

# **The Executioner's Song Study Guide**

## **The Executioner's Song by Norman Mailer**

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# Plot Summary

Norman Mailer's *Executioner's Song* is many things, and its status between the realms of fiction and non-fiction makes it difficult to define. It is not non-fiction, notwithstanding the author's claim in his Afterword. The Pulitzer Prize Committee recognized Mailer's work as a "...thoroughly imagined work of fiction." This novel is not a work of non-fiction, but it is also not wholly a work of fiction. The book's form causes us to examine the line between reality and perception. What is the truth? How is truth colored by the telling of it, whether through a novel or through the rules of a trial? Are the points of view about Gilmore that Mailer describes "truth" in any way?

*Executioner's Song* is the novelized story of the life and death of Gary Mark Gilmore, the first person to be legally executed in the United States following a ten-year hiatus on executions imposed by the U.S. Supreme Court. The execution occurs in Utah, the center of the Mormon religion. The background of the Mormon culture, with its history of blood atonement, plays a role in the novel.

Mailer romanticizes Gilmore's life and death, painting him often as a heroic figure. Still, it is clear that Gilmore is a career criminal who chooses the path his life takes while still a pre-teen and pointlessly kills two people. Is Mailer biased toward Gilmore, showing him as something he is not? Is Mailer creating a commentary on perception and how Gilmore is perceived in the media and elsewhere? The presentation of Gilmore's character, whether purposefully or not, makes us wonder what is reality and what is perception. Ultimately, the whole book is colored by Mailer's perceptions and intentions, as is all media, to some degree and sometimes insidiously.

Mailer's work begins with the story of Gilmore's parole from Marion State Penitentiary in Illinois. Gilmore is transferred to the mid-west institution from Oregon State Penitentiary, where he had helped instigate a prison riot and where he had been forced to take the drug Prolixin to subdue his aggression. Gary and some of his apologist friends blame the drug for some of Gary's later behavior, but the claims appear weak in the presence of Gilmore's long-established behavior patterns. Gary is released from Marion in 1976, into the sponsorship of Brenda, his cousin, who lives in the Mormon enclave of Provo, Utah, home of Brigham Young University. Brenda arranges a job for Gary, working for her father Vern, who is married to Ida. Vern owns and operates a shoe repair shop. He is an accomplished cobbler and hires Gary as an assistant. He also provides lodging for Gary, living with him and Ida.

According to Vern, Gary is a hard worker but totally inexperienced. He wants badly to fit in with the guys in the shop, and everyone is friendly to him. However, Gary wants to develop his cobbler skills over night and becomes testy when Vern cannot pay total attention to his training. Gary is a continuous beer drinker - a beverage he brags that he never pays for but always shoplifts - and frequently "borrows" money from Vern. Quickly, his welcome grows thin, but Vern is too nice of a guy to say anything. Brenda, however, scolds Gary for borrowing so much money from her father and suggests that it might be time for Gary to find new digs. This he does by going to work for another charitable



boss, who also arranges a place for him to stay and puts up the down payment for an old Mustang. The Mustang plays a key role in Gary establishing a lusty relationship with Nicole, a 20-year-old beauty who has already been married three times and has two children. Nicole owns a Mustang exactly like Gary's, and she sees that as a cosmic sign of their intertwined destinies.

Gary and Nicole enter into a relationship of hard, animal sex, fraught with all of the complications of anger, jealousy, ego and attitude that might be expected from two young and totally undisciplined lovers. Gary quickly gets into trouble, going on a binge that takes him to Idaho, where he assaults a homosexual man and steals his vehicle. The Idaho authorities cut Gary loose at the urging of Mont Court, Gary's parole officer in Utah. This is only one of several jams Court bails the criminal out of, looking for a trusting, touchy-feely relationship with the slick but hardened con. Sterner action by Court on this and at least one other occasion might have prevented the two murders that Gary later commits in Provo. Gary continues to steal and, on one burglary, breaks into a gun shop. Then, he starts showing off the merchandise he has purloined. The eventual murder weapon is in that lot of goods. He also gives a gun to Nicole, who ends up pointing it at him after one of their arguments.

When Gary's Mustang keeps breaking down, he falls in love with a white pickup on the same lot, but he doesn't have the money to buy it. He finally cons the lot owner into giving him the truck with the promise of a \$400 payment in a week's time. Gary tries to borrow from all of his friends, but everyone is pretty wise to him now. When that approach fails, he chooses a remote all-night gas station to rob, and then he murders the attendant execution-style. He is accompanied by April, Nicole's 12-year-old sister, an acid-high tweaker with serious underlying emotional issues. She is so spaced out that she stays in the truck while Gary does the murder, and she is totally unaware of anything out of the ordinary. After the murder, April spends the night with Gary at the local Travel Lodge Motel.

The next night, Gary travels solo to the City Center Motel. He robs the motel and commits his second execution-style murder. He is seen running from the motel carrying a gun and the cash drawer. He throws the gun in some bushes, but he shoots himself in the hand in the process. He leaves a trail of blood from the bushes to the service station where the white truck is parked, and the attendant at the station writes down Gary's license number. The night ends in a peaceful surrender to the cops, during which Gary forgets to put his truck in park. It rolls off into a drainage ditch, an ignoble end for an object desirable enough to cause a man to kill two people.

The second book of this two-book tome tells the tale of the media circus Gary Gilmore creates by accepting the death penalty handed down by the Utah courts. He insists they follow through with it and chooses a firing squad as the means of carrying out the sentence. Quickly, the world media takes over the Hyatt in Salt Lake City, replete with TV producers, charlatans and fast-buck artists, including such notables as the ever-cool Geraldo Rivera. Always sensitive to the outside world's view of this peculiar state as a bucolic enclave of religious eccentrics, the governor and others high in state government are not eager to win the reputation as the first state to defy the Supreme



Court ban on capital punishment, especially by firing squad. Sam Smith, the warden of the Utah State Penitentiary, and the attorneys representing Gary, however, are adamant that the state follow through with its sentence. Organizations such as the ACLU and NAACP get involved in trying to stop the execution, as does the attorney for another condemned murderer who is afraid a Gilmore precedent will get his client killed. Gary's insistence on dying creates some strange bed fellows, as traditional adversaries, the Attorney General's Office and the team of defense attorneys, join forces. They manage to get a couple of stays of execution, which are then quickly overturned in a prolonged game of legal brinkmanship. The last stay is overturned by a three-judge panel of the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals just a few minutes before the execution.

In the final couple of chapters, Mailer ties up a few loose ends. Nicole goes to Southern California for a few months and then relocates to somewhere in Oregon. She tries to remain faithful to Gary for a while, claiming she senses his presence during that period, but she soon reverts to her old habits, picking up a hitchhiker and taking him to bed. One of Gary's Mormon apologists claims the murderer comes to him in a vision to let him know that everything is okay and how cool it is to be able to walk through walls. Vern's knee condition gets worse, and he has to give up his shop. Bessie's health also continues to deteriorate up in Portland. Gary's attorneys sprinkle his ashes from an airplane above Spanish Fork, Utah, following Gary's last instruction and his last act of defiance. It is illegal to spread human ashes in the pristine Mormon air of the Beehive State.



# Book 1, Part 1

## Book 1, Part 1 Summary

Gary Gilmore is a violent child. Born in Utah, he moves to Portland, Oregon with his mother, Ida, while he is still a child. In spite of a mean streak he displays with other children, Gary is always tender to his cousin, Brenda. When Gary comes to visit in Provo after the move to Portland, he and Brenda always play with one another. When Gary reaches adolescence, he begins getting in trouble with the law and ends up in reform school in Oregon. Later, he goes to Oregon State Penitentiary. He is nearing parole at the beginning of *Executioner's Song*, and he has contacted Brenda to help him establish a home and employment so that he will have a place to go when he gets out of prison. She arranges a job and lodging for him with Vern, her father, who owns a shoe repair shop in Provo. Gary will live in Vern's house, along with Ida, Vern's wife. On his first day in Provo, Gary and Brenda stay up talking until dawn. Vern is Gary's mother's brother. Gary's mother is Bessie, who lives in Portland.

Within the first days of his new freedom, Gary establishes himself as something of an insecure bullshitter with a fragile ego. Vern is an exceptionally strong man who can squeeze a bathroom scale until it registers 230 pounds. Gary tries to challenge Vern but reaches only 150 pounds. Gary challenges Vern to arm wrestle to try to redeem his self-esteem, but Vern beats him easily with each arm. The third day Gary is there, however, he takes a sledgehammer to a section of curbing that Vern wants removed to make a second driveway on his property. Gary does a yeoman's job of a tough task that requires a lot of strength and endurance. Thus he re-establishes his macho ego, which was bruised a bit in the arm-wrestling match. Vern, whose bad leg prevented him from doing the job, appreciates the gesture.

Gary goes to work for Vern in his shop for \$2.50 per hour, and at first he seems a willing and attentive worker. He wants to learn everything right away, but Vern and his other employee can't spend as much time with Gary as he wishes. Gary seems to have an almost obsessive desire to carry his own weight and fit in. He finds himself standing around waiting while he is eager to move to the next step in the learning process. Vern tries to counsel Gary that it takes time and patience, but Gary seems incapable of internalizing the notion.

Gary forms a quick friendship with Vern's other employee, Sterling Baker, who is about 20. They talk a lot about girls, and Gary expresses a strong preference for females about 20 years old. Sterling realizes that Gary was about his age when he went to prison 13 years previously and that probably accounts for their bond. To help Gary assimilate back into normal life, Vern and Ida set up a date for Gary with Lu Ann Price, a divorced friend of theirs near Gary's own age. Gary dresses for the date wearing a loud, comical fishing hat that someone gave him. He wears it about everywhere, not realizing that it makes him look foolish. On the date, Lu Ann takes him to Fred's Lounge. Gary is fascinated with even the smallest details, such as the signs, mirrors, clichés and



bromides tacked up behind the bar. He confirms Lu Ann's observation that he has not been in a bar for a long time. Gary drinks beer steadily and continues drinking when he gets in Lu Ann's car to leave.

On the way home, Gary reveals that it is very difficult for him to make friends. In prison, the only time friendship was offered was when someone wanted something from you. He says that he got himself put into solitary as often as he could so that he could have quiet and privacy. During a drive before they go home, Gary asks Lu Ann to go to a motel with him. She declines, telling him that she is there to be his friend and that if he wants the "other," then he should find someone else. Gary begins to whine, complaining that everyone else has something but that he has nothing. He says that Lu Ann and people like her have it easy. Lu Ann tells her guest that he will have to earn what he wants, just as those he claims "had it easy" have earned what they have. Gary gets angry, said he doesn't want to hear any more. Lu Ann allows as how he is going to hear it anyway. At this point, Gary raises his fist, threatening Lu Ann, but he does not hit her. Nonetheless, she feels intense rage pass through him. Later that night, after he returns home, Gary continues to drink beer and gets into a discussion about fear and violence. Gary wants to know why Vern isn't afraid of him, and Vern replies, "Because I can whip you." The dialogue ends in laughter, with Gary saying that, for the first time, he feels at home.

Brenda and her husband Johnny host Gary for Easter weekend. Gary has fun with Johnny, painting and hiding eggs. Friends come over with children, and Gary gets along with them famously. Gary continues to drink and becomes belligerent at the table during Easter dinner. At one point, he orders Brenda to shut up and eat. Gary says he has been to see Mont Court, his new parole officer, and that he is "a pretty good egg."

Gary gets into the habit of playing in weekly poker games at Sterling Baker's house. Rikki Baker, Sterling's brother, is also a regular there, and he and Gary bond. Gary is not popular at the poker table because his cheating is obvious and he uses jailhouse intimidation to prevent protests. Some of the other players complain to Sterling about Gary and stop coming to the games. Other players replace them, and Gary begins to irritate them as well. They get Rikki to invite Gary to go chase women. Gary and Rikki cruise Main Street in Provo, striking up conversations with women. Gary, however, is not cool and gets immediately to the point, asking women to have sex with him. Frustrated with this approach, he suggests to Rikki that they just get a couple of women and rape them. Rikki doesn't go for that. Gary also tries to get Rikki to partner up with him to cheat at cards, but his friend declines that offer as well.

