

# **The Big Empty: Dialogues on Politics, Sex, God, Boxing, Morality, Myth, Poker, and Bad Conscience in America Study Guide**

**The Big Empty: Dialogues on Politics, Sex, God, Boxing, Morality, Myth, Poker, and Bad Conscience in America by Norman Mailer**

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# Plot Summary

The Big Empty by Norman and John Buffalo Mailer is a collection of discussions between father and son. Norman is fifty-five years older than his son, John. Not surprisingly, the "discussion" between the young aspiring writer and actor and the famous award-winning writer is rather one-sided, one that more closely resembles an interview by a young writer who wants to gain the wisdom and knowledge of an older learned and accomplished artist. There are many questions from John and some comments. However, the majority of the substance in the book is the thoughts and opinions of Norman Mailer who is obviously very bright and the book provides proof that he is also very opinionated - if there was ever any doubt!

This work was published in 2006 and much of the focus of the discussions between father and son center on the Iraq War and the administration of President George W. Bush. That Norman and John are both political and social progressives is evidenced by their comments and opinions. Norman delineates the differences between protests in which he was involved as a young "anarchist" like the march on the Pentagon in 1967 against the Vietnam War and modern day protestors. He tells his son that the protestors of today are more focused on venting their personal anger and bolstering their self-image than they are on what they are protesting. Protests that are effective are focused, organized and are led by charismatic leaders who are calm, cool and collected.

Norman Mailer gives a major speech before the Neiman Fellows on December 6, 2004. He addresses what he considers the illegal Iraq War and the many failures of the Bush Administration. In the speech, he also raises a cautionary note about the future of America. He fears that the growing powers of Corporate America will ultimately be its downfall.

Included in The Big Empty is a long interview that Norman and John did with Playboy in 2004. Norman, who was married six times and had eight children and a step-son, talks about immorality and amorality. He confesses to amorality in his life and explains how man can have many lovers but ultimately does seek someone for whom he has a deep love.

The topics of discussions that Norman and John take on run the gamut from serious issues like political correctness, racism, legalization of marijuana, fascism and existentialism to lighter subjects like Texas Hold 'Em and the sport of boxing.

What is obvious throughout the book is that young John has a great admiration for the brilliance and wisdom of his father. Both men are liberal-minded and agree on most of the subjects. The book is a testament to the mutual love and admiration that father and son have for each other.



# Part One, Pages 3 through 36

## Part One, Pages 3 through 36 Summary and Analysis

### Generations

Father and son discuss the generation gap. Norman, John's father, is fifty-five years older than his son. John is from the GenY generation, the last generation who were able to discover the world before technology and the Internet totally took over. Computers and the Internet were part of his world in 1996 when he graduated but they weren't all encompassing like they've become. After his generation is gone, no one will remember what the world was like before technology.

Norman acknowledges that he's old enough to be John's grandfather. He is not a technocrat. He doesn't even know how to turn on a PC. He is fortunate enough to have an assistant who takes care of his computer work. The GenYs, have been pressured to feel naked without their cell phone and Blackberry. As a young boy, Norman had to go to the library and dig through the files and books to find the information he needed.

Norman thinks there is nothing like writing in long-hand. He thinks it makes a spiritual connection between writer and his writing. John agrees. He likes to write in long-hand but he is not fortunate enough to have an assistant and transfers his writing from long-hand to the computer. Norman says that after his writing is typed on the computer, he reads it like it's something new, like it's something that someone else wrote. Norman speaks about how important it is for a man his age to keep working. It gives him purpose.

Norman speaks of the war between liberals and conservatives. It is a conflict of extremes. Often they are right in their criticism of each other. America has more power than ever before and doesn't know how to use it. In Iraq for example, America is all thumbs when it comes to understanding another culture. According to Norman, more power equals less pleasure. Capitalism is greed but it works because creativity is also part of it. To Norman, President George W. Bush represented a fall in stature. "Patriotism" has been exploited. John adds that Americans take pride in their flags. Norman points out that the fascists did, too.

### Protestors, Flag-Cons, and the Big Empty

Norman and John discuss Michael Moore's documentary "Fahrenheit 9/11." Norman cautions that liberals shouldn't ridicule conservatives. The Progressive Party of 1948 tried that and have paid for it ever since. He felt the real story of "Fahrenheit 9/11" was the emptiness in the faces of the principals. George W. Bush has no depth. Norman suspects he never said to himself, "I don't deserve to be president." John agreed that just the sight of George W. brings out the rage in the left. Norman figures that the Republicans are holding their convention in New York because they're hoping to get



attacked so they can exploit it. Norman fears that the activists on the left don't know what they're doing, that they assume that expressing their rage will get Kerry elected.

### The Problem of Leadership

John comments that there is no leader on the left. Norman recalls the march on the Pentagon in 1967. David Dellinger and A. J. Muste were leaders of the protest. They were very organized and got their point across to President Johnson. John has concern that there's no time to organize before the Republican National Convention begins. Norman hopes that even if people don't show up to protest that there will be enough to defeat Bush. If there is a crowd, he hopes they don't riot. They need a charismatic leader who can calm them down. Norman feels dread about the outcome of the election.

### Four More Years?

John questions how they will make it through "four more years." Norman assures his son that they will but doesn't guarantee what shape they'll be in afterward. The country has undergone brainwashing in the last four Bush years. Norman had tried to talk Ralph Nader out of running. He's a good man but he will just take votes away from Kerry. Of course, Bush and Kerry are both pro-corporation. But Kerry is better than Bush. Norman laments about how George W. mangles the English language and how he's used key words like "evil," "patriotism," "terrorism" and "flag" to stir up the people. Corporations are running America and no mainstream politician can do anything but go along with them. They are working against forces greater than they are.

