Norman Mailer was one of the most protean writers of the latter half of the twentieth century. In both his fiction and non-fiction, regardless of its setting or time period, Mailer mapped the conflicts and concerns of contemporary history. Indeed, from his first published novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), to his final novel, *The Castle in the Forest* (2007), Mailer probes society's and his characters' spiritual, psychological, and physical wounds.

Norman Kingsley Mailer was born to Fanny (Schneider) Mailer and her husband, Isaac Barnett “Barney” Mailer, on January 31, 1923. His sister, Barbara, was born in April 1927, and both the immediate and extended family, including Norman's cousin “Cy,” remained unstinting in pursuit of Norman's excellence; for his part, Mailer remained tightly connected to his family. At age 16 Mailer, who had spent much of his adolescence building model airplanes, attended Harvard to study engineering, but soon found himself attracted to writing, a desire actively supported by his family. Early on in writing, as in life, Mailer discovered one of his many alter egos in the Irish protagonist of James Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* novels. And, indeed, his early college writing, such as the never-published *No Percentage* (1941), was imitative of Farrell, along with Hemingway and Faulkner.

Not only did Mailer dive headlong into writing, but he also actively sought the experiences that would give truth and voice to his words. Indeed, throughout most of his career, it was often difficult to separate the narrative of his life from the narratives he wrote. In particular, his marital history, which he comments upon in *Armies of the Night* (1968a), was fraught with drama. Mailer married his first wife, Beatrice Silverman, a Boston University student he met when he was a junior at Harvard, shortly before he was drafted in 1944. On November 19, 1960, after a raucous party that concluded with a fight and beating in the street, Mailer quarreled with his second wife, Adele Morales, then stabbed her in the abdomen and back. Mailer was sent to Bellevue, although he maintained all along that he was sane, and when Adele recovered from her wounds, she refused to press charges. While there was an attempt at reconciliation, the couple separated in March 1961. He then married Lady Jeanne Campbell in early 1962. Despite his relative optimism in *Armies*, published four years after he wed next wife Beverly Bentley, they separated, and Mailer’s mistress, Carol Stevens, moved into the family home. It was not, however, until 1980 when Norris Church was the central woman in Mailer’s life, that Mailer quickly married and divorced Carol Stevens to legitimize their daughter Maggie, and then married Norris, whom he considered his soulmate and with whom he shared a birthday. Despite the volatility of his married
life, Mailer remained a central figure in his children's lives, all nine of them – Susan, Danielle, Betsy Ann, Kate, Michael Burks, Stephen, Maggie, Matthew, and John Buffalo Mailer – with the last of whom Norman collaborated on *The Big Empty* (2006), a father/son series of interviews on issues of the time.

Not only did his domestic situations provide a symbiotic relationship to his writing, reinforcing his sense of the violence that lurks just below the surface of love, but also other life experiences often crossed the boundaries between his fiction and non-fiction. Beginning with the first-hand military experience in World War II that provided the cynicism and material for *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer engaged fully in politics, Hollywood, boxing, and other arenas in which he shaped himself and his fiction and non-fiction. Mailer consistently made history by challenging society's complacency and too-easily embraced ideologies, arguing in “The White Negro” (1957) that murder is “not altogether cowardly”; battling the feminists of the 1970s in *Prisoners of Sex*; naively supporting Jack Henry Abbott’s release from prison, helping him publish *In the Belly of the Beast* (1981), and testifying for Abbott at his trial in 1982 after he was arrested for fatally stabbing a busboy; and inviting Ronald Reagan's Secretary of State George Schulz to the PEN International Congress in 1985. He examined politics from the inside and out: expressing the desire to believe in JFK in “Superman Comes to the Supermarket” (1960), running for mayor of New York as a Left Conservative in 1969, and covering the Democrat and Republican Conventions in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968b). If the world of American politics provided grist for the Mailer mill, the world of Hollywood gave him the opportunity to examine the “American Character” in its many evolving forms – particularly in his novel, and later the play, *The Deer Park* (1955), and in his two books on Marilyn Monroe, *Marilyn: A Biography* (1973) and *Of Women and Their Elegance* (1980). Then, too, there is the world of boxing and its character as it is reflected in *The Fight* (1975) as well as Mailer’s own pugilistic efforts. Indeed, throughout his career, it was evident that Mailer, as he admitted in *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), crafted himself as self-consciously as he crafted his characters.