Gary finally outstays his welcome at Vern and Ida's, and Brenda tells him he should move. Gary does move out, finding a job with Spencer McGrath, who runs an insulation shop and who also helps him get a place to stay. Before starting his new job, however, Gary goes on a bender that ends up with him in Idaho facing charges of auto theft, driving without a license and felony assault against a homosexual man whose pickup Gary commandeered. The Idaho authorities arrest him, and when they see his record, they call Mont Court to see how to handle the parolee. Astonishingly, Mont Court, who was a Mormon missionary and elder as a boy and apparently believes in eternal





forgiveness, advises the Idaho authorities to release Gary on his own recognizance. He then speaks with Gary, who promises to return to Provo. He returns, drunk, after a chain of phone calls that disrupt the lives of just about everybody he knows in Utah. Rikki and Gary continue their prowling, and Gary becomes even more obnoxious with women, simply demanding sex. At one point, he tries to get Rikki to help him rob a bank. Again, Rikki demurs.

McGrath buys Gary an old Mustang, which is curiously the same make and model of one belonging to Nicole, Rikki's sister. Nicole sees the coincidence as evidence of some sort of spiritual or karma-related connection. Finally, Gary has found his soul mate, and he gets lucky in a Biblical way. Nicole is a sex addict and not all that securely tethered to reality. She has a long history of drugs and legions of men. She also has two small children, to whom she occasionally pays attention when she isn't involved in something else. Gary's jailhouse charisma sweeps her off her feet, and the two are bound in a visceral pubescent love, common to delinquent pre-adolescents of all ages.

## Book 1, Part 1 Analysis

To understand the environment into which the felon Gary Gilmore is released, it may be helpful to understand something of the Mormon culture. Mailer describes Provo as being "...in the Mormon Kingdom of Deseret, just fifty miles below Salt Lake." The Mormons once considered themselves to be a separate country, rather than a territory of the U.S., and the vestiges of that defiance remain in the present-day culture. Mailer describes Provo as "a Mormon stronghold," and even Mormons from other parts of the state consider Provo to be the most insular and strictly orthodox Mormon enclave in the world - even more so than Salt Lake, their administrative and spiritual headquarters.

Gary's compulsion to fit in by carrying his own weight in the shoe shop is a common symptom of recently released felons who are sincere about making a normal life. The reaction, say some behavioral scientists, is a result of unrealistic daydreams about normal life that convicts indulge in while incarcerated. Their daydreams are based on fantasies that tend to overlook the realities of life, ignoring the hardships involved in the mistaken belief that an aggressive attitude will suffice instead.

On his date with Lu Ann, Gary reveals his childish attitude and behaviors, perhaps a result of his long period of incarceration. He likes younger women - those of about his age when he went to prison. He sees himself as the victim, coveting the things others have without making any link between his misfortunes and the crimes he committed to create them. Like a child, his rage flares up when he doesn't get what he wants, and he resorts to fits of violence or intimidation. Gary is at sea in civil society, unable to cope with a less regimented world on the sunny side of the bars.

Gary continues to prove himself unfit for civilized society. He gathers about him people who are only a step or two further up the ladder of social responsibility than he is and a few people who apparently want to feel good about themselves for helping the poor ex-con. Ultimately, these people enable Gary to murder two people. Characters such as

Nicole, Brenda and Rikki can be forgiven for their ignorance and primal motives, but Mont Court, an officer of the court who is supposedly knowledgeable in the ways of ex-felons, emerges as a villain in this tragedy.



# Book 1, Part 2

## Book 1, Part 2 Summary

Part 2 of *Executioner's Song* is a profile and history of Nicole, Gary's young lover, who ultimately becomes one of his apologists for the murders that place the ex-con in front of a Utah firing squad. By the time Nicole meets Gary at 20 years old, she has been married three times and has had two kids. She is a pretty young woman who has a well-earned reputation for being a ready and easy sexual partner. She prides herself on the fact that she hasn't slept with anyone for several weeks when she meets Gary, who brings a quick end to her abstinence.

Sex defines Nicole's life from early childhood. Her sister Sue and Sue's husband, Rikki, think of her as a slut and even tell on her once when she has sex with someone in their grandmother's house. Her grandmother, of course, is a strict Mormon, which magnifies the crime through the lens of religious judgment, which defines just about everyone in Provo. From the very beginning, when Nicole discovers that she and Gary have the same make and model of car, Nicole begins to weave a thread of spiritual mysticism through the tapestry of what is to become a sick and fatal relationship. She spends hours in conversation with the former convict on such topics as karma and reincarnation. Previously, she has had such conversations only in her head. Groping for each other in their newly generated fog of hormones and mysticism following a cosmic beer run in Nicole's magic Mustang, the new soul mates attempt to consummate their union. Unfortunately, Nicole's hardened criminal stays soft and can't rise to the occasion. There are no concrete curbs around that need smashing this time, so Gary has to swallow the indignity of impotence.

Not long after meeting Nicole, Gary moves out of Vern and Ida's place and moves in with Nicole. Nicole rents a small house in nearby Spanish Fork, where she lives with her two children. Nicole works at a sewing machine company. One day she takes off work so she can spend some time with her sister Sue, and she shares with Sue the joy of this new love she has found with Gary. She tells Sue that she has never felt this way about any other man and that she feels spiritually tied to Gary. She is particularly impressed with his artistic talents, saying that he draws "like a real artist." Others in Provo share this opinion of Gary's talent, though no one defines the term "real artist." Gary also tells Nicole about his mother, expressing affection and sympathy for her pain from crippling arthritis to the point of tears. Nicole is moved by the depth of Gary's feeling for his mother. She had not imagined that her tough new lover was even capable of crying. Their relationship grows more and more domestic, falling into a pattern of early morning coffee and banter before Gary goes to work and passionate sex at night.

Once, Gary asks Nicole if she remembers the first time she "had fucked someone," and she replies that her memory on the matter is vague. She must have been 11 or 12. Nicole segues the conversation toward less embarrassing topics, such as her pet raccoon that used to go to school with her on her shoulder. She used to play hooky a lot



and was caught once by her mother. She tells Gary about her mother cutting her hair so short that kids on the playground tease her about being a boy. She drops her panties to prove that she is a girl. She writes a very pornographic letter to a nasty little boy when she is 10 or 11, challenging him to stop talking about it and do it with her. She doesn't send the letter, but her mother gets hold of it and is not pleased.

Before Nicole is 11, she won't let anybody "put it in," but she still likes taking her clothes off and letting people look. Then, she lets the boys touch her. By sixth grade, Nicole has blossomed and "had the biggest boobs in elementary school." She earns the nickname "Foam Rubber." Once she develops the big tits and it gets around that she likes to take her clothes off and let boys fondle her, she becomes very popular. She loves the attention, especially from the best looking boys, and that pisses off her female classmates. "The girls from the good Mormon families who went to Sunday school used to spite her a lot." By Junior High, Nicole is running with a bad crowd and stealing a lot. A counselor talks her into going to the "nuthouse" at 13, telling her she will only be there for a few weeks. When she tells about her relationship with her father's old Army buddy "Uncle Lee," however, they keep her for seven months.

Beginning when Nicole is six years old, Uncle Lee lives with Nicole's family on and off. He regularly molests her while he is a houseguest. When her folks are working at night, Lee comes into Nicole's bedroom after his bath, wakens Nicole and takes her out into the living room. There, he opens his bathrobe, exposing himself, and entices Nicole into performing oral sex and playing a game called "rubbing pee pees." When he asks her if it feels good, she says, "yes." At 12 years old, Nicole tells Uncle Lee that he can't make her do it anymore. He replies that he has been spying on her and has seen her masturbating. Since she has such a "free spirit," he says, they should "do it together." Gary opines that her father, "should be shot."

Nicole's first husband is Jim Hampton, and she marries him when she is 14 and he is 20. She has escaped from the nuthouse - which, she says, is really only half nuthouse and half reform school - and has run off to stay with Sue and Rikki. She meets Jim Hampton there, and he immediately falls in love with her pubescent charms. He asks her to marry him, and her father enthusiastically agrees. Nicole sits in the back of the car while the two men drink beer up front on a quick trip to neighboring Nevada for a no-hassle wedding. Child brides are not uncommon in Utah. In spite of trying with great enthusiasm, Nicole is never able to climax while she is sleeping with her new husband. She attributes her sexual hang-ups to two secrets she has not told her husband. The first is Uncle Lee, but the other has to do with someone she identifies as "that dude," whom she really liked.

Dude is 28 and is holding a multi-day bash in a house near Nicole's grandmother's house while she is on leave from the nuthouse. She hops in the sack with him for a few torrid tumbles, and then he tells her that she would really be doing him a good turn if she would fuck his buddies too. She does, for several days, one after the other. In the midst of it, she meets one of Dude's buddies named Barrett, who shows her a bit of kindness. A month later, she sees Barrett again when he gets committed to the nuthouse, where they resume their acquaintance. Barrett, however, is AWOL from the



Army, and the Army takes him back. While Barrett is gone, she marries Jim Hampton. Love and irresponsibility enable all dreams, however, and after dumping Jim Hampton, she marries Jim Barrett.

Nicole runs off with Barrett, and they live in a Volkswagen for a while because Barrett's mother, who is sweet and understanding in other ways, won't let them sleep in her house if they aren't married. Eventually, the pre-nuptial couple ensconce themselves in a grubby apartment above a bar in Lehi where winos litter the walkway up to their front door. The location offers the additional benefit of allowing Nicole to watch from above as her father comes into the bar on a regular basis to drink the day - and night - away. Nicole has forgotten to leave a forwarding address with her husband, the other Jim, so when Charlie, Nicole's father, finds the couple shackled up above his favorite watering hole, it is a tense moment. At first, Charlie threatens to cut Barrett's balls off, but Nicole explains how much Barrett loves her. Her father leaves. Apparently, he didn't wholly bless the union, however, because a couple of days later, the police come to the apartment and bust Barrett for being "an improper person."

After the big bust, the couple goes out on the town in Provo. They park on Main Street and drop some Sunshine acid. A rock song with a siren in it triggers a reaction in Nicole, and she begins screaming, yelling and running. This behavior is a dramatic event on the main street of Provo. It ends with Nicole in the local hospital, where she is held hostage by her mother, until Jim Barrett cons his father out of a hundred and eighty bucks to bail her out so he can marry her. The couple cons a van and some cash out of Jim's dad, and they head down to San Diego, where they get into debt, stay stoned, adopt a bunch of cats and learn that, basically, life is a drag if you don't do something with it. The adventure isn't an entire failure, however, since Nicole learns how to come.

The disillusioned couple heads back to Utah. They leave the van, a candidate for repossession, parked at an interstate on-ramp, and hitchhike to Modesto, CA. They rent an \$80 per month cabin with their very own colony of cockroaches. Nicole becomes pregnant and Jim Barrett convinces a rich lady to let them housesit her thirteen-room house until it sells. After half a month, the sheriff comes to evict couple. The woman has changed her mind. Nicole is suddenly homeless while seven months pregnant, and she is still a child. As providence would have it, Nicole's dad shows up. He is still in the military at the time, and he has caught orders for Midway. Without a second thought, she jumps at the chance to leave with her Dad, without as much as a goodbye. When she is in the Army hospital at Midway having her and Barrett's baby, Barrett writes a hot check at the Salt Lake City Airport and joins her. He has already fallen in love all over again, doing serious damage to his father's long-distance phone bill in the process.

## **Book 1, Part 2 Analysis**

In the eyes of this reviewer, Nicole's character is an icon of the underbelly of the Mormon theocracy that rules Utah. Provo is the hub of that culture, much more so than the more metropolitan, less provincial Salt Lake City. Salt Lake is the city of temples, tabernacles and tourists, whereas Provo is a center of fierce Mormon orthodoxy. The



culture is such that one must excel in the eyes of the Church - must aspire to the "Celestial Kingdom" - to be counted as worthy, to become a little *Godlet*, and if you're lucky, inherit a planet to rule. Worthiness is finely graded, according to one's works for the Church, one's bloodline, spouse, wealth and position. Mormons go only to the Ward (neighborhood church) as defined by strict boundaries, to which they are assigned. Everyone knows everyone else - and their business - a condition that leads to a surface conviviality that shrouds inner resentments. Each Ward has a Bishop, a layman (always male) with no special training, yet who counsels the young - boys and girls - on their most intimate issues. Neighbors spy on neighbors, and Mormon Bishops hear confessions. When someone doesn't measure up, they are ignored or disdained by the righteous, or outright shunned.

