He wasn't doing too well financially primarily because of his drinking, and he called me up one day, before the *Playboy* stuff occurred, and said, I've been asked to write a story [for *New West* magazine] about what you're doing in Utah because I know you. They want me to tear you to pieces. I say, well, let's come up with something good. He calls, and we're joking on the phone. He's drunk as all hell on the other side. You know, he says, you're like an eel, or you're like a carrion bird. People couldn't understand after he wrote that article about me how I could invite him to become part of the project. But you have to understand my great love for Barry.

I also realized that I might be operating only on one level with Gilmore. So I call up Barry after the meeting with the *Playboy* editor and say I'll pay you X dollars; will you come here and work with me

on the interviews? And see if you can come up with questions that I'm missing. Barry becomes my corner man, as I call him. He never speaks to Gilmore, but I use some of his questions. He comes out to Utah in mid- or late-December 1976. By then I've really started to see that there's a book here—forget about the motion picture.

JS: When you say “one level,” do you mean you sensed there was a greater depth to Gilmore than you were getting at?

LS: I don't want to use the word “depth.” There's always greater depth to everybody's life, but it's always better to have two people looking at the same thing than one person.

JS: What comes across in the *Playboy* interview is a real combativeness between you and Gilmore. The interview's long and detailed enough that you catch him in a number of lies and contradictions about his motives, his past.

LS: I think if my memory is right that it was the longest *Playboy* interview ever published to that date.

JS: How did your relationship with him grow over the course of the interviews? Was it clear that you had to be combative from the very start?

LS: I knew I had to become the devil's advocate with him. I couldn't just accept him. He didn't like the fact that I was pursuing the relationship between him and his mother. At one point, he's inviting me and then uninviting me to the execution. At another point he's saying to his lawyers—I find out later—that he doesn't like my tactics. No, I don't think Gilmore and I were on the best of terms when he was executed. I didn't want him to be executed, but that was a personal thing. I'd already been accused in print of exploiting his execution and wanting it to happen, which wasn't true.

I always said to the press, don't criticize me for what I'm doing. Criticize the work I produce when it's produced. I got very mad at the press. And Gilmore got mad at statements that I made like that. I would say that it's not invented in the *Playboy* interview—we really did have a combative relationship, Gilmore and I.

JS: Did he infuriate you? There's something infuriating to the reader, I think, in his explanations for the murders, the way he backs away from certain perspectives when pressured. Here's an example: “I've given some thought to the fact—well, I shouldn't use the word

fact—to the *possibility* that maybe [Jensen and Bushnell] were supposed to have been killed,” he says. “How do I know they weren’t meeting, at my hands, a karmic debt?” You say in reply, “It must be very comforting for you to think in those terms.” How did you deal with this sort of thing?

LS: I would never think it through. I would just let it be there. I didn’t have time to think through what he was doing or what his motives were. All I knew was there were certain subjects he wouldn’t go near, wouldn’t talk about. And if he wouldn’t talk about it, then I went after it.

As the execution gets closer, there are the hearings with the state Supreme Court, where Gilmore answers the question by one of the justices, “Are you ready to be executed?” His answer is something incredible, to the effect of “I’m not ready to be executed today. I’m ready to be executed on the date and time that the law has specified for me to be executed.” Which shows he has a certain sense of sanity and rational thinking, and completely throws out all the appeals that he’s insane and doesn’t know what he’s saying. That thinking impresses everybody. There, and other times he speaks, at other pardons hearings, it’s all just coming right out of Gilmore’s mind extemporaneously. I know because I’m behind the scenes with him and his lawyers, and I know what’s going on every inch of the way.

JS: Mailer said in an interview, after the publication of *The Executioner’s Song*, that he really wrote the book to show Gilmore was serious about his intention to die.

LS: Correct.

JS: How would you, as the person who met him, assess the seriousness of that wish? How much profundity do you grant it?

LS: Gilmore had a choice in life—to spend the rest of his life in jail, where he’d already spent fifteen or more years and been butt-fucked many times, or be executed. He knew what it was like to be a piece of meat. And he had suffered through Prolixin [an antipsychotic drug administered to Gilmore in prison]. I honestly believed that he was totally sincere in saying this is not the way that I’m going to live out the rest of my life; I might as well die and take my punishment for what I did. And if there’s something on the other side, there is, and if there isn’t, then too bad. I think he was totally, 101 percent serious about it. It

wasn't a whim. I think he had thought it out, and he wasn't about to live the rest of his life being butt-fucked. And he knew that he wasn't strong enough to do that to anybody else. He wasn't part of the bull gang in prison. He never was.

Now that's my answer. I don't know what Norman's answer is to the question of what Gilmore was thinking, but that's mine.

Let me tell you what I think Gilmore was with an image. If you have a piece of soap that's been lying in a soap dish that's had a little bit of water in it, and it's almost half disintegrated and half not. There's enough solidness to it but not—you know what I'm saying? That's Gilmore. You could see the wear and tear of the prison years all over him.

He was well-read, in my opinion. He had not had good sexual relationships with women because of all the years he had been in. He didn't know when he got out of prison that he was still like a 14-year old kid. He didn't have any social skills at all. He didn't even fight in the trial; there was no defense. He knew he had done it—had done it out of craziness after he failed with Nicole.

Now if he could break out, wind up in the mountains in Alaska—sure, he'd take that as an option. But the choice between an execution and life in prison? He'd take the execution in two seconds.

JS: So you work with Farrell on the *Playboy* interview. How does Mailer become involved in the project?

LS: All types of people find out I've bought the rights, and I start getting calls, some of them quite weird. For instance, one night I'm sleeping in my hotel when the phone rings. Someone starts singing "My Way" on the other end, and I'm waking up, and then it hits me that it's Paul Anka's voice. Next thing I know he's introducing himself, and he wants to produce a movie about Gilmore. He doesn't know I'm doing a book, and it takes a week or so to blow him off in a nice way.

