

DOC NYC Film Festival 2023: Part 3

How to Come Alive with Norman Mailer: A documentary approaches the American novelist with sympathy, but not enough scrutiny

Erik Schreiber
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This is the third of three articles in a series devoted to the 2023 DOC NYC film festival, which was held on November 8–26. The first article is available [here](#), and the second is available [here](#).

Director Jeff Zimbalist's *How to Come Alive with Norman Mailer* (2023), screened at the most recent DOC NYC film festival, in November, attempts to grapple with the American writer in his various contradictions and assess his cultural and political significance.

Mailer's unhappy trajectory speaks in an especially spectacular and therefore all the more telling way to the fate of a significant portion of the postwar intelligentsia in the US and elsewhere. Starting out as a sharp critic of American bourgeois society, under the influence, to an extent, of the Trotskyist movement or its periphery, the novelist was intimidated by or accommodated himself to the official anticommunism of the 1950s. He subsequently spent much of his life writing secondary or worse material, becoming one of that same society's court jesters and even at times, to be frank, a buffoon.

His ultimate intellectual prostration was summed up by his visit, shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, to CIA headquarters to "mend fences." The visit was memorialized by the *New York Times* in February 1992 under the headline, "Mailer Visits C.I.A. and Finds He's in Friendly Territory." Is it possible to imagine a worse fate?

One doesn't expect to encounter this perspective on Mailer in a contemporary documentary, or even a serious trace of it, and, on that score, Zimbalist's film holds few surprises. It is a conscientious, but not terribly insightful work.

Mailer's provocations, some of them sophomoric, were not well-received by feminists and others during his lifetime. But there is no question that what was *best in him* would find the current stifling atmosphere uncongenial. In fact, the climate has been inhospitable to him even in death.

Mailer established his reputation with his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), and gained further acclaim, or at least celebrity, with subsequent work such as *An American*

Dream (1965) and *The Executioner's Song* (1979). Mailer gloried in playing the contrarian, with the ostensible aim of challenging people to think. He sometimes succeeded in this aim. But in his quest to outrage, increasingly divorced as time went on from a hostile attitude toward the status quo, Mailer also veered into boorishness and self-destructive behavior. Nor did his literary output maintain a consistent caliber or social value.

How to Come Alive with Norman Mailer follows the writer from his boyhood in the 1930s through his service during World War II and throughout his tumultuous literary, journalistic and personal life. It includes clips from many of Mailer's frequent interviews and public appearances. Mailer's family members and contemporaries such as journalist Gay Talese, director John Waters and talk show host Dick Cavett also offer their perspectives on the writer. This variety of sources makes for a comparatively rich presentation. Yet Zimbalist's film does not provide the historical context and critical commentary it needs to.

Mailer was born to a middle-class Jewish family in 1923 and grew up in New York City. His mother's emphasis on reading and the life of the mind strongly influenced him, and he came to see writing as a noble profession. After he received a high score on an IQ test, he apparently developed a sense of self-importance. His exceptional intelligence enabled him to enroll in Harvard at age 16 and to graduate with honors.

The film points out that Mailer was old enough to witness and fear fascism in the 1930s, but it says little about how the militant labor struggles and widespread socialist sentiment of the period affected him. In 1944, Mailer was drafted into the US Army and ultimately stationed in the Philippines. He was impressed by a few macho soldiers from Texas who may have contributed to his subsequent fixation on masculinity. Mailer's experiences during the war in the South Pacific provided the inspiration for *The Naked and the Dead*, a book that still disturbs and challenges its readers.

Critics hailed Mailer's literary debut as a great war novel, and the work became a best seller. Suddenly, Mailer was everywhere in the media and on magazine covers. He had achieved his dream

of becoming a respected writer seemingly overnight.

How to Come Alive says little about Mailer's next two novels, apart from the fact that they were critical failures. We see Mailer himself disparage them. But we're not told that Mailer wrote his second novel, *Barbary Shore* (1951), under the influence of Jean Malaquais, a leftist Polish-Jewish writer and erstwhile member of the Trotskyist movement. As we previously commented, Mailer said that he finished his second novel "with a political position which was a far-flung mutation of Trotskyism." In fact, Mailer at the time supported a version of state capitalism (Malaquais maintained a long friendship with C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya, who rejected the positions of the Fourth International), but the American novelist's "leftist" political orientation raised the hackles of the capitalist press.

