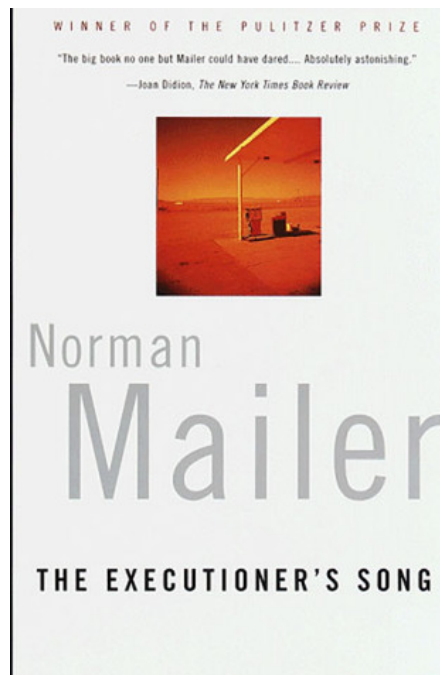




The Executioner's Song

Norman Mailer

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The Executioner's Song

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The Executioner's Song Norman Mailer

In what is arguably his greatest book, America's most heroically ambitious writer follows the short, blighted career of Gary Gilmore, an intractably violent product of America's prisons who became notorious for two reasons: first, for robbing two men in 1976, then killing them in cold blood; and, second, after being tried and convicted, for insisting on dying for his crime. To do so, he had to fight a system that seemed paradoxically intent on keeping him alive long after it had sentenced him to death.

Norman Mailer tells Gilmore's story--and those of the men and women caught up in his procession toward the firing squad--with implacable authority, steely compassion, and a restraint that evokes the parched landscapes and stern theology of Gilmore's Utah. **The Executioner's Song** is a trip down the wrong side of the tracks to the deepest sources of American loneliness and violence. It is a towering achievement--impossible to put down, impossible to forget.

Winner of the 1980 Pulitzer Prize

The Executioner's Song Details

Date : Published April 28th 1998 by Vintage Books USA (first published October 30th 1979)

ISBN : 9780375700811

Author : Norman Mailer

Format : Paperback 1056 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Crime, True Crime, Mystery

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From Reader Review The Executioner's Song for online ebook

david says

The law, and the randomness of it, geographically and demographically, has always disturbed me. Additionally, the comingling of it from disparate precedents only exacerbates it, and the courtroom turns itself into a "Wheel of Fortune."

Money is made by layering one brick of precepts on top of another. What you end up with is an expensive wall without doors, made poorly and soon to crumble. There is a way out but only for the officers of jurisprudence and their fraternity. If you want to leave with them, there is a fee to be free, and no guarantee.

Yes, Mailer is quite the writer. And the story is well told.

However, there is little pleasure gained from someone else's misery nor do I like reading how one person can dismantle and destroy the lives of many. Gary Gilmore, a deplorable celebrity, would be a non-issue in today's world, a paragraph on page three of a local rag. So, what have we learned from his crime and his defense decades later? Does the legal and prison systems work? No, but business is brisk, dockets and prisons are full, and it continues to aggrandize.

Kara says

This book is a total slog. The Goodreads description calls it meticulous; I call it boring. It kind of lands in gray area between fiction and non-fiction, and it's pretty obvious that neither Mailer nor Schiller (the principal "researcher"/journalist/producer/opportunist) actually did a face-to-face interview with Gilmore. As a subject, Gilmore just isn't that interesting. One of the journalists suggests that Gilmore is "mediocrity enlarged by history," and that pretty much sums it up. He was a mediocre criminal and an awful human being. Had he ended up with life in prison, rather than a death sentence, no one would have written ten words about him.

I can't believe this won a Pulitzer.

Fawaz Ali says

In the Executioner's Song, Norman Mailer chronicles the life of Gary Gilmore; a man responsible for murdering two people in Utah in 1976. The book takes a particular interest in the events surrounding the murders, trial and execution of Gary Gilmore and follows the lives of people who have come into contact with him.

The first part of the book leading to the murders is engaging; whereas the second part is dull; as it provides lengthy accounts of secondary characters that are irrelevant to the story of Gilmore. Mailer introduces minute and at times private details of these characters in the hope that the reader will be able to understand the psychological makeup of Gilmore and the reasons behind his murders. What Mailer fails to realize is that the specifics of a person's life are of no interest to the reader and may limit the progress of the story. After all, what is the purpose of providing the eating and sexual habits of a character at length? Is it important to read

long correspondence letters between Gilmore and his girlfriend containing nothing but obscene and sexual language? Why provide extensive background material about anyone who has had a few minutes conversation with Gilmore?

At 1,050 pages, the book is a very tiresome read, and although it won the Pulitzer Prize, it cannot be compared to Capote's *In Cold Blood*. The Executioner's Song could have been a definite classic, but unfortunately it seems that no matter how good a writer is, he or she still needs the services of an EDITOR!

Tijana says

Dželatova pesma je na tankoj granici između romana i onog što se kod nas zove dokumentarna proza. Utoliko verovatno nije baš najrepresntativniji primer Majlerovog (stvarno ne mogu da prelazim na „Majler“ dok me ne nateraju) stila. Ali jeste zanimljiva i na svoj način kvalitetna knjiga. Hiljadu i sto strana deluje kao malo previše za poslednjih godinu dana u životu sitnog kriminalca, ali ovo je zapravo vrlo detaljan prikaz dva određena segmenta američkog društva s kraja sedamdesetih: u pitanju su s jedne strane niža i radnička klasa i njihovi prirepci – ljudi koji su u nekom trenutku ispali iz društvenog sistema i sad se nekako povlače uz njega i po okrajcima – a sa druge mašinerija koja se pokreće u trenutku kad neko od tih ljudi van sistema poremeti njegovo delovanje: u prvom redu sudstvo, u drugom mediji. I Majlera zanimaju mnogo više te dve grupe nego sam Gari Gilmore i njegova savršeno besmislena ubistva. On svoj tekst zasniva na hiljadama stranica intervjua, novinskih izveštaja i sudskih dokumenata koje prerađuje i oblikuje tako da postepeno, dok roman odmiče, čitalac uviđa (ne baš da uživa u tome, ali uviđa) čemu sva preopširnost: glasovi iz Gilmoreovog okruženja – članova njegove porodice, poznanika, saosobnika, sudskog i zatvorskog osoblja, bezbrojnih pravnika i novinara – postepeno se stapaju u hor koju pokušava da nam pruži potpunu sliku američkog života na dnu. Da, to je užasno ambiciozno (to je Majler) i često mnogo napornije nego što bi čovek očekivao, ali deluje krajnje verodostojno (svaki glas zadržava toliko individualnosti da se prvih nekoliko stotina strana čini kao da se Majler baš i nije mnogo trudio da oblikuje te silne intervjue) i često upečatljivo (ali opet, to su trenuci koje treba sitom prosejavati). Romanom dominiraju dva lika: u prvoj polovini, to je Nikol Bejker, Gilmoreova devojka (devetnaest godina, tri braka, dvoje dece, starije ima pet godina, saberite sami; životna priča odgovarajuće grozna) a u drugoj Lorens Šiler, profesionalni novinar-lešinar. Dominacija njihovih glasova dosta jasno odražava dvodelnu strukturu knjige – do ubistava i posle njih – i napor koji je autor uložio da pruži celovitu sliku ljudi o kojima piše: nije baš da ima mnogo toga pozitivnog da se kaže o Šilerovom poslu, ali on se toliko *trudi* da bude korektan i toliko investira sebe u to što radi – i sposoban je (ili je Majler sposoban za njega) za istinski jezive uvide u vlastitu ličnost da... pa ništa, pošto ne da razvijate ljudska osećanja čak i za njega. Dobra knjiga. Dobra knjiga od trista strana kamufliranih sa još sedamsto kroz koje se nekako treba probiti.

