
Keywords

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Transcript
Mailer: “The Executioner’s Song”
TOM BROKAW, co-host:
This is Norman Mailer. He is instantly recognizable to people all over the country and all over the world. And he is, once again, acclaimed this morning: he has won the Pulitzer Prize for a work of fiction called “The Executioner’s Song.” It is an extraordinary book about the life and the death of Gary Gilmore in Utah. Probably the most publicized public execution in this country, wouldn’t you guess?
NORMAN MAILER (Author, “The Executioner’s Song”): Well I’m not sure about that, certainly the most publicized in many years.
BROKAW: Well, but I must say, Norman, all the television coverage, the book that was written about it, all the coverage you’ve done – it really was a kind of quintessential media event taken to capital punishment.
MAILER: Well, Tom, I wouldn’t argue with you.
BROKAW: I know.
MAILER: You know it occurred to me that there may have been some execution in the nineteenth century that --
BROKAW: Got as much attention. Let’s talk about the prize. You’re a veteran of many wars, and I use that metaphorically. Does winning the Pulitzer Prize have the meaning for you that it once did?
MAILER: It was more enjoyable this time. You know, I won it 11 years ago, and I was running for mayor at that time. And, you know, when you’re in politics, you get so single minded, and all I thought about was, “I wonder if this is going to be good for the campaign?” And you know, of course we needed money, and I said well that’s 1,000 bucks, I’ll put right into the campaign. I really had a crude and crass reaction the other time.
BROKAW: Well, basically, what I’ve been reading about you recently that if you win a prize it will be going to one of your many ex-wives.
MAILER: Well it will be a pie; it will be cut up, yeah. But anyway, the prize is nominal its not that, its
agreeable to win the Pulitzer Prize. I like it. It got me good treatment in jail once many years ago.

BROKAW: It did? How so?

MAILER: I had to go to jail for 3 days and the lawyer, Phil Hershcop, called up the sheriff and said, “Now Ray, we’ve got a couple political prisoners for you, and they’re going to jail for just a couple days, and they’re very nice boys. And I want you to treat them right. One of them is Norman Mailer, and he’s famous, he won a Pooolitzer Prize, Ray, and you remember that.

BROKAW: Where was that?

MAILER: It was Alexandria jail.

BROKAW: Why were you in jail?

MAILER: It was an aftermath of the march on the Pentagon, and I think I was sentenced to 5 days, and there was a long appeal for a great many of us. Not because it was such a terrible sentence, but because of the principle of it. About three years later, the last three days, my sentence came down, and I had to serve it.

BROKAW: Let me ask you a question that I think is on the minds of a lot of people, it’s certainly on my mind. People are saying, “I just don’t get it Norman Mailer. You seem to be involved with so many distractions with alimony fights and political stuff and other things, and when you set down to write something, you end up writing this exceptional piece of work, and you win the Pulitzer Prize. Why aren’t you spending more time on what you do so extraordinary well, this business of writing?”

MAILER: Well I don’t know how I could. I mean, you know, my mother didn’t raise me to work that hard. The thing about the “Executioner’s Song,” I guess, the reason I’m glad I won this prize and enjoy winning it is that I did work harder on that book than any book I’ve worked on in my life. Just in terms of the number of hours I put in.

BROKAW: You set out to write it just for the money, originally. I mean you took this as a quick commercial –

MAILER: No, I never, I always set out to get as much money as I can for a book. I never write a book just for the money. You know, there’s that old Jewish expression, “It’s alright to marry money, dear, if you marry with love.” Well, you never want to do a book that you have no respect for. You have to have a lot of respect for a book, because you’ll be living with it for a few years.

BROKAW: Yeah, but this book grew on you in a way, as I recall your experience in writing it. It went from being a long treatment to, you went out there and lived in Utah and you became involved in the fabric of life and in the fabric of Gary Gilmore’s life, didn’t you?

MAILER: Oh, I got more and more involved, but that happens to me with every book. Whenever I have a good book I get more and more involved. I thought I’d be able to do the book quickly when I started, and it took longer and longer. I thought I could do it in 6 months and of course it took two years, and instead of making money I lost money because I had to live all that time.

BROKAW: This is described—Well how much money did you make? People are going to say, I wonder how much you made on the book?

MAILER: Well, of course, I get half of the money that comes in, and I think at this point the book has earned something like $600,000, which sounds like an immense sum but half of that is mine, and after you
take away all the income tax and the alimony and this and that, the book left me in debt. I’m not worried; I think I’ll get it back yet.

BROKAW: The book is, you won for fiction but the line is so fine in this book, “The Executioner’s Song,” between fiction and non-fiction. How do you tell the difference when one reads it?

MAILER: If I had known the kind of controversy that was going to create, I don’t know—I think I still would’ve called it a fiction, but I would’ve written a preface. If I had taken this book and had given imaginary names to all the characters, but even though every event was exactly as I could make it, it still would’ve been called fiction and no one would have argued with it. Somebody would say, well, its not a terribly imaginative piece of fiction, it holds very close to the events, but you know, no one would’ve argued whether it was fiction or not. So, I thought, go one step closer and use the names, because I wanted to dramatize something, which is that no matter how close, and no matter how accurate we try to be when capturing something from life, you end up creating a fiction. There’s no such think as a newspaper story that isn’t a fiction. I mean, with the best one in the world with the most scrupulous attention to the details and the facts, you still, you can’t transmute, you can’t transfer people from life into words on the page without making a fundamental alteration of their persona.

BROKAW: Do you approach one different than the other when you are writing a just a pure reportorial piece as opposed to writing a novel?

MAILER: I find an imaginative novel as opposed to a factual novel much easier to write, because there’s much less work to it, you don’t have to keep touching base and making certain that your facts are correct. But as I say, the main thing you want is that feeling when the reader goes through it that they’re reading a book, that they’re reading a novel, reading a story. And so I was obsessed with making “The Executioner’s Song” just as readable as I could make it. I wanted it to be the most readable book people had seen in years.