Barbary Shore, set in a Brooklyn rooming house and involving lengthy discussions in part among its ideologically driven residents, was published during the Cold War, the McCarthy era and the Korean War. Anticommunism had become the state religion in America. Accusations of communist sympathies ruined not only careers, but also lives.

In this environment, Mailer's open interest in socialism quickly drew the near-universal hostility of the critics. The major newspapers and journals of opinion greeted *Barbary Shore* with sneers. *Time* magazine, for example, headlined its extremely hostile review *Last of the Leftists?* and noted that,

Riffling the dead leaves of a bankrupt dream, neo-Marxist Mailer sees one faint hope, 'socialist culture.'

Although Mailer was obviously disgusted with the conformism and ideological repression of the postwar period, he was not prepared for such an onslaught. Faced with this unrelenting pressure, Mailer retreated from his socialist inclinations. None of this makes its way into the documentary.

Mailer was one of many American artists and intellectuals who succumbed to such pressures after World War II. Like many of his peers, Mailer turned away from social engagement and toward largely psycho-sexual concerns. Along with Freudianism, Mailer became almost obsessed with masculinity, especially as expressed stereotypically in lust and violence. *How to Come Alive* does not describe this change in Mailer's approach or how it affected his writing.

The film does discuss, though, an apparent symptom of Mailer's growing fascination with violence. After a party one night in 1960, Mailer stabbed and nearly killed his second wife Adele Morales. He was involuntarily committed to Bellevue Hospital for a few weeks. Although Morales did not press charges against him, Mailer subsequently pleaded guilty to a charge of assault, for which he received a suspended sentence. Mailer and Morales later divorced, but the attack did not end his career.

Zimbalist's documentary does show that Mailer remained, for better and worse, a literary and public figure to be reckoned with. Though he enjoyed baiting feminists, they respected his intelligence enough to listen to what he had to say. In fact, it was

journalist and feminist leader (and Democratic Party supporter) Gloria Steinem who encouraged Mailer to run in the 1969 New York City Democratic Mayoral Primary election. The film mentions that his mayoral campaign was unsuccessful but says little about Mailer's reformist-libertarian program ("Power to the Neighborhood" and opposition to "centralized government"), which made no serious appeal to the city's working population. By this time, the writer was calling himself a "left conservative."

How to Come Alive also says too little in general about the literary and social significance of Mailer's work. It discusses novels such as *The Executioner's Song* in terms of what they meant to Mailer personally or what he was going through when he wrote them. The themes of these books, the questions that Mailer raised in them and the skill or honesty with which he dealt with them are given comparatively short shrift. The predominant focus is Mailer, the public personality.

Throughout his career, Mailer remained concerned about American society, which he found increasingly loutish. He detected a creeping fascism or "psychological totalitarianism," as he called it. He sought to challenge this society to become more self-critical, less afraid of failure and more noble. Some of Mailer's observations, though hazy, may have been correct. Yet his focus on the psyche and his tendency to rely on impressions and intuition sharply limited the extent to which Mailer's work could reflect social truth in America or anywhere else. Moreover, Mailer's potentially productive desire to provoke often degenerated into gratuitous crudity, nastiness and clownishness. His visit to the CIA 15 years before his death in 2007 gives some indication of where his various musings and meanderings landed him.

Zimbalist made *How to Come Alive* with attention and care, and the film provides a good amount of information about its subject. The view that it presents nevertheless has serious limits. The global and historical issues that affected Mailer's development are not examined in great depth. The film takes Mailer seriously, but also perhaps too uncritically. His family members and contemporaries admit that he was mistaken at times, but the film does not get to the social and historical roots of Mailer's mistakes — or to the roots of his achievement. To some extent, the film takes to Mailer the subjective approach that he took to the world. The resulting picture is detailed but significantly incomplete.

Concluded



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