Dave Cullen says

I won't rate this, because I only got about a hundred pages. I couldn't make it any further, though. I disliked the writing style intensely.

Jason Pettus says

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

The CCLaP 100: In which I read for the first time a hundred so-called literary classics, then write reports on whether or not they deserve the label

Essay #52: *The Executioner's Song* (1980), by Norman Mailer

The story in a nutshell:

One of the last great hurrahs from the so-called "New Journalism" of the countercultural years (but more on that in a bit), this 1980 book purports to be a "true-life novel," telling in a sweeping and narrative way the tale of Gary Gilmore, who just a few years previously had become the first person executed in the US since the Supreme Court's lifting of the ban that had lasted over a decade, at the time a hotly contested political issue that galvanized anti-death-penalty advocates. As such, then, the thousand-page manuscript is split into two parts: in "Western Stories," we get the tale of Gilmore himself, the murders that sent him to jail, and in general just the kind of rough-and-tumble life he was leading back in early-'70s Utah where these events took place; while in "Eastern Stories," we get an exhaustively detailed guide to the actual trial, as well as all the machinations that came with him becoming a *cause celebre* (including a last-minute phone call from Johnny Cash right before his death, as well as one of history's first media frenzies over securing a criminal's story rights).

The argument for it being a classic:

Well, for starters, say its fans, this won the 1980 Pulitzer Prize, and was also easily the biggest commercial hit of Mailer's entire oeuvre; but this is just a deserving capper, they argue, to the long career of a fascinating writer, one who with a handful of others almost singlehandedly changed the way we now think of journalism. And like I said before, this is because Mailer (along with contemporaries like Tom Wolfe, Ken Kesey, and Hunter S. Thompson) is considered a pioneer of what's called the "New Journalism" of the 1960s and '70s, a more engaging style of truth-reporting that enfolds not only the "facts" but also the metafictional elements surrounding those facts, like for example the journalist's own life and biases, and how their report actively changes the events they're reporting on. (After all, Mailer was one of the founders of the now revered *Village Voice*, which virtually created the blueprint for all the alternative urban arts-and-culture weeklies that came after, as well as the habit of all of them to center each issue around a lengthy piece of hard-hitting investigative journalism regarding a left-leaning social issue.) Love it or hate it, there had never been anything quite like *The Executioner's Song* before Mailer sat down and actually wrote it, a subtly seminal book that has had a much bigger impact on the nonfiction pieces of the '80s, '90s and '00s than most people even realize.

The argument against:

As is the case with many contentious classics, critics of this book use pretty much the same facts cited by its fans but to posit the exact opposite argument -- that the main reason this won the Pulitzer was to celebrate Norman Mailer being Norman Mailer, and that the entire "New Journalism" movement is in reality an embarrassing excuse for a bunch of arrogant blowhard males (and they're *always* males) to stroke their own massive egos. And indeed, no matter what you think of this argument, there's definitely some objective truth to back it up; it's hard to deny, for example, that the second half of this book is not so much about Gilmore himself as it is Hollywood producer Lawrence Schiller, the opportunist who did most of the wheeling and dealing to secure Gilmore's story rights in the first place, and who actually conducted the vast majority of the interviews that Mailer based his book on. A padded, badly written doorstop of a book that simply confirms the author's obsession with grunting, violent misogynists, critics argue that the only reason *The Executioner's Song* gained any notoriety in the first place is because it's so big, tackled an issue that at the time was so

trendy, and was written by Mailer during the height of his public infamy; and as soon as these three elements are forgotten, so too will this book quickly recede into obscurity, which critics claim you're already starting to see happen these days, just thirty years after the book's initial publication.

My verdict:

Covering as it does almost the entire history of written literature, there are of course all kinds of fascinatingly unique issues to deal with regarding all the time periods looked at in this CCLaP 100 essay series, from the standardization of modern English itself during the Renaissance to the establishment of the novel format during the Victorian Age; and one of the most interesting things about the Postmodernist Era (lasting roughly from Kennedy's death to 9/11) is that it allows me to look at writers who are destined to be quickly forgotten by history but haven't yet, the slew of artists in any given generation who might become quite big in their own lifetimes but who eventually suffer the same fate as, say, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, once the biggest-selling author in human history but now only remembered (if at all) for coining the phrase, "It was a dark and stormy night." I consider Norman Mailer one of these people, for example, because what his critics say is definitely true -- that he was much more known during his lifetime for *being Norman Mailer* than for any of his individual finished works, a bombastic and larger-than-life figure who exploited the "let it all hang out," "there are no wrong opinions" attitude of his hippie times to get away with some of the most ridiculously blatant sexism, homophobia, and just plain bullying the modern age has ever seen.

But as history teaches us, it is these self-referential "meta-celebrities" who are the quickest to be forgotten by posterity, and frankly I doubt that Mailer is going to be anything but a scholarly footnote by this point even fifty years from now; and so that makes it quite interesting to read one of his best-known books at this particular moment in history, when public goodwill for Mailer is currently at one of its highest points (he died just three years before I'm writing this, long enough for his canonization by fans to have begun), because undoubtedly both he and his work will be looked at in an entirely different way in just another generation or two from now. And indeed, while I found the book interesting enough, I also had a lot of sympathy for its critics' arguments, that there is an unhealthy symbiosis here between its length, the author's notoriety, and the amount of attention and awards it received; because surprisingly enough, it turns out that when you write a 500-page story about the ins and outs of daily life for a petty criminal in the rural wastelands of the Pacific Northwest, such a story tends to get *really* tedious *really* fast, and it's hard to deny that the only reason Mailer made it this big and tedious was to give the Pulitzer committee the justification needed to give that year's award to a book that is frankly only subpar in quality. Although certainly it had the kind of impact on journalism that its fans claim (albeit not always in a positive way -- this is also the book that helped inspire all those endless "To Catch a Predator" lurid network-television specials), I can't honestly say that the book itself is anything special, and certainly not one of those fabled "books to read before you die" that serves as the ultimate litmus test in this essay series. Do yourself a favor and read a biography instead of this endlessly captivating and infuriating figure, which much more than his finished books is what I feel will be his real lasting legacy.

