

NORMAN

Norman Mailer is one of the few American writers who, over a career spanning six decades during the latter half of the 20th century and nearly 40 books, doggedly occupied America's literary and cultural spotlight. He invented himself as the original writer-celebrity; he was a legend, a pariah, a larger-than-life caricature. Though admired and loathed in equal parts, he was never dismissed.

The public persona preceded him, but it was the writing—confrontational, brutally frank, sexually explicit, violent, a live wire connected to the collective psyche of his readers—that proved Mailer's reputation to be well-founded. Nominated for the National Book Award five times (he won for *Armies of Night* [1968]) and awarded two Pulitzer Prizes (for *Armies of the Night* and *The Executioner's Song* [1979]), Mailer wrote extensively and in every conceivable genre for dozens of magazines and journals, including the *Village Voice*, which he cofounded in 1955.

Despite the over-the-top autobiographical aspect of much of Mailer's writing, characterized by the solipsistic paean *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) and a number of other collections of essays and social commentary, the young Mailer seems to have lived a relatively normal childhood. Born in Long Branch, New Jersey, in 1923 and raised in Brooklyn by a doting mother, Mailer entered Harvard early, studied aeronautical engineering, and graduated in 1943. Joining the army early the following year, he served as a rifleman in the South Pacific. That experience led to his first—and in many ways, despite the quantity of writing to follow, his most famous—work, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948).

After experimenting with sex and drugs upon returning from the war, Mailer's mercurial life started to resemble the plot of a reality television show. Married six times (infamously, he stabbed his second wife, Adele Morales, at a party), he was known as an attentive father to his nine children. In 1969, he ran for mayor of New York City, but he didn't win. In his later years, he became the kind of genteel social gadabout he might have skewered a few decades before.

The author invited more than his share of scathing criticism over the years, none more pointed—or, in hindsight, more humorous—than fellow writer Gore Vidal's rant against his nemesis, which appeared in an essay, "Norman Mailer's Self-Advertisement," in the *Nation* on January 2, 1960. "Mailer is forever shouting at us that he is about to tell us something we must know or has just told us something revelatory and we failed to hear him," Vidal griped, "or that he will, God grant his poor abused brain and body just one more chance, get through to us so that we will know."



Norman Mailer, 1948

As maddening as Mailer and his moods could be, however—in both his work and his personal life—his longevity and his close attention to the gritty details of American culture and the hypocrisy of the country's most powerful institutions provide some of the most powerful writing and insightful social commentary to emerge from the second half of the 20th century.

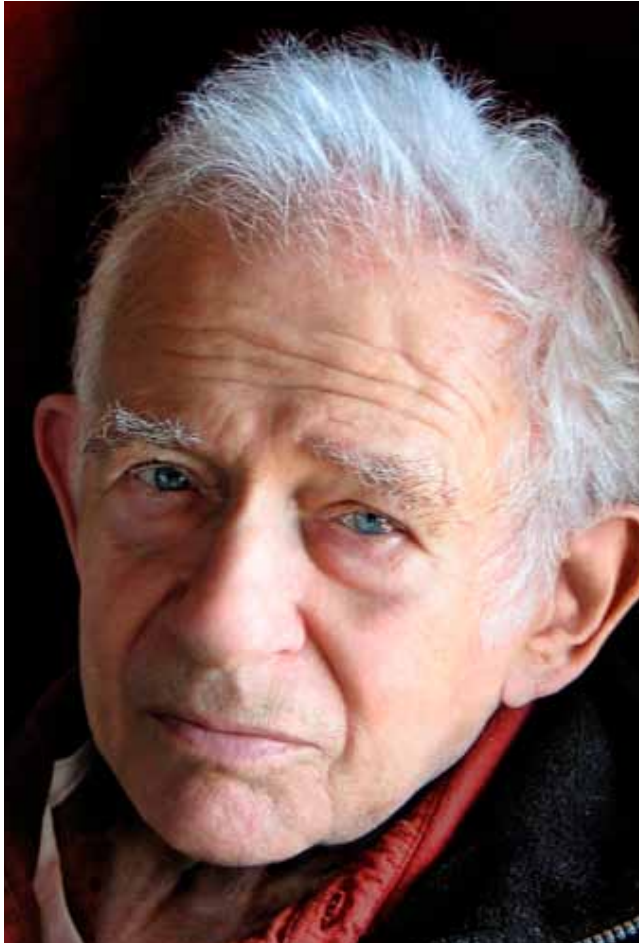
Mailer died in 2007 in his adoptive New York City, leaving the indelible mark on American letters that he had always hoped he would.