Joan Didion is the writer that I want at that point. She's on my mind. There's *Play It As It Lays*, and I'd met her once, and I said, wow, what she could do with this. I've said that publicly before, but what I've not said publicly is she's the only fucking person I thought of for a month or so. How am I going to convince Joan Didion to write the book? I'll send her the Lenny Bruce biography I did with Albert Goldman. Everything in my mind was: how was I going to get her?

- JS:** When I hear of your interest in Didion I immediately think she's a sort of "western voice," if you will. She gets the west. She has that sparseness of language and all those great desert scenes as well. Is that what you're thinking?
- LS:** Exactly right.
- JS:** This is also deeply ironic for many of us—for me at least, since one of the first things I ever read about *The Executioner's Song* was Didion's glowing *New York Times* review of it.
- LS:** Yes, we'll come back to that, I promise. But first, while Farrell and I are doing the *Playboy* interview—I can't remember how it came up, but I finally realized that Farrell thinks he's going to write the book. And I've never mentioned to him that in my mind is Joan Didion. The irony is that she's Barry's closest confidante. But I've never committed myself to him in our contract; it doesn't mention a book. I have to tell him, Barry, you're not going to write the book. Well, who's going to write it? I said, I don't know. I'm going to try to get Joan Didion, or maybe Norman Mailer will write it.
- JS:** Is this the first time Mailer pops into your mind?
- LS:** Well, not exactly. But Farrell says, why would you want Mailer to write it? He knows why I'd want Didion to write it. But why would I want Mailer to write it? I said, Barry, because I think he understands violence a little better than you do.
- JS:** Now in Peter Manso's book of interviews about Mailer I think you say you had two reasons. You thought Mailer knew something about violence, and you also had maybe heard something about Mailer's bad relationship to his father.
- LS:** Right. And I didn't even know if that was true. I didn't even know if Mailer had a bad relationship with his father. But I'd heard it somewhere.
- JS:** And that was the blind spot in the Gilmore story, right? The father who seemed to possibly be at the root of everything.
- LS:** Or his mother. At that time I already knew about Gilmore refusing to answer questions about the mother and the father, you know, whether the father was related to Houdini or not. That was a blind spot. The father was involved with violence in some way. He was in and out of jail for robbing people. I had this idea, based on interviewing her, that Gilmore's mother was involved too—that they drove across Texas like

Bonnie and Clyde or something out of Terry Malick's film *Badlands*. But that was speculation on my part.

Quite honestly, I never did call Didion. I took a draft of the *Playboy* interview and sent it to Molly, Norman's assistant, and said, would you have Norman read this? I think this is a subject he might be interested in. I have no way of knowing what happened between Molly and Norman. Norman said recently at a Harry Ransom Center event that he had been thinking of Gilmore prior to this and joked with Molly once, "Oh, someday we're going to get a phone call from Larry because I see his name in the newspaper."

This is March of '77. I had started flying to Utah Monday through Saturday every single week. I had the same girls who had been with me in Utah working in L.A. transcribing the tapes. And I just started the process of interviewing, as you know, an extraordinary number of people.

At some point Molly calls me back and says Norm is going to give you a call. We talk. He is very nice and polite. It's as if we'd never had an argument, okay? Even though we do have very big fights during *The Executioner's Song*, bigger than you can conceive of. I then send them some of the interviews of Nicole, I think, and as I'm working in Utah I'm sending him, through Molly, this interview or that interview.

The next big thing is I say to him, or he says to me, I'd like to meet Nicole, or you should meet Nicole. Before he'll commit to anything. Nicole has come out of the nut house [a few weeks after Gilmore's execution], and I've taken her to California and gotten her set up in a beach house in Malibu. I gave her an allowance and bought her a Great Dane puppy so she would have somebody she has to care for. I read that in a psychology book.

JS: Are her kids with her mother?

LS: They're with her and the mother there in Malibu. I'm interviewing Nicole twice a week. This is roughly March of '77. She and Norman meet in New York, and on the same trip I'm going to meet with Scott Meredith [Mailer's agent] and try to sell the book. Norman, Nicole, and I have lunch at the Tiki Room at Trader Vic's, which was under The Plaza Hotel, downstairs. Then we go ice skating in the rink in Central Park, Norm and Nicole and I.

- JS:** I think you've described Nicole as being like Alice in Wonderland at this point, because she'd never been east.
- LS:** She'd never been to California when I brought her here. Never been out of Utah. Later we go buy a chess set around the corner on 57th or 58th Street, and Norman starts to teach her how to play chess. I leave them alone and go to see Scott Meredith.
- JS:** How has your conception of Nicole changed at this point, since first reading about her in the paper?
- LS:** Well, I see that a large part of the project will be about how the Mormon community affected people like Nicole. There's a big, for lack of a better word, white trash community there, you see? And Nicole fit into the white trash. I remember at one point she looked at me and said, you really consider me white trash, don't you? I remember when she saw the film she turned to me and said, you really think I'm a whore, don't you?
- JS:** She's abused from a young age—she's raped at age eleven, right?
- LS:** Yes.
- JS:** We know that certainly Gilmore turns their love affair into something very cosmic, very mythical, and she certainly goes along with that to a large degree. But what do you think accounts for her susceptibility to men like Gilmore? What did you learn about her?
- LS:** It isn't that I'm begging the question and don't want to answer it. But during the period of doing interviews, I never get into those questions in my mind. I'm always just thinking, what have I been told, what am I missing, what do I need to know? Now years later, I would have that type of question about Nicole. But I wouldn't be thinking that at the time.
- JS:** Why not?
- LS:** It's just not my nature. During the process I'm just interested in collecting it all, all the stories and information.
- JS:** And not explaining it.
- LS:** Right. Certainly I had the most frank sexual discussions with her that I've ever had with anybody I've interviewed. She was beyond open. I'm not saying she was open without me first gaining her confidence. But she was probably the most open person I've ever spoken with, in any way. And certainly all of that worked right into Mailer's writing, because when you've got somebody

giving you all that information that's so real, you don't have to invent it.