Is it a classic? No

(And don't forget that the first 33 essays in this series are now available in book form!)

Jack says

I should start out by admitting that I'm wary of inordinately long books. I decided that this, my first Mailer, had a reputation such that I would give it a shot.

Then, a few days ago, a sensation akin to exasperation and/or fatigue set in which I don't think related to the quality of Mailer's prose. I was on page 802, and had a moment of terrifying clarity in which it became real

for me that I still had another 250 pages to go. Thereafter, I started to find it difficult to maintain the proper perspective on precisely how well written this book is.

But I maintain that this book would be hard to evaluate anyway. The quality of the research is amazing, and with Gary Gilmore especially Mailer creates a wonderful literary portrait. Gilmore comes across as a psychopath, but still a human. Even when repulsed by Gilmore's motivations and actions, the reader can understand them. And although I personally never felt a great surge of sympathy for Gilmore, this portrait makes the second half of the book, when the media and the legal system engage in a truly nauseating liason to exploit Gilmore's pending execution, all the more effective. And here too, I felt like I understood the people involved even as their actions made me physically wince.

I couldn't shake the feeling though, that as mailer so meticulously reconstructs the pertinent actions and backgrounds of virtually EVERYBODY important to his subject, the discussion of Gilmore's victims felt kind of tacked on. He discusses their lives and the trauma to their families, but, for example, Gary's cousins and uncle both get more attention. In fairness, this disparity could well just be because Gilmore's side cooperated with Mailer on the book.

Similarly, I was a little disappointed that Gilmore's girlfriend Nicole - to whom Mailer devotes about as much attention as Gilmore and paints as compelling a portrait - just kind of disappears at the end. She spent much of the book seeming like a co-star in Mailer's story, and a very intriguing one, given that she WASN'T a heartless killer, but was in love with one. But after Gilmore's death, she just kind of disappears, notwithstanding some extremely sad omens that she's just going to continue her self destructive patterns. Some other material could have have been clipped, and these kind of issues addressed, to create a conclusion more consistent to the text without adding length.

All in all though, the book is remarkable simply because I'm not sure I've read anything quite like it. It's certainly reminiscent of *In Cold Blood*, but seeks out a more comprehensive effort to document everything about the time period between Gilmore's parole for one crime and his execution only nine months later. The breadth of subjects interviewed and the scope of the narrative is astonishing.

Matt says

This book is something. Yup, it surely is.

The Executioner's Song is one of those oxymoronically-named "non-fiction novels." In a non-fiction novel - the classic of the genre being Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* - a journalist takes his research as far as humanly possible, right up to the boundary of unknown human thought, and then fills those gaps with reasoned speculation. It's kind of shady. Well, it's really shady, especially since it's never clear what is hard-fact and what is guesswork. Shadiness aside, this type of book is also hugely entertaining.

The Executioner's Song tells the story of Gary Mark Gilmore (funny how killers and child stars always go by their full names), a lowlife thug who'd spent over half his life in prison before ruthlessly murdering two men while on parole. Instead of fighting his conviction on appeal, Gilmore forced the State of Utah's hand, essentially daring them to execute him. Coming on the heels of the US Supreme Court's moratorium on the death penalty, Gilmore was the first person executed in the country for 10 years.

That's the story in a nutshell, but there's nothing about *The Executioner's Song* that is nutshell worthy.

To begin with, it's written by Norman Mailer. In fact, that might be the most important thing about *The*

Executioner's Song: the Norman Mailer-ness of it all. If you don't believe me, just look at the front cover: a small picture of a gas station (where one of the murders occurred); the title of the book, in small print; and then the author's name, NORMAN MAILER, in huge font, dominating the negative space.

I wasn't yet born while Mailer was in his prime, and he was dead before I read his first book, but I've read enough of his work, and read enough about him, to understand that Mailer made himself the foremost character of everything he wrote.

He does this in *The Executioner's Song* by the simple fact that he wrote a 1,000 page book about Gary Gilmore. 1,000 pages about a pseudo-folk hero who never did a redeemable thing in his life. He may have had a genius level IQ, and a talent for drawing, but he was unexceptional in every other way. Even his crimes were garden-variety: two cold blooded murders of young white men that occurred while in the course of botched robberies. Tragic, yes, but not shocking or, unfortunately in this country, out of the ordinary. Moreover, despite what the publisher's copy would have you believe, Gary Gilmore didn't "fight for his right to die." Instead, he sat on his sociopathic ass while the State of Utah battled the ACLU over the date of his execution and his own lawyers battled over who would get paid for the rights to his stories.

In short, there's not a lot of story. So what does Mailer do: he writes a 1,000 page monster, a white trash epic, a hillbilly *War and Peace*. It's unlike anything I've ever read.

You realize you're reading something unique, as soon as you get to the first page. The book, you see, is written in bite-sized paragraphs that are separated by double-spaces. At first, this is kind of obnoxious, and a little pretentious. Then, you realize it's sort of awesome. Each of these lonely word-chunks represents its own contained thought; and as you move from one thought to the next, you get into a kind of rhythm that is both engaging and oddly-poetic. I have no idea how Mailer sustained this style for so long, but he does.

Mailer's greatest achievement is his voice. The book is seemingly written in the third-person, but it actually shifts subtly to the point-of-view of the subject of each paragraph. It's almost as if these characters are telling their own story, with their own constricted lexicon. Mailer restrains himself from using fancy words or elegant descriptions or complex sentences. Everything is simple, hard, flat, and colloquial, the way that Gary or his girlfriend Nicole might tell a story. (Of course, Mailer being Mailer, he can't resist throwing in a few malaprops that certainly didn't come from any interviewee. I'm thinking, specifically, that the phrase "competent glasses" is a Mailer-ism, and possible inspired the insufferable Murray from DeLillo's *White Noise*).

While on the topic of restraint, it should be mentioned that Mailer has attempted to do the hardest of things: create a work without judgment. This is both an asset and, eventually, a liability.

Mailer simply tells the story: this happened, then this, then this. It's almost like he's acting as a conduit, rather than an author. He adds no commentary to the actions of his central characters. For a reader accustomed to being told how to feel, this might feel odd and a little disorienting. For instance, there are dozens of scenes of Gary, a pathetic conman, fruitlessly trying to bend people to his will. Instead of noting how Gary was acting like a low-rent Jedi with his silly mind tricks, Mailer remains silent.

This reticence is especially true with Nicole, who is actually the central character of the book. Nicole Barrett was first married at the age of 14, and in subsequent years, and through subsequent marriages (and two children) she slept with dozens and dozens of men, women, and children (sadly, I am not exaggerating). She is constantly saying how much she loves Gary, even while sleeping with her ex-husband, and a stranger she meets at a bar, and a random hitchhiker. The natural inclination of an author is to note the incongruity in her thoughts (faithful love) and actions (sex with any sentient beings in her path). Mailer resists this urge and the resulting portrait, with all its inherent (and human) contradictions is all the richer. (You are forced to balance Nicole's victimhood - she was sexually abused as a child - with her own consistently poor choices and subpar

parenting).