### On the Loss of Honesty

John wonders why John McCain is supporting George W. Bush. Norman explains that McCain wants to be president someday so he's playing politics. John is certain that McCain won't be Bush's vice president because he couldn't stand what Bush would do for another four years. Norman thinks that McCain would put his country first. If he thought he could influence Bush he might take the vice presidency.

### Therapeutic Protest

John asks if there are benefits to protest other than political. Norman responds that protestors vent their rage and test their courage but often have very little political impact. A protestor can never assume that a protest will accomplish his goal. Americans are drawn to calm and cool leaders. When Howard Dean did his scream in Iowa, he was never forgiven for it especially by the media. The problem with any form of protest is that the protestors have to pass through the huge filter of the media. The anti-war march against the Pentagon in 1967 was initially trashed by the media but eventually it was seen to have a positive impact. Many thought that the protest had aggravated the cops. Norman himself was seen as a protest candidate when he ran for Mayor of New York in 1969. Some of the anti-war protestors feel more self-respect after they speak up. The protest helped to end the war but the corporate world also feared that they could not trust the college graduates who came to work for them.



### The People's Republic of New York City

John asks Norman if New York was part of America or if it was an entity of its own. Norman responded that there were many great American cities but New York was the nation's only "world-city." Norman compared it to Hong Kong which is an independent city-state.



# Part One, Pages 37 through 86

## Part One, Pages 37 through 86 Summary and Analysis

### Iraq, Vietnam, and Politics in a Quagmire

John asks Norman how he would compare Vietnam and Iraq. Norman thinks Iraq is bad but Vietnam was much worse. Nearly sixty thousand soldiers were killed and two million Asians. What is comparable is that neither strategy worked. The big difference is that American intervention in Iraq disturbed the two major branches of religion that had been in place for thirteen centuries. Trying to defeat communism in Vietnam was not as culturally disturbing since it had been the policy for only fifty years. Norman fears that an American military presence will lead to unending acts of terrorism for the next century. Kerry should do well since he is a military vet and Bush was only in the National Guard. But he is sure the Republicans will try to tarnish Kerry's military service.

Norman thinks that some conservatives might go for Kerry since Bush isn't a true conservative. Bush is in the same category as the neoconservatives, oil tycoons and gung-ho militarists who are all prone to act first and ask questions later. True conservatives resist change, are deliberative and act with prudence. The flag-waving that Bush et al encourage is reminiscent of fascist governments. These flag-cons try to scare the country by warning the people that America will lose its preeminence in the world unless there are drastic changes - like taking over the oil in the Middle East and enlarging America's status as a superpower. Americans used to be hard workers but they've become power seekers. Sitting in front of a computer all day is not a good way to live. John adds that it's no longer possible to take over the world with military power. Norman concurs - the experience in Iraq is telling American as much.

### The Politics of Tragedy

John wonders if the Republicans might be having their presidential convention in New York City to cash in on 9/11. Americans suffered a loss of status from the terrorist attacks. It was a new reality. We were no longer safe in our big corporations. Norman is certain that the Republicans settled on New York to exploit the attacks for their own purposes. And if there are protestors, they will be portrayed as besmirching the memory of those who died - including the first responders. There are a lot of conspiracy theories but Norman is not buying into them although there were some inexplicable events that day that remain a mystery. Fighter jets weren't automatically scrambled like they should have been. The only people the attacks benefited were those who wanted to go to war with Iraq.

### Central Intelligence

On May 26, 2004, Al Gore called for the resignation of Bush and Cheney staff members who got America into the the Iraq War. The only one to resign was George Tenet, CIA



Director. The CIA provided the evidence that they knew Bush and Cheney wanted - even if it wasn't there. Those who insisted there was no evidence that Iraq was involved in the attacks finally gave up when no one would listen. Tenet himself told Bush that the evidence leading to Iraq's involvement was a "slam dunk."

### The Big Empty

John asks his father about the World Trade Organization anti-globalization movement that began in 1999 in Seattle. One feeling that some conservatives share with liberals is that corporations are stifling man's development. While they provide economic benefit, they are bad for people aesthetically, culturally and spiritually. Corporations are the Big Empty. Their architecture is empty. The expressions on the faces of CEOs are empty like Bush and his cronies. Michael Moore contrasted their vacant look to the young faces of the soldiers fighting in Iraq and the real faces of the suffering Iraqi people. One of the neo-cons who seems real although Norman doesn't agree with him is Donald Rumsfeld. He doesn't weigh his words. If he feels angry, he shows it. If he's happy, he smiles. He isn't afraid to express doubt.

If Kerry gets in, he can begin to repair the damage that Bush has done. Of course, he'll be pro-corporation like the rest. There is a profound difference between corporations and capitalism as long as it stays in small business. The small businessman is the individual who takes the risks and is creating something. CEOs of large corporations no longer care about the quality. The large amount of advertising dollars they have allows them to advertise wide-scale which brings down quality.

To win the war against corporations will take at least fifty years of revolution. Their brainwashing has been subtle. Norman recalls when John wore T-shirts that advertised corporations, something that John doesn't do any longer. If Bush is re-elected the country will be divided more than ever before. All Bush has to offer is world conquest. He has nothing else to offer. John says the diversity of the protestors will signal that the spiritual revolution may be on the rise. Norman is afraid that the protestors are not focused on the election but just have a need to vent their rage. Norman quotes Hermann Goering who at the Nuremberg trials after World War II said in part that ". . . people can always be brought to the bidding of their leaders."

### Myth Versus Hypothesis

Norman gave a speech to the Neiman Fellows on December 6, 2004. He began his speech by commenting that since his reelection, George W. Bush seems more like a president. He had always impressed Norman as a facsimile of macho virtue. His father had been manly enough to be present but couldn't escape his humility. George W. had been a cheerleader at Andover which might not have helped his self-image. But he had developed a unique ego and had become as vain as sin. His reelection has caused great woe among Democrats who did not believe he could win a second term. Of course, had Kerry won, he would have had to pay for all of Bush's mistakes.





