

Introduction

Maggie McKinley

Over the course of his prolific career, which spanned six decades, Norman Mailer published over forty books of fiction and nonfiction, frequently experimenting with different genres, perspectives, and themes. He was also a public speaker and political activist – in sum, an avid public intellectual – and therefore a fixture in American culture for most of his life. An acclaimed journalist and contributor to the burgeoning New Journalism movement in the 1960s and 1970s, Mailer regularly wrote for publications such as *Esquire*, *Commentary*, *Life*, *Playboy*, *Dissent*, and *The Village Voice* (which he also helped to found); he also directed four films, and adapted his novel *The Deer Park* for the stage. Much of his work was both commercially and critically successful: he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize twice, the National Book Award once, and in 2005 he was honored with the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.

Though Mailer was a chameleon of sorts, constantly reinventing himself as a writer, there were certain themes with which he remained preoccupied throughout his career, including existentialism, totalitarianism, democracy, technology, masculinity, and duality, among others. Likewise, certain public figures fascinated him for decades, and he wrote about such diverse individuals as Pablo Picasso, John F. Kennedy, Muhammad Ali, Gary Gilmore, Lee Harvey Oswald, Adolf Hitler, Marilyn Monroe, and Jesus. These were not random obsessions; rather, Mailer's perspectives on the lives of these individuals were often intertwined with his other thematic interests.

One could say more broadly that what ties all of these subjects together – the lynchpin around which all of these varying interests turned – is America. Throughout his work, Mailer strives to capture the essence of America's cultural and political turmoil, offering incisive commentary on its history and its geopolitical roles, while also working to articulate the emotional undercurrents of a nation and the intangible forces that propelled individual and social behaviors. "America was born of the seed of

the most wonderful flowers and the ugliest weeds,” Mailer once said. “I’m fascinated by America – by its despair, its unpredictability, its untractability. Everything can happen; it can go from bad to worse, or it can get better.”¹

Born in 1923 and raised in Long Branch, New Jersey, Mailer began writing very early in life, though at the time his subject matter was quite different: at the tender age of seven, he composed a science fiction novel about a rocket ship to Mars.² As Mailer grew into his adolescent and teen years, he became more interested in the sciences, and by the time he enrolled in Harvard University in 1939, he had decided to major in engineering with the goal of becoming an aeronautical engineer. While there, however, Mailer began to find more value in his elective writing courses which, while challenging and even humbling for him (his work was subjected to sharp criticism from both professors and peers), rekindled his love of writing. *A Calculus at Heaven*, a novella he wrote while at Harvard, was published in the anthology *Cross-Section: A Collection of New American Writing* in 1944, and *A Transit to Narcissus*, another novella he wrote during his college years, was eventually published as a facsimile in 1978. He did complete his major in engineering, but by then his plans had shifted towards a writing career. As he said, “I entered college as a raw if somewhat generous-hearted adolescent from Brooklyn who did not know the first thing about a good English sentence and left four years later as a half-affected and much imperfect Harvard man who had nonetheless had the great good fortune to find the passion of his life before he was twenty.”³

In the spring of 1944, Mailer reported for basic training in the US Army, and that fall, he shipped out for the Philippines, assigned to the 112th Cavalry Regiment. During his time in the Army, Mailer was already making plans to write a war novel, and indeed, his first full-length book, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), was based on his World War II experiences in the Pacific and on the soldiers he met there. That novel, a smash-success that remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list for over a year, catapulted Mailer into literary celebrity. Mailer’s subsequent two literary efforts are often seen as somewhat faltering attempts to find his own voice, as he experimented with style, point of view, and philosophy, chasing the success of his breakthrough novel.

Mailer’s work with *The Village Voice*, which he helped to found in 1955 with Edwin Fancher and Dan Wolf, and to which he contributed a weekly column in early 1956, marked his entrée into the world of journalism, a genre to which he would make important contributions in

decades to come. Though he resigned from his column and from active involvement in the production of the *Voice* in the spring of 1956, largely due to disagreements regarding its political stance and perspective, he remained a majority stakeholder for years. He would also contribute various pieces to the publication over the years, in addition to writing for intellectual outlets *Dissent* and *Partisan Review*. Many of the articles Mailer wrote during the late 1950s were eventually compiled in 1959's *Advertisements for Myself*, which can be seen as Mailer's "self-reintroduction" of sorts. This collection of new and previously published pieces, often accompanied by additional commentary or "advertisements" penned by Mailer, features a narrative voice notably different from his first three novels, defined by a self-awareness that would come to define much of Mailer's creative nonfiction.