Of course, it's impossible to write entirely without judgment. Mailer's judgments come from his elisions. His focus is on Gilmore and Nicole, their "love" affair, Gilmore's incarceration, and finally, Gilmore's death. What is missing is the crime and its victims. Mailer devotes perhaps 12 pages to the family of Max Jensen, the first victim, and half of that to Ben Bushnell, the second. The crimes themselves are told in a couple sentences: the shootings are bloodless, vaguely-detailed affairs, which stand in contrast to the graphic retellings of just about every other incident in the story.

This is simply unacceptable for a book that spends hundreds of pages following peripheral characters. In the most egregious example, Mailer spends half a chapter following the day-in-the-life of one of Nicole's former lovers. Mailer seems to relish the opportunity to describe this man having sexual intercourse with a fifteen year-old girl, right down to their exact positions (hint: 70 - 1 = literary statutory rape). After this sordid event, this man disappears from the book. Yet for all that, Mailer can't be bothered to flesh out the lives of the victims, or their wives, or even describe the violent acts that put Gilmore in jail.

Unnecessary detail is the lifeblood of *The Executioner's Song*. In the first half of the book, which starts with Gilmore's release from prison, follows him through his destructive courtship of Nicole, and ends with him in the clink, these digressions are mostly forgivable.

In the second half, however, frustration sets in. This is mostly due to the fact that Mailer decides to follow every twist and turn of producer Lawrence Schiller, as he tries to secure the book and movie rights to Gilmore's life story. One starts to wonder why Mailer would decide to make a leech such a central character. Then you read the copyrights page, and the acknowledgments, and you realize that Mailer got most of his research material from Schiller. At this point, you see these sections of *The Executioner's Song* in a whole new light (the phrase "mutual masturbation" springs to mind).

One of the mysteries of *The Executioner's Song* is the extent of Mailer's involvement. We all know that Capote famously went to Kansas, spent time with the people of Holcombe, and interviewed killer Perry Smith. There is no indication that Mailer did anything similar. Most of the research appears to have been done by Schiller, and by Gilmore's two attorneys, who spent hours interviewing Gilmore for Schiller, instead of fulfilling their ethical obligations as lawyers.

This is only really a problem with regards to Gilmore. While Nicole's life story is told front to back, in great detail, Gilmore - the putative focus - remains elusive. Mailer's portrait of Gilmore is pointillist; it doesn't come from him, but from the words and observations of all these different people who came into his orbit. Unfortunately, you lose a lot of information in that space between the points. Mailer compounds this problem by refusing to supply any basic biographical information. It's not until deep into the book that you learn why Gilmore was in jail in the first place (armed robbery, apparently).

I still enjoyed this book, despite these problems. I couldn't help but admire the audaciousness, the narrative voice, and the amount of effort that must have been required to put this story together. Throughout, it had me questioning my own beliefs, my own perceptions: who were the victims? who were the perpetrators? was justice served or did the justice system fail? Mailer's refusal to give you any overt guidance draws those internal questions into sharp relief.

Gilmore was shot through the heart four times on January 17, 1977. At the risk of injecting politics into Goodreads, I cannot resist a parting thought:

How can anyone think it was a good idea to execute Gary Gilmore?

The scenes at the end of *The Executioner's Song* show Utah's Attorney General and the Warden of the Utah

State Prison at Point of the Mountain racing against the clock to kill Gilmore before the US Supreme Court can intervene. To what end were these men acting? Would it have killed them (pardon the pun) to wait for the Supreme Court to rule on the Stay of Execution? Does it really ennoble justice to be racing down courthouse hallways, trailing sheaths of paper in your wake, to call the prison and set the machinery of death in motion? Were these men or wolves? I can accept - because it is the law - that the Government can take a life; I cannot accept that it will do so with unconstrained eagerness.

More than that, did anyone in 1977 stop to think: why are we doing what Gary Mark Gilmore wants us to do?

I once visited a client in prison. He was being released and I wanted to check in with him, to make sure he "registered" with certain governmental agencies. This was the first time I'd ever been in a prison. And by prison, I mean the penitentiary, not the county lock-up where defendants are held pending trial or to serve sentences of less than a year (I have to go to lock-up all the time, unfortunately).

It sat on the edge of town, on a flat stretch of prairie with bluffs in the distance. It had chain link fences and razor wire and towers and guards. It wasn't Marion or Supermax, but it sure wasn't Six Flags either. To get in, I showed my ID, registered, and locked all my belongings in a locker. Then I went through one set of locked doors, then another, then another, and another. After that, I was escorted outside, to another building, another set of doors. When the visit was over, after 20 minutes, I wanted to leave, but I couldn't, since there was still an hour left in the visitation block. So I had to wait with all these cons and their families, who could sit close but not touch, and who were watched by guards and cameras and who were chided when they got too near. Imagine that kind of hell: to see but not touch the people you love.

Anyone who says prison isn't punishment has never been to prison. It sucks. When I left, I sat in the parking lot for ten minutes, gulping free air.

Everything about prison is regimented and lock-step. You wake when they tell you, you sleep when they tell you, you eat when they tell you and stop eating when they tell you, you go outside when they tell you and come back in when they tell you. You're always watched, by guards and by cameras. Some lights never go off. There is always noise (Gilmore hated the noise): doors opening and banging shut; guards yelling commands; other convicts talking and threatening and acting out. There are wags who will tell you it's nothing but laying around all day, watching television or reading. Right. Except try doing that surrounded by several hundred felons, all of whom will con you, some of whom will rape you, or beat you, or kill you; try watching the boob tube while sitting on molded chairs with an armed robber to your left and an attempted murderer to your right; try getting through a single page of a book with all that clanging and hollering.

Gary Gilmore didn't want to die because he felt remorse. He was unable to feel remorse because he was a sociopath (it would've been nice had Mailer interjected himself enough to analyze Gary's condition, but even without any outright discussion, Gary's psychopathy is self-evident). He wanted to die because it was preferable to prison.

Fundamentally, Gary Gilmore was a coward. He was scared of prison. He'd spent a lot of time behind bars, and his great fear was waiting out the remainder of his life in a place without hope. More than that, he'd worked himself into such a state over Nicole - whose breakup with him precipitated his killing spree - that he didn't want to live with the thought of her sleeping with other men.

Essentially, Gilmore was attempting state-assisted suicide. And the State agreed. Wholeheartedly. How is it punishment when you give the prisoner exactly what he wants?

If Gary Gilmore had not been executed, he would be 70 years old right now. He would have had to endure 33 years of short, plain meals; 33 years of brief outdoor trips to the yard; 33 years of clanging doors, shouting

guards, lockdowns and prisoner counts; 33 years to think about the life he'd never lead; 33 years to miss all the technological advances; 33 years to think about the women with whom he'd never sleep; 33 years to miss Nicole. If justice is possible, I think it looks something like that.