"If some of [Mailer's] books, written quickly and under financial pressure, were not as good as he had hoped, none of them were forgettable or without his distinctive stamp," Charles McGrath wrote in the lengthy *New York Times* obituary tracing the arc of a contradictory, incandescent character. "And if he never quite succeeded in bringing off what he called 'the big one'—the Great American Novel—it was not for want of trying."

MAILER

Book by Book

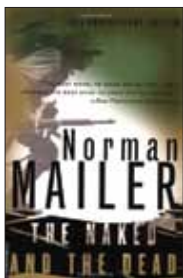
BY PATRICK SMITH



Norman Mailer, 2007

THE EARLY NOVELS

The Naked and the Dead (1948)



little anticipated the arrival of a 25-year-old novelist of such obvious talent. In the *Naked and the Dead*, Mailer, who had conceived the book in broad brushstrokes even before he joined the army, focuses on an infantry platoon struggling

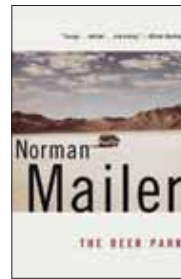
“The natural role of twentieth-century man is anxiety,” General Edward Cummings concludes in Mailer’s debut novel, which stayed on the *New York Times* best seller list for more than a year. And the author spent much of the next six decades proving the truth of that role. In the aftermath of World War II, the American reading public could have

to survive while stationed on a Japanese-occupied island in the South Pacific during World War II.

Partly autobiographical—Mailer spent time on the island of Leyte during World War II, seeing limited action—and partly the work of a gifted and creative writer who had much to say about the moral landscape of war and life, the novel is still considered Mailer’s finest work. Along with Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, James Jones’s *From Here to Eternity*, and Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, it remains one of the iconic novels to come out of the war.

“Even in its repetitiousness, wordiness, and overanalysis of motive, it is a commanding performance by a young man of 25 whose gifts are impressive and whose failures are a matter of reach rather than grasp.” DAVID DEMPSEY, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 5/9/1948

The Deer Park (1955)



After the lackluster response to his second novel, *Barbary Shore* (1951), Mailer risked his reputation by writing a book so obscene in the eyes of his publisher, Rinehart, that it was unceremoniously rejected; it eventually found a home with Putnam.

Hollywood’s elite gather in Desert D’Or, a thinly fictionalized Palm Springs. In a story of two overlapping love affairs—one between an Air Force pilot and an actress, the other a director accused of Communism and the vamp who threatens to end his career—Mailer satirizes the moral decadence of the 1950s as characterized by Joseph McCarthy and his hearings before the House Un-American Activities Committee. The novel’s long-suffering theater director is a thinly disguised version of Elia Kazan, the famed Hollywood director whose career was marred by testimony he gave before the committee in 1952.

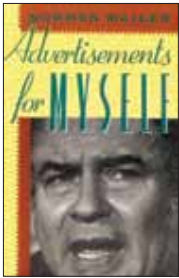
Like *Barbary Shore* before it, *The Deer Park* met with a frosty critical reception. “With those bad reviews of my second and third book, I learned the way a young professional fighter would learn that they can take a beating,” Mailer said in a 2004 interview. “They can take a bad beating, and they’re not ready to quit the ring, and that does give you a fine strength. It also takes something off you forever.” In hindsight, perhaps the most interesting aspect of the novel is that the poor reviews prompted the author to reconsider his narrative approach—and, for a brief time, forced him to question his chosen career.

“Mailer has undertaken to write about a group of procurers, lushes, casual adulterers, hypocrites, people not so much in love with evil as in search of it. ... Mailer would seem to have the instincts of the artist, which is to say ... that his approach to his material is at bottom moral.” JOHN BROOKS, *NEW YORK TIMES*,

10/16/1955

COUNTERCULTURE AND PROTEST

Advertisements for Myself (1959)

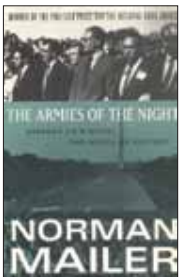


A collection of Mailer's short stories, articles, and essays—including “The Man Who Studied Yoga,” “The White Negro,” and “The Time of Her Time,” among many others in the book's nearly 500 pages, as well as excerpts from previously published fiction—are linked by an autobiographical chronicle that introduces each piece. In the aggregate, the work showcases Mailer's considerable talents in nonfiction and his use of a quasi-confessional style that became the stock-in-trade of cable-news anchors and afternoon television and radio talk shows. *Advertisements for Myself* also left little doubt that the author's ego had recovered from the bitter critical disappointment of *The Deer Park*.