Norman explains to the audience that as a novelist, he lives with hypotheses which enrich the mind. New information that brings the writer closer to reality weakens the hypothesis. The benefit of hypothesis is that it can stimulate one's mind and heighten consciousness. Patriotism offers its own brand of hypotheses. Some Americans believe it is not patriotic to support their country no matter what it does. Others feel that patriotism means to have unquestioned faith. Some may ask why are we in Iraq. Do we have a right to be there?

A good novel is an attack on reality. The assumption is that the reality is ever-changing and no one can predict conclusions especially the more intense a situation is. None the less, questions are asked and the truth is pursued which often leads to more questions. The American public was given more than a few narratives as to why why we were in Iraq. It was obvious that those in the administration were "hell-bent" for war. Some said George W. was trying to outdo his father. Another scenario was that he was trying to validate his father's occupation of Iraq a few years before. Some thought it was a noble cause - to democratize the Middle East. Then there was the element of fear - Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. Osama bin Laden was on the loose. Saddam Hussein was a dangerous enemy. Norman tends to think that we marched into Iraq and war because it was the simplest way in which to portray revenge. A war would also authenticate Bush's Florida "win."

But other things were going on. American students were falling down in comparison to Asian and European students. American corporations were prepped to outsource jobs because of low wages in Third World countries. American factory jobs were in jeopardy of disappearing. Before 9/11, trouble was brewing. The right saw the left as godless and immoral. The Catholic Church was going through scandals. The FBI was being infiltrated by spies. With the nation's economy and spirituality out of kilter, war seemed to be an answer, a distraction. Pitting the two sides of the divided country against each other and framing it with the possibility that each side could become more powerful than the other, the country ventured into myth - not into hypotheses. The hypothesis opens the mind to thought and observation. Myths are frozen hypotheses that, by design, never evolve. All questions are answered with a repetition of the myth - good will overcome evil. Part of the myth was the promulgation and perpetuation of fear. The weapons were somewhere and poised to kill us. Osama bin Laden was lurking. Going after the terrorists couldn't be categorized as a police action - going to war was the appropriate response. But immediately half the country was against it. The debates was: How much goodness has America done but how much has it exploited the world?

But it was Bush's goal to keep America fixed on myth. America must fight Satan! Smart Republicans and not-so-smart Republicans bought into the myth because of their belief that America was special to God. American exceptionalism is another phrase that is used to express this sentiment. George W. understood stupid people well. Republicans were sold the bill of goods that it was a good war and what we were doing was honorable. Those at the top did not think they were doing the honorable thing and didn't care that they weren't or that they were lying to the public. They had concluded that if America was to solve its problems and survive, it had to become an empire.



The exceptionalists had considered President Clinton as weak and with the advent of 9/11 saw their chance to save the country and attain global domination. But the truth, the real motivation could not be presented to the public at large; thus, the myths of weapons of mass destruction, the democratization of the Middle East and the war against terrorism had to be offered up to convince the public that war was the only answer. The concept that democracy could come to a backward and oppressed people was another myth. Dick Cheney and Karl Rove were too intelligent to believe that. It is Norman's suspicion that Cheney's main goal in going into Iraq was for oil.

The political state of the nation may cause more and more voters to become uncertain about where to place his vote. But indecision is implicit in living in a democracy.

### The Cost of Kerry's Loss

John asks his father if he still thinks it may have been better for the Democrats to lose in light of the Supreme Court retirements. Norman fears that the country will be paying a price with the establishment of a conservative court. But the Democrats did not run a very good campaign. Kerry didn't come down against the war because he wanted to appear strong and went along with it. Dean was the only candidate to come out against the war.



# Part One, Pages 87 through 111

## Part One, Pages 87 through 111 Summary and Analysis

### What Took Us into Iraq?

John comments that Americans are catching on that Saddam posed no real threat to America. The war was waged at great political cost to the Republicans. Why did they do it? It had to be more than oil. How could the Christian president justify the deaths of all the innocents who perished in the war? Norman answered that the Bushies loved selling the idea of spreading democracy and figured on the stupidity of the American people. They were experienced and smart enough to know that they would encounter trouble. But they knew they could weather the storm. Bush couldn't handle it but Cheney, Rumsfeld and the others could. These men have a diabolical capacity to live with a bad conscience. In 2001, the country was going down hill and they needed a distraction especially since they planned to give the rich a huge tax break.

John interjects that they sacrificed the poor, sent them to Iraq, for the rich. But it's a cycle that's always existed, Norman responds. The powers that be work at keeping the majority stupid and uniformed.

### Why Don't We Just Get Out of Iraq?

John asks why the US just doesn't get out of Iraq. John's response is that it's not easy to withdraw and there's never a quick departure. The US invaded Iraq and nearly destroyed it. They couldn't just leave all those people with ruin and devastation. The probability that a civil war could break out in Iraq looms. Syria might intervene and support the Sunnis against the Shiites. Bush would never allow America under his tenure to look like what in his estimation would be a weak loser. As far as democracy, that is something that cannot be gifted to a people; it has to be something that is wanted and built up internally from the ground up.

Of course, if America did pull out it might soothe the concerns and rage of the insurgents and may stimulate a feeling of nationalism within Iraq. European countries might be interested in investing in the oil-rich country. But there's one thing that Bush could never say, "I screwed up!"

### Patriotism

John asks Norman about his two definitions of patriots: Those who don't question any move made by their government and the others who do question a move that seems wrong to them. Norman estimates that a full two-thirds of the population are the former. A democracy depends on the intelligence of its people—the kind of intelligence that



breeds curiosity and a deliberative approach to issues. Danger is always near. There are no guarantees for a happy ending.

