



NORMAN MAILER WRITER

There is no question that Norman Mailer has entered the mythology of masculine America. The mention of his name receives the odd response older people usually reserve for past presidents, war heroes, or felled civil-rights leaders. For a new generation, which knows nothing of the last three, he exists as that impossible mix of bohemian artist, bad-boy politico, and movie star. His biography is more telling of the times than Hearst's, Hoffman's, and Hemingway's combined. He first catapulted into the literary limelight in 1948, at the age of 25, with the publication of the defining war novel *The Naked and the Dead*. Since, he's written on everything from the pharaohs of ancient Egypt to Marilyn Monroe, from the 1967 antiwar march on the Pentagon to the right-to-die Utah spree-killer Gary Gilmore (picking up a Pulitzer each for the last two). There is also, of course, the media Mailer, the man who fell into headlines fast—for stabbing his wife in the early '60s; running for mayor of New York in '69; parties, sparrings, marriages; and even aiding in the release of prisoner turned writer Jack Abbott, who stabbed a waiter six weeks out of lockup. It is hard to determine how much of the macho myth of this man comes from the newspaper, the history books, or his own fierce writing style. In any case, his name is embedded in the folklore of the last century—mostly because he alone was trusted to write it. Some refer to him as the American Tolstoy. They are correct. At 80, Mailer is about to put out a new book, *The Spooky Art*. In this phenomenal essay collection, he discusses his insights and instincts on writing, his habits, and his heroes. As you'd expect for a legend this large, he has a great deal to tell us. **Christopher Bollen**

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN *The Spooky Art* is set to be released on your 80th birthday. What prompted you to write this book now?

NORMAN MAILER I can lay it all at the feet or the heart or the fault or the virtue of J. Michael Lennon, the provost at Wilkes University. He's put together a Mailer archive, which I wouldn't have without him. He said to me about a year ago, "You've given a great many interviews over the years, and you've said an awful lot about writing in them." I said, "Oh, come on." And he said, "I'll prove it to you." Apparently I had made something like eight hundred references to writing in forty years—which is not that unusual if you think about it. He went through the interviews and showed a few hundred to me. I started looking at them and began to see there was a book there. I worked on it slowly for about four or five months. It was a lot of fun to do.

CB You've written more than thirty books since 1948. When you publish a book, are you dogged by all those other books—and the reader's expectations—weighing on the new one?

NM That's a good, tricky question. Each time I write a book, I generally like to do something new that I haven't done before, because writing can be a terrible chore. What makes it come alive is doing something you haven't done. It's a little risk. At my age I'm not looking for prodigious risk, and yet, in a funny way, I still am. The greater the risk, the more dedication you feel toward the book, provided there is some confidence in you that you can do it. But as far as what the previous book has to do with a new one, I don't think it has that much influence, frankly. Each of my books has gone in a different direction. As I said in *The Spooky Art*, probably the artist that had the greatest influence on me, more than any writer, is Picasso, because of the way he had of going off in a new direction. He was telling us a secret,

which was that style is a tool by which you explore reality. Given the reality you are trying to uncover, you have to find a new way to go at it. And very often you blunder into that style. For my book *The Armies of the Night*, I didn't know what I was going to do for a whole week, and then finally, I took a piece out of *Time* magazine. There was this article there speaking of me in the third person and saying some very bad things. I printed that article up, and at the end of it, I put a very simple sentence, which went something like, "Let us leave the pages of *Time* magazine to find out what happened." But that set it up so I could write about myself in the third person, as Norman Mailer.

CB What's so interesting about your career is that most authors are tied to a certain decade or group—the Beats, the New York School, the New Journalists—but you are Norman Mailer on your own. You aren't shoved in any set. Are there any writers or periods you would associate yourself with?

NM No, I wouldn't. And I'm sure others wouldn't either. I don't think John Updike goes around comparing himself to anyone else. I think there is a tendency to feel *I am my own man. I'm my own writer*. Take Joyce Carol Oates, who's written, I believe, something like ninety books—that's a phenomenal feat. I don't think she would think of herself like any other woman who is writing today. When you're young, there is a tendency to say *Am I as good as so and so?* One is always measuring oneself against one's contemporaries. That's a silly worry. If you have real talent, no one's going to do a book like yours. However, there is a certain reality to that worrying because there is a time that is the right season for a book and a time that is not.

CB In *The Spooky Art*, you say that you had ultimately failed in a claim you made once in 1958 that you were going to make a "revolution in the consciousness of our time." But you're the writer who invented what it meant to be hip in "The White Negro"; you helped get Kennedy elected president with your essay on him in 1960; you were a radical presence in the Vietnam War protests; and you influenced the U.S. prison system. You brought these issues to the plate.

NM Listen, if I changed the prison system, it was for the worse. Really, that whole thing that happened with Jack Abbott was such a disaster that, if anything, I think parole boards are less open to letting prisoners go now than they were before. I may have changed the prison system one half of one percent for the worse, but I certainly wouldn't claim to have improved it. I wanted to, but your actions can result in the reverse of what you were hoping for.

CB When you were writing in the mid to late '60s, you were very politically involved. A reader can trace a line from your speech at the Berkeley war protest in 1965 to your participation in the march on the Pentagon in 1967 (which became the material for *The Armies of the Night*) to your presence at the charged events of both conventions in 1967 (covered in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*). Do you see any change in your politics during those years?