One of the difficulties in evaluating Mailer's impact on literature is that critical reception has often confused, in both positive and negative ways, the man with the work and has often been radically inconsistent. With the possible exceptions of his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, which was universally heralded as the best war novel of its time, and *The Executioner's Song* (1979), seen as an antithesis to Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), almost every other publication was greeted by equal responses divided between love and hate. From the beginning of his career, Mailer also encountered difficulties with censorship – nearly a fifth of the profanity in *Naked* had to be removed even after his cousin recommended that he use the word “fug” instead of the more offensive “f” word – yet remained dedicated to making his readers uncomfortable. Ever the iconoclast, Mailer made it clear that his job as a writer was to shake his readers to the core and to challenge the too-easily held beliefs of society.

From the beginning, Mailer crafted characters – both fictional and historical – who stood in the midst of existential conflicts. He defined those existential crises as moments when one must choose a direction without knowing the outcome. Indeed, for Mailer heroism is the deliberate act of choice in the face of the unknown, of bravery, however foolhardy, in the face of fear. So, most of Mailer's novels begin by situating his characters at the edge of the unknown and unknowable. The soldiers at the beginning of *The Naked and the Dead* know that they will face battle the next day and that they may, of course, face death. The work's central metaphor is literally played out in the card game with which the book opens. The narrator follows the internal and external dialogues as Wilson, Croft, and Gallagher
contemplate both their choices to fold, hold, or raise the stakes and the unknown outcome of the next
day's battle. The protagonist of The Deer Park, Sergius O'Shaughnessy, who does not consider himself
a gambler, does make the fateful choice to enter a poker game, and it is that act that brings him to the
Desert D'Or retreat with $14,000. While most of these existential moments are acted out in the face
of death, either as the potential outcome of an action or as the generative conditions under which one
acts, Mailer's version of death in Ancient Evenings (1983) implies that even the afterworld demands
choice, for Menenhetet II, a deceased young nobleman who guides the reader through an ancient
Egyptian necropolis, must decide which route to take through the Land of the Dead. Will the newly
deeased Egyptian trust his corrupt great-grandfather's ghost, as repulsive in death as he had been in
life, and allow Menenhetet I to guide the younger ghost in his journey? Furthermore, humans act without
absolute guidelines of right and wrong.

For Mailer and his characters, there can be no certainty because the outcome of the battle between
God and the Devil has not yet been determined. God is not all-powerful and does not know his destiny
but continues to engage in the war between good and evil. Evil itself is an unknown, a mystery, because
it is part of this ongoing war. So, God and the Devil are part of an irresolvable dialectic. When Mailer
imagines God and the Devil, both sides “have armies, adjutants, aides, little demons, angels”; both “have
their department of dirty tricks” (1975). In Armies of the Night, Mailer acknowledges that both “armies”
are equally admirable and disgraceful; in Harlot's Ghost (1991), he directly explores the department of
dirty tricks, the CIA, without bringing the plot to full closure, ending as it does “To Be Continued.” In
The Gospel According to the Son (1997), Mailer ambitiously imagines Christ’s own uncertain role in the
Manichaean battle between his father and Satan. Last, but not least, The Castle in the Forest explicitly
sets up the Miltonic structure of the war as demons and angels, without knowing the future, direct
Hitler and history. The problem of evil, however, is too complex to trace as a simple causal pattern.
Part of the lesson Mailer learned in writing about Gary Gilmore in The Executioner's Song, which he
then applied to writing about Hitler in The Castle in the Forest, is that there is no simple answer to
“Why?” While at one point in his career, Mailer thought that the novelist might be able to explain what
the psychologist could not, his experience with Gary Gilmore revealed the impossibility of such a task.
So, despite the enormous amount of “factual” information and multiple points of view he marshals in
The Executioner's Song or the bibliography, theology, or psychology he cites in Castle, Mailer came to
believe that the best the novelist can do is to push the ideas as far as possible and provide the highly
detailed materials in which the conflicts play themselves out.