Many of the peripheral characters thus far in *The Executioner's Song* are products of this winnowing process by the spiritual elite, an underclass that functions half-believing and still fearing the wrath of Joseph Smith. These "Jack Mormons" drink, engage in illicit sex, smoke cigarettes, smoke pot and gamble. There are far more Utah license plates in the parking lots of border sex shops, bars and casinos in neighboring Wyoming and Nevada than those of native residents. Nicole, as she is drawn in this section, is at the bottom of the bottom. She is a slut - albeit a damned desirable one - not only in the eyes of the God-fearing, but of the druggies, drunks and perverts who people her own class as well. She is a slut even in her own eyes. Hypersexuality is a common result of childhood sexual abuse, and given the influences of Uncle Lee and her father, Nicole may not be entirely to blame. The point is that, in the cultish culture that spawned her, she may have had little choice. If you aren't part of the mainstream and you don't pay your tithes regularly, you aren't much in the eyes of the church. There is an old saw that says: "The Jews invented guilt, the Catholics perfected it, and the Mormons taxed it."

Mailer makes much of the new-age spiritualism, much of it drug-induced, among the hippie-like subculture of this Provo society. Gary believes in reincarnation, and both Gary and Nicole believe their souls have been joined at some cosmic level - at least until Gary grows boring and scary. The entourage of *Three-Penny-Opera* weirdoes are products of the Mormon winnowing process, lepers as it were, shunned by the righteous. Their drift toward bizarre spiritualism is not surprising. In Provo, even the proper folks quite literally believe that in the middle of the 19th Century an angel came down from heaven to chat up a supposedly napve country bumpkin, with a reputation for selling secret treasure maps. They believe without question that this angel, called Moroni, brought Joseph Smith some golden tablets, which no one else ever saw, and a couple of gadgets that allowed him to translate the unidentifiable language on the tablets into an Americanized version of the archaic dialect of the King James version of the Holy Bible. It is not surprising, then, that the social and spiritual detritus of this cult would be prone to supernatural rationalizations to justify their pathos and willing to act on their fantasies as if they were real - especially when animated with some killer Thai Stick.



# Book 1, Part 3

## Book 1, Part 3 Summary

In this part of *Executioner's Song*, Gary establishes himself as a child molester and an attempted child rapist. Barnett finishes the job that Gary starts with a 12-year-old girl, Rosebeth, whom Nicole and Gary invite into their bed. Nicole also has a homosexual relationship with the girl, delighting in teaching her the things that Uncle Lee taught her at six. The first tangible evidence of Gary's lust for underage girls - at least evidence witnessed by those who surrounded him - is at a family gathering. Gary asks 12-year-old Annette, a young granddaughter of Ida, not the girl who is ultimately violated, to baby-sit for Nicole's children while Nicole and he go up the canyon to party. Ida puts her foot down, saying Annette is too young for that responsibility.

Peter Galovan rents a cottage behind Vern and Ida. He is an uptight, unstable religious fanatic, given to nervous breakdowns. Not a bad man at heart, Peter simply can't handle much stress without melting down emotionally. His reason for living is to get back in the graces of the Mormon Church, from which he asked to be excommunicated when things went sour on his mission to Brazil. He was labeled as a serious religious deviant when he got off the track with the popular Jesus Movement and started trash-talking the Mormons. He is an emotional and spiritual basket case. If things get a little out of whack, he repeatedly finds himself checking back into the psych ward for lithium treatments. Peter sees Gary holding hands with Annette and talking to her in a suggestive manner. He tells Ida that he thinks Gary is propositioning her granddaughter. Gary comes unhinged and calls Peter out. They go outside to fight, while Vern referees. Once outside, Gary blindsides Peter with a shot to the back of the head before the fight even starts. This disgusts Vern, who seems to lose all respect for Gary from that point on. Peter recovers, however, and kicks Gary's butt, but as far as Gary is concerned, the score remains unsettled. Losing, especially losing gracefully, is not part of Gary's prison-nurtured genetic code.

After the fight, Pete remains fearful of Gary, and the stress is pushing him into another breakdown. Pete calls the police, goes to the station and files a report. Vern and Ida do not oppose the action, recognizing that Gary is slipping out of control. Pete also calls Mont Court, but the parole officer declines to get involved, saying it is too involved since Gary is from another state. Pete insists that Gary is going to kill him - or someone else - and decides to press charges. At work, everyone notices that Gary is getting bolder. He talks more and more about prison. He tells and retells a story about killing a guy by stabbing him 57 times. He brags that he knows Charles Manson. He does not explain how he met Manson in San Quentin, while he was in the Oregon State Pen. Gary begins drinking on the job, and suggests to one co-worker that they should come back at night, steal the company truck, repaint it and sell it. Pete expresses to Nicole his sure conviction that Gary is a killer. He says, "Your man is far gone. He's a killer, I believe. He wants to kill me."



Gary grows weary of his cheap Mustang and gets angry and violent with the dealer who sold it to him. He sets his heart on a truck on the same lot, but the dealer won't sell it to him without a co-signer for the loan. Gary asks both Vern and Spencer, his boss, to co-sign, but neither one of them will go for it. When Gary gets angry during this period, he steals something. He breaks into a gun shop and steals a bunch of pistols. He hides some, asks other people to keep some, and gives others away to other people. He talks as if he knows a lot about guns, but the things he says, such as a .22 magnum making the hole the size of a .45, suggest more vapor than substance. As he is building up to some sort of explosion, he becomes more demanding of Nicole, demanding sex six or seven times a week. She is growing tired, feeling constrained and frightened of him. They have some hellacious fights, and after a couple of violent episodes, she leaves him and goes to live with her sister at her great-grandmother's house.

The loss of Nicole devastates Gary. He whines, cries and begs not only her but all of their mutual friends. He spreads his misery around, dropping in drunk at random on people at all times of the night and day. His immaturity is manifest, and he simply doesn't know how to cope with his inability to accept something over which he no longer has control. Gary deals with his depression by attempting to steal a tape deck from a supermarket. He is driving Nicole's car, which he has absconded with after abandoning her and the kids after a fight. The security guard at the supermarket challenges Gary, so Gary throws the tape deck at him, tells him to "fuck off" and bashes two cars on his way out of the parking lot. He abandons Nicole's car, which the police later impound. He goes to Nicole's great-grandmother's place where Nicole is staying and leaves her a syrupy letter he has written. She falls for it and comes back to him the next day. They call Mont Court, who comes by to take Gary to talk to the police the next day. Gary is polite and charming, and the bucolic officers essentially say, "ah shucks, let's give the boy a break" and turn him loose with a court date. At Gary's arraignment the judge, whom Nicole describes as an "uptight Mormon," also falls victim to Gary's well-honed prison charm and releases him with \$100 bail.

Nicole has a couple of happy nights with her felonious lover after the tape deck incident, but then Gary returns to beer and drugs, while she tries on a new guy and replays a couple of old ones. She ditches Gary and gets a skuzzy apartment in nearby Springville. When she returns to the house in Spanish Fork to get her vacuum cleaner, Gary tries to keep her from leaving. She points a gun, which Gary gave her, at him. He just says, "Go ahead and shoot." She puts the gun away and drives off, but it seems Gary is already developing a death wish.

## Book 1, Part 3 Analysis

The two dominant dynamics that seem to have driven Gary Gilmore's life since childhood - sex and violence - come into sharp focus in this section, steeped in chronic alcoholism. Even the pattern of Gary's theft seems to be a symptom of anger and frustration, rather than desire for the stolen objects. Gary brags to anyone who will listen that he never pays for beer, that he always steals it, even when he has cash. When he was a child, he stole a .22 caliber rifle and then threw it in the creek. When he attempts





to steal the tape deck, it is after a fight with Nicole and motivated by the residual anger from that squabble rather than a desire to listen to some new tunes. When the pubescent Rosebeth joins Gary in bed, they both perform oral sex with her, and Gary tries unsuccessfully to penetrate her several times. After Barrett deflowers Rosebeth, she giggles that the reason he can penetrate her is that his penis is smaller than Gary's.

By now, it is no mystery that Gary is a tragedy waiting to happen. He and Nicole are clearly low-life trash, who commit felony child molestation with zero consideration - if indeed the thought even crosses their twisted minds - of their victims. They show no moral or ethical considerations. One might ask, where were Rosebeth's parents in all of this? That Gary ends up committing two murders is not in the least surprising, but what seems astounding is how the relatively normal people - especially the authorities, all of whom seem to sense the looming tragedy - can be so complacent about the abundant danger signs. Why is Gary - or Nicole, for that matter - not locked up either in jail or an asylum? The answer to that is probably, "the times." This takes place in the seventies, when the victim industry is struggling to gain a strong foothold in America. Everyone is a victim. No one is responsible for his or her own actions. Rehabilitate; don't punish. Do not judge; it is politically incorrect. We must strive to *understand* these helpless creatures of society's exploitation. This is the sort of thinking that eventually leads to the backlash of more prisons and harsher sentences. Even with these too-little-too-late measures, the victim industry is ensconced firmly in the American psyche, feeding legions of case workers, parole officers, grief counselors and other touch-feely types who might find it difficult to make a living in a productive enterprise.



# Book 1, Part 4

## Book 1, Part 4 Summary

In this critical part of *The Executioner's Song*, the real Gary Gilmore finally stands up and steps into character as a remorseless, cold-blooded killer, driven by pubescent impulses and child-like emotional and social development. An insatiable longing for a white pickup truck he can't afford triggers his actions. The truck is on the same lot - V.J. Motors on State Street - where he got the Mustang he grows to hate because it keeps breaking. Thwarted in his efforts to beg or borrow the money he needs to make a payment that is due on the truck, he robs an all-night gas station in Orem, killing the young attendant, Max Jensen, and leaving his wife, Colleen, a widow. Max does not resist during the robbery, but Gilmore murders him methodically, execution-style, nonetheless. His target for the following night is an idyllic young Mormon family, Debbie, Ben and baby Benjamin Bushnell. Ben runs the night desk at the City Center Motel in Provo, while Debbie runs the Busy Bee Daycare Center. As with Max, Ben offers no resistance to the armed robbery, but Gilmore kills him anyway.

Gary begins the first night of his rampage of murder and robbery by going by Nicole's mother's house, looking for his lost love. Nicole is not at home, but her pubescent sister April is. April fulfills Gary's need for nubile companionship just fine. She is a space cadet, zonked out on psychedelics and loosely tethered to reality even on a good day. While Gary is robbing and murdering Max in the all-night Orem gas stop, April remains in the white truck, oblivious, tripping in whatever is left of her own mind. She doesn't notice the blood on Gary's clothes when he comes out of the gas station office or any number of things that might suggest all is not right with the night. The couple ends up spending the night in the Provo Holiday Inn, but April refuses to fuck Gary because she is feeling paranoid.

Later, Gary stops by with April to see his cousin Brenda and her husband John, who is recovering from surgery. April mentions that Gary frightens her, and Gary makes her tell Brenda that he did not try to rape or molest her in the Holiday Inn. April says that it isn't that - that Gary treated her "real nice," but there is this other kind of fear that she can't explain. Gary pulls Brenda aside and offers to give her and John \$50 to help them get past the hard times while John is not working. She is touched by the gesture but declines. In the following conversation, Gary reveals that he's stolen the money, but there is no hint in that dialogue of the gas-station robbery and murder. Gary has a meeting with Mont Court to discuss the action he will have to take after the tape-deck incident at the shopping mall. Court is still looking for ways to reach Gary and is beginning to waver on his decision to recommend a week in jail for Gary, afraid it might endanger his relationship with the felon. Although both Provo and Orem are pretty small towns in 1976 and murders are extremely uncommon, neither Court nor anyone else seems willing to make a connection between Gary and the crime. Nicole, however, does express her suspicions that Gary might be the culprit. While riding around with Peter,



one of her recycled lovers, she first learns of the gas station murder. She indicates to Peter that she is scared - that she thinks Gary might have been the triggerman.

Already, Gary's precious white truck is giving him heartburn. The battery keeps going dead, and it is overheating. He still doesn't have the \$400 he needs to keep it from being repossessed. Gary's solution is simple and straightforward. He drives into Norman Fuller's gas station, where Gary has already had some work done on his new prize. Having nothing to do while Norm works on his truck, Gary saunters down to the City Center motel, steals the cash, murders Ben Bushnell, creates another new widow and removes the father from the life of his infant son. Gary then strolls out of the motel, goes back to the service station and retrieves the Holy White Truck. While Gary is retreating from the City Center Motel, Peter Arroyo, a motel patron returning with his children from dinner at the Golden Spike Cafe, observes the murderer in the motel office. When he is seen, Gary is still holding the long-barreled revolver he has used to commit the crime and has a cash drawer tucked under his other arm. When Gary leaves the office, Arroyo goes inside and sees the murder victim on the floor in a pool of blood, with Colleen kneeling next to her husband's corpse. The pair tries to turn Ben over on his back, but the floor is too slippery from the blood to gain sufficient footing. Continuing his brilliant crime career, Gilmore shoots himself in the hand while he is trying to dispose of the murder weapon. Norm Fuller can see that Gary is hurt, and realizes that something just isn't right. He jots down the license plate number of the white truck as the serial murderer drives away.