JS: Tell me about the mechanics of getting her out of the mental institution and taking custody of her.

LS: I corresponded with the mother, who had gone to work as a card dealer at a casino near Vegas. And the question was whose custody is she going to be released into? And I went to Bob Moody, Gilmore's lawyer, and I said look, I have to interview her extensively. Why don't you go to the officials and propose that she be taken out of state; then they don't have to worry about her being an embarrassment here in Utah any more. Or winding right back up in the mental hospital. I'll get a doctor that will agree to see her. I'll agree to help provide her with some type of education and employment. All of these things just come out of my head, sitting with the lawyers. We'll take her to California with her kids and her mother and guarantee to support her for six months, see if we can get her back on the road.

I was also worried, quite honestly, that if she gets out on the streets, then somebody else starts interviewing her. I didn't have a contract with her. Which eventually I do sign. She gets paid \$25,000, if my memory's right.

JS: So how long does it take her to get right?

LS: Well, does anybody ever get right? That's the first question. How long does it take her to settle down might be a better question. Maybe ten years. After the book is done she stays in California, and I send her to secretarial school just to learn how to type, so she can get a job doing something. She bums around here, and what does she do? Goes and marries another ex-con who beats the shit out of her all the time. And one night she calls me, in the middle of the night. I got to get a divorce from him, she says, I need \$3,000 for an attorney, this and that. So I give her the money for the attorney, and the guy's in prison for beating her up and everything. She went right back to where she was. She went through that with him for a couple years, then she married a potato farmer up in Eugene, Oregon. I went and visited her up there. I slept in the van with her and her sister April and the kids. She adopted a couple kids with the potato farmer and then ran a truck into him and had a big fight, a big battle. They divorced.

And then she married a TV or a hi-fi repair man and came back down here to L.A. and spent some time with me and my second wife. And she went back to Oregon. Then she called me up again five, six years ago. I need an attorney, she said. My new boyfriend's in jail and he's the only thing that matters to me. I said I'll help you out, but I'm not going to give you any money. I'm not going to help you get him out of jail. I don't want to get involved. I haven't heard from her since.

JS: Why do you think Mailer is attracted to her as a subject? Louis Menand has written that Nicole ends up being possibly Mailer's greatest character ever.

LS: Well, I think she's the greatest character because Mailer never fucked her. I don't think he's ever had a relationship with anybody like Nicole. And he never fucked her. So I think she's a really a great mystery and therefore he can write well about her. That's my amateur answer.

JS: I think we left you back in New York, selling the book to Scott Meredith.

LS: Norman is meeting with Nicole, and I go to Scott and say, how much do you want for Norman to write the book? He says, I want half a million dollars. I say, well, you know it's going to be very difficult to get half a million dollars. And he says, nobody's going to give you half a million dollars for Norman Mailer. Because Norman doesn't write narratives anymore. He's been unable to write narratives. All he does is write these 30,000-word articles for *Life* and everybody else and then turns them into books. And some of them are good books, but he's not writing narratives. They're really big essays.

I'm lost—I don't even know the difference. If something I read by Norman Mailer is good, I don't think it's a narrative, it's an essay, I don't think what it is. And I say this to Scott. He says no. He's teaching me something which I didn't realize. For somebody to pay that money, don't you realize, Larry, that in a book like this you need a narrative?

JS: And luckily you have a lot of that.

LS: But then Scott says we have another problem, because Norman's under contract to Little, Brown, and I've already discussed it with them, and they're not interested in the book. Scott's throwing all this right in my face.

JS: And Mailer's been working on *Ancient Evenings* for ten years or so at this point, right?

LS: Which he hasn't delivered. But I say to Scott, what do you mean you offered it to Little, Brown? I own the goddamn book. I haven't even signed an agreement with Norman yet. He says, if Norman's going to write a book, it has to be offered to them first as per the contract, and they've turned it down. So you can now go sell it to whoever you want.

Of course I say to myself, Jesus, if Little, Brown turned it down, and they're Mailer's publishing house, Random House, who published my Lenny Bruce book, sure ain't going to take it. Every hardcover publisher I walk into is going to say why isn't Little, Brown taking this book. I get really mad at Scott because he's done something that can hurt me in the sale of the book. He's a very smart agent. And I'm wondering whether he's killing the book on purpose because he doesn't like the subject. Because the word gets out fast that Little, Brown has turned down Mailer to write a book on Gilmore.

I'd published enough books by then to know I can't make a misstep. Of course I don't let Norman know how mad I am at Scott. I went to Pocket Books first. I knew that every hardcover publisher in those days sold the paperback rights to a paperback company. So I said to myself, well, if no hardcover publisher wants it, maybe I'll sell it to a paperback house. Now I haven't even said to Scott or anybody that a Mailer book potentially could come out first in paperback and never in hardcover, because that would be a negative. Pocket Books turned it down. They said we can't take the gamble Mailer's just going to wind up writing an essay.

I don't remember who gave me the idea of Warner Books. But the next day I went to see them, and I'm taken in to the editor-in-chief, Howard Kaminsky. I tell him what the project is. Then, at the right time, I say Norman Mailer has guaranteed to write a narrative—and of course nobody's guaranteed that he's going to write a narrative.

He'll write a narrative, I say, guaranteed by contract. How much money do you want? A half million dollars. Mailer will also sign the contract? Yes. Done deal. The book was sold as a paperback for a half million dollar advance.