The 1950s were a time of experimentation for Mailer in more than just the literary sense; he also began to smoke large quantities of marijuana, in addition to drinking and doing a number of other drugs. As biographer J. Michael Lennon notes, "Without drugs, he couldn't write . . . Along with marijuana, Seconal, booze, coffee, and two packs of cigarettes a day, he began taking a tranquilizer, Miltown, and a type of amphetamine with the trade name of Benzadrine."⁴ Mailer felt that marijuana, in particular, expanded his mind – something he emphasized in *Advertisements for Myself* and in his "Lipton's Journal" (a document to which Robert Begiebing pays close attention in Chapter 33).

However, extended periods of drug use and drinking, combined with the pressure Mailer felt to write his next great novel and the mixed reviews his second and third books received – topped off by an attempt to run for mayor of New York on the "existentialist ticket" that failed before it even truly began – eventually led to a personal nadir. In what is now an infamous moment in his history, in 1960 Mailer stabbed his second wife Adele after a party at their home. Adele recovered and did not press charges, and Mailer was ordered to Bellevue for psychiatric evaluation for just two weeks, but this egregious mistake cast a shadow over his life and career. "I feel I did a lousy, dirty, cowardly thing," he said to the judge at the time.⁵ Though Mailer often spoke and wrote openly about other personal experiences in his work, he remained reticent to discuss this particular incident for much of his life.

Mailer's violent altercation with Adele, while the most serious act of aggression in his life, was one of many incidents that contributed to his becoming an increasingly polarizing figure. On one hand, he was seen as an incisive public intellectual and talented author, often admired for his

intellect and literary ingenuity, and his ability to consume and produce literature at an impressive rate.⁶ On the other, he was a man with an unfortunate reputation for egotistical braggadocio, combativeness, and hotheadedness. His skepticism of the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960s and 1970s incited the ire of those invested in the work of second-wave feminism. Notably, some of his most significant gaffes, particularly with regard to his comments about women, occurred on television – a medium definitely not suited to Mailer's style of engagement. (He himself would admit this in his analysis of television, and his own appearances on TV, in 1977's "A Small and Modest Malignancy, Wicked and Bristling with Dots," published in *Esquire*.) Mailer's personal relationships further contributed to the negative publicity that swirled around him. By the end of the 1960s, he had been married four times (to Beatrice Silverman in 1944, Adele Morales in 1954, Jeanne Campbell in 1962, and Beverly Bentley in 1963), and these marriages had produced six children. He would marry and divorce once more (to Carol Stevens, with whom he also had a daughter), before marrying Norris Church in 1980, with whom he had another son, in addition to adopting Norris's son from a previous relationship.

Often, these are the details for which Mailer is remembered, as elements of his life are shaped into a sensationalized and dramatic tabloid tale. The chapters in this volume will take up Mailer's biographical details wherever they are pertinent – as indeed they are, in many cases – but it should be acknowledged that such details are only a part of Mailer's storied career, and should not control his literary legacy. Amid personal and public chaos, for instance, Mailer produced some of his best work, establishing himself as a foremost public intellectual of the twentieth century. The 1960s were particularly productive for Mailer⁷: during this decade he published two novels (*An American Dream*, serialized in *Esquire* in 1964 and then published in book form in 1965, and *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, published in 1967); a collection of short stories (*The Short Fiction of Norman Mailer* [1967]); two essay collections (*The Presidential Papers* [1963] and *Cannibals and Christians* [1966]), and two full-length works of nonfiction (*The Armies of the Night* and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, both published in book form in 1968), while also directing a theatrical version of his novel *The Deer Park* and three experimental films, contributing a regular column to *Esquire*, conducting interviews, and delivering speeches, many of which expressed his criticism of America's role in Vietnam.

The Armies of the Night, which won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction, arose out of Mailer's involvement in one

particularly notable Vietnam War protest – the 1967 march on the Pentagon. This work, followed closely by Mailer’s coverage of the 1968 Democratic and Republican conventions in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, established Mailer as one of the most recognizable and significant writers of the New Journalism movement. These works also introduced a wider audience to what would become Mailer’s characteristic use of illeism, or third-person personal, wherein he makes himself a character or “participant–observer” in his own nonfiction.