#### American Fascism?

Beneath all of Norman's remarks are very unhappy premises. He thinks that the leaders in America might prefer fascism to democracy. John asks how similar to Nazi Germany in the early 1930s America is today. Norman responds that they are very different. Germany was suffering through absolute ruin. They had been made the sole villains in World War I and they were made responsible for extreme reparations. The German mark was a joke.

If fascism comes to America it will be a slow process. America would have a totally different kind of fascism. The right wants to rule by keeping the masses stupid. The left must be careful not to share in that stupidity. "Fahrenheit 9/11" fed into some of those old cliches of the left.

#### Terrorism

John asks, if the administration had to exploit fear about terrorism in order to sell the war, how much of that fear was legitimate? Norman thinks America overreacted to the fear which was born, at least in part, from our own guilty consciences. The 3,000 people killed on 9/11 is repeated and repeated yet no one mentions the thousands killed in other wars - 400,000 killed in World War II and 60,000 in Vietnam Nam to name a few. Some 40,000 people are killed every year in automobile accidents. Fear of terrorism currently occupies center stage. America must ask itself what it wants to be and where it wants to go. Muslims resent America for profiting over the past two centuries while they have been tricked by progress.

#### Environment, Profit, and Karma

John mentions that even though Bush has two daughters he seems to have no interest in a future with a healthy environment. Norman responds that Bush very much believes in a future. After all, God talks to him every night. Norman finds it asinine how seriously Bush takes himself. The environment is safe and not the issue to Bush, the safety he is concerned with is the security that results from fighting terrorism and world domination. Besides, facing environmental concerns would cause Bush's cronies to lose profits and our economy to go into a tailspin. John fears that if steps aren't taken soon to solve environmental problems that it will be too late. Norman responds that the anti-environmentalists believe in the excuses they make for their lack of action. If the devil controls karma, these guys will be in power for quite a while.

# Part Two

## Part Two Summary and Analysis

### Courage, Morality, and Sexual Pleasure

The following is an excerpt from an interview that Norman and John did with Playboy in December 2004. Playboy asks Norman about immorality and amorality. Norman responds that immorality is a more defined concept. One's moral logic discerns immoral actions. Generally speaking, an amoral man is thought to be a sexist. There are two sub-categories of sexists: one doesn't give a damn about his partner and the other has a biological drive, a physical need, like an animal.

John thinks that everyone lives by a personal code. Norman agrees and says that even an amoral person has a code. A man can have multiple partners but he gets to a point when he is ready for serious love. A person needs to feel a great love for someone he is faithful to for ten years. Norman admits to his own problems. He's been married six times, has eight children and one step-son. They discussed President Clinton's amorality. Norman defends him as a bright and capable person with natural warmth. However, he thought his comment, "I did it because I could" was needlessly cruel to Monica Lewinsky. But Clinton had to satisfy a hurt and angry wife. And, there are many intervening considerations for a politician who has a wife who wants to run for high office.

The Playboy representative asks Norman about the relevance of literature in modern times. Norman points to literary giants such as Hemingway and Faulkner who probably didn't sell as many copies of their books as serious writers do today. However, they were inspirational and had a great influence on younger writers. Historically, literature has been important in the development of cultures and for a nation's greatness. England benefited from Shakespeare. Ireland owes much to the works of Joyce. America is currently focused not as much on the arts as it is on power. Although power has always been sought by great nations, it has usually been mixed with other forces such as culture, art, sports and architecture. John adds that most theaters are named for corporations as are most sports stadiums. Somewhere along the line, great minds used to speak to the masses; now it's pop celebrities.

Karl Marx's writings were read by millions and many were willing to die for his ideas. The failure of ideology like Bolshevism and Stalinism was the adherence to the idea that religion was "the opium of the masses" (p.125). John asks Norman who will be the last best novelist. Norman responds that it will probably be some poor unknown poet. He predicts that someday novels will be read on the computer and there won't be a need for actual books. But fiction is vital for a culture because it is the backdrop for moral questions. This brand of truth is at odds with corporations who want to keep the B-S train running 24/7 at top speed. They need to brainwash the populace that corporations are good for the people or that corporations are even people. Modern day corporations



are much more effective at controlling people than were Stalin's methods. The serious novel is antipathetic to corporate capitalism. Norman salutes Oprah Winfrey for featuring Anna Karenina in her book of the month club. However, will she continue to support classics or will the power of her own career trump it? Norman's favorite place and time to write is in Provincetown, MA, in the winter when no one else is around. After women's liberation came along, men lost most of their control in a marriage. Women are closer to the universe—closer to creation. They have better instincts. Women and men both inflict cruelty on one another. He does not believe in the superiority of either sex—it's like comparing dogs and cats. John sees women like Hillary Clinton and Arianna Huffington moving up in the ranks and becoming more influential politically. Norman agrees but politics would change them. When he ran for Mayor of New York, he knew that he would never write again if he were elected because he'd be used up in many ways that he would detest.

In concluding their Playboy conversation, they touch on such subjects as courage, which to Norman, is the most important virtue. We can only feel love for someone when we respect ourselves, Norman adds. They discuss Freud briefly and where technology is leading the world. Some say that technology is even stunting evolution.

#### How Rich do You Need to Be?

CEOs of major corporations make one hundred or even one thousand times more than the guy at the bottom of the totem pole at the corporation. Such disparity is what sparked the French Revolution. Unfair conditions launched the Russian Revolution. Will there be a revolution in America over disparity? "Revolutions that transform countries emerge from a huge inchoate wrath" (p. 154). If there is a total economic collapse, the masses would resent the huge incomes that the fat cats enjoyed. John thinks that CEOs would be willing to give up some of their salary if they were approached in the right manner. Norman responds that the CEO would be polite and listen and then laugh his head off in private.