I go back to Scott Meredith and say, I got your half a million dollars and I want you to give the book for nothing to Little, Brown.

Don't ask them for a penny of advance and see if they'll take it. Scott says, we won't give it to them for nothing. We'll just ask them for a token \$25,000. And based upon the fact that there was already a paperback sold, Little, Brown took the book for \$25,000.

JS: That's all done by May of '77, when Mailer begins working on the book. He goes out to Utah, does some interviewing with you.

LS: He goes there that summer by himself and stays in the house Gilmore stayed in. I think he starts to look at life a little bit differently. I don't think he had ever actually gone and spent time in the field. When he wrote *The Deer Park*, he told me, he just drove through Palm Springs. He spent like twenty minutes there. I don't think he's ever spent really a lot of time in places he's written about. And I think in this project he spent a lot of time in two ways. Once by himself and once through my interviews.

JS: Do you think Utah affected him deeply?

LS: I saw Norman walk the streets and absorb things, and I think *The Executioner's Song* mellowed him out. I think he saw the lives of people like Vern and Ida and Brenda and Johnny, her husband. I think he started to value life a little differently. I only went to Utah with him when we interviewed the murder victims' wives. Well, I do make a trip with him merely to introduce him to the various people. But then he was off on his own. Whether he would re-interview them or not interview them or just have dinners with them or whatever, we never even discussed. In many instances I've no idea how long he spent with them. We did make many trips to the Oregon State Prison together to research Gilmore's time there.

You give the writer the material; you talk about the subject, but you don't tell him what to write. You allow that work to be the total creative invention of the writer. If you don't do that then you don't respect the writer and you should not have hired him. The only way you guide the writer, if you can guide the writer, is by what you give him in the research.

JS: What kind of reception do you and Mailer get from the community in Utah?

LS: Partway through Mailer's first trip we start working on getting to interview the victims' wives [Colleen Jensen and Debbie Bushnell]. I

start to negotiate with the representatives of the families. I did not attempt to do that before I had Mailer aboard and it became known publicly that Mailer was writing the book. Because I knew that the Mormons might look upon me as a negative person—the guy who paid Gilmore’s family money, who’s going to make a hero out of him. So I knew we shouldn’t go near the Mormon families until I had credibility on my side.

We had a reception in Salt Lake City at which Norman and I did what one Mormon called the dog and pony act. We invited the attorney general and some leaders of the church and introduced Norman to the community and announced that he was going to write about this story. Hopefully at that reception we made the right impressions. Then I continued my negotiations, and finally the attorneys for the wives said they would agree to interviews. They would have to be in their attorneys’ offices. I had already offered to make a donation to the church or to the families. I don’t remember exactly, but I think the payment was around \$10,000 each—a nominal amount.

These interviews also become an extraordinary situation for me because it’s the first time I’m ever going to do an interview with Norman Mailer. Who’s going to lead the interviews? I only realize as we talk about doing them how much Norman really respects my method. I discover for the first time what he thinks. And it gives me the confidence to do the interviews with him. He tells me he wants me to take the lead. And he will only come in when either he taps me under the table with his foot or taps his finger.

The interviews were each around four hours long, I believe. And I can only say that when Norman came in with a question, it was so perfect and so important—a question I could not have conceived of. Almost 12 years later Norman and I do lots of interviews together in Belarus [for *Oswald’s Tale*] and have tremendous fights in front of people—of course, they don’t know what we’re fighting about because they’re Russian and we’re fighting in English, screaming at each other. Sometimes we get up and walk out of the room. But in the interviews with the victims’ wives, Norman asks just a few questions but very, very important questions.

JS: One other interview you try to get with Mailer is of Bessie, Gilmore's mother.

LS: We tried to understand the relationship between mother and son. I mean, here's a woman whose son is going to be executed and she doesn't go herself to convince him not to be. She talks to him only once or twice on the phone. Gilmore had another brother who had died a violent death, a homeless guy, and there was also his brother Mikal [author of *Shot in the Heart*, a memoir of the Gilmore family]. Mikal was born a Mormon, not raised a Catholic like Gary was. He had come and pleaded with Gary not to go through with it. Mikal writes in *Shot in the Heart* that he learned more about his mother and his relationship to her from my interviews than he knew himself.

I'm talking to Bessie all the time on the phone, tape-recording the conversations, interviewing. I'm really into Bessie pretty deep. She's really frank and honest with me, a little bit of a mystery, but I want Norman to see the flesh. So we go up to Oregon and knock on her trailer. No, I'm not going to see you boys, sorry, she says. I got Norman here, I say. She doesn't see us. We go up there on another trip, knock on the door. No, no, no, don't bother me, you don't need me. Go up a third time or a fourth time. I remember the last time it was just pouring rain. And Norman's sitting in the car. He's mad at me, and I said, Norman, we got to do this. I go knock on the door—same response. I say, it's raining, Bessie, we're out here in the goddamn rain. Norman just wants to sit and talk to you. No, no, no. And if my memory serves me right, I said, Bessie, Norman's got to go to the bathroom. You know he's not a young man any more. All right, she says. If he has to go to the bathroom.

She opens the door. And I make the decision not to go in. I'm not trying to make myself a hero. He's writing the book.

JS: Do any actual interviews result from that, or is it just the brief time he spent with her?

LS: Just a conversation between them. I did a couple interviews with her on the phone afterwards. She loved Norman.

JS: That seems to be a big theme in this story—Mailer opening doors. Being liked by all.

LS: At this point in his life. I used to say that in the early days when I knew Norman, you put a microphone in front of him, he becomes a boxer. I had big fights with him about some of the press conferences, how he conducted himself. Because he was a boxer, you know. He wanted to get out there and scrap. A street fighter.

JS: How do you yourself become a subject in *The Executioner's Song*?