“Mr. Mailer wastes too much ammunition in discharging minor grievances and in firing away at effects rather than causes. ... Elsewhere in the book Mr. Mailer shows that he has a gift of humor. Its manifestations are often acrid and sometimes very funny.” HARRY T. MOORE, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 11/1/1959

Armies of the Night (1968)

♦ PULITZER PRIZE, NATIONAL BOOK AWARD



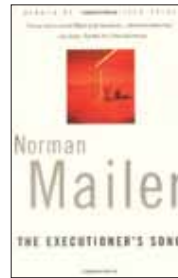
The follow-up to the previous year's *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, an examination from a young soldier's point of view of his thoughts on killing, death, and duty, *Armies of the Night* took American readers by storm, winning unanimous praise from critics and pulling a rare double in the year's major literary awards. A split narrative fusing nonfiction and fiction and subtitled *History as a Novel, the Novel as History*, the book recalls the author's participation in the anti-Vietnam War march on the Pentagon in October 1967. “[I]n fifty years the day may loom in our history as large as the ghosts of the Union dead,” Mailer intones in a comic self-portrait—and a subsequent arrest for crossing a police line.

The novel became, along with Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Hunter S. Thompson's *Hell's Angels*, and Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, part of what Wolfe later called “the new journalism”: nonfiction with all the color of a novel.

“The book cracks open the hard nut of American authority at the center, the uncertainty of our power—and, above all, the bad conscience that now afflicts so many Americans. *Armies of the Night* is a peculiarly appropriate and timely contribution to this moment of the national drama and, among other things, it shows Mailer relieved of his vexing dualities, able to bring all his interests, concerns and actually quite traditional loyalties to equal focus.” ALFRED KAZIN, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 5/5/1968

The Executioner's Song (1979)

♦ PULITZER PRIZE

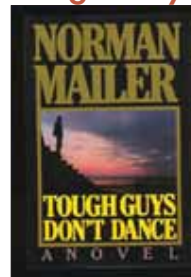


After the success of *Armies of the Night*, an intense period of production saw, among other books, the publication of *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968), a documentary-style take on political mayhem collected from pieces Mailer wrote for *Esquire*, and later, a controversial biography of Marilyn Monroe. But *The Executioner's Song*, a journalistic biography, written with the help of reporter Lawrence Schiller, vied for top spot in the body of Mailer's work and won a second Pulitzer for the author.

The long narrative follows the brief, blighted life of killer Gary Gilmore, an intractable, violent product of America's prison system who ended up on death row after robbing and murdering two men. In 1977, he became the first man to be executed for his crimes in the United States since the previous year's reinstatement of the death penalty.

“For all the sleaziness of the characters, I read the book with fascination from beginning to end. ... But even more enthralling than the questions Mr. Mailer teases us with, is the technique he employs to do it. He tells his entire story in the voices of the various people who supplied the eyewitness accounts of Mr. Gilmore's life and death, and no more than a dozen times in the book's thousand pages does he let his own voice slip in.” CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 9/24/1979

Tough Guys Don't Dance (1984)



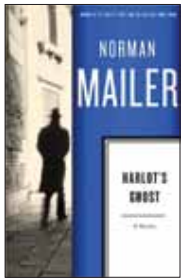
Mailer's flinty prose always tended to the noir, and he explores that voice in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, which features a reporter, Tim Madden, who wakes one morning with a severed female head, a blood-splattered Porsche, a tattoo—and no memory of the previous night. Coming on the heels of the previous year's *Ancient Evenings*, Mailer's “Egyptian novel” more than a decade in the making, *Tough Guys* sailed equally uncharted waters in the author's body of work.

“This book is like an illegitimate baby—it was written in two months, therefore born out of wedlock, and I'm struck by the fact that the event took place,” Mailer said in a *New York Times* interview. His cavalier attitude toward the novel's genesis and its critical reception, which varied so wildly from lavish praise to spiteful wrath that one suspects Mailer really was ahead of the game in self-promotion and self-branding (no such thing as bad press, right?), makes *Tough Guys Don't Dance* a must-read in the author's body of work.