NM During that period, I would say my politics were pretty much the same. It was a happy period for politics because if there was one thing you knew, it was that the war in Vietnam was wrong. A lot of us had that feeling, quite powerfully, and that was enough to fuel good political writing. The hardest thing in political writing is to approach politics when you aren't sure of your own ideas. Your ideas can be wrong. But the important thing in writing is that you have a blind from which you can speak. A duck hunter has a blind where he can sit and

pop a duck if a duck is unfortunate enough to fly by. There is something similar to that in writing. Many of us had the confidence that the war was all wrong. So it was an easy period to write well and write quickly about politics. It's possible that the situation with Iraq could produce good writing. It may prove a fertile subject in time to come. **CB** Another point that comes through in the book is your emphasis on writers not trying to produce best-sellers. Your very first book, *The Naked and the Dead*, was a tremendous best-seller. Were you surprised it did so well?

NM Oh, yes. I used to go around and scold my editor, saying, "Do you realize that if this book doesn't sell enough to earn me a living, I'm going to have to write historical novels?" I was surprised when it took off. I had thought maybe it would sell enough so that I could live for a year or two. In those years you didn't need that much money. My god, you could live off of 5,000 dollars a year in 1948. One of the reasons it took off is that it is a very good best-seller novel. It's got many characters, a lot happens, and there is a confidence in the writer that he can handle everything that's happening, which is one of the marks of a best-seller—an absolute fool can write a best-seller, but they have to think they are on top of what they are doing.

CB How do you pick your subjects?

NM If you are older, you have a much better sense of when you are really going to write on something and when you're not. What I found as a writer is that the signals from the unconscious are faint. It's as if you are on an outpost in the North Pole and your radio is weak and you can barely hear what people are saying. I think that the unconscious is like that. It can be a surly fucking servant sometimes, because your unconscious might not be in love with you, but you've got to listen to it. Little pokes, little nudges are all you ever get. I think when you get older, you get more sensitive to those little signals, so you know that you are serious about a given book.

CB What about a book like *The Executioner's Song*?

NM That's totally different, because, if ever there was a book I could have written without delving into my unconscious, that would be the one. The material was extraordinary. It called for different talents—for great skill in interviewing. Larry Schiller, with whom I worked on that book, was a marvelous interviewer. When he'd interview someone, very often the person he was sitting down with had never been interviewed before. Larry had the sense to talk to them a long time about themselves. There was a motel clerk who happened to sign in Gary Gilmore on the night after he committed his first murder. The interview was worth maybe a half page of the book. But Larry spent an hour talking to the man about himself. An hour went by before he said to him, "When was the first time Gary Gilmore came to your motel?" At that point, the interviewee was extraordinarily well oiled. We got a huge amount of material through that style of interviewing. I was happy that I came to that book relatively late in my career. By then I knew not to mess with the material. That book is really a work of craft rather than talent.

CB Most writers don't get much press attention outside of book reviews. You, on the other hand, have never stopped being a cynosure of the media. Is it hard to stay focused?

NM It has its advantages and its disadvantages. It certainly doesn't help your sales. Young writers think, *Oh, my god. I've gotten a lot of press, a lot of ink. That will help me sell a book*. Well, it does occasionally, but most books aren't sold that way. When someone goes out to buy a novel, they have to have a certain respect for the writer. Best-sellers sell for totally different reasons—that's like going to McDonald's. For a serious novelist, a lot depends on respect for your name. So publicity makes your life more interesting perhaps, but it doesn't sell books. People think, *Oh, Mailer, there he goes again. Doesn't he ever stay out of the papers?* One of the reasons you are always in the papers is because you are one of the names that are around, one of the players on the board. As an example, I was at a party at the restaurant Mortimer's in New York years ago. It used to be one of the in restaurants. I had the remains of a cold. I started coughing, and a huge wad of phlegm was in my mouth. It was too embarrassing to take out a handkerchief, so I sort of nodded at people and walked outside. There were a bunch of photographers out there, because there were a lot of celebrities at that party. I obviously didn't want to talk with that stuff in my mouth, so I walked over to the curb and spat it out. One photographer came over and asked if I was all right. I said, "Oh, yeah. I just got rid of an oyster." Now, in Brooklyn, we used the word *oyster* for phlegm. I walked back in and didn't think anything else about it. The next day in the papers, it said, "Norman Mailer coughed up a bad oyster at Mortimer's restaurant." I had to call up the place and apologize. That sort of idiocy happens all the time. Someone once said, "Who's your public-relations man?" I said, "If I had one, I'd fire him."

CB You make the very strong assertion in *The Spooky Art* that a writer can "alter the nerves and marrow of a nation." You even go so far as to say that when novels disappear, so will democracy. What can be done to change this?

NM I don't like to think in terms of what can be done. Everyone thinks they have the right program to do things. I've got to believe that it just isn't so. It's self-contradictory. All writers can do is try to give their best. There is a saying that nothing can break your heart faster than writing a novel. If serious novels begin to disappear, we are that much closer to totalitarianism, because novels get to the interstices of a problem. Like nothing else they explore the various nuances of a moral question, and this is what keeps democracy alive. I'll tell you one thing I detest about George W. Bush is that he hates any question that takes longer than ten seconds to answer. That sort of thinking is antithetical or antagonistic to every novel.

CB Do you find you have a stronger work ethic as you get older?

NM As you get older, your life gets simpler. Elia Kazan once said, "Work is a blessing." In certain ways, you are wiser and more economical. You call your shots more carefully. A writer's life gets easier after a certain point. You've learned how to work with your lacks. That's as important as not asking your strengths to do double duty for your weaknesses.

Norman Mailer at home, Brooklyn, NY, 1963

Photography Diane Arbus

Copyright ©1963 The Estate of Diane Arbus, LLC

The Spooky Art is out January 31, 2003, from Random House