LS: On some of my previous books my name appeared on the cover. But I understood with this book that since I had been criticized for buying rights and things like that, I didn't want my name on the cover. I knew it would hurt the book. It would taint the way reviewers would look at it. I hadn't even thought at that time whether Norman would even include me in the interviews. I also knew that with the exception of Woodward and Bernstein's *All the President's Men*, books do not sell as well if there are two names on the cover, whether it's fiction or nonfiction.

After the breakthrough with Bessie, on one of the plane rides back from Oregon, Norman says to me, I have a problem with the book. When Gilmore goes into prison and Nicole goes into the nut house, I got nothing to tie the two characters together. I got two separate stories. Who's the character that ties these two people together? I say to him, I think you got to meet Earl Dorius. Earl's dealing with both Gilmore and Nicole through the judicial system at that point. And he's a devout Mormon. He's deep in the church. And that's where the church really comes into the story. So we arrange a trip, and I take Norman to meet him. I let them go off and have lunch or dinner together. And I think Norman calls me up and says, oh, wonderful, nice guy, but he doesn't work, Larry. You don't know anything about writing books.

On another trip back from Oregon, Mailer gives me about 150 pages of the manuscript. I'm reading it on the plane, and—well, I don't like it. It's like a fucking love story. I realize I got to be really polite to Norman, because what do I know? He's the writer. But those pages never appear in the final book. While reading them I said, Norman, I've been thinking about the fact that Earl Dorius isn't right. The only other person I can think of that's involved with both people is me. And he says to me, well, could I do interviews of you?

JS: So he immediately sees the possibilities.

LS: Well, I don't know then what he sees; he just says, would you give me some interviews? And the first interview is actually done with a tape recorder on that airplane ride. I make a very important decision at that time. Norman may not agree with this, but it's true. I know that if I can give enough material to Norman for him to criticize me, and if I don't edit that material, I will never fucking have to worry about somebody saying that I hired Norman Mailer to write this book and he whitewashed Larry Schiller and cleaned up all the things that he was being criticized for doing to get this story. The work will surely be independent, and nobody will ever look at the copyright page to see that it's my copyright. I just told him everything. I held back very, very little. I knew I would be helping the project.

JS: Is that the only draft you see? Does Mailer show you anything else?

LS: Not till later. He goes off and writes the book. About six or nine months pass and Howard Kaminsky asks to see a draft, because he's supposed to make another payment on the advance. So Norman sends me a draft of the entire book. But he says, I don't like the draft. I need another year to work on it. And another \$100,000.

Kaminsky doesn't want to take the gamble. Mailer's got a heart condition, he says to me. How do I know that he's going to finish this book? You want another \$100,000, the advance is now up to \$600,000—how do I know you're not going to come back and ask me for another \$100,000? What insurance are you going to give me if I give you the \$100,000?

So one minute I'm the business man and the next minute I'm a creative person out there doing interviews. The business people can't conceive of me as a creative person, and vice versa.

I said to Kaminsky, I'll get you an insurance policy. Well, Howard says, if he's got a heart condition, how are you going to get it? I'll pay the high premium. Will Mailer go take a medical? If he wants the \$100,000, he's got to go take a medical examination. Do you realize what that is, to say to an author you have to go take a medical examination? It's a big, big thing to say that to an author.

Then Kaminsky also says: the manuscript we got here, I want it edited in case Mailer drops dead. So I've got something to publish. I said, you can't do this to a writer, have somebody writing behind his back. And Howard says he needs that insurance. I tell him, I'm not going to

give you that right. But if I decide I will have this manuscript, which I will hold, edited, and if something unfortunate happens to Norman and he doesn't finish the book, then at that time only will I guarantee to deliver this manuscript. And based upon that, Kaminsky agrees. I speak to Norman, and Norman agrees to have a medical exam.

And Norman doesn't know—and maybe will not know until he reads this interview—that I do take the manuscript and hire an editor, one he has worked with before. The editor comes to California and edits the manuscript, and I lock it away in a bank vault.

JS: So there's essentially a second version of *The Executioner's Song* out there.

LS: Just in case, God forbid, something happens to Norman.

JS: You referred earlier to fights with Mailer over this book. What were those about?

LS: During that additional year, after the first draft, Norman would send me things periodically. So one day I see that he has put something into the head of a character. And I know it's not from the fucking character, because I did the interview of the character. And I know the character doesn't think that way. What he puts in the head of the character is something that could only come from Norman's head. So I call Norman and say, you can't do this. You're putting your thoughts in his head to make a goddamn point about something you believe in. Don't tell me what to do, he says. That's the way he would have thought. I say something very nasty to him—something like, the final word on this book is going to be with me because I own the book. I don't want to talk to you any more, he says. Boom. Fuck you. We hang up.

After that, for a while, we communicated through telegrams sent through our wives. We didn't talk to each other. Norris [Church Mailer] would send a telegram to me, and my wife at that time would send a telegram back to Norris. Finally, Norris sends me a telegram or calls me and says, why don't you call Norman. And I call Norman and he says, do you have any objection if I call this guy and ask him if he ever thought this way? And is it all right, if he says he could have thought this way, that I put it in his head? I agreed. And I don't remember if Norman called me back or whether I got a telegram, but he said, I spoke to him and he said to me he could have thought that very easily. You can call him if you want, Schiller. I said, I take your word,

Norman. You never lied to me. And that started us on the road to mending again.

JS: You amassed a lot of material about Gilmore's nearly two decades in prison. Obviously Mailer drew on some of that. But did you ever talk with him about the decision to start the book with Gilmore's release from prison in 1976 and just cover those three months leading up to the killings?