Vern and Ida live next to the City Center Motel, but engrossed in *Perry Mason* and *Ironsides* on the TV, they are unaware that anything is amiss until the sirens show up. The murder scene is frantic, replete with paramedics, firemen and oh-so-many Provo policemen. Through conversation with Martin Ontiveros, who does odd jobs around the motel, and Gene Overton, who owns the motel, they conclude that Gary is the perpetrator. Ida calls her daughter Brenda, who sponsored Gary in the conservative Mormon hamlet in the first place, and alerts her that her charge is an apparent murderer. Meanwhile at the hospital, the doctors call Dean Christiansen, the lay bishop of Debbie's ward, to help comfort her in her grief. In the Mormon ecclesia, the lay bishop is a central figure in every family and every believer's life.

On the run now and hurting from the self-inflicted gunshot wound to his hand, Gary drives to Greg and Julie Taylor's house, a couple he has befriended since coming back to Utah. Julie has just returned from the hospital, and her husband doesn't want to disturb her. He declines Gary's plea for a set of clothes and a ride to the airport (presumably in Salt Lake City, since there are no commercial flights to Provo). He does, however, call Brenda at Gary's request and passes the telephone through the window so the cousins can chat. Actually, it is Johnny, Brenda's husband, on the other end of the line. While Johnny is talking to Gary, two Provo policemen, Toby Bath and Joe Barker, show up at Brenda and Johnny's house. Simultaneously, Johnny and Brenda hear an all-points bulletin on their police scanner that Gilmore is at large and considered armed and dangerous. Brenda invites the cops in, telling them that Gary is on the line. When Johnny hands Brenda the phone, Gary tells her some far-out tale about being shot while attempting to prevent a robbery. She recognizes it immediately as bullshit.



While Johnny writes down the address for the benefit of the police officers, Brenda humors her wounded cousin, telling him she will bring him clothes and codeine.

The address Gary gives in Orem, a different jurisdiction, and the police chief urges Brenda to stall Gary as long as possible. Johnny goes to the Orem Police Headquarters to assist. The apprehension of Gary Gilmore takes quite a while. The police are reluctant to approach him, fearing for the safety of Greg and Debbie, who are still in the house from which he was talking to Brenda. When Gary finally leaves the Taylor residence in his white truck, the police quickly stop him and have him step out of the vehicle with his hands raised. Gary complies, but consistent with his bumbling nature, he forgets to put the truck in park. He stands there in the middle of the road with his hands in the air, surrounded by police officers armed with shotguns and automatic pistols, and watches helplessly as the Holy White Truck, for which he has killed two men, rolls indifferently away from him, settling without fanfare in a roadside drainage ditch. Oddly, it seems as if the inanimate object of his pubescent passions wants nothing more to do with him than do most of his fellow primates.

Gerald Nielson, a Utah County Deputy, takes Gary to the hospital to get his hand treated. On the ride, Gary says that he wants to talk to Nielson later. Nielson suspects that Gary wants to confess. Gary is introduced to Noall Wootton, the Utah County Prosecuting Attorney, who requests that Gerald interview the suspect. The attorney takes the deputy aside and enlists him to help get a confession from Gilmore. During the first interview with Nielson, Gary spins a tale of being shot while trying to prevent some unidentifiable guy from holding up an unidentified store, from which no police report has been filed. The story is a pathetic fantasy, but Gilmore tenders April's name as his alibi on the night of the gas-station murder. By the end of the interview, Wootton is pretty much convinced to charge Gary with first degree murder in the motel case, because he has both a witness and abundant physical evidence. With the gas-station murder, however, he has only a smudged fingerprint for evidence, and there is the possibility of an alibi in the form of spaced-out little April.

The court appoints Mike Esplin as Gary's attorney. When Gary is arraigned, Nicole is hiding in the woodwork, having decided that she really does love the murderer. Utah County regulations in 1975 allow defendants charged with capital murder to have two attorneys at county expense. The going rate is \$17.50 per hour for routine work, and \$22 per hour for time spent before the court. Wootton's salary is \$17,500 per year.

Over the next weeks, Nielson continues to try to lead Gary into a confession. They talk about trivial matters as well as the victims and survivors. Gary inquires if the victims were good Mormons, and when Nielson says that they were, Gary affirms that his mother is also a good Mormon. Nielson, who has done service under cover in Salt Lake, is cautious to make sure that he doesn't illicit a confession that might be barred from testimony. Finally, Gary begins giving up details about the homicides. He brags that he used to be a good criminal, pulling off many thefts, robberies and burglaries without being caught. Nielson asks Gary if he would have gone on killing if he hadn't been caught, and Gary replies that he would have. When Nielson asks why Gary did it, Gary replies, "I don't know."



Sometime after his confession, Gary seems to become genuinely contrite. He cries for the victims, especially since one of them had been a Mormon missionary, and mourns the misery he has brought into the lives of the victims. He professes his love for Nicole and writes her a letter. He also expresses a fervent hope that he will be executed for his crimes.

## Book 1, Part 4 Analysis

A whole lot happens in this section as far as the story is concerned, but it is not entirely clear what Mailer is trying to accomplish literarily. His use of gutter slang and vernacular is understandable out of the mouths of his bottom-dwelling characters, but it is disingenuous at best in the narrator's own voice. It seems that the author is trying to elicit sympathy for the serial murderer Gary Gilmore, by playing on the pathos of the pitiful characters who surround him. Today, thirty years after the initial publication of *The Executioner's Song*, in a world of harsher prison sentences, three strikes and the felony status of many drug offenses that drew merely a wink and a nod back then, this attitude seems whiny and tawdry. In the seventies, however, the prevailing liberal attitude was that there were no bad boys, that everyone was strictly a product of their environment and that anyone could be rehabilitated. It is unclear whether Mailer truly felt this way or was simply mirroring public sentiment, but in hindsight, that attitude seems convoluted and almost evil.



# Book 1, Part 5

## Book 1, Part 5 Summary

The first part of this section provides an insight into Gary's youth through the eyes of Bessie, his mother. When she receives word of Gary's latest crimes, his arrest and the possibility of a death sentence, she is stunned but not surprised. She reminisces about the few good times she has had with her son, especially during a brief period of freedom when he is between Oregon State Correctional Institution and Oregon State Penitentiary.

Gary comes by her house with all of his Johnny Cash albums, and they listen for hours on end to the country singer wailing out tales of hard times and prison. One time, when Gary is 22, Bessie comes home to find Gary going through her personal papers in her desk. One of the papers he has found is his birth certificate, which reveals that his name is not Gilmore, but Hoffman. As it turns out, Gary's father is something of a flim-flam man, who goes by many different names, depending on what part of the country he is in. There is some evidence that he may have had multiple families as well, and that he has not always been in the best of favor with local law-enforcement agencies.

In the meantime, Nicole continues as usual, whoring around with this guy and that, all the time professing her undying love for Gary. Gary sits in his cell at the Utah County jail masturbating to memories, writing dirty letters to the girl "who taught me how to fuck something besides my hand" and fantasizing about escape and freedom. Cliff and Tom and Nicole's other lovers become a little unnerved when they learn they are screwing a girl who a serial murderer thinks is his alone, but the sex continues. For her part, Nicole rationalizes that she's not really two-timing Gary since, even though she is screaming and clawing in the ecstasy of coitus with her new partners, she doesn't really love them. Through it all, Nicole continues to visit Gary every opportunity she gets, hitchhiking from Springville to the county jailhouse because one of her ex-husband/lovers stole her Mustang and parted it out to fix somebody else's ride. On one trip, when Nicole is thwarted in her effort to see Gary, she makes such a scene at the jailhouse that Sheriff Cahoon takes her off Gary's visiting list. Gary swallows his pride, however, and begs the jailer to reinstate her, and the jailer complies.

During this period, Gary is transported periodically between the jailhouse and the nearby state mental hospital, where Dr. Woods is evaluating him to see if he is sane enough to stand trial. Nicole has more freedom in her visits with Gary at the hospital than at the jailhouse, and Gary spends a good portion of one letter lamenting the fact that he has missed an opportunity to "...touch you on your sweet little cunt," while the hospital staff members weren't looking. After a while, conversation and correspondence between the couple turns to the topic of death. Gary plays with the idea in a shallow philosophical manner, thinking that reincarnation might return him to the world as a happier person. This also seems to be a rationalization, as if his misery is not his fault and he is the perpetual victim. He loops Nicole into his death fantasies with wooing



words of rejoining in the life hereafter to live forever in happiness. This is not a far-out notion in Utah, where the Mormon Majority believe that the well-behaved Mormon man goes on to become a mini-god and inherits one of the millions of unused planets as his personal fiefdom. There, he will live happily ever after with his obedient wife - or, until recently, obedient *wives* - in the great Celestial Kingdom. That Gary is hardly a well-behaved Mormon man escapes his reasoning and fails to interfere with his fantasies. Nicole takes the notion one step further and stages a half-hearted suicide attempt in which she extracts a blade from a disposable Princess razor and scratches her wrist after a visit with Gary.

Far more important to Gary than questions of life and death, however, is a letter he receives from his young lover. She reveals that she has been having sex with a large portion of Provo's skuzziest male population that isn't locked up - yet. Gary goes ballistic upon this revelation and settles into a deep-blue jailhouse funk. He swears his undying fidelity to Nicole - not a difficult thing to do in jail - and demands the same loyalty from her. For a while, Nicole stops coming to visit her man in jail. Gary becomes so depressed that Sheriff Cahoun moves another hard-core con named Gibbs into Gary's cell. The two immediately bond, start speaking in prison jive and share endless yarns about the only thing they have in common, lives lived behind bars.

Gary's depression deepens, and he writes lengthy letters to Nicole, begging and beseeching her not to fuck other men. The thought is chewing him up. Eventually she resumes her visits to the jailhouse, and Gary's letters became sensuous again instead of demanding. Nicole swears that she will be true to him. Gary plays with the idea of escape and comes up with a plan. He wants a friend at the shoe shop where he worked to hide hacksaw blades in the soles of a pair of shoes. Then, Aunt Ida will smuggle them in to him. Of course, he never considers the consequences his scheme might bring to the others he is so glibly trying to involve. The scheme dies before it is born, and Gary's thoughts turn to suicide as he contemplates the possibility of the death penalty. As he considers taking his own life, Gary suggests that Gibbs request to be moved out of his cell so that he will not be implicated in any ensuing investigation. Gibbs, who has become more than a little nervous about his serial-killer roommate's squirrely behavior, agrees without protest. The actual move, however, does not occur.

## Book 1, Part 5 Analysis

Does the reader really care about Bessie's upbringing? Sometimes it seems that Mailer suffers a compulsion to simply write down absolutely everything he knows about a subject, or a subject related to a subject - or even some unrelated tangent that may or may not have something to do with the point he is trying to make - if, indeed, he has not forgotten what that point was when he started. This could be the result of some really bad editing, an egotistical compulsion to display absolutely every nuance of his research - just for the sake of showing us he knows it - or a frantic attempt to illicit sympathy for a psychopath from a trendy audience predisposed to feel sympathy for anyone painted as a victim.



Both Gary and Nicole's thoughts and actions around the notions of death and suicide seem superficial and adolescent in the extreme. Products of the Mormon culture, both of these dysfunctional rejects are predisposed to notions of a hierarchical afterlife. Unlike the doctrine they were raised with, their personal philosophies seem to indicate that they will be swept up into some sort of pubescent sexual paradise without regard to consequences for their mortal behaviors. Gary clearly has an active and creative imagination, at least as portrayed by Mailer, and he cleverly weaves the prospect of his impending death and his lust for Nicole into a satisfying fantasy to wile away his time in jail. On a more temporal level, he quickly establishes dominance over Gibbs, playing on his reputation as a serial murderer.