#### Political Correctness and Racism

Norman has had to rein himself in over the years as far as political-correctness is concerned. He "teased" a Japanese woman by referring to her as a kamikaze. He regrets that comment and another one he made thirty-five years before: "all women should be kept in cages." He made that last comment to Orson Welles on a television show (p. 158). Norman has fears about where the foul attitude that exists in America may lead. People are angry over the disparity of wealth. The top-half of one percent are pulling in 25 percent of the wealth. Norman loves women and there's not a racist bone in his body. John adds that there is racism throughout the country. Political correctness will not end bias and prejudice because it's a forced behavior.

#### Marijuana

John asks why the Bush Administration is obsessed with marijuana, even medicinal marijuana. Overturning states' rights is not conservative. Norman responds that a lot of



conservatives question whether Bush is really a conservative. "Republican" and "conservative" do not have the same meaning. But no administration - Republican or Democrat - has ever supported legalizing marijuana. Smoking pot is safer than drinking alcohol. Norman smoked marijuana for a five-year period but quit when he decided he wanted to be a serious writer. Smoking pot is a right of passage and he would never discourage a young person from trying it. It's a spiritual drug. It changes one's perception. John spent a year in the marijuana community when he worked at High Times. It was a wild year. Drugs can bring out emotions in a person while booze brings out violence. John thinks the main reason that pot is illegal is because of hemp which could be used as a fuel and raw material and threaten the oil and other industries.



# Part Three

## Part Three Summary and Analysis

Mailer vs. Mailer: A Talk About the Sport of Boxing

This interview first appears in "Stop Smiling" on April 15, 2005.

Boxing had been a favorite sport of the Mailer family for many years. Norman believes that the lower weight classes require more skill. Middleweights are the most exciting to watch. Heavyweights are the clumsiest of the fighters but still Norman finds it the most exciting class. John thinks the Ultimate Fighting Championship demonstrates that the toughest boxer is not necessarily the toughest man. The Ultimate fighters come from different disciplines including sumo wrestling and jujitsu. Norman thinks that a jujitsu champion could never hold up against a professional heavyweight.

John asks Norman if he thinks a large ego is necessary to be a good fighter. Norman responds that a strong ego is necessary to match the intensity of the sport. He relates a story about Carmen Basilio who was a tough welterweight. He was hit and knocked over. He was just a few inches from the canvas on his bent knee but made himself get back up. Later, someone asked him why he didn't go down all the way. He responded, "I didn't want to start no bad habits" (p. 182).

When women first got into boxing, they were dreadful. Norman jokingly said at the time that he was "half-tempted to have a sex-change operation. Because then I could be champion of the world" (p. 184). They've gotten much better but they're nowhere near the level of male boxers. Boxing is different than other sports because it's one on one. It is a demanding sport due to the amount of discipline and intelligence that is required to be successful. Restraint is vital because a boxer can get caught up and kill his opponent. Kids who need attention can find a social outlet in boxing and come to realize their strengths and abilities. To Norman, boxing is a grueling sometimes violent sport but it's a sport of honor. The link that Norman makes between boxing and writing is that both can cause great suffering.

Texas Hold 'Em

John likes to play no-limit Texas Hold 'Em because he enjoys the balance of luck and skill and applying it to his life experience. The game has caught on quicker than any he's seen. Norman thinks it may be a passing fancy. Playing the game allows you to find your strengths and weaknesses. John likes to practice reading other people to try to catch them bluffing. John wonders if it's possible to somehow summon luck. Norman thinks that it may be possible but only for a couple of days at a time. A streak of luck like that is what a person needs when trying to win a tournament. The bluff is key in poker because without it, it would be "like a loveless marriage" (p. 201).

Existentialism—Does It Have a Future?





This article by Norman Mailer appeared in the June 2005 issue of "Liberation." Sartre is the one who derailed existentialism. Heidegger had been working and researching and looking for a connection between man and the divine. Sartre was comfortable being an atheist. He touted living with emptiness and proclaimed that he would not look for the hereafter. Though it was profound, it disallowed existentialism from in-depth exploration. Obviously, it is impossible for one to contemplate how man was created without thinking of a force that existed before and one that was more powerful. Being an atheist, Sartre was content with just being and not thinking beyond it. That removed the possibility that man represented a good purpose.

If existentialism is to survive, it needs a God who is not necessarily a creator but an artist and a God who suffers the uncertainties of existence. Sartre would not consider that the movement needed a God who embodies some of man's flaws.

### God, the Devil, and a Third Party

John asks his father why people feel the need to think of God as all-powerful and all good? Norman responds that part of it is due to the fundamentalist belief that the devil is in them or poised to jump in at the slightest opportunity. Early man lived outside without shelter and had to be terrified with the havoc that Mother Nature could cause. Certainly, the God who controlled the wind and storms was all-powerful. From those long-ago peoples, religions were established and most were based on the fear of God. Norman believes in a God who is not all powerful or all good but, like a good man, is doing his best. For those who believe in existentialism, God could re-inspire them and stimulate a new desire for a peaceful inner life.

John asks Norman about the possibility of establishing a third political party. Norman would be for it if it showed signs of strength and growth. He's a Democrat but the Democratic Party is really just Republican-Lite.

John asks if God could have a life-span like man. Norman feels that God has been evolving. Norman always looked at Jesus as a god who was doing the best he could. John comments that since it takes a man and a woman to create a child, couldn't that process be mimicking a cosmic process? Might it take two opposing forces to create the universe? When John needs a spiritual uplifting, he prays to the spirits. They are not all-powerful but he feels comfort from them. Norman is a great believer in prayer himself. He also feels that we leave the world with better questions than the ones we came with. Perhaps God likes that - God might be stimulated by what he can learn from the people.



# Characters

## Norman Mailer

Norman Mailer is the brilliant and renowned writer who is the author of such classics as *The Naked and the Dead*, *Executioner's Song*, and *Armies in the Night* among many others. He is a much-lauded writer, recipient of the National Book Award and twice the winner of the Pulitzer Prize among other awards.