LS: Yes, that was discussed. We went to the prison in Oregon, and Norman went to Marion, Illinois, to another prison Gilmore was in for a short time. There was a whole book you could write about the prisons, with or without Gilmore as a character. Those interviews are fascinating stuff. I've spent some time with Charley Manson. I've been with a number of people that have committed these horrendous crimes against society. And the years that they spend in prison and the prison system and everything, either told through Gilmore or through a doctor or through whatever character, is an incredible work that, some day, somebody will do. Norman and I talked several times about it. But a decision was made—and this is me talking, not Norman—that the rest of Gilmore's story is more interesting, because woven inside of this social story is this love story, this failure. And you didn't need much of the prison stuff to understand that larger story.

JS: You promised earlier to come back to the story of Joan Didion's review. Her being assigned to it couldn't have been simply coincidental.

LS: Pure coincidence. At some point before Kaminsky asked for the insurance policy, Norman, I think, sent a draft to Joan, for what reason I do not really know. And he came to California and she, Norman, and I had lunch at the Polo Lounge of the Beverly Hills Hotel. Now she doesn't know, and Norman doesn't know, that she was the first writer in my mind. The ironies in this, her being a confidante of Barry, you know? I didn't even know until that lunch that Mailer had this close relationship with her. In the course of the lunch—from what I remember, and I'm paraphrasing—Joan says, you know, this is so rich and it's so pure and it's so honest, to see you didn't need any other voice, Norman, in a book like this.

JS: So did the original manuscript have a pretty strong Mailer presence?

LS: The first draft that I saw had a presence, but I don't want to use the word "strong." It wasn't like Mailer was a character in the book. But

you felt Mailer analysis, terminology—you knew the voice of the writer in that manuscript. Didion didn't make a big point of it. She just said it in passing. She simply said, "We don't need any other voice," or "Your voice is not needed here."

And of course about nine months later, when he delivers what he calls the official first draft of the book, Mailer doesn't exist anywhere in the book. In some ways, if you knew his previous work but didn't know this was Mailer's writing, you would never even conceive of the fact that Norman Mailer wrote that book.

JS: And that's what all the reviews really picked up on.

LS: Right. Now I remember we joked with Joan at lunch, what happens if the *New York Times* asked you to review the book, Joan? And she says, oh, I can handle that.

The book comes out in October 1979, and, of course, the reviews speak for themselves. But before it was released, there was a marketing decision made. What I'm going to say is only my view, not necessarily historical fact. The book was going to be a fall release, three months before Christmas, when review space is very, very short. And many reviewers combine reviews. Tommy Thompson, who had written *Blood and Money*, a very big seller, was coming out with another book, a crime book called *Serpentine*, sure to be a bestseller. And then it was announced that Tom Wolfe was going to release *The Right Stuff*—the first book that he was writing without his customary voice. And you have Norman Mailer releasing a book, the first book without his voice, which nobody knows about yet. But people do know about Wolfe's book, that it's going to be a straight narrative.

We immediately know that there's a chance that every major reviewer outside of the *New York Times* will combine *Serpentine* and *The Executioner's Song* in one review. And that would be devastating. I've got a very, very big ego. It's mellowed at age 70. I said—maybe not to Norman, but to other people—you can't throw away a Pulitzer. I was going crazy. I never told Norman that I was, not directly. But one day I'm sitting with Norman and Ned Bradford [Mailer's editor] at Little, Brown, and Norman says, well, Ned, I'm not going to put this on the nonfiction list. It's going to go on the fiction list and I'm going to call it a true crime novel. And of course I immediately inside myself say, thank God, because a novel is never

reviewed in tandem with a nonfiction book. And it won't be judged against *The Right Stuff*.

JS: Did anyone at Little, Brown object?

LS: No. Ned needed a little explanation by Norman; he didn't understand it for a few moments. Norman explained to him that there are areas in which he had extrapolated. Between A and C he'd written B.

I personally believe he never would have won the Pulitzer if it was on the nonfiction list.

JS: Undoubtedly it's affected the book's critical reputation in the years since. Beyond those great reviews, one issue that surfaces a lot in the book's reception is capital punishment. That's surprising, since I don't think of it in the same way I think of, say, *In Cold Blood*, as a political book. To what degree did you—and Mailer—see it as a book about capital punishment?

LS: I don't think Norman ever did. I can't speak for what's in his mind, but from his conversations with me I think the issue was only going to be dealt with from the standpoint of the facts. The author wasn't going to present his point of view through a character. And I don't believe the book was ever designed to be about the issue of capital punishment. Capital punishment was certainly an issue, because there was a moratorium on it in the country. Gilmore by accident was breaking that moratorium because Utah did not have an automatic appeal process, as most of the states did. And the NAACP and the ACLU felt that Gilmore's execution, if it took place, would open the floodgates for executions of the minorities primarily that had been sitting on death row—which did happen in Florida and Texas.

JS: Let's talk about the film, which airs in 1982. Mailer's screenplay, the one that you direct, isn't the only one written, is it?

LS: ABC is long out of the deal by the time the book does so well. But I feel a moral obligation to them, and I go back to ABC. They say, we'd love to make the film. I say, how much do you want to offer Norman to write the screenplay? They say, no, we don't want him. He doesn't do screenplays. He wrote a screenplay for Universal or somebody else and it's not very good. So I walked out on ABC. Because I considered Norman to be a partner, even though he didn't own any of the film rights.

I take it to CBS. And CBS says the same thing: love to have it; but no Norman. So I say, I'm going to make it as a feature. I have a door always open in television because I'm making television films. But I'm not like that as a feature director. My agent gets me a meeting with Jeffrey Katzenberg, who's then at Paramount. He says, Mailer writing the screenplay? Interesting idea. I like that. You directing it? No.

I said, I don't want to make the film unless I can direct it. You've never directed a feature before, Larry. I said, I put myself together with a good cinematographer and a good editor and a good script person, I'm sure I can handle it. No, sorry. So I walked out of Paramount. I went to see Sid Sheinberg at Universal. Oh, Mailer? I like the idea. You? No.