In yet another vein of the political sphere at this time, Mailer tried his hand at political candidacy once again, running for mayor of New York in 1969 alongside journalist Jimmy Breslin. The campaign (treated in more detail in Kevin Schultz’s Chapter 15, on “Left Conservatism”) was ultimately unsuccessful, but nevertheless heightened Mailer’s visibility and political engagement.

In nearly all of his work and political involvement – as in his earlier publications in the 1950s – Mailer demonstrates a fixation on the contradictions and complexities of American life. As he wrote:

Since the First World War Americans have been leading a double life, and our history has moved on two rivers, one visible, the other underground: There has been the history of politics, which is concrete, factual, practical, and unbelievably dull if not for the consequences of the actions of some of these men; and there is a subterranean river of untapped, ferocious, lonely, and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream life of the nation.⁸

Mailer became, for all intents and purposes, a chronicler of American culture and history, someone who would not hesitate to point out what made America both beautiful and ugly. In *The Armies of the Night*, he worries that America – amid the messy conflict in Vietnam – was “once a beauty of magnificence unparalleled, now a beauty with leprous skin.”⁹ He had high hopes and high standards for his country, but worried about the nation being consumed by its flaws.

These concerns persisted as Mailer continued to write into the 1970s, though the style in which he expressed his apprehensions continued to evolve. During this time, Mailer provided unique commentary on American politics and culture, as in *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970), his book on the Apollo 11 mission, as well as in his profiles of Marilyn Monroe in *Marilyn* (1973) and Muhammad Ali in *The Fight* (1975) – works that feature a hybrid of biography, journalism, and memoir. His range is also evident in the lesser-read *St. George and the Godfather* (1972), which covered the George McGovern–Richard Nixon campaigns, and in

Genius and Lust (1976), a primer on Henry Miller, as well as in *The Faith of Graffiti* (1974), a analysis of street art featuring John Naar's photographs of New York graffiti. As Bonnie Culver explores in Chapter 24, on Mailer and Second Wave Feminism, the 1970s also saw the peak of Mailer's notoriety within the Women's Liberation Movement, following the publication of his 1971 treatise on sex and gender, *The Prisoner of Sex*, and his subsequent appearance as moderator at a New York Town Hall meeting on women's rights.

Most noteworthy among his published work in the 1970s, though, was *The Executioner's Song* (1979), about convicted killer Gary Gilmore, which earned Mailer his second Pulitzer Prize and once again illuminated his ability to experiment with and reinvent his literary style. In this work, Mailer's authorial voice is not as central as in his other works – his third-person personal perspective is absent – and his prose, particularly in the first half of the novel, is noticeably spare. In her review of the book, Joan Didion (a longtime fan of Mailer's work) praised the artistry of the text, comparing its two distinct halves to “long symphonic movements,” one a “fatalistic drift, a tension, an overwhelming and passive rush toward the inevitable events,” and the other “the release of that tension, the resolution, the playing out of the execution, the active sequence.”¹⁰

While Mailer was writing *The Executioner's Song*, he began to correspond with a convict named Jack Abbott, largely to gain additional insight into a criminal mind, which he felt might help him construct Gilmore's story. Indeed, Mailer told Abbott that his letters “lit up corners of [*Executioner*] that I might otherwise not have comprehended or seen only in the gloom of my instinct unfortified by experience.”¹¹ Over the course of many letters, Mailer became increasingly impressed with Abbott's intellect and his potential as a writer, and Mailer was one of several individuals who helped to petition for Abbott's parole in 1981. This parole was granted but, tragically, soon after his release Abbott murdered 22-year-old waiter Richard Adan in New York City, and was returned to prison. Mailer was once more caught up in a whirlwind of negative press, with many blaming him for Abbott's ill-fated release – though Adan's father-in-law Henry Howard was among those who noted that Mailer should not shoulder the blame for the tragedy. “I'm not angry at Mailer or Random House,” Howard said. “It's their job to recognize writing talent and they saw it in Jack Abbott. My quarrel is with the prison authorities, with the Establishment. It's their job to decide who goes out of prison, and not because of some pressure from great writers or publishers.”¹² For his part, Mailer expressed regret and remorse in the wake of Abbott's crime,

condemning Abbott's violence though not entirely forsaking their connection; they continued to correspond for years, and Mailer admitted to a "continuing psychological and emotional and spiritual relationship" that would last for life, and "perhaps beyond."¹³