The time-frame of the *Big Empty* is pre-2006. There is great focus on the 2004 presidential election and the Iraq War. Norman Mailer is a progressive both politically and socially. It is no surprise to read about his contempt for the administration of George W. Bush and his role in involving America in the Iraq War. He has great animus for Bush whom he views as unqualified to be president and strangely vain and arrogant - strange because he has no reason to be arrogant.

Norman discusses the effectiveness of protest. He thinks back to his young days when he was an anti-war protestor during the Vietnam War. He attributes that organized and calm protest as a factor in ending the war. He compares the anarchists in his days to the protestors of today who are disorganized and who seem to want to vent their anger and build up their own image rather than be effective in their protests. He warns the youthful protestors that they should not expect to achieve the political goal that they ostensibly represent.

Norman has some fun with his young son, John, who co-wrote the book. Norman is fifty-five years older than John. Norman admits that he is old enough to be John's grandfather. They compare the gap of multiple generations that exists between them. When Norman was a youth - he says in the days of antiquity - he had to physically go to a library and dig through files and books to find what he was looking for. John is a member of GenY, a generation of people who has had the Internet at their disposal most of their lives. John's peers would not be caught without their cell phone and Blackberry. Norman admits that he doesn't know how to turn on a PC.

Norman gave a major speech before the Neiman Fellows on December 6, 2004, in which he expressed his concern for America's future and the threats that the country faced. He intimated that many of these dangers were of internal making.

## George W. Bush

Norman Mailer is not a fan of George W. Bush. He hates the way Bush butchered the English language and he thinks that arrogance emanated from his every pore. Mailer suggests that Bush had probably not asked himself a very pertinent question, "Do I deserve to be President?" Norman Mailer has a strong conviction that George W. Bush was not qualified to be president. He notes the frozen smirk on his face and an expression that emanates an inexplicable arrogance and even a sinful vanity.



Norman writes that because Bush was a cheerleader in school instead of an athlete, the experience may have done damage to his self-image. But Bush was able to convert that possible humiliation into a unique bluster that he maintained throughout his life and presidency. Norman portrays Bush as being surrounded by a team of manipulating neo-conservatives who were bright and intellectual way beyond George W.'s capacity. He refers to Bush as a flag-con - a flag waver who was able to convince the nation that it must go to war against Saddam Hussein who had weapons of mass destruction and was determined to use them against the United States.

In the section before the 2004 election takes place, Mailer supports John Kerry, the Democratic candidate. Mailer, like other progressives, could not believe that Bush could be re-elected. But Bush exploited the attacks of 9/11 to a level he felt catapulted him to world leader and fighter of terrorism and defender of America. Mailer also feels that by taking on the mantel of hero and military leader that Bush would justify his Florida "election" to the presidency.

## **John Buffalo Mailer**

John Buffalo Mailer is the co-author of *The Big Empty*. He is a writer and playwright and is the son of famous author, Norman Mailer, his co-author. It is obvious that John admires his famous father and garners a wealth of information from him during his discussions and interviews with him.

## **Norris Church Mailer**

Norris Church Mailer is John Mailer's mother. He dedicated the book to her, "To a lovely lady - Norris Church Mailer."

## **Michael Moore**

Michael Moore produced the documentary film, "Fahrenheit 9/11." Norman didn't think it was a good idea to ridicule the Republicans because the Progressive Party of 1948 had tried that and look how that turned out.

## **John Kerry**

Norman and John supported John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election. Norman acknowledges that both Bush and Kerry were beholden to corporate America but that Bush was worse.



## **Ralph Nader**

Norman tried to talk Ralph Nader out of running for president in 2004 because he'd take votes away from Kerry and would lead to the reelection of George W. Bush.

## **Lyndon Johnson**

After the relatively peaceful march of 1967 against the Vietnam War, Lyndon Johnson got the message. He knew that if that large amount of people showed up in protest there were millions behind them.

## **John McCain**

John Mailer wonders why John McCain came out so strong for George W. Bush. Norman responds that McCain was playing politics because he wanted to be president some day.

## **Hermann Goering**

Hermann Goering, a Nazi military leader, is quoted as saying that no matter the form of government, people will always be at the bidding of their leaders.

## **Donald Rumsfeld**

Although Norman Mailer did not agree with any policies of Donald Rumsfeld, Mailer had a strange admiration for him because he was not afraid to show his emotions. If he was angry or happy he showed it. And he was not afraid to express doubt.

## **Dick Cheney and Karl Rove**

Norman Mailer identified Dick Cheney and Karl Rove as the "brains" behind the push for the Iraqi War and for world dominance. He depicts Bush as basically their puppet.



# Objects/Places

## 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

Norman Mailer makes the case that the Bush administration exploited the attacks of 9/11 for their own purposes: the invasion of Iran and a push for world dominance.

## Iraqi War

The Bush Administration used non-existent "weapons of mass destruction" to help convince the American people that the US must invade Iraq. No weapons were ever discovered and the war led to the death of thousands of US soldiers and many more innocent Iraqis.

## Fahrenheit 9/11

"Fahrenheit 9/11" is a documentary film about the Bush administration's reaction to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the lies told by the President and his executive staff that led America to the invasion of Iraq.

## 2004 Presidential Election

There is much focus on the 2004 Presidential election in this work. Both John and Norman wanted John Kerry to be elected and drive George W. Bush out of office.

## The Big Empty

The title of the book, *The Big Empty*, refers to corporate America. It is Norman Mailer's very strong conviction that it is Corporate America that will be behind the undoing of America. The manner in which Corporate America operates has little to do with real capitalism.