# Book 1, Part 6

## Book 1, Part 6 Summary

For Esplin and Snyder, Gary's court-appointed legal team, this is the case of a lifetime. First-degree murder cases are rare in Provo, and they are very high-profile. Considering that this is also a death penalty case and that no one has been executed in the U.S. during a decade-long hiatus legislated by the Supreme Court, Gary Gilmore definitely has prime-time potential. He is a bankable star right out of the gate. The two attorneys are the topic of the moment in the courthouse shop. The young attorneys are fired up, dedicated and willing to work ungodly hours to put forward a credible defense for Gary Gilmore. Their biggest obstacle, however, is an uncooperative client.

The prosecution is entering the fray with a tight circumstantial case. They have little forensic evidence and no eyewitnesses to the actual crimes, but they do have a witness who saw Gary in the motel and who watched him coming out after the murder with a gun and a cash box. The state has a match between the bullet that killed Benny Bushnell and one that was test fired from the gun found in the bushes. They have a blood trail from the bush where they found the gun and the garage where Gary parked the white truck, but the lone fingerprint on the gun is too smudged to put the gun in Gary's hand. Even without hard evidence, the case is tight, but Gary refuses to allow his attorneys to call any of his friends or Nicole to help put a human face on a murderer. He even refuses to allow an Oregon State Penitentiary shrink to testify that he thinks Gary is crazy, because Gary doesn't like the guy. From the beginning, nobody has much hope that the verdict will be anything but "guilty of homicide in the first degree." There is a great deal of speculation, however, about the second phase - the mitigation phase - of the trial, when the jury will be asked whether Gary is to be put to death or receive a sentence of life imprisonment. Essentially, the question is, "Will the state of Utah dare to break the Supreme Court's ban on execution as a cruel and unusual punishment?"

Esplin and Snyder spend a great deal of time with the folks at the Utah State Hospital who have done a thorough workup on Gary's psychic tickings and clickings. The principle psychiatrist is Dr. Woods, but several other mental health types have assisted him. Their conclusions are that Gilmore's IQ is well above average, that he is a psychopath but that he is not psychotic. Psychopathy, or sociopathy, is described as the condition of an anti-social personality disorder. It does not qualify for a get-out-of-jail-free card. Gary cannot plead insanity on the basis of his psychological evaluation. Gary's attorneys spend so much time with Dr. Woods and his associates that Dr. Woods fears that it will appear he is working with them to free Gary. Appearances are paramount in Utah, often at the expense of substance and duty. Try as they might, the young lawyers are unable to uncover anything that would label Gary Gilmore legally insane. They do find one psychiatrist at Oregon State Penitentiary, Dr. Wesley Weissart, who once diagnosed Gary as paranoid, a good, old-fashioned brand of crazy upon which a crafty young attorney might hang a plea. The problem is that the good doctor



hates Gilmore, and Gary hates the doctor. Dr. Weissart doesn't want to get involved, and Gary won't let his attorneys put the doctor on the stand in any case.

Gary continues his jailhouse antics with Gibbs, making sport of guards and inmates alike. They have several short-time cellmates, and Gary stares down and intimidates both the weaklings and the strongmen, quickly establishing his dominance. Luis is a Hispanic nighttime guard who quickly becomes Gary and Gibbs' plaything. They taunt and trick him mercilessly, often with the complicity of other guards who do not care for Hispanics.

Gary's biggest crisis during his wait for trial comes not from the court but at the hands - or more accurately, the vagina - of Nicole. Gary asks Nicole during a visit if she is still fucking other guys, and she just can't hide her lying eyes when she answers in the negative. Gary goes beyond ballistic this time, all the way out into high orbit. In his letters, he regales Nicole with page after page of profane condemnation, threats of suicide and, worse yet, threats of killing yet another victim, explaining that when he gets pissed it doesn't really matter who he kills. He whines and cries in long, ugly paragraphs, expressing his rage and pain in an endless egotistical diatribe. He is so totally self-absorbed that no thought of concern for Nicole's trials - or anyone else's - flows through his pen. Eventually, however, the lovers reconcile, based on Nicole's promise of everlasting monogamy. Not long after, however, she finds herself naked under a rutting biker in Salt Lake City, a circumstance that she later claims really isn't her fault.

Compared to the drama preceding it, the actual trial of Gary Gilmore is anticlimactic. Led by prosecutor Noall Wootton, the State of Utah puts forward a straightforward, largely circumstantial case, a wholly convincing case that Gary Gilmore murdered a defenseless motel desk clerk in cold, premeditated blood. The whole process takes only three days, with the first day given over to jury selection. On the second day of the trial, Wootton first trots out Larry Johnson, a draftsman familiar with the layout of the motel, followed by Detective Fraser, who photographed the motel office. Then, Gene Overton comes to the stand to describe Benny Bushnell lying on the floor, dying in his own blood. Dr. Morrison, Utah's Deputy Chief Medical Examiner, testifies that the absence of powder burns around the wound indicate that the barrel of the gun was placed directly against the victim's skull before the fatal shot was fired. Neither side asks Officer Gerald Nielson about the confession he heard from Gary. The judge who presided over the preliminary hearing expressed doubt that it would ever be allowed into evidence during trial. An FBI expert testifies that the bullet in the victim's head and a bullet test fired from the gun recovered from the bushes came from the same gun. Finally, Peter Arroyo places Gary in the motel and leaving the motel with a gun in one hand and a cash box in the other. After Arroyo, the prosecution rests.

The defense's case is over in a heartbeat. Esplin rests without fielding a single witness, and the judge adjourns early so folks can watch a Ford/Carter presidential debate. No one is more surprised than Gary Gilmore at the defense team's decision to fold without presenting a case. He is livid, and demands to take the stand in his own defense, in spite of his attorney's dire warnings to the contrary. They intend to attack the case on



appeal and fear that Gilmore's testimony will hamper that effort. Undaunted, Gary continues to insist until the judge changes his mind with a detailed description of the potential consequences. Finally, Gary acquiesces, and the judge recalls the jury to hear closing arguments. The judge then gives the jury instructions so that they can begin deliberation. The jury takes one hour and twenty minutes to come back with a guilty verdict.

At one-thirty the same afternoon, Wootton begins the mitigation, or penalty, phase of the trial with a strong argument for a death sentence. Setting up their strategy for appeal, the defense objects to nearly every phase. Following Wootton, Snyder, rather than Esplin who handled the evidentiary portion of the trial, makes a short argument for leniency that no one expects to convince anyone. A short time later, the jury comes back with a verdict of death. The judge asks Gary to choose his manner of death, and Gilmore replies, "I prefer to be shot." The judge concurs and sets November 15 at 8:00 a.m. as the moment that Gary Gilmore is to enjoy his fifteen minutes of fame as the first man to be executed in the United States in a decade. Later that day, the condemned murderer is transported the few miles between the Utah County Jail in Provo and death row at the Utah State Penitentiary at the Point of the Mountain.

## Book 1, Part 6 Analysis

This section is the most substantive thus far, in terms of advancing the story line. Still, there are a great many rabbit trails and copious detail of questionable relevance. One could easily get the feeling that Mailer very much enjoys hearing himself write.

The theme of Gary's lust and desire for Nicole - dare one call it love? - develops in an explosive fashion here. His pages of obscene ranting over his misery that she is not remaining faithful to him are way over the top. As juvenile as they seem, the intensity of his pain and rage are raw and genuine. It is understandable, perhaps, when one considers that Gary has never had anything resembling a natural relationship with a woman. He has spent his whole life in the fantasy worlds created by a creative mind in a young, developing body, fueled by testosterone yet cut off from any but masturbatory or homosexual expression. His view of the ideal sexual world comes from the unreal pages of *Playboy* and other sex-oriented media and myths that discredit any but the most perfect female body - again, as defined by *Playboy* and other sex-oriented media and myths. Nicole seems to have that idealistic icon of a body and a sexual drive to match it. Gary easily overlooks her immaturity, lack of reason and self-serving ideas, conversation and behavior. The same media and myths that define the perfect female form also deny the relevance of such qualities as intelligence and genteel behavior. For Gary, Nicole is an icon of sexual success as he has constructed it in his jailhouse fantasies.

Gary's relationship with Nicole - or at least the relationship he imagines if all of this murder stuff would just go away - may be the telling factor in his ultimate decision not only to accept the guilty verdict but also to choose shooting as the way to end his life. It may be that he finally realizes that his plans of escape or acquittal are preposterous and



that his only chance of repossessing Nicole lies in his fantasy of some sort of heroic afterlife. Death is still abstract enough to believe in, undiminished by rational metrics. His choice of means of death fits nicely into that scenario. There is, after all, something rather romantic about standing up before a firing squad - the final cigarette, the blindfold and such nonsense - as compared to strangling at the end of a rope or suffocating in a chamber full of poisonous gas.



# Book 1, Part 7

## Book 1, Part 7 Summary

Grace McGinnis is a schoolteacher in Milwaukie, Oregon, a bedroom town for Portland. She is a friend of Bessie's, Gary's mother, whom she came to know while teaching Bessie's younger son Mikal. She never taught Gary, however. Grace becomes embroiled in Bessie and Gary's endless trials and travails while Gary is locked up in Oregon State Penitentiary. She goes on visits with Bessie to see her little black sheep and comes to know Gary only as a character on the other side of a table in the prison visiting room. She eventually severs ties with Bessie and her clan, unable to bear up under the constant emotional strain of one crisis after another. She has had no contact with the Gilmores for several years when she first learns of the Provo murders. Nonetheless, she feels qualified to become an apologist for Gary's behaviors, blaming the drug Prolixin and the Mormon Church, rather than the murderer.

The Prolixin issue grows out of an incident in which Gary was involved in a violent inmate riot that went on several days. When it was over, Gary was forced to take the long-lasting Prolixin, which had recently displaced Thorazine as the chemical restraint of choice for inmates. It offers the convenience of one dose per week rather than one every few hours. Grace blames the drug, rather than the violent and dangerous behavior that led to its administration. She claims that she saw an evil change come over Gary after he got off Prolixin, notwithstanding a lifetime of evil behavior preceding his encounter with the correctional pharmacopoeia.

Grace also blames the Mormon Church for Gary's behavior, because they refuse to pay the back taxes on Bessie's house. Bessie offers to deed the dilapidated property to the Church - property that is not only facing foreclosure for back taxes, but also a threatened action from the city government because it is an eyesore and safety hazard. To Bessie's credit, she is crippled by arthritis and struggling to make ends meet as a bus person in a local tavern, but her condition hardly seems to be the Church's fault. The Church, on the other hand, makes a business decision more than a humane one, judging the property not worth the cost of taxes and maintenance. When Gary learns of this, he becomes livid with rage. According to Mailer, "The only time she [Grace] saw him [Gary] angry was on the day Bessie told him she had definitely lost the house. He was so angry at the Mormon Church that even the recollection of his wrath years later made Grace think, *'I'll bet a nickel he knew those boys were Mormon before he killed them.'*"

Bessie echoes the ill will toward the Church that Grace sees in Gary: "Of all the people, she said to herself, who ever hurt me, it's been only Mormons, nobody else ever could." She remembers the terrible hatred on Gary's face the day she tells him in the visiting room at Oregon State that the Church never helped her save the house. "There was a look in his eyes then as if he had found an enemy worthy of his stature." Mailer offers no comment on whether either Gary or Bessie give any thought to the notion that if her



sons had made different choices in life they might have been able to, or inclined to, help her, rather than forcing her to depend on the charity of the Church.

During Gary's first weeks on death row, he seems to reconcile himself, at least by words, to impending death. He continues with his obscene letters to Nicole, still obsessed with the notion of owning her and making sure that she never has sex with another man. He whines constantly about the noise on death row and realizes that if he continues with the appeal process, this will be his life forever. He decides that death is preferable and shares that decision with Nicole. He seems to assume that Nicole will commit suicide when he dies so that no other man will ever have her, and they can live happily ever after in their fantasy of an afterlife. Actually, that fantasy is not much different from the Mormon doctrine on which they were both raised, but they conveniently edit out the part in which such happiness is given as a reward for being good Mormons - which, of course, they have not been. In his letters to Nicole, Gary makes a childish and transparent attempt to convince her that he is not trying to talk her into killing herself, but he makes no bones about that being his desired outcome. At one point she balks and becomes angry with him for pressuring her, but for the most part she goes along with his game. Gary even requests to see Cline Campbell, the Mormon chaplain in the prison, and reveals his plan to let the state go ahead and kill him. Campbell agrees that might be a good idea. He reasons that, although suicide might be a sin, paying for your sins with just punishment would not necessarily be wrong.