Instead, the bloodlust of Utah's body politic and the cowardice of Gary Mark Gilmore conspired to stage a violent farce. Utah gave up a bit of its soul, and Gary Gilmore managed to escape.

William1.2 says

What a ***** book! Mind numbingly good. An intellectual grand slam!

Alex says

Top Five Executioner's Songs

5. Bodies, Drowning Pool
4. Heads Will Roll, Yeah Yeah Yeahs
3. How I Could Just Kill a Man, Cypress Hill
2. Party Rock, LMFAO
1. The Lord High Executioner's Song, The Mikado, Gilbert & Sullivan

Problem is that this is not just 1100 pages of a dude in a black hood doing the watusi to LMFAO. Look, I get what Mailer's doing here. He's using the case of murderer Gary Gilmore to raise big questions about good and evil and free will, and it's a smart thing to do and he does a good job.

But that doesn't change that it's a bummer of a book.

And it should have been pruned. It is important for Mailer to show everyone around Gilmore, so we can see that it's his whole world, his whole milieu that directs him to where he ends up, but it didn't need *this* much detail. Mailer could've trimmed 400 pages out and it still would've been longer than Crime and Punishment, y'know?

And he definitely should have trimmed out most or all of Gilmore's letters. The guy is stuck at the maturity of a high schooler; his letters range from boring to embarrassing. Which I understand is a point in itself, but maybe hammered home a bit hard.

This book is good at what it does, but what it does is bum you right out.

K.D. Absolutely says

Long read. 1,050 pages of history about the life and death of an American that was executed by firing squad in 1977 in Utah. This is Norman Mailer's answer to Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* that was published in 1969 and started a new literary classification called *non-fiction novels*.

I read this with a lawyer as a reading buddy. We spent 14 days (1 day per part). Here is the discussion thread

containing our daily thoughts. Sorry if some of the phrases are in Filipino.

Gary Mark Gilmore (1940-1977) had spent half of his life in jail when he was paroled (crime: robbery) in 1976 at the age of 36. He tried all sort of jobs while living with his uncle **Vern Domico**. However, as his cousin **Brenda** commented when Gilmore encountered all sorts of many problems while working, "*he was locked up when he was supposed to be learning about how to earn a decent living.*" So, the disillusioned Gilmore, confused on how to live outside the prison, turned to booze, drugs and ways, illegal as they were, he knew on how to escape from the reality of a bigger prison called life. He fell in love with an 18-y/o sexy teenager **Nicole** and the love turned to obsession. When Nicole left him, Gilmore killed Nicole's new boyfriend then afterwards, on the same night, killed a man he had not even met before. This somehow summarizes the first half of the book. I liked the story because of its readability, its call for a reform in the US penal laws (in fact according to Wiki, this case triggered a nationwide debate on death penalty upon this book's release) and Mailer's crystal clear and emphatic characterizations. Had the book ended here, it would have gotten 4 stars from me.

The second half of the book is not as effective as the first half. It tells, basically, the aftermath of Gilmore's conviction: death. A big part of this second half is spent on negotiations for the film right to turn Gilmore's life into a movie, the repeated appeal (the Stay) resulting to several postponements of the execution and the eternal love between Gary Gilmore and Nicole that reminded me of Romeo and Juliet because at one point, they both took drugs as they attempted a double suicide. Aside from the last one and Gilmore's interactions with his family, his mother **Bessie** and his youngest brother **Mikal** half of the book is utterly boring. Not only it is anti-climactic but it is too detailed on things that I am not interesting for me. My interest only got up again when Gilmore was finally killed but that was only discussed in the last two parts and they were not able to bring back the emotional impact that this book was able to do in its first half.

Overall, a good book to know how the legal (criminal) system in the US worked in the 70s. Compared to our here in the Philippines, my reading buddy explained to me that they have a jury system there and the judge's role is just that of a facilitator. There is also this legal procedure called *Next Friend*. She also refresh my mind on the meaning of Writs of Mandamus and Certiorari. Two writs that were repeatedly mentioned in the second half.

Prior to this book, I used to be unaffected whenever I heard people getting death penalty. Example was when **Leo Echagaray** (1960-1999) was executed by lethal injection here in the Philippines after 23 years that the death penalty was removed from the Philippine law. When he was executed, I told myself: What kind of father is he? He raped his own daughter so he deserves death. It's was very easy for me to say that.

Now, I would not be very quick to say so. Just like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, this book is also an eye-opener.

Marriel says

Gary Gilmore's died in photographs are black and white. They are all mugshots. Gray faced still if they were to be in color mug shots of crimes of who knows what. Living or dead. Gray smirks and flat lines and nothing reaching the eyes because they are always somewhere else. Some live to get to heaven and another hopes it won't be as bad the next go around... Crimes to be and crimes of the soul. The photograph captions might say, "We always knew he'd be up to no good." The inside caption says, "I don't know what I knew." Does it have to be that way?

The photos are taken with a box painted black and a hole cut into it. There's an entire roll of a guy name

Skeeziz going down on himself. The view is seen through the eye of an obsidian ring gifted by the man butt fucked in jail. Waiting for the roll to come back but it never does.

Staring contest time. Score one point for Gary Gilmore. If anyone knew then what anyone doesn't really know now...

Turn to the left. It is Racist Gary. Turn to the right. Country-and-western Gary appears. Do the hokey pokey and turn your self about. Poetic Gary. Artist Manque Gary is only in the dark room. The front shows Texas Gary (I laughed through my nose when the queen inmate gives props to his fellow "Texan") and the back could be Karma County Gary, in another life. Gary the movie star is on tv and Gary the killer Irishman represents. You'll get a t-shirt. Gary the romantic signs autographs with roses and kisses. Don't love anyone but me, baby. I'll say I'll die for you but I'm really dying for me.

Look the other way when a kid is sent to juvie and look back again for the big finish. The seconds between flashes burn the irises of lights on 24/7 in the prison cell (as if that wouldn't drive someone insane). There are billboards all along the way that say "Nike: Let's do it already" and ride in the shoes of another. The shoes might be a beat-up mustang that stops more than it starts. Tension building out of tedium. Does it ever stop? It doesn't start.

Facing oneself? Gilmore wins and loses. It's a giant staring contest and playing chicken. No, this photo came out all wrong. There are red eyes and he looks like a demon! Now he's old and frozen young.

The Executioner's Song is exactly the kind of book that I love the most. Descriptions in my head that I can see. (Like Nicole Baker's kid sister April. Her disturbed lips that droop on the corners like a truly crazy person from the nut house that both sisters frequented as teens. The hunger in her that gnawed if she wasn't always talking. It feels like that about people! I know that!) Something I can understand and trust because it doesn't feel like being told this is the edited tv interview and an hysterical tv host with an agenda (sorry, Geraldo. I didn't look up your teary interview with Gilmore's deathwish lawyer). It is well past depressing what journalism in this day is (Nicole's cellphone would be hacked, among other things). [Actually, it's kind of eerie what with mentions of Murdoch, big pay dates and exclusive rights for stories. The snowball's hell in chance of fair play started picking up momentum a long time ago.] Photographs and reading for what feels true is something else. The why is in the steps of those Let's Do it Nikes. Take me to the edge of the cliff and now let's play chicken to see if I can jump too. I recognize the tension and the tedium of what doesn't start.