## March on the Pentagon

Norman speaks of the 1967 protest at the Pentagon against the Vietnam War. It was perceived as negative at first by the media but it had a positive and lasting effect in that it contributed to the end of the war.



## **New York City**

Norman says that there are a lot of good American cities but there is only one "world city" in the United States - New York City. He compares NYC to Hong Kong which is a semi-independent city-state.

## **Neiman Fellows**

Norman gave a speech to the Neiman Fellows on December 6, 2004. In his speech, he excoriated the Bush administration and its lies in getting America involved in the illegitimate war in Iraq.

## **Neo-Cons and Flag-Cons**

According to Norman Mailer, it was the neoconservatives or neo-cons who were behind America's involvement in the Iraq War. He depicts neo-cons as war-mongers who see global dominance as the only way for America to survive. Bush was surrounded by neo-cons but he was their puppet and a flag-con - someone who waves the flag and touts patriotism as a way to manipulate the public.

## **Weapons of Mass Destruction**

Norman Mailer advocates the common speculation that the CIA provided false evidence (because they knew Bush and Cheney wanted it) that proved that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, was prepared to use them against American and may have had an involvement in the 9/11 attacks.

# Themes

## Generation Gap

One of the themes that is visible throughout *The Big Empty* is the generation gap between the two authors, John Buffalo Mailer and Norman Mailer. The former is a young and aspiring playwright and actor while the latter is the famous award-winning author and liberal advocate. John is part of the GenY generation. He wistfully tells his father that his will be the last generation to know what it means to be a young person and go out into a world that technology has not yet completely taken over.

Though the two men are obviously close and like-minded in many ways, the gap of multiple generations between them is stark; however, they deal with it with lightness and tolerance. Norman readily admits that at fifty-five, he is old enough to be John's father. John was around twenty-five when this book was written. While John and his peers would feel naked without their cell phones and their Blackberrys. Norman is not afraid to admit that he doesn't even know how to turn on his computer. Luckily, he has an assistant who does that for him.

But though many years stand between Norman and John, who are both writers, they do have some of the same approaches to their craft. Norman tells John that he doesn't write on a computer but doesn't want to. And, he's not just saying that. He feels a spiritual and emotional connection with his pens writing in long hand—even though his handwriting is almost illegible. Something magical seems to happen when he writes in long-hand. When his assistant takes his writing and enters it into his computer, he reads his written word which then strangely seems like someone else's writing. It's a strange sensation but young John recognizes the emotion about which his father speaks. As savvy as John is with modern technology, he too writes everything out in long-hand. He isn't fortunate enough to have an assistant and inputs his writing into the computer himself. But father and son take the same approach to the physical and emotional part of their writing.

Despite the many years that separate them, the two do share many of the same political and social views. They are both progressives who see greedy corporations, an unregulated environment, and a quest for world dominance as dangers to America's democracy.

## The Myth vs. Hypothesis

As an artist and writer, Norman Mailer explains that writers of fiction, authors of novels, like he is live in what he terms "hypothesis." Unlike journalists who dig into the slime for facts, a writer of fiction works from a different direction to attain a "truth" - a truth is a very different thing than a fact. A truth is an elevated level of reality. Instead of conducting oneself as a reporter finding a story, the novelist starts with a story made



from air—or it seems like air but it is actually an admixture of creativity, spirit and personal background and experience.

The writer makes presumptions about reality and he lives with hypotheses which serve to enrich the writer's mind so he can write and hypothesize all the better and, as a bonus, hopefully he is able to enrich the minds of his readers. So writers exist in a narrative world of drama and emotion. They are physically in the same world as everyone else; however, in their mind they exist with mere presumptions about life as it is or as it could be. The more "facts" that a novelist has, the more his fantasy is weakened as it begins to more closely resemble real life.

While the writer exists in his fantasy as long as he can keep it pure and robust, the politician lives in reality but projects myth to the populace. And he is probably just as safe in his existence as the writer is in his. He can perpetuate his myth as long as he can keep up pretenses and as long as outside forces do not expose the myth, he can live in perpetuity behind his myth. The world of the myth-maker is safer than an existence in hypotheses in that maintaining a myth requires only minimal labor since every doubt and question can be responded to with the same answer.

After George W. Bush convinced the country (or most of it) that it was necessary to invade Iraq, he answered every question he had in the same way. He didn't even have to think: "Good must overcome evil." The myth-maker creates a one-size-fits all answer to any doubting Thomases or questions from a inquiring reporter.

## The Power of Protest

Norman Mailer had been part of protests in the past. In his youthful days, he participated in the anti-war protest march on the Pentagon that strongly advocated the end of the Vietnam War. This protest march took place in December 1967. It is his contention that the 1967 protest march was successful because it was organized and the participants stayed focused. There were two organizers to whom he referred as anarchists, who kept control of the situation. Norman feels certain that this march contributed to the ending of the war. President Johnson knew that the protestors were serious and that behind all those who showed up were many people who did not attend but undoubtedly felt just as strongly.

To have a successful protest march, it's necessary to have a cool and charismatic leader who will soothe raw nerves and keep the people calm. The protestors that Norman observes in today's marches are often egocentric in that they are most concerned with venting rage and bolstering their own self-image. They lose sight of why they're marching. Protestors like this cannot expect to have much influence or to attain their political goal. Oftentimes such individuals will go out of their way to gain attention and appear on TV or be interviewed by a reporter.

There is a therapeutic quality about protest. The feeling of self-pride grows within one who speaks out and protests against issues that are heartfelt and important. One



experiences a healthy liberated feeling and even civic pride when speaking out about political and societal issues that impact a community or country.

# Style

## Perspective

The Big Empty is a series of discussions between Norman Mailer and John Buffalo Mailer, father and son. As such, Norman and John each are speaking from their own perspective. Norman is a famous writer and John is a budding playwright and actor. Norman is fifty-five years older than his son. John takes on the posture of interviewer during most of the account. It is obvious that he enjoys gaining the wisdom of Norman's long life and experiences.