Once the trial is over, there really isn't much point in Snyder and Esplin keeping close contact with their troublesome client. Much of the appeals process is *pro forma*, requiring little participation on the part of the convict. On November 1, however, they drive out to the Point of the Mountain to visit with Gary. They are excited about the news they bear. They had so many points to make on appeal that the entire legal community, country wide, is betting that the death sentence will be overturned. Since there is no provision for an automatic appeal in the Utah law, almost everyone is betting that, if it reaches the U.S. Supreme Court, it will be overturned on that point alone. Since the Utah courts will not be eager to be embarrassed by the federal courts, they doubt it will ever make it to the U.S. Court of Appeals. This is all fine and good, except for one thing. Gary says no. He would rather die, he claims, than spend the rest of his life in maximum security. In spite of the best efforts of his attorneys and the courts, Gary stands his ground, insisting that his appointment with death in just two weeks be kept.

## Book 1, Part 7 Analysis

At this point, Norman Mailer seems absolutely desperate to find some thread to attach to Gary Gilmore that will illicit sympathy in his audience. Perhaps the audience of the time is driving his quest. The prevailing attitude of many Americans at the time is that anything of the system (i.e. the authorities) is wrong and oppressive, while all who are dysfunctional and disenfranchised are noble and faultless victims of an unfeeling social system driven by corporate greed. Gary Gilmore is neither faultless nor noble, and he creates victims aplenty, rather than personifying one. He is a psychopathic predator, so

selfish and self-absorbed that he tries even to destroy the one thing - Nicole - that he claims to love.

Mailer's presentation of Grace McGinnis' Prolixin argument for Gilmore's behavior shows the desire of many to blame Gilmore's actions on something outside of himself. In my view, Gary Gilmore is not a creature molded and shaped by irresistible forces. He is an intelligent, though twisted, young man, subjected to the same influences as many others who do not murder their fellow humans, and endowed with the same free will. Prolixin does not make Gary Gilmore murder his fellow man, nor does the Mormon Church. Gary Gilmore kills people because he makes a rational decision to become a murderer. His decision not to appeal his death sentence and accept the consequences of his actions is also a rational decision, one that in retrospect may have been one of his more intelligent choices, serving both self interest and that of society. Who can blame a man for not wanting to face the torment of life in maximum security day after day for the rest of his life, preferring instead a simple end to the misery of a misspent life?



# Book 2, Part 1

## Book 2, Part 1 Summary

In Phoenix at a correctional officials' conference, Earl Dorius and Bill Barrett of the Utah Attorney General's office find themselves in great demand. The Gilmore case is all over TV by this time, and everyone wants the local take on the story. Meanwhile, back on Death Row, Gary writes a letter protesting the stay of his execution, accusing the state of not having the courage of its convictions and calling the officials involved "silly." Enter Dennis Boaz, a pot-smoking, hippie-like, former prosecuting attorney from Boalt Hall, U.C. Berkeley's highly rated law school. Boaz has pretty much given up law to become a starving writer, who has the starving part done, but is yet to publish anything. He is living in Salt Lake City off the largess of friends. He is in debt, broke and jobless. He drives a new Saab that is about to be repossessed and is into synchronicity, numerology, the Tarot and a host of other ancient recycled and new-age mystical philosophies and doctrines. Sometime earlier, he felt a cosmic connection to Gary Gilmore and wrote him a letter. Thoroughly pissed that Utah is denying him his right to die on November 15, Gary contacts Cline Campbell, who also thinks he should die, and asks him to contact Boaz to see if he will act as his attorney in a petition to set aside the stay. When Campbell shows up at Boaz's door, the mystical attorney/writer thinks he is from the collection agency come to repossess the Saab.

Owing to a U.S. Supreme Court decision that the press do not have a constitutional right to enter prisons to interview inmates, Warden Sam Smith at the Utah State Penitentiary has been keeping all reporters out. When Boaz makes it clear that he is not only a writer but a lawyer and that he too wishes Sam's show to go forward on November 15, the warden admits him with a wink and a nod. He gives the explanation that he cannot deprive his prisoner of his right to legal counsel. Boaz is not a member of the Utah bar, so he needs a sponsor to plead Gary's case before the court. Prosecutor Wootton is happy to accommodate Boaz with a friend of a friend. After all, they are all on the same side. Gary goes to court with his new mouthpiece to argue for his right to die on November 15. The Court graciously accommodates him, setting aside the stay, but then Utah Governor Rampton issues another stay on his own authority.

While all of this legal juggling is going on, Tamara Smith, a new and rather naive reporter for the *Salt Lake City Deseret News*, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Mormon Church, befriends Nicole in the hopes of getting a story. A highly emotional being herself, Tamara takes Nicole's story to heart, agrees to keep it off the record until such time that Nicole releases her from the pledge and becomes deeply involved in Nicole's personal life. Nicole even confides her plan to commit suicide after Gary is shot and entrusts Tamara with all of her letters from Gary. Shortly after giving up the letters, Nicole reclaims her personal correspondence, but Tamara has already spent 10 hours photocopying them.





Predictably, Gary goes ballistic with the news of the governor's stay. He forms a suicide pact with Nicole. Nicole goes to as many doctors as she can, getting prescriptions for sleeping pills. She ends up with 50 Seconal capsules and 20 Dalamanes. She splits them down the middle, 25 and 10 for each of the two lovers. In a macabre, yet humorous, scenario, Nicole double-wraps Gary's share in a child's balloons and then inserts them in her vagina. Paranoid that she might be strip-searched when she goes into the prison, she stuffs them as high up as she can. In fact, she is strip-searched, but not that deeply. Security in the visiting room is lax, and there are no other visitors. Nicole sits necking on Gary's lap, and hiding his action from the guard, he tries to retrieve the parcel from Nicole's nether parts. His fingers are not long enough. Next, the couple stands looking out the window with their backs to the guard in the bulletproof cage. Gary stands nibbling on Nicole's neck with his hands on her shoulders, while she probes herself to retrieve the pills. She can touch the balloon, but she cannot dislodge it. Finally, she uses her abdominal muscles, simulating birthing contractions, until she can reach the contraband with her fingers. Her head aches, and she sees stars for her effort. That night at midnight, Nicole takes what she believes is a lethal dose of drugs. Later evidence, however, suggests that Gary isn't quite so serious and is simply indulging in shits and giggles, to put it in prison parlance.

## Book 2, Part 1 Analysis

*Romeo and Juliet* this ain't. Gary and Nicole are not the progeny of two noble families kept apart in their love by some ancient grudge. He is a crafty, manipulative, murdering psychopath in the prime of life, and she is an emotionally defective 20-year-old child nymphomaniac with lousy taste in men. They are both the products of dysfunctional families, steeped from birth in the mysticism of a cultish culture and religion. Now, they are represented and supported in their delusions by a washed-out hippie lawyer turned wannabe writer.

Gary has told everyone that he wants no publicity, but this commitment does not apply to the opportunistic Mr. Boaz, who is trying to save his Saab. To the lawyer, this murderer with a death wish smells like money. Without regard to the canons of legal ethics, he opens negotiations for a TV documentary, to air after Gary's death, and Nicole cuts a deal with the *National Enquirer* for a \$2,000 interview. This releases Tamara from her off-the-record pledge, and she proceeds to pen the story of her relationship with Nicole.

Notwithstanding Nicole's deal with the *Enquirer*, she proceeds to suicide with a purpose. This, coupled with a bizarre last will and testament and her commitment to do an interview she wouldn't be alive for, underscores the complete control Gary has over the disturbed and naive Nicole. Later, there is some evidence that Gary may have been somewhat less enthusiastic about dying than his child lover.



## Book 2, Part 2

### Book 2, Part 2 Summary

Part 2 of Book 2 has little to do with Gary Gilmore, but it has a great deal to do with self-serving profiteers and media ghouls with dreams of riches and career advancements rising from his corpse. Boaz has already positioned himself between the money and his client, but when he tries to play hardball with the big boys he finds that he is just what he is: a small-time dope-smoking hippie bush leaguer from a place nobody ever heard of.

Gary does not die from the Seconal, of course, and evidence suggests he never intended to. He takes the pills just a couple of hours before morning bed check, not at midnight as his pact with his lover dictates. With his knowledge of drugs, Brenda observes, he surely knows that he is ingesting less than a lethal dose for a man of nearly 200 pounds. His intentions for 100-pound, elfin Nicole, however, are serious - deadly serious - and he almost succeeds in assuring she will never fuck another man. When Brenda confronts him with that scenario, Gary does not deny it. He just laughs it off. Curiously, Brenda laughs with him. Nicole spends days in ICU at Provo Valley Hospital, teetering between life and death. When she recovers enough to walk, she is shipped off to the State Hospital, which is not far removed geographically from the prison at Point of the Mountain where Gary is incarcerated. In the meantime, Gary wakes up after a few hours in his Salt Lake hospital bed, spends a couple of days harassing the staff there and then returns to maximum security.

Neighbor Kathy Maynard discovers Nicole the day after her very sincere suicide attempt, and while she and another friend are trying to wake Nicole, Jeff Newman shows up. Jeff is the *National Enquirer* reporter who had offered Nicole \$2,000 for an interview. He tries to bull his way into the house while they are trying to revive the unconscious Nicole, but Kathy sends him packing.

The so-called legitimate media like to dump on the *Enquirer* for paying subjects for sensational stories, but in the Gary Gilmore case, none of the media seems to behave ethically. Since they have no access to Gary, the media monkeys start calling just about everybody who knows anything about the case. An out-of-town reporter blind-sides Dennis Boaz with an early morning phone call seeking his opinion on the suicide attempts before Boaz knows anything about them. Another reporter informs Boaz that he is the number one suspect on Sam Smith's list of potential Seconal smugglers. Even Geraldo Rivera is in town, and Geraldo is still masquerading as a legitimate reporter, before he gets into hyping safe openings in Chicago and phony firefights and cave discoveries in Afghanistan. He tells Boaz the same thing. Boaz arranges to meet Rivera in his room in the Salt Lake Hilton, where Boaz asks Rivera if he knows where Boaz can get some good pot. Rivera contacts another reporter who coughs up (pun intended) some killer Thai-stick for the frightened attorney/writer. Boaz ends up in tears, spilling out his innocence and fear to the slick media monkey.



Officials still say they suspect Boaz of smuggling in the Seconal, although the investigators actually decide it was Nicole, and they use that as an excuse to prevent Gary from having any human contact with the outside world. Boaz, therefore, has to talk with Gary by phone, looking through two panes of bullet-resistant glass. In the meantime, Dennis has been talking out of school, playing a bit fast and loose with his promise not to say anything to the press. He also publicly reverses his commitment to Gary's right to elect death, although his motives remain a bit cloudy. He claims that he has been so moved by the double suicide attempt that he has gained a new appreciation for the value of life, but some suspect he is scared to death of being prosecuted for smuggling contraband into the prison. Others voice the notion that he realizes he can milk more money out of the corpse by stretching out the process.

Although literally hundred of players vie for a piece of Gary Gilmore, the field quickly narrows to two heavy hitters. The first contender is Larry Schiller, a former *Life* photographer turned sensationalist writer and wannabe documentary producer. He has the reputation among his colleagues as a sleazeball because he has capitalized on a couple of public deaths in cheap books. Schiller really does have some talent, however, is eager to restore his reputation and is walking a fine line with the Gilmore story. The other player is David Susskind, a producer with a better reputation among the media monkeys, but who also wants to pick Gary Gilmore's bones. Initially, Susskind has the inside track, based on a verbal agreement with Boaz, but Boaz is turning flaky. Stanley Greenberg, a noted TV writer and stylish anti-capital punishment advocate, calls Susskind, an old buddy, offering to team up with him. From his lofty perch in Manhattan, Greenberg proclaims that Gilmore is deranged, insane, that he has no right to declare that he wants to die and that *they* should have recognized that long ago. Greenberg had neither spoken with any of the people involved, nor had he read any of the exhaustive psychological reports by people actually qualified to make such determinations. Greenberg is a flash in the pan in any event, bailing to protect his public facade as soon as the negotiations for story rights get dirty. While Susskind is romancing Boaz, Shilling is wooing Gilmore's family, specifically Vern and Ida, and Gary is fixing to fire his hippie mouthpiece.