In the wake of this, Mailer still pressed on, his writing remaining his first priority. In the 1980s and 1990s, Mailer's literary output continued to impress, though again his focus shifted – this time away from New Journalism and back to the novel. Mailer experimented with a number of different genres during these decades, with results ranging from 1984's neo-noir *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (which Mailer admitted was dashed off to meet pressing financial demands¹⁴) to the 1991 spy-thriller *Harlot's Ghost* to a New Testament reimagining told from the perspective of Jesus in 1997's *The Gospel According to the Son*. During these decades, Mailer also redoubled efforts to write his "big book"; as early as 1959, he had expressed his desire to write not just a major American novel, but *the* American novel, a book that would be "the longest ball ever to go up into the accelerated hurricane air of our American letters."¹⁵ While many of his books met this criteria in the literal sense, with hefty tomes such as *Ancient Evenings* (1983), *Harlot's Ghost*, and *Oswald's Tale* (1995) approaching or exceeding 1,000 pages – they never quite met Mailer's own ambitions, or the public anticipation he had created for that "longest ball." Still, despite some mixed reviews, these works were admired for – among other things – their level of evocative detail, innovation, and depth of research. *Ancient Evenings*, for instance, is a narrative in the epic tradition, steeped in ancient mythology and Egyptian history and spirituality; moreover, of researching and writing *Harlot's Ghost*, Mailer noted, "If I have not absorbed one hundred books on the CIA, then I must have come near."¹⁶ Further, to compose *Oswald's Tale*, a literary biography of Lee Harvey Oswald, Mailer spent months in Russia with producer and director Larry Schiller (who had also facilitated Mailer's work on *The Executioner's Song*) to conduct research and interview Oswald's widow, Marina.

The last decade of Mailer's life was defined by his ongoing vested interest in American politics and culture, and his sustained engagement with intellectual, philosophical, and spiritual growth on both individual and national levels. One of Mailer's most famous quotes, featured in *The Deer Park* and also inscribed on his gravestone, is: "There was that law of life so cruel and so just which demanded that one must grow or pay more for remaining the same."¹⁷ Mailer stayed true to this maxim even in his last years. His conversations with Mike Lennon entitled *On God: An Uncommon Conversation* (2007) reveal a mind still searching for answers,

still striving to better understand the workings of the human mind, body, and soul. As Mashey Bernstein discusses in Chapter 22, on Judaism, while Mailer was never traditionally religious, he maintained an interest in spirituality and specifically in the tenets of Jewish faith, culture, and history. This is evident in a number of moments in *On God*, as well as in Mailer's final novel *The Castle in the Forest* (2007), which imagines Hitler's youth and early development through the perspective of one of Satan's devils.

This introduction can provide only a snapshot of the major events of Mailer's life and his multitude of literary contributions. Over the decades, five Mailer biographies have been published, by Hillary Mills (1982), Peter Manso (1985), Carl Rollyson (1991), Mary Dearborn (1999), and most recently, by J. Michael Lennon, whose authorized biography of Mailer was released in 2013. Each of these offers unique insights that enhance our understanding of Mailer's life, and fill in the many gaps that a brief overview like this one must necessarily leave. It is worth noting, though, that Mailer's life is intertwined with many of the cultural, political, and historical contexts informing his work, since he himself was an active participant in many of the events about which he wrote, and as a result many additional biographical details are covered in subsequent chapters focusing on these contexts.

In fact, this is evident in Part I, which centers on Mailer's notable literary influences, and his relationships with other contemporary writers. Part II continues to examine the literary contexts of Mailer's work, with authors reflecting on the many genres to which he contributed over the years, and on his ability to fashion unique generic hybrids. This tendency to defy categorization is also evident in the ways Mailer straddles Modernist and Postmodernist movements, seeming to belong to both while being part of neither, as Jerry Schuchalter and Scott Duguid observe in Chapters 9 and 10, respectively.

Understanding Mailer's work requires discerning the many unique theories underpinning both his fiction and nonfiction – ideologies that developed over the course of his career, shifting as the world changed and Mailer changed with it. Thus, Parts III and IV focus on the political, philosophical, and cultural contexts of Mailer's work that helped shape these theories – subjects as varied as Marxism, American liberalism and conservatism, John F. Kennedy, the Vietnam War, totalitarianism, existentialism, technology, violence, race, and Judaism. Part V is an extension of this discussion of Mailer's philosophical and theoretical views, placing a specific focus on his engagement with the topic of gender and sexuality – topics often at the forefront of discussions about Mailer's idiosyncratic and often controversial views.