Ever anxious about their masculinity, Mailer's protagonists violently struggle to define their manhood in
relation both to other men, particularly father figures, and to women. In bed, as in war or the boxing ring,
these men are constantly caught up in webs of power and authority. The Naked and the Dead pits
Cummings against Hearn; Barbary Shore (1951) joins violence and sexuality as Mikey Lovett is
embroiled in an Oedipal triangle with his landlady, Guinevere, and her husband, McLeod, who is
murdered. In An American Dream (1965), which was published first in serial form in Esquire, Stephen
Richards Rojack murders the wife whose power threatens to unman him, and much to the dismay of
certain critics, he gets away with it, not unlike the way in which Mailer got away with stabbing Adele.
Later in 1984, Mailer published Tough Guys Don't Dance in which Tim Madden wonders if he is
sufficiently the “tough guy” his father expects him to be, even as he is unsure whether or not he has
committed murder. Part of Mailer's fascination with violent characters, particularly Gary Gilmore, is the
way in which the barely controlled violence of a sexual relationship can explode in otherwise
unmotivated ways. Finally, The Castle in the Forest focuses as much on the father's powerful sexuality
as on the way Hitler’s personality is forged in the heightened crucible of sex and violence.

Just as Mailer’s own highly volatile romantic relationships and pugilistic impulses informed his novels and non-fiction, so did his sometimes paradoxically ambivalent politics. Many have argued that one of the weaknesses of *Barbary Shore* is its overtly political allegory, yet in neither *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967) nor *Armies of the Night* (1968a) – two novels more explicitly engaged in the political question of their day – does Mailer take a position on that central question. The main character in *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, simply called D.J., is set at the edge of his existential moment, preparing for his departure for Vietnam. Mailer, however, is much more interested in the less-than-harmonious chorus of voices responding to the political choices; D.J. provides narrative access to multiple voices, just as *Armies* takes its readers to the steps of the Pentagon so that they can eavesdrop on the full panoply of American voices. Similarly, while *The Executioner’s Song* places the reader in the midst of the cacophony of voices – both those calling for Gilmore’s execution and those against – it is genuinely democratic in its interrogation of the various political and personal motivations of those engaged in the debate.

Dialectics and doubling are not simply the content of Mailer’s work but the form as well. *The Executioner’s Song* is divided between “Western Voices” and “Eastern Voices,” while *Harlot’s Ghost*, which is about double agents, falls between the “Alpha” and “Omega.” These divisions mark stylistic, as well as perspectival, differences. In the middle 1950s, somewhat frustrated by the reception to *Barbary Shore* and beginning to doubt the conventional form of the novel, Mailer began to explore what came to be known as New Journalism and at one point owned a 30 percent share of the *Village Voice*. The subtitle of *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History* announces the generic oppositions that the book will then call into question, hence challenging literary classifications and categories as well. In fact, the confusion of how to classify Mailer’s work is evident in the two Pulitzer Prizes he won: *The Armies of the Night* won the Pulitzer Prize for non-fiction, while *The Executioner’s Song* won the Pulitzer for fiction. Occupying the space between the “facts” of history and the imaginary reconstructions of the novel, Mailer’s books seek to redefine the Great American novel. Just as America is itself too complex to classify, so the forms in which Mailer writes of America avoid neatness and simplicity. In *Tough Guys Don’t Dance, Harlot’s Ghost, and The Deer Park*, Mailer pushes the generic boundaries of the detective novel, the spy novel, and the Hollywood novel past their limits. Mailer’s efforts to capture the expansiveness of America, its many voices, and its chaotic democracy also set up a tension between the sheer length of his novels (typically over 1,000 pages) and his prose style. While he is certainly capable of Faulknerian sentences that continue at length, many of his sentences are powerfully succinct, almost terse, and they are sometimes delivered at the most intense moments with a flatness of affect that paradoxically intensifies the experience.

In addition to the Pulitzer Prizes for *The Armies of the Night* and *The Executioner’s Song*, Norman Mailer received the National Book Award for non-fiction for both *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* and *The Armies of the Night*. *The Executioner’s Song* also received a National Book Critics Circle Award nomination, an American Book Award nomination, and a Notable Book citation from the American Library Association. Mailer was also the recipient of the Emerson-Thoreau Medal for lifetime achievement from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1989 and the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters from the National Book Foundation in 2005. Despite failing health and eyesight, during interviews following the publication of *The Castle in the Forest*, Mailer expressed his plan for a new novel that would pick up from the digression on Czar Nicholas II in *Castle
and further explore yet another one of the twentieth century's enigmatic figures, Rasputin. Normal Mailer died at the age of 84 on November 10, 2007.

SEE ALSO: Farrell, James T. (AF); Faulkner, William (AF); Hemingway, Ernest (AF); Historiographic Metafiction (AF); The Novel and War (AF); Social-Realist Fiction (AF); Wolfe, Thomas (AF)

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


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