What I didn't realize is they'd accept any writer as a first writer because in the feature business everybody is rewritten. But when you commit to a director, you don't want to fire him when he's directing the picture. It's a more serious decision, you see? In television the director doesn't mean anything, because they don't look for quality. It's on one night and they get good ratings or bad ratings. They don't worry about reviews. It's a very funny thing.

I say to myself, I know this story better than anybody else. I lived it, I was there, I know the nuances of it—sorry, but I'm more important than Norman. I go into NBC and take it to Perry Lieber. He says, Mailer's never done anything for television. We can't hire Mailer. I say, who would you like to suggest? Well, we got a great writer here. He just won an Emmy for *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, he knows how to take a big, long book and condense it—Tracey Keenan Wynn. I meet with Tracey and six months later I get a screenplay. It comes to me before it goes to NBC.

JS: So how does Mailer get back into the picture?

LS: I read Tracey's script, and I can best say it as follows: I did not find a new experience in the screenplay. I give it to NBC, and they love it. Take your four million dollars, they say, and go make the film.

I had to go to Yugoslavia for some reason. But on the way to Yugoslavia, I stop to see Norman in London. He's going to appear in Milos Forman's *Ragtime*. I tell him what's happening with the film. Do you like the screenplay, he asks. I said, not really, I'm a little disappointed, seems I've seen it all, heard it all. But I know what I'm

going to do with the film, and the screenplay is just the road map for me. That's all I said to him.

I come back to California. And I get in the mail from Norman the paperback version of the book. Pages are torn out, lines crossed out. It says, scene one, go to page 43. Scene two, go to page 16. The script is all there, in lines from the book.

Well, the first thing I did is call the lawyers, because you don't want to get in trouble with one writer writing behind another. The lawyers said, tell NBC, and then you got to type it up and see what it is. And like every goddamn page is the same as Tracey wrote, but there is something different about it. Mailer adds an extra four words to the dialogue, or he edits it a little differently. With every single character in Mailer's version, the dialogue defines the character. I just couldn't believe it. "I don't give a shit about your pants"—that line defines Brenda right off the bat. In Mailer's scene that was the first line. Tracey used the same thing, but it was the third line in his scene. By the time you got to that line, its power was dissipated.

I took Mailer's script to NBC and said, I want to make Norman's screenplay. And you know what their answer to me was? We told you we're making the film. We don't care whose screenplay you use. That's your business.

JS: So then you go and make the film, right?

LS: Yes. However, in the Writers Guild you have screen credit. There has to be an arbitration. You can't prove that Mailer never saw a copy of Tracey's screenplay. There are many, many instances where the second writer gets no credit at all if the majority of the scenes and the dialogue are virtually the same. Yes, he may have made it better. But if he hasn't redone the majority, he doesn't even get a share of credit. And very rarely does a second writer get a single credit because of the presumption that he read the first writer's version.

So Tracey writes a very long analysis of why he thinks he should have a single credit, proving Mailer had to have read his screenplay. He doesn't call him Mailer; he calls him writer B. He's writer A.

JS: Does he know it's Mailer?

LS: Yes. But he's not allowed to say it to the Guild. Mailer, on the other hand, writes a one- or two-page letter. It's about two people, traveling separately, asking for advice from the same *maitre d'* on what

road to take on a trip, what restaurants to eat at, what to have. They stop at all the same places, totally independent of one another. What he was basically saying is that there is sometimes only one road you can travel. And there are just obvious places to get off to have lunch, and sometimes the best thing on the menu is what you order. He was saying that no matter who wrote this screenplay, they had to have used certain scenes and certain dialogue. That was the analogy. And he wrote it very, very skillfully. The Writers Guild, I think for only the third time ever in television, awarded the second writer a single credit as a sole author of the screenplay. Without knowing that he had written the book. Tracey took it to an appeal and lost.

That validated for me how I felt about the screenplay. Because in the back of my mind was: am I getting excited with Norman's screenplay because it's Norman?

JS: Tommy Lee Jones gives a remarkable performance as Gilmore. He wins the Emmy for Best Actor.

LS: Tommy was not the first choice. It was Nick Nolte, who didn't even want to consider the project because he was a big theatrical actor in those days. And the network wanted Priscilla Presley to play Nicole. That is a big, big battle with the network. Lynn Stalmaster [the casting director], because of his big credits, convinced the network to let me see unknowns. He brought in several, and of course Rosanna Arquette, who had only made one film as a walk-on—she was Nicole to me. I sent her up to Oregon to meet the real Nicole for about a week.

Eli Wallach I knew personally. That was probably the only mistake I made in casting. I loved Eli, but he played the role [of Vern Damico] a little too Jewish and not Italian.

But the real gamble in the film was using all the real people. And mixing—like Bob Moody plays himself, but an actor plays Ron Stanger [Gilmore's other lawyer]. What I tried to do for all the actors was to put a real person with them so they could socialize and mix.

JS: Tell me how the community received you.

LS: They respected the book very, very highly. It got great reviews in Utah. It had not maligned the Mormon community at all. So when it came to making the film, they knew I had delivered to them something that they could be proud of. And the doors were open to me to

make the film any way I wanted. The whole film was made in the real locations in Utah. We even shot all the prison scenes on the prison grounds. The execution was done in a warehouse because even though the prison would have allowed us to restage it, I didn't feel it was good for the prison population.

JS: What was it like filming the murders themselves?

LS: I was able to get the blood in the second murder approved because in the first murder, I didn't show any blood. I just showed Gilmore pointing the gun and turning around and walking out of the bathroom—it leaves to your imagination what the body must look like.

In the second murder, I don't show Gilmore taking the shot. But then you go outside and they're pumping away on his heart and the blood is pooling. So by not showing the shooting in the second murder, I was allowed to show the blood. Those are the trade-offs you make. But when you put it together the way we edited it, it actually becomes very strong.