“Tough Guys Don’t Dance is, for openers, an engaging murder mystery, vividly set in a locale (Provincetown, Mass.) that Mailer, a sometime homeowner there, knows as well as the back of his fist. ... He has never sublimated his preoccupations so thoroughly into fuel for engrossing fiction.” PAUL GRAY, *TIME*, 8/6/1984

LATE NOVELS AND NONFICTION

Harlot’s Ghost (1991)



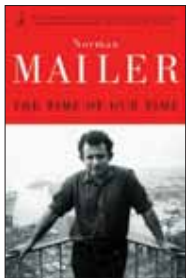
Harry Hubbard, a smart young man whose father and whose mentor, Hugh Montague (aka Harlot), both of whom are senior CIA operatives, coerce him to join the Agency. When Montague dies on his boat—the cause of the death is unclear—and Hubbard’s wife admits infidelity, the chastened agent travels to Russia, where he reads the story of his life in the CIA. The remembrance of his career—the subterfuge, his relationships, Cold War gamesmanship, the Kennedy assassination—form the spine of *Harlot’s Ghost*.

The last line of the book—“To be continued”—left fans clamoring for a sequel that never came and made critics who thought the 1,300-page behemoth overlong anxious that Mailer would make good on the tease.

“Mailer here espouses just about all known and several unknown forms of fiction: Bildungsroman, epistolary novel, diary novel, phone-call novel, gossip-column novel, philosophico-political novel, pornographic novel and adventure story rotate into our field of vision. He comes closest to another highly gifted, overexuberant ex-Harvard man, Thomas Wolfe, whose voluminousness he certainly has.”

JOHN SIMON, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 9/29/1991

The Time of Our Time (1998)



The Time of Our Time narrates events, both big and small, that shaped America over the last half century. Mailer included passages from *The Naked and the Dead*, *The Deer Park*, *An American Dream*, *The Armies of the Night*, *The Executioner’s Song*, *Ancient Evenings*, and *Harlot’s Ghost*—some of the author’s most celebrated books and others that

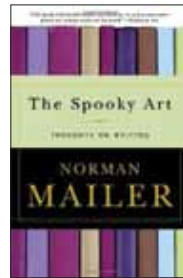
had critics decrying Mailer’s seemingly capricious talent. It also collects portraits of Ernest Hemingway, Dorothy Parker, Truman Capote, JFK, Marilyn Monroe, Lee Harvey Oswald, Madonna, Bill Clinton, and others as they appeared in some of his best magazine pieces. Think of it as an update 40 years later of *Advertisements for Myself*. Without the ads.

“Mailer has never hit that home-run book, but in his repeated attempts, honestly recorded in *The Time of Our Time*, we are offered a remarkable portrait of an artist and of the indelible mark he has left on American life and letters.” JAMES SHAPIRO, *NEW*

YORK TIMES, 5/10/1998

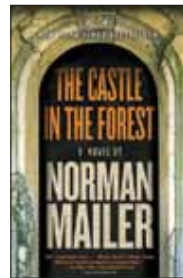
The Spooky Art (2003)

Thoughts on Writing



Putting an honest perspective on how to handle the rewards and trials of the writing life, aspects of craft the author knows well, Mailer, having rewarded the purely visceral for decades, seems finally to have come to terms with the craft of writing: “Writing is spooky. There is no routine of an office to keep you going, only the blank page each morning, and you never know where your words are coming from, those divine words.” Fans of Mailer’s writing will find some bon mots here; for the novice, the book provides some valuable context and access to the writer’s mind, although for unadulterated passion and venom, check out anything from the 1960s.

The Castle in the Forest (2007)



A brave, yet flawed final attempt by the protean author. At his death, Mailer was writing a sequel to *The Castle in the Forest*, which is narrated by a mysterious S. S. man and presents readers with a young Adolf Hitler. Only after Alois Hitler beds his daughter, Klara, and makes possible the birth of Adolf, does the devil (called the Maestro) become interested in Team

Hitler.

After tackling such historical figures as Marilyn Monroe, Jesus Christ, Lee Harvey Oswald, Picasso, and Muhammad Ali in his books, Mailer claimed that an insistent muse led him to the story of Hitler’s childhood. His first book in 10 years received mixed reviews. Supporters opined that no matter how distasteful his subject, Mailer still exerts a powerful, mesmerizing hold on his readers. Detractors, however, cited a clumsy Freudian hypothesis (Hitler as possibly the offspring of father-daughter incest), among other shortcomings. Nonetheless, even the naysayers agreed that Mailer is a master prose stylist whose eccentricity never fails to engage—on some level. (★★★ Mar/Apr 2007)

“Should *The Castle in the Forest* prove his last major work, then it must be said he ends in strength, the virility of his inventiveness undiminished by the approach of death or the changing of literary fashion, or the dehumanizing onrush of digital technology.” CHAUNCEY MABE, *SOUTH FLORIDA SUN-SENTINEL*,

2/4/2007 ■