Introduction

9

Over the years, Mailer devoted book-length works to an array of figures with whom he felt affinity, whose mysteries and complexities obsessed him. Kennedy, as mentioned above, is one of these – but not all of these individuals were so closely tied to the political contexts of Mailer’s work. Often, the characteristics of these individual lives, as Mailer perceived them, overlapped with and informed his ideas about existentialism, masculinity, art, and celebrity, to name only a few. The chapters in Part VI address these intersections, providing information about the famous figures that inspired Mailer while also drawing connections between their lives and the philosophical and cultural contexts that inform Mailer’s body of work. As is the case with much of this volume, this section therefore overlaps with others, addressing not just philosophical and cultural contexts, but also matters of form and genre, contending with Mailer’s unique contribution to literary biography.

The collection concludes with Part VII, offering commentary on Mailer’s legacy: his role in advocating for literary and artistic freedom; the insights offered by the publication of his letters; his international presence; the direction of Mailer Studies in the twenty-first century; and finally Mailer’s ongoing political resonance, as his cultural commentary proves to be increasingly relevant during a particularly chaotic and uncertain moment in American politics.

The controversy that has swirled around Mailer’s personal life and public persona has often loomed larger than his literature. While it is not advisable to overlook Mailer’s missteps – in his life or his work – it is important to consider these as part of a complex and lauded career, the study of which not only provides insight into Mailer, but into American history and culture. Thus, it is the aim of *Norman Mailer in Context* to demonstrate how a variety of contexts can illuminate and enrich rather than overshadow Mailer’s literary contributions, highlighting the impact he has had in areas ranging from literary style to American political history. “Being a novelist, I want to know every world,” Mailer once wrote.¹⁸ The many contexts of his work demonstrate just how many different worlds he inhabited.

Notes

- 1 Norman Mailer, “Why Do People Dislike America?,” *The Egotists: Sixteen Surprising Interviews* with Oriana Fallaci (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1968), 8–9.
- 2 Norman Mailer, *The Spooky Art* (New York: Random House, 2003), 6.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 9.

- 4 J. Michael Lennon, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 193.
- 5 Quoted in Lennon, *A Double Life*, 289.
- 6 See J. Michael Lennon's article on Mailer's library, "The Naked and the Read," *Times Literary Supplement*, March 9, 2018, www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/norman-mailer-library/. Mailer also wrote some of his most famous work in a matter of weeks or a few months; *The Armies of the Night*, for instance, was composed at "breakneck speed . . . over ten thousand words a week." Lennon, *A Double Life*, 391.
- 7 As such, in 2018, the Library of America published its first editions of Mailer's work – a two volume boxed set entitled *Norman Mailer: The Sixties*.
- 8 Norman Mailer, "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," 1960. Reprinted in *The Presidential Papers* (New York: Bantam, 1963), 38.
- 9 Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night* (New York: Signet edition, 1968), 320.
- 10 Joan Didion, "I Want to Go Ahead and Do It," *The New York Times*, 7 October, 1979.
- 11 *Selected Letters of Norman Mailer*, ed. J. Michael Lennon (New York: Random House, 2014), 311.
- 12 Quoted in M. A. Farber, "Killing Clouds Ex-Convict Writer's New Life," *The New York Times*, 26 July 1981, www.nytimes.com/1981/07/26/nyregion/killing-clouds-ex-convict-writer-s-new-life.html
- 13 *Ibid.*, 572.
- 14 Mailer said that sometimes, "You just damn well have to write a book for no better reason than that your economic problems are pressing. *Tough Guys Don't Dance* comes under that rubric." *Spooky Art*, 111.
- 15 Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself*, 1959 (New York: Putnam's-Berkeley Medallion edition, 1966), 439.
- 16 Norman Mailer, "Author's Note," *Harlow's Ghost* (New York: Ballantine Books edition, 1991), 1170.
- 17 Norman Mailer, *The Deer Park*, 1955 (New York: Random House edition, 2015), 346.
- 18 Norman Mailer, "Social Life, Literary Desires, Literary Corruption," 2003. Reprinted in *The Mind of an Outlaw*, ed. Phillip Sipiora (New York: Random House, 2013), 533.