After that there were something like four television films that showed executions. They were even thinking of broadcasting a live execution after *The Executioner's Song*. It opened the gates. *In Cold Blood* had not been shown on television yet. And I don't remember how the hanging scene was edited for television.

JS: That's another film that benefits a lot from its score, that driving, Quincy Jones jazz.

LS: I had Waylon Jennings do the music. He wrote the original songs. Or sang and re-sang songs. I had a great music composer, John Cacavas, who did a lot of what we call sound-alike songs. Where you think it's Johnny Cash singing or Ray Charles singing.

In Cold Blood reminds me of something else. After the book is published but before the movie, Norman and I are at the Bel Air Hotel in Beverly Hills, and we walk into the bar. Sitting there all alone at the bar is Truman Capote. Norman doesn't even notice him, but I do. And being my normal bold self I say, Mr. Capote, I'm a friend of Mr. Mailer's. Would you like to join us for a drink? And he gets this twinkle in his eye and a little smile and says, of course.

He sits down next to Norman and says—I'm paraphrasing all this—Norman, about this book you've written, it's awfully long isn't

it? I hear it's very, very good. But awfully long, isn't it? It'd be nice if every once in a while you could condense something a little.

Norman says something like, I don't think you've ever understood anything I've written. And Capote says, how could I understand it? I get lost because it's so long. At which point there was a bit of pleasant conversation, and then Truman said, I've got to go. It's so delightful to see you, Norman. I forget exactly how he said it, but definitely that word—"delightful."

JS: Talk about the film's overall impact.

LS: For a while the success of that film opened every single door in Hollywood for me. It was beyond a television movie in many ways. Up to that time if you had a beer can on the table, it had to say "beer" on it. It couldn't say Budweiser or Michelob. But I went to Standards and Practices and said that since this was a real story written by a writer who had just won the Pulitzer, if there was a phony object in the film, it would destroy the credibility. And the whole concept of this was to make it as credible as possible. And they allowed the entire film to have what was then called product identification.

The second breakthrough in the film was the use of language. We didn't get the word "cocksucker" in. But we got in words like "shit" that had never been used in drama before. They'd been used in news broadcasts. So when Brenda says, "I don't give a shit about your pants," that was the first time that it'd been used. Originally that line had "fuck" in place of "shit." "Fuck" is used a couple times in another context, which they allowed. The film brought a reality to television drama which had not been exhibited before. You really felt that you were at the real place.

JS: I was surprised to learn that the scene that opens the film—of Gilmore standing between two electric eyes at the airport exit, opening one door and then the other—was put in by you. It seemed like such a Mailer commentary on technology, along with the drill Gilmore can't make work, the sewing machine Nicole talks about. Even the bicycle tire Gilmore kicks out of his way at one point.

LS: There are two types of directors—directors that plan every single shot, and directors that work on instinct, like Bob Fosse or Robert Altman, that put actors in a situation and have something creative

come out of it. Not having been trained as a director, I always tried to surround myself with the most talented people I could afford or get. When you meet an actor like Tommy, you know you've got a guy who's really good, really instinctive. Tommy was always reaching out to me because he felt—or at least I thought he felt—a little uncomfortable with the role. To give you an example, I was walking down Broadway with Tommy, before we started filming, and he said to me, how do you think Gilmore walked? And I said, well, how do you walk after you've been fucked in the ass? That's all I had to do—put an image in Tommy's mind. I'm not articulate. I don't have the vocabulary. So working with actors, I always give an image.

At the airport, we're lining up the shot. Tommy and I are inside while they're lighting outside. And I think I said to him, you know, going through these doors is like coming out of prison, going back in prison. You leave, you come into this town, you're going to go out of this town. I just felt that the doors represented an uncertainty of life. I said to him, why don't you try it—come on out, go back in. See where you want to start. And that's how it happened.

JS: One of my other favorite moments in the film is seeing Nicole's house empty except for that vacuum cleaner, looking so lonely on the floor as Gary comes in, not long before the murders. You realize how reduced his life has become.

LS: That's something else I didn't know how to do. I knew exactly what I wanted in the scene. I just didn't know where to put the fucking vacuum cleaner. I tried putting it in several different places, and it just didn't fucking look right. I decided to put it in the room because maybe Tommy would play with it, maybe something would happen. So in rehearsal he gave me enough of a taste to know that it was working for him. Whether it worked for me no longer mattered. It was working for the actor.

I had another concept in the photography of that film—let the camera always sit when we can. Let the actors move and tell you the story; we'll pan with them. The camera's not going to be on dolly tracks. We're a fly on the wall as much as we can be. There's the great scene when Gilmore walks in with the beer and comes into the kitchen. He's just sitting there and the camera's on him. He takes the gun out and lays it on the table; then the camera just pans over to

Grace [Zabriskie, who plays Nicole's mother, Kathrynne]. You let the actors play.

JS: One final question. In the *Playboy* interview you ask Gilmore what he thinks the national fascination is with him. I wanted to ask you the same question. What do you think the fascination with this story is?

LS: Then or now?

JS: Well, both. The fascination has really continued, in some ways.

LS: Then, I thought the national attraction was the fact that a guy said, I don't want to live, I want to be executed. And it was going to break the moratorium on executions. Now that I look back, what was the fascination with the story? I think it was just like if there hasn't been a plane crash in the United States for X years, and then a plane crashes, everybody's going to be fascinated with it.

When the media covered the events that led up to the execution and thereafter, I prayed nobody would investigate the real story with Gary and Nicole, and nobody would look at the social structure. That's what I'd be able to deliver and surprise everybody with. I just prayed every day that nobody else would be doing what I was doing and what I hoped Mailer would do. And I was lucky. I lucked out.