As the story churns in the international press and the Salt Lake Hilton fills up with media mavens from around the planet, Susskind, in a move of desperation and proclaimed charity, offers to partner up with Schiller. While Schiller admires Susskind, recognizes his preeminence and would like to work with him, he is not willing to give up control of the deal. Although Schiller can't compete with Susskind's screen credits, he is by far the better businessman. He is honest and straightforward with Vern and Ida, insisting that they protect *their* interests by bringing in attorneys of their choice to work with him on *their* behalves. On the recommendation of this new coalition of Schiller and the attorneys representing his relatives, Gary cans Boaz. He is not angry with his former lawyer. He thanks him and offers to pay him and then signs contracts with Schiller. In his simple, country and refreshing way, Vern insists that the bulk of the proceeds derived from the deal go to benefit the children of Gary's victims.



## Book 2, Part 2 Analysis

Curiously, this book about Gary Gilmore becomes a bit more interesting when Mailer takes him out of the spotlight. It appears that the author has attempted to paint a background of a poor, victimized casualty of an uncaring society, which should strive to understand the serial murderer, rather than punish him. In this reviewer's mind, Mailer fails in that attempt by drowning his characters in saccharin clichés, narrator-voiced street talk - a stunt the author is too erudite to pull off - and whining pathos drawn from the dysfunctional lives of those who surround the murderer. In fairness to Mailer, however, the mid-seventies is a time when the literate are dumbing down America, and it is cool to talk dirty and with little attention to grammatical conventions. Everybody - Pulitzer Prize winners included - has to make a buck. In Book 2, *Executioner's Song* becomes more the documentary it purports to be and less like a novel with more diversions than *Canterbury Tales*.

Mailer does a good job of portraying the sleaziness and hypocrisy of the media, with his portraits of journalists, TV and movie producers pretending high moral motives and then abandoning them as soon as the situation changes. At one point the exclusive rights to Gary and Nicole's stories are essential, but when it looks like Nicole might die, they start bending it around so that she becomes less important. Even without the rights to Gary's story, but with Nicole's, they can produce a fiction film about a Gary-like character who is to be executed and who is in love with a Nicole-like spacey chick. Suddenly all of the big-time and wannabe big-time TV and publishing types beat paths to the humble Mormon doors behind which live the bit players who might be able to influence Gary's choice of who gets what rights. The notion of truth never comes up in the discussions of potential story lines, and no one approaches any of the survivors of Gilmore's victims waiving checks and contracts in *their* faces. The only ones showing any compassion for the victims' survivors are Vern, Ida and Gary himself, all of whom insist a portion of the proceeds go to the children of the two victims' families. As the strong and wise proponent of the victims' needs, even deceiving Gary about some money he wants to throw away in unwise gestures of ego gratification, Vern emerges as the true hero of this tawdry tale. Mailer pretends to occupy a sort of moral high ground concerning the rest of the money-grubbing media, but it is doubtful he was working *pro bono* when he wrote *Executioner's Song*.



## Book 2, Part 3

### Book 2, Part 3 Summary

Gilmore continues his hunger strike while Sam Smith, the warden, and other officials explore the laws that might allow them to or prevent them from force-feeding him. Earl Dorius has spent a good deal of time researching the issue and is looking forward to announcing his conclusion, but the *Salt Lake City Tribune* upstages him. The newspaper goes back to Judge Ritter to try to get a restraining order against Sam Smith's no-interview policy. The *Tribune* is well prepared, and Earl is not. The *Tribune* wins and immediately dispatches reporters to the prison to blind-side Schiller and interview Gary. Schiller agrees to let Gary go ahead with the interview, on the condition that Schiller be present during the interview, thinking the additional publicity will serve his monetary goals in the long range. He arranges a signal with Gary - rubbing his chin - if he wants his property to stonewall an answer from the *Tribune* or any other outside interviewer.

Although claiming not to want any publicity, officials from Utah learn to love their 15 minutes of national and international fame. They hold a Board of Pardons meeting in a theater-like room to accommodate the national TV media when they consider Gary's case. Notwithstanding Schiller's attempts to glamorize Gary Gilmore and romanticize his relationship with Nicole, the big boys aren't buying it. Their attitudes toward the murderer is hostile, and he overhears one reporter comment, "Can you believe the attention this cheap punk is getting?" Earl Dorius notes that, as the media advances, security in the prison withdraws. Anyone, he thinks, "...could bring in a magnum and blast a hole through Gary." During the hearing, Gary calls the Pardons Board "cowards" for not fulfilling the sentence they have given him, and he is scolded by the officials, who explain that it is not Gary's place but theirs to decide the when and where of the execution. In the end, however, Gary prevails, and the board approves the execution. Among the pundits, smart money is on December 6 as the likely date for the execution, so that they can abide by a Utah law that says that, in the absence of an appeal, the execution must be carried out within 60 days of October 7 when it was handed down.

Earl Dorius files a Writ of Mandamus in the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals to attempt to set aside Judge Ritter's restraining order that allowed the *Tribune* to interview Gary. He claims to be concerned with the dynamics of unrest and rebellion within a prison community that such publicity might engender. Despite his best efforts, Earl loses, and this opens the floodgates for a group of lawsuits to give other media types access to the condemned man. Dorius also tries a Writ of Mandamus to the Utah Supreme Court, and he wins a one-night stay of the judgment that prevents a scheduled TV production. The court hears arguments on the writ the following morning. The whole issue pales, however, in the light of a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that same morning, which stays the execution based on a petition filed by Gary's mother with the help of the ACLU. The Attorney General takes an exhausted Dorius off the case for arguments before the Utah Supreme Court, and while he appreciates the rest, he feels somewhat left out.



One of the things that gives Schiller a leg up on the competition for getting the rights to Gary's story is a check for \$50,000 from ABC. The TV network advances the money to Schiller against the revenues of a made-for-TV production they plan with him. Although Schiller's credentials are not as persuasive as some of the other bidders, he knows how to use the cash. After he loops Vern in as Gary's agent and pushes Boaz out of the picture, he turns the money over to Vern, with the council of Bob Moody and Sanger, the two attorneys he has hired to represent him in the dealings with Gary's rights. Gary - to whom the money technically belongs - begins giving it away by the fistful to prison buddies, such as Gibbs, and a few non-cons. Vern, for his part, feels he has a duty to protect Gary from his own largess. He talks his nephew out of some bequests and into paring down others, always reminding Gary of the need to preserve enough for the victims' children. Of all the players in the media circus, including the attorneys, Vern emerges as the one level head. A conservative businessman who has spent all of his life in the prevailing culture, he is not about to change for a bunch of big-city clowns.

In the meantime, Gary has gotten his back up against the wall with his hunger strike. With every visit from Schiller, he complains about how hungry he is, yet he refuses to eat until Schiller gets him a phone call with Nicole over at the State Hospital. Hunger strike or not, nobody is budging on that issue. Schiller speculates that for someone who doesn't want publicity, Gary is doing pretty well. He suspects that Gary had hoped that other convicts would join him in his strike, but so far no one has. It isn't, after all, as if Gary were a long-term resident of Utah State Prison. He is just a traveling carnival that is no doubt bringing some entertainment to the other cons, but he is hardly one of them. In one visit, in fact, Gary admits that his hunger strike is a publicity gimmick to get public sympathy on his side, through his lust to visit Nicole. Eventually, it becomes a matter of pure stubbornness on Gary's part. The U.S. Supreme Court votes 5-4 not to interfere with the State of Utah, however, and to let the execution go forward. Gary uses that as an excuse to resume eating after 25 days of claimed abstinence from nutrition, conveniently overlooking his pledge not to eat until he could talk to his honey.

## Book 2, Part 3 Analysis

A couple of interesting themes and insights occur in this section. One is Sam Smith's unilateral decision that, "no one is going to make any money out of Gary Gilmore." This illustrates the general naivety and moral judgment common to the theoretically minded Mormons of Utah. Making money off of a man's death would not be *Doing the Right Thing*, according to God and the teachings of Joseph Smith, so by God it will not happen in any Utah prison. This is, however, a First Amendment issue - a matter to be decided by a higher power than a mid-level bureaucrat in Utah - even if God *is* on your side. On the flip side of that is the down-home common sense of Vern, Ida and the two local attorneys they have hired to help guide them through the labyrinth of big-time media deal making. Throughout the whole business, they are the ones who keep their heads out of the clouds, although the attorneys do admit to a small pride at seeing their faces on national TV. They remain on task protecting the rights of Gary, his relatives and by virtue of their deal with Vern, those of the victims and their children.



Another emerging theme here is the media as the story. This is something that seems to have increased exponentially since the late sixties and early seventies, emerging from the heady days of Vietnam. Whereas reporters used to be lauded for disappearing in their stories - becoming invisible behind fact and objectivity - many television journalists wear their opinions and points-of-view on their sleeves. What used to be commentary has become reporting, and the public seems to eat it up. What used to be journalism has become easily consumed, but only partially digested, fast-food news - the busy body's substitute for a heartier perception of current events. Actually reading and thinking about things would take valuable time away from the pursuit of lucrative careers and junior soccer leagues. The prevailing attitude seems to have become, "Don't bother me with facts, I gave in the Sixties." As the media has come to do more and more of the thinking for the public, the media has also become more and more what the public is thinking about. The media have become the shapers, rather than the purveyors, of opinion. The Gilmore execution is a new high-water mark in this movement, which has since become the norm.



## Book 2, Part 4

### Book 2, Part 4 Summary

Part 4 of the second book in *Executioner's Song* is essentially a collection of anecdotes occurring in the lives of some of the players in the Gilmore drama during the Christmas and New Year season of 1976-77. While many of the institutions, agencies and officials, at least in their official capacities, are closed, absent or sluggish during this traditional stop-work period, not so the people. Gary is still in maximum security and stirring things up, and the two Provo lawyers representing his and Vern's interests still visit Gary on a twice-daily basis. They are becoming quite fond of him. The lawyers ask Gary questions that Schiller provides, and then they record his answers for later publication. Schiller, in the meantime, is vacationing in Hawaii, attempting to smooth out a rocky relationship with Stephanie, his assistant/traveling companion and trophy fiancée. With the happy couple are both Schiller and Stephanie's mothers. The three ladies will be heading overseas shortly to peddle Gary's letters to Nicole to the foreign press. This fact is being hidden from Gary, as it would likely trigger a tantrum.

The U.S. Supreme Court rules quickly on the Gilmore case brought by his mom, brother and the ACLU, upholding the death sentence. This means that Gary has to go back to court to get a new execution date. It looks like it is going to be a happy occasion for Gary, because Bob Moody has arranged with somebody to be standing by with Nicole to receive a phone call in the hospital. The plan is that, while waiting in chambers for court to begin, Moody will initiate the call to his contact, who will then hand the phone to Nicole. Unfortunately, they put them in a room with no phone, so the session gets off to a bad start for Gary Gilmore. The judge does, however, give the murderer another execution date: January 17. Gary makes yet another - this time serious - suicide attempt and ends up in ICU in a coma. They release him quickly, however, and return him to prison while he is still stoned. This interferes greatly with the interviews Moody and Sanger are conducting during their visits. On one occasion, Gary nods off and falls out of his chair mid-interview. On the night before Christmas, Gary throws a temper tantrum in his cell because the guard serves his meal on a paper plate, so the mass murder spends the Holy Day in the hole.

Gibbs, Gary's old cellmate from Utah County Jail in Provo, offers up his own version of a Christmas surprise for Gary. When Gibbs gets out of jail, Gary arranges for Vern to meet him at the door with a \$2,000 check for old time's sake. It is something of a shock, therefore, for Gary to learn that Gibbs has been working undercover for several law enforcement agencies, including the FBI, for the past twelve years. In fact, Gibbs was the key witness, testifying under immunity from prosecution, in a trial that broke the biggest theft ring in Utah. Gary is livid. When someone suggests various ways of getting back at Gibbs, Gary comments, "I can handle it from here." Gary isn't the only one whom Gibbs has pissed off. The members of the theft gang he helped break up want a piece of him too. His law-enforcement buddies set Gibbs up with a false ID and some money. He buys a used Oldsmobile, withdraws the rest of Gary's gift and gets the hell





out of Dodge with a pocket full of cash. He makes it to somewhere in Idaho where he spins off the highway and down an embankment in inclement weather. He shatters his leg and suffers a nasty gash on his forehead. He seeks medical attention, but he is afraid to be admitted to the hospital. Gibbs winds up holed up in a cheap motel where he lives on codeine, whisky and intense pain. He claims a log truck forced him off the road, but there is no truck at the scene. The police cite him for driving too fast for the weather conditions.