I can't stop thinking about Nicole Baker. I'm so impressed that she was honest about things that would make her look really bad. Her relationship with her children (neglectful), prostitution, her and Gary fooling around with the young Rosebeth, Gary's mostly repressed pedophilia, Nicole's taste of it (the tragic tale as old as time of learning from what was done to you). She's the most embarrassed about her second husband saying she was a bad lover. (I think I loved Nicole when she tells Gary about the letter her eleven year old self wrote to a perverted boy who wouldn't leave her alone. She dares him to do those things for real. Then she tears up the letter, shocked by what she had written. Her mom tapes the letter together and accuses little Nicole with it.) She sleeps with a lot of men who would be grateful for any lay to feel better about herself. Wasn't that something? It really is like she lived with one foot in one world and the other in the other. That might be from falling in love all of the time. Other world dreaminess. (It was definitely a lot to do with their dad letting the rapist buddy of his have unfettered access to his daughter in her childhood. Yeah, he didn't know. Right. Younger April gets gang raped and force fed drugs. No wonder they were insane! Or locking her up in the nuthouse at fourteen [as much a "cure" as juvenile prison was for kids] and only letting her out to force her to marry that sicko. Or the second husband, Barrett. Boy, was he something (he meets her when she's being gang banged by other dudes at a party. They'll "love" the fifteen year old girl, all right). Nineteen year old Nicole WOULD have sympathies for Gary Gilmore, a man let out of prison for the longest bit of freedom he'd have had since fourteen years of age (he is thirty-five when he is executed). I was impressed by the pictures of Nicole looking at Gary, Gary looking at Nicole, Nicole looking at April, April looking at

Nicole, Gary's cousins looking at Gary. Hoping? (Nicole wasn't always the girl fucking a store manager for food stamps money to pay for car repairs so she'd have to stop hitching to visit Gary in prison to Nicole.) I was impressed with this book for walking with both feet on both sides of her worlds. The world where she didn't want to live and be with Gary after death. The world that got creeped when anyone tried to own her (it might be bad that I base too much of people based on myself, but I knew Nicole would dump Gary before she did because I'd have been just as creeped by the neediness. Of any of her men). The Nicole that talked to herself as if all of that shit wasn't going down and all there was ever going to be was shit. It was half bravery, half blindness. One foot in and out. [The last written about Nicole is that she is deeply religious and married. I wonder if she has unwavering truth and belief about that love as she did in her dreamy worlds at the age of nineteen. Probably.]

I can't respect any view that pretends what one person was to one person is how they are all to everyone else. Like I said, this is my kind of book exactly.

I have my doubts about what some of them say, though. The Executioner's Song doesn't purport all of its stories as fact. It's like being somewhere yourself and deciding if you can trust your own memories or not. Like I don't believe that April was thinking of Nicole and didn't fuck Gary when he took her around for his crime spree (and one of the murders she was waiting in the car). He also took her to see One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest! That killed me the first time when he ruined the movie for everybody else. He went to the same nuthouse and even saw the film filmed from his prison window, or so he claimed). April had already been dumped by her sister's first husband...

Gary would play chicken and lose. It comes out that he never killed anybody else (on release he had bragging rights to killing a black inmate), or homosexuality (he made out a couple of times with pretty boys. Fucked one pretty one. It didn't do anything for him. Right). He'd lose trust game but Gary wouldn't keep lying. Inbetween poses there'd be evidence of the truth. I don't know, I found that to be fascinating. You can tell a lot about people by what they think you want to hear. I had the feeling from Gary that it was from talking to himself for so long, perhaps more than the kid's wish to shock adults. He put on those poses for himself. Does it get more alone than life in prison? Was he a failure because he couldn't know how to live outside of it?

Their love letters were both ridiculous as any teenagers in love (they were very much teenagers) would be. Self-serving (especially for Gary. His true selfishness came through in his manipulation of Nicole to kill herself so no one else could ever have her but him. He didn't know Nicole, then, if he thought she wouldn't be with any other men). Talking in the dark and building up truth out of desires, hopes and a big fuck you to everything else (life, for one). Too long in prison of loneliness. But they were so much the same in the playing chicken in that staring contest and the truth coming back that I can't help feel that some of it was a kind of love.

The pictures might have some auras of bad spirits around them. All of the bullets from all of the firing squads in Utah wouldn't penetrate the bad feelings, the build-up and frustration. Impatience for something to happen. I think it made sense that Gilmore did any of the things he did. It was that keeping things away like a pee dance to ward off evil. It wasn't that he was stupid and didn't know where he'd end up. He would get tired and would want to die. (I didn't need to read the book or know anything about Gary Gilmore to understand why he wanted to die. It wasn't guilt. Self-hate that has more to do with how you feel about yourself than what others feel about you.)

I think that it was slithering towards the light at the end of the tunnel and the worm is blind and can't see which way out of the picture. If ghosts are created in the atmosphere when something really horrific happens in a spiritual kind of sense (like Star Wars when all of the voices cried out together after they snuffed it at the long hands of the empire) I think maybe it is like worm holes are created in whatever living and breathing sense there might be of morality, spirituality and humanity. Worm holes for putting a fourteen year old kid in

prison (Gilmore was not born a murderer) and keeping him there. [Something I ask people a lot when they get on their high horses about other peoples lives: What if one of those times they went out drinking and driving they killed someone? Or their "innocent" high school hijinks of fake ids happened post-911 when having a fake id is a federal crime? Mandatory sentences, making an example of someone. Worm holes that are bigger than the world. Could you slither out? I tend to get depressed and stew in hopelessness more than getting angry but that one really does me. When people don't care about stuff like that. Worm holes that they used a firing squad because they wanted blood shed.] Worm holes of killing two men because they were there. Worm holes of punishing a family (the ending of Gary's mom Bessie sitting at her window despite death threats, maybe because of like a dare, from the public... Shit). Worm holes of Gary's trying to control Nicole and all of the young girls who wrote to him in prison because he was just the neatest thing since government cheese or the invention of tampons. A LOT of young women were attracted to him. Yikes. They were like Nicole loving what they couldn't love about themselves in another person (blind and slitheringly lost). Worm holes of abuse begetting more abuse. Will the 24/7 prison lights ever go off enough to shed some light? How does it fix society to lock away and forget until its time to bounce more bullet holes off the bad spirits?

Whether one believes that they have long underwear protecting them in their lives, or reincarnation like Gilmore believed, I think that Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* does deserve to be a classic (grumble). For the pictures, and the staring and the chicken and the trust game when you don't know if someone even caught you, and telling the truth. The lights are still burning. Worm holes don't go away if you remain blind.