The book is categorized into different topics and within each of the topics are exchanges between John and Norman. It is no surprise that the famous author and advocate of progressive thought and ideology is outspoken, serious and funny and has the ability to provide a mixture of responses that are, at times, charming, blunt and wistful. The discussions contained in this book, take place over a period of a year.

Norman Mailer is a literary giant and a legend in his own time. In 1948, when he was twenty-five years old, he published his first book, *The Naked and the Dead*. He won the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize for his book, *The Armies of the Night*. He received his second Pulitzer Prize in fiction for *The Executioner's Song*.

John Buffalo Mailer is an actor, playwright and journalist. He is a founding member of Back House Productions.

## Tone

Norman Mailer is a much-honored and successful writer. He won the Pulitzer Prize twice and the National Book Award for some of his works. When this book was written, Norman was in his advancing years. He had lived a long, exciting and sometimes turbulent life. Those elements from his life are reflected in his witty, insightful and always brilliant remarks.

John, his son, mainly asks questions of his father in this work of exchanges between the two who are also co-authors of *The Big Empty*. The respect and admiration that young John has for his talented father comes through the pages. One can imagine that the twenty-five-year-old John is probably hanging on his every word. Although John does not provide as many comments as his father, the remarks that he does make are evidence that the son, who is also a writer, is also bright and is following in his father's footsteps.

Norman's responses to questions and remarks by his son reflect the magical way he has with words and phrases which he is able to transfer from the written word to the spoken one. He often writes in subtext which makes the reader stop and re-read his passages. At one point, he makes the comment that he likes to write passages that the



reader doesn't quite understand at first and that require a re-read. Norman feels that giving the reader such complex thought-provoking passages makes them dig deeper into their own intellect to gain a deeper meaning of his words.

## Structure

The structure of *The Big Empty - Dialogues on Politics, Sex, God, Boxing, Morality, Myth, Poker and Bad Conscience in America* is quite a novel one. This work is a collection of discussions between Norman Mailer and John Buffalo Mailer, father and son. Norman Mailer is the famous award-winning writer who is also an advocate for progressive causes. His son, John, is a budding playwright and actor and is politically and socially in tune with his father. The two men begin their series of discussions together by telling the reader about the great generational gap that exists between them. Norman is fifty-five years older than his son who was around 25-years-old at the time of the publication of this book.

The book is set up in three parts each with a number of sub-sections. Part One has nineteen sub-sections and focuses on the Iraq War, terrorism, patriotism and the failed administration of George W. Bush whom Norman detests. Part Two has four sub-sections that center on cultural and societal issues such as political correctness and racism. Part Three has four sub-sections which cover an array of diverse subjects from boxing to existentialism.

There is a Preface written by John Buffalo Mailer and an Introduction written by Norman Mailer in which they provide their feelings about this work.



## Quotes

"After my generation is gone, no one will remember what the world was like before the technological revolution. No one will have a clear sense of what we've gained and lost because of it." (Part One, page 4)

"You just can't trust a man who's never been embarrassed by himself. The vanity of George W. stands out with every smirk. He literally cannot control that vanity. It seeps out with every movement of his lips, every tight-lipped grimace. Every grin is a study in smugsmanship." (Part One, page 14)

"Successful politicians have to make hard choices. Very few good people can do it because the hard choices are so often god-awful. In addition, you have to smile standing next to people you despise." (Part One, page 25)

"Samuel Johnson once said, 'Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.' I would add that the family is the large refuge of a politician who's retiring in disgrace." (Part One, page 51)

"I cannot believe that Bush and Company are a gaggle of fools, not by a long shot. They are the most calculating administration I've encountered in my life." (Part One, page 87)

"I don't know much about the Greeks, but the little I have learned about them in recent years does inspire some respect on this matter. Because they saw life as a dynamic mixture of hope and despair. In other words, you never live without the possibility that disaster may be near." (Part One, page 98)

"'I did drugs because I could.' 'I had sex because I could.' It is not so much immorality as amorality that drives such behavior. In the absence of moral order or authority, the fool is free to pursue all courses with abandon." (Part Two, page 115)

"'I did it because I could.'" ~ President Bill Clinton (Part Two, page 118)

"'Politics is the art of the possible.' What's important is to get some part of what you want done. That's how a democracy works. By pieces and parts." (Part Two, page 121)

"I do agree with Robert F. Kennedy that every action you take is equivalent to throwing a pebble into a pond. It's the ripples that affect the machine." (Part Two, page 131)

"You know, I love this country with all its faults, but one of its huge spiritual crimes is that



we're the BS kingdom of all time. We've found a way to process BS so you can't even smell the bull any longer." (Part Two, page 139)

"It's very hard to feel love if you're full of shame. We can only feel love for someone else when we have gained respect for ourselves—it's why we have this endless obsession with courage." (Part Three, page 145)



## Topics for Discussion

What were Norman Mailer's views on George W. Bush as a person and as a president?

What was Norman Mailer's theories on living in "hypothesis" and living on "myth"?

In Norman Mailer's opinion, what were the positive outcomes of a Kerry presidency? What were the negative possibilities? In what way did he view Bush and Kerry to be alike?

What did Norman Mailer think of Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11"? What approach did Moore take at the beginning of the documentary that Mailer said had failed in the past? What was his point of reference?

According to Norman Mailer, what are the real purposes of protest? What impact do they actually have on politics? What misconception do many protestors have? What kind of leader is needed to make a protest successful?

What were the theories, according to Norman Mailer, that led America into the Iraq War? Who were the principals that led America into the illegal war?

What are John and Norman Mailer's views on political correctness, racism and legalizing marijuana?

What sports or recreational pursuits were enjoyed by Norman and John? What are some of their observations about these interests?