If I were to listen as well as burn my retinas I'd hear Stewart Copeland there rocking the short shorts and the drums. It's skins to skin. Andy Summers has one eye on Sting's leanings towards sentimentality (someone removed his stinger! Probably fell off after hours of tantric sex) and the other on his pocket where Robert Fripp's phone number is safely tucked away. Sting's distinctive voice that seems to say, "Hey, I'm Sting" says to Bring on the Night. I couldn't stand another hour of daylight. I'd listen to The Police's song about Gilmore in the dark when I was a thirteen year old fan (I had the videos, the books. My first concert, my first tape, my first cd, my first record). I wanted to die too. I'd try to stay awake as long as possible because at night I could finally be alone. [Hey, don't make fun of me. If it weren't for Sting I'd not have discovered Dennis Potter either. That was another branch of sky reaching beauty on my ugly tree with roots in the down and dirty of bad taste. Hey! I was with Andy! We hated the sap!)

Does this make you laugh? One of Gilmore's favorite stories is about giving Fungoo the kinda retarded and retardedly trusting inmate a tattoo on the back of his neck. The tattoo is of a penis. Fungoo comes back upset because his parents are coming to visit and could Gary please change it to a snake or something. He doesn't trust anyone else to do it. Gary makes it a three headed penis. He couldn't resist. I laughed. Maybe that's why I liked this book so much. It's the dark parts of yourself you hope no one hears loneliness of bad spirits and hoping to live another day... for what? I loved it because it didn't pretend. It's why I kinda love Nicole, bad parts and all. Pictures tell a story they don't capture the soul into one thing.

Tommy Lee Jones wrinkled like a hounddog... Damn, no I haven't seen this yet. (It's on netflix streaming so soon. I'm sad to have finished this book! But I doubt the movie is this good. It will probably be the self serving mirror image and not the daring to show yourself kinda mirror staring.)

Flavia says

I had this book on my list as "must-read classic". I don't know where that came from. It was one of the most boring books I ever read. I cannot believe I ploughed through > 1,000 pages of excruciatingly detailed

narration of the true crimes, trial and execution of Gary Gilmore. I didn't give anything away; it's on the book jacket. After reading how each person dressed, how they were raised (even the minor players whose names you can forget right afterwards!), their exact words in every exact circumstance, the trial and the legalities of the appeals.... I feel I didn't learn much about the US court system, except that it is convoluted. Nor could I really care about any of the "characters". I think it is unlikely to change the minds of those in favor of the death penalty, if that was the intent. Bottom line is: what was the point of this, exactly?

Vit Babenco says

I'm not a big aficionado of criminal chronicles. And even such scrupulous and voluminous analysis of crime as *The Executioner's Song* didn't really move me deeply.

"He was ready to argue there was no rational way you could justify the death penalty, except to admit it was absolute revenge. If that, he would say, was the foundation of the criminal justice system, then we had a pretty sick system."

All those thieves, robbers, rapists, murderers do their obnoxious crimes and when caught they declare that society is guilty in their crimes and cry for mercy... And they get mercy.

When the crime becomes a focus of the wide public attention this publicity begins to work against justice.

Rachel says

There is a TED talk by Bryan Stevenson, about racial and class injustice in the prison system, that asks what I have come to realize is the hardest and most important question about capital punishment. It is not "does a guilty criminal deserve to die?" but "does the state have a right to kill?". This is a basic and obvious question, but it seems to take a backseat to the first question in discussions about the death penalty. The argument over capital punishment is as much or more gut driven as it is reasoned.

Having read this book, working for the government, seeing bureaucracy in motion, I have to say that I have little faith in the state's objectivity, its ability to decide a man's life. Many elements of the Gilmore execution are horrifying. And I used to be pro death penalty, before I read about it in practice, because I believe that people like Ted Bundy, Richard Ramirez, and Tiny Davis have perpetrated some true evil and should permanently lose their freedom. But, do we have the right to kill them -- as the anti-death penalty coalition in this book asks--to show that killing is wrong? I don't know. Anything but a "yes, absolutely" answer to that question is a working "no." it is too weighty an issue to say "eh...go ahead". As far as the justice served, I don't understand how killing someone (especially one, two, multiple years after the crime) is supposed to assuage anything for the victim's family.

So, the book. It's hopeless and profoundly depressing, not just in Gary's death but in the lives of its main characters. They are married and divorced way too young, sexually violated, mentally ill, chronically poor. For the first third of the book, Gary's let out of prison on robbery charges, goes to live with relatives who put faith in his rehabilitation and try to set him up with jobs and a place to live. Then he meets this girl, Nicole. She's something like 15 years younger than him. They have this obsessive, mostly sexual relationship and then she leaves him and he kills a couple people "to keep from killing [her]".

Then when he's on trial/in prison/waiting to die, she comes back and falls for him harder than ever. A great chunk of the book is the sexy, misspelled, uncannily teenage love letters they write back and forth. You see why it's such a marketable story, why media outlets competed hard for the rights to it.

Oh yeah -- a good portion of the book is about the media too. It is the least interesting part of the book, unless you like watching people with tragic lives get further exploited.

The Executioner's Song is a feat. It is not pleasant but it is an overlook to the way some people's real lives happen to work out, by luck, decision or both. Mailer's writing lacks that technicolor sensation of fictionalized accounts of real people; it is a long drive on a scenery free road on an overcast day, no neatly packaged endings with grand lessons learned but a fade away. Some exasperation.

I do wonder what Nicole Baker is up to today, how frequently she thinks of Gary still. She compels me, just as she compelled everyone else.

Steven Walle says

GARY MARK GILLMORE IS DEAD

This book is a faboulas account of Gary Mark Gillmore and those who shaped his life. Gary was a thief from the beginning and served over half his life in prison. Coming out of prison as a thirtyfive year old man, not knowing how to work, cary on relationships, or do any of the day to day tasks we all face, Gary kills two people. This decision gets him the firing squad in Utah. While he is on death row many family members and lawers as well as the press are trying to stay the execution which was much against Gary's wishes. He thought that getting executed would earn him absolution. He attempts, with his lover Nicole, to commit suicide twice to no avail. I recommend everyone reads this book. O and by the way it is a true story. Enjoy and Be Blessed. Diamond

gaby says

I can't resist the deliciously apparent metaphor provided by the circumstance that it took me pretty much exactly from Christmas to Easter to read this epic, 1100 page book about the life and death of Gary Gilmore.

1100 pages! I've only read one longer book in my life, The Glass Bead Game, which was so good it took less than a week to read. Obviously, this book wasn't in the same league.

But it was much better than expected, since I'd otherwise been nursing a nascent hatred of Mailer initially spawned by my dissatisfaction with the wretched Armies of the Night. I figured I'd give him another shot though, I mean, people fucking worship Mailer. So, why not try the OTHER book he won a Pulitzer for?

And indeed, The Executioner's Song was well played and well deserving of that honor. The book is actually broken into two separate books - the first is, at its core, an intact and insulated lovestory set in rural Utah between a recently-sprung life-long convict and his new lady love. The first book never hints at a larger world -- it is a completely zoomed-in microcosm that never really roams farther than a couple of blocks of a single small town. There's a small cast, and the reader feels a sense of security in the smallness of the story, and the finite boundaries of its physical and emotional domains.

The second book is an instant and complete paradigm shift. It zooms out on the first paragraph from small-town Utah to the broader country and watches the firestorms that are set off when Gilmore refuses to appeal his death sentence after being tried for murders to which he admits. Extremely suddenly, the sense of nearly idyllic security provided by having just read 500 pages about 4 or 5 people in a single town is exploded by the introduction of all of the big-time journalists (Geraldo Rivera, Barbara Walters), politicians (the Supreme

Court, the president), Hollywood producers (big names in the 70's, though lost on me today), and celebrities (when Johnny Cash calls, Gilmore says, "Is this the real Johnny Cash? Oh yeah? Well this is the real Gary Gilmore!") who swoop down into Provo, Utah, to capitalize on the sensationalism of capital punishment.

It was a nerdy delight to discover that much of the second book is really an exercise in the minutiae of civil and criminal procedure in the federal courts, as Gilmore's lawyers wrangled with the ACLU and other civil rights groups for Gilmore's "right to die." Gilmore was the first person executed in the US after the Supreme Court issued and then rescinded a moratorium on the death penalty. As if the issue of capital punishment wasn't thorny enough in 1970's politics, Gilmore threw the wrench of WANTING to be executed, and of wanting the right NOT to appeal. From a legal standpoint, it was a mess of tangled and conflicting jurisprudence, and everyone from the local magistrate in Provo to the District Court to the Tenth Circuit to the Supreme Court weighed in - numerous times!

Through much of the first half, I figured this was Mailer's FUCK YOU to Capote for *In Cold Blood*. This was Mailer's response, and if you're going to take on *In Cold Blood*, it might as well be 1100 pages. But I was wrong. This book does a whole lot more - it encapsulates *In Cold Blood*, in a sense. It tells that story - a small town rocked by murders, and the boys who done it, and the execution. But Mailer tells the other story too, and it turns out to be just as compelling - the legal wrangling, the movie deals, the fancy New York lawyers who fly in with the contracts, the Hollywood bigwigs who move in for the kill (literally, into the Travelodge by the prison).

In good conscience I can recommend this book without reservation. But, it IS 1100 pages.....

And now, on to *Fear & Loathing on the Campaign Trail*. When will this "New Journalism" streak end?????

Paul Bryant says

I never got round to reviewing this mighty five star masterpiece before because I thought it spoke for itself. But I just reread one long chapter and was again knocked out, it's just beautiful stuff. Not having read anything else by stormin' Norman except his dubious, lubricious "biography" of Marilyn Monroe (I liked it but the pictures were better, I mean to say, he had about 8 wives himself and he was moaning out loud that he'd never married Marilyn, really it was a bit gross) I had thought he was one of the most style-conscious American writers but in this book, it being one of those "non-fiction novels" like *In Cold Blood*, he throws "style" right out the window and it's all written in ironed-flat just-the-facts affectless Carver-speak, an absolute delight to read.

Of course, what a story. There's this scene, you know it's gonna come up, Mailer knows, Gary knows - he's in prison, Mailer is interviewing, and they discuss who's going to be playing Gary in the inevitable movie.

what he got was Tommy Lee Jones

and his own Juliet, Nicole Baker

got Rosanna Arquette

They couldn't be complaining none.

The Executioner's Song is pure underclass literature, like *Random Family* (Adrian LeBlanc), the essays of Theodore Dalrymple, *Crimes in Southern Indiana* (Frank Bill), *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* (Carolyn Chute), *London Labour and the London Poor* (Mayhew) and so on, and it might possibly be the best, because most detailed, of all of these attempts to portray life at the bottom; which is hard to do, because those who come from the bottom tend to be trying to get away from it in their writing (Genet, Jack Abbott), which means that the writers who try to portray these complex, frenzied lives are looking from the outside in, and often the whole thing is beyond them, how could it not be.

Mailer got everyone on board, talked to everyone, laid everything out, let everyone speak for themselves. It was a feat. Brilliant. Must read.

Tony says

In the Summer of 1976, Max Jensen had been married one year. He had just finished his first year of law school. He managed to get a job working nights at a gas station in Utah. One night, Gary Gilmore pulled in and put a gun to Jensen's head. He took what money was on hand. Then Gilmore said "This one's for me" and shot Jensen in the head.

It the Summer of 1977. I had been married one year. I had just finished my first year of law school and, not being well-connected, managed to get a job working nights at a secluded little gas station outside Pittsburgh, PA. One night, two young men walked into the station around closing time. One of them pulled a gun, held it against my head and walked me into the bathroom. They took what money was on hand. I felt the barrel of the gun on the back of my head as they demanded I open the safe. I said I didn't know the combination, which was true. They told me to turn around. Awaiting a bullet, I was maced instead.

In 1979, I read *The Executioner's Song* and had, it's fair to say, a rooting interest.

Darlene says

Full disclosure: I am not now nor have I ever been a proponent of the death penalty. There are some very good reasons it should be abolished.. least of which is that there is no evidence it serves as a deterrent to anyone other than the person being executed (for obvious reasons). This is the story of killer Gary Gilmore. In the summer of 1976, he robbed two men and then shot them both execution style. He was tried, convicted and sentenced to death in the state of Utah. What made this case so controversial is the fact that Gilmore decided he did not want to wait and go through the endless appeals process. He wanted to be executed right away. Like most true crime books, this story takes you through the entire trial process and you get a behind the scenes look at how the criminal justice system of the United States works.. which isn't always logical and doesn't always seem fair. There are not many redeeming qualities to Gary Gilmore's life. He was a career

criminal who had been in and out of prison his entire life. As a matter of fact, he committed these crimes while on parole. At the same time, Mailer shows you how absolutely illogical this whole process can be.. not to mention the hypocrisy that was present in this case. Although Gilmore said he wanted to be executed right away and it would seem that the state would want to save the tax payers significant money by granting his wish, that is not what was done. The ACLU took up the case and began to fight appeals FOR him. Attorneys were concerned that perhaps Gilmore had a death wish and perhaps that made him insane so they proceeded to try to stop it for that reason.

Mailer's book went on for over 1,000 pages and truthfully he could have summed in up in far fewer pages. Having read other books by Mailer, I think this is just his style. Gilmore's story is very compelling and it also demonstrated the very mixed feelings of the people who are charged with carrying out these state sponsored murders. It also demonstrated how political this process really is and how the killer is often exploited by his own attorneys and other people in his life who want to use his story for profit and fame. All in all, a very sad but interesting story. Gary Gilmore was executed by the state of Utah on January 17, 1977.