## Book 2, Part 4 Analysis

This section reads more like an anthology of short stories than a documentary, and Mailer stretches his credibility even thinner than he has in previous sections. Throughout *Executioner's Song*, Mailer frequently speaks from the minds and perspectives of the various characters. He seldom attributes his knowledge to a specific interview or incident that would give the reader a clue as to where or how he divined the most secret and intimate thoughts of people who were total strangers until he began researching his book. His veracity is particularly suspect when he expresses this secret knowledge in street talk, which seems stilted and artificial coming from his educated voice. In this section, for example, he describes Gibbs' accident as if the logging truck were real. He states it as a fact when the accident first occurs - a fact that implies some interference by Gary who says, "I can handle it from here."

Mailer is so absolute in the real existence of the truck that the reader might very well expect that it would still be at the site of the accident. Of course, the truck driver could have fled the scene, but that is certainly no more likely than the probability that this career convict is lying - that he invents the truck to cover his ass. The point is that Mailer, a seasoned journalist, never considers, or at least doesn't portray, the possibility that Gibbs is making stuff up. What is gained by this narrative that concretely gives Gibbs' story, whether real or imagined? When Mailer reveals that there was no truck at the scene, do you begin to question the nature of truth-telling? It seems as if Mailer wants to make sure his readers come to the conclusion that Gary is controlling events in Idaho from his cell in Provo. Only pages later, Mailer mentions that the cop cites Gary for driving too fast. Even then, Mailer does not call his readers' attention to the possibility of deception by Gibbs. The omission reinforces the notion that the truck is connected to Gary, and even that the connection might be supernatural. This is the stuff of novels, not journalism.



## Book 2, Part 5

### Book 2, Part 5 Summary

While Schiller is in Hawaii, his partner Farrell continues to rough out a *Playboy* interview that Schiller has already contracted for. Moody and Sanger continue to go into the prison twice a day, spending hours visiting Gary through a glass barrier, speaking on telephones and recording the interviews. Neither Schiller nor Farrell is pleased with the way the two attorneys present the questions to the murderer. They have grown fond of Gary, as indeed everyone seems to do when they spend any significant amount of time with him, and they often make jokes around the questions, minimizing the importance of the deeper psychological and mystical topics the writer and producer are interested in. Moody and Sanger are attorneys, and they are infected with the sort of "wiser than mere mortals" virus that seems to target law school graduates. They look at the interviewing process as attorneys would look at it, and since many of the questions are more of mood and feeling than fact and verbal content, they seem unable to grasp the point. To counteract this miscommunication, Schiller and Fowler take to having Gilmore read the questions out loud before answering them, rather than having the attorneys ask him the questions.

When asked if Gary went into the service station and the motel intending to kill someone, he acknowledges his premeditation. When asked when he first thought of killing someone, he replies that he can't recall exactly, but that it had been building all week as an amorphous sort of pressure that he had to find a way to relieve. He says that neither victim did anything to annoy him - to trigger a killing - and that indeed they were complacent, obedient and even polite. He acknowledges that the second murder was easier than the first and that he would have gone on killing if he had not been caught.

Schiller has still not told Gary that he has sold a few rights to the *National Enquirer*, and he knows the news is not going to please Gary. He also makes the mistake of calling Nicole "Freckles," which is a pet bedroom name Gary used in his letter to his lover. Until then, Gary did not know that Schiller had gone back on his word and read Gary's letters during a brief period when Schiller had custody of them. In fact, Schiller made six sets of copies, parts of which he shared with the *Enquirer* and larger parts of which Stephanie, her mother and his own mother are trying to peddle to the European press. The thing that frightens Schiller the most is not the excerpts from the letters that the *Enquirer* has printed but what they have done with one of the interview tapes Gary recorded with Moody and Sanger. The *Enquirer* hired an expert to analyze the stresses in Gary's voice and then published the results, which suggest that Gary doesn't really want to die, that he is terribly frightened and that the stand he is making is largely jailhouse bravado. Schiller is so afraid this will cause Gary to clam up and turn off the money faucet that he sends him a telegram full of rage at the publication. Gary, on the other hand, is barely fazed by the incident. His attitude is that, after all, it is just the *National Enquirer* and everyone knows what kind of journalism that rag practices.



Bill Moyer, who is basically a print journalist, is making his debut into television with the inauguration of *CBS Live*. He wants to open his first show with a piece on Gilmore, and Schiller is helping him for his own reasons. Schiller has a poor view of the journalists covering the Gilmore story. They don't really dig into the story the way he and Farrell have, but they sit around the bar in the Salt Lake Hilton, discussing the tidbits they get from each other and come up with a consensus - sort of journalism by committee. Schiller needs to humanize Gary in the public eye to make his planned book and film production work, but if he tries it himself, the public will think he is doing it for the money. Moyer, however, will be viewed as a more objective source, and he seems amenable to the deal. Just as Schiller is putting this deal together with Moyer, ABC pulls the rug out from under him. The network president, Frank Pierce, announces publicly that ABC will not produce any entertainment pieces on Gary Gilmore. The New York headquarters is unaware of the deal their L.A. office has cut with Schiller. The wife of one of Pierce's top executives is repulsed by the whole circus surrounding the execution. The executive has taken his wife's strongly voiced complaint to Pierce, who makes the announcement, unaware that ABC has already given Schiller \$70,000 in advance money. The good news is that Schiller will not have to repay the seventy grand. The disastrous news is that Schiller has lost his national sponsor.

Gary's brother Mikal is in Utah and still talking to the ACLU. He is also visiting Gary, however, and is undecided about whether or not he wants to pursue a stay against his brother's wishes. Attorney Gil Athay represents one of the so-called Hi-Fi Killers, who tortured and killed the customers of a record store, and who was sentenced to death in Utah before Gary Gilmore hit the scene. His position is that if Gilmore is killed without an appeal, it will open the execution floodgates, and his client might get swallowed up in the raging current. He suffers under the additional problem of representing a black man in a theocracy run by the Mormon Church, which is outspokenly racist. According to their doctrine, Negroes (the politically correct term of the day) are sons of Old-Testament Ham, destined to be hewers of wood and carriers of water (read servants of whites) and are not allowed into the priesthood of the Mormon Church. The ACLU, of course, backs Athay on this. They make this argument before the Court during the last week before the November 17 execution case. Mikal ultimately decides not to oppose his brother's wishes, and this fact further weakens the ACLU's case.

During this final week, Schiller hires two top-notch typists from an agency in L.A. and some off-duty policemen for security, rents a copy machine and sets up a branch office in the Provo Holiday Inn. Sales of the letters in Europe are not going as well as anticipated, and after expenses, he has netted only \$10,000 from that exercise. What's more, Stephanie finds the whole business ghoulish and distasteful, and she refuses to rejoin her intended in the cultural wasteland of Provo.

Barry Farrell is growing frustrated by not being able to conduct, and perhaps to manipulate, the interviews. Farrell is convinced beyond reason that all serial murderers - indeed all habitually violent men - are the product of childhood abuse. Yet, Gary claims that neither his father nor his mother have ever beaten him or abused him in other ways. Farrell is convinced that Gary is hiding the truth about his childhood, including experiences in reform school and prison. Farrell believes that Gary must have been



abused, because nothing else fits Farrell's pre-conceptions. He is convinced that if he were conducting the interviews himself, he could ferret out the truth. The notion that Gary Gilmore is just a bad person, or that there might be a genetic element to his criminal nature, apparently never enters his mind. Schiller and Ferrell try to toughen up the questions to call Gary's bluff, but the effort is unsuccessful. When they confront him about the phoniness of some of his responses, he explains that in prison you sit around a lot bullshitting with other prisoners, and after a while, responses become rote and practiced.

Although Schiller comes across pretty much as a carrion bird, as some of his colleagues call him, he does take one impressive and expensive ethical stand. Rupert Murdoch, publisher of the *New York Post* and the *Village Voice* offers him \$125,000 for an exclusive of Schiller's personal moment-by-moment account of the execution - assuming of course that Gary doesn't un-invite him. Schiller lusts after the money, wrestles with his conscience, has a vividly described scatological episode with diarrhea and ultimately decides to refuse the offer and give his account away to the world press without charge.

As the weekend before the Monday date for the execution nears, the event attracts a smattering of protest groups and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of reporters, cameramen and other media mavens. Someone in the hierarchy of Utah government has drafted a media relations plan to control the movement of the hoards. The plan requires all reporters who want to be kept up to date to gather in the prison parking lot no later than 6:00 p.m. on Sunday night when the gates will be locked, and no one else will be admitted until after the execution. The media is locked in to spend a bitter-cold Utah winter night. Notwithstanding regulations and Mormon sensitivities, the media comes well stocked with booze. By the time the execution actually occurs at 8:00 a.m. the next morning, the press corps will be freezing, dead tired and half drunk, which will no doubt dull some of the more aggressive and penetrating questions. The conditions might piss them off after the fact, but nobody seems to care much about that. Schiller talks a buddy at *Time* into snagging him a press pass so he can enjoy the parking-lot party before going into the old prison cannery where Gary Gilmore is to be shot by law enforcement volunteers. In the meantime, the crowds protesting capital punishment will have to hold their candle vigils on the access road in the bitter Utah night.

## Book 2, Part 5 Analysis

Mailer does a good job here of describing the media and legal feeding frenzy surrounding Gary Gilmore, corpse in waiting. Money, readership and potential ratings bring the biggest names in American journalism down into the gutter to fight it out in the mud and the blood and the beer with the likes of the *National Enquirer*. Media icon Rupert Murdoch is on the phone to sensation broker Schiller, salivating over the prospect of exclusive rights not to actually witness the execution, but simply to talk to someone live who has seen it, while the body is still above room temperature and before the blood is dry. The stakes are not small. \$125,000 is worth quite a bit in the newly born year of 1977.



Norman Mailer is a great deal more credible in this second half of *Executioner's Song* than he is in Book 1. When he is attempting to recreate the life of Gary Gilmore through the obscure eyes of minor characters, he seems somewhat lost. He meanders into the mind of someone and gets stuck there. With irritating repetition and in painful detail, the story becomes about someone who might cause the reader to question, "Why do I want to know so much about this person?" It may be that Mailer is simply experimenting with some novel literary form that blew right past this reviewer, or it may be that he is simply on unfamiliar turf. Conversely, in Book 2 he is writing not so much about the underbelly of the Mormon Church, the shunned of Provo, but about the media. That is a topic Mailer understands very well from personal experience. Both parts of the book show different viewpoints of Gilmore, how he looks through the eyes of those around him and how he looks, is portrayed to the world and is manipulated through the eyes of the media.



## Book 2, Part 6

### Book 2, Part 6 Summary

On one level,, Part 6 of the second book of Mailer's tome is an intimate portrayal of a convict's last night in maximum security prior to a sunrise (7:49 a.m.) appointment with a firing squad. It provides insights not only into the convict's behavior but also into the attitudes of the institution and the emotions of those close to him who make a macabre party in his suite of cells. On another level, it is an intricate examination of the dynamics of American criminal law, from the Circuit level to the Supreme Courts, which emerges either as magnificent and heroic or cruel and frivolous, depending on whether one views it from a rational or an emotional perspective.

While all sorts of legal maneuvering is going on between the State of Utah, as represented by the ACLU, the NAACP and the attorney for another condemned man on Utah's death row, Gary and friends enjoy what Mailer labels "An Evening of Dancing and Light Refreshment." The refreshments consist primarily of liberal doses of some kind of pharmaceutical speed provided to Gary every couple of hours by the prison dispensary to add a lightheartedness to his last night on the planet. Surrounded by Vern, Ida, Moody, Sanger, the Catholic and Mormon chaplains and some other friends, Gary pretty much sets the mood for everyone. Gary wants to party hearty, at least as long as the speed lasts. The evening includes music from a portable phonograph, Gary smooching his married cousin Toni, dancing, drinking smuggled liquor and a liberal dose of gallows humor. It even includes pizza, which the partiers pony up for, but which Gary is denied because he didn't put it on a Last Supper list. Realizing that prohibiting pizza to a condemned man seems a bit silly, the Warden relents, but out of spite, Gary refuses to partake.

In the meantime, Bob Moody is doing service for the Church from his lofty position in the Mormon hierarchy. He is tending to his family's spiritual needs down at the local ward, while trying to keep on top of the ever-fluid shenanigans of those who are trying to prevent Gary's execution against his wishes. With his ecclesiastical and familial duties fulfilled, an exhausted Bob Moody joins the party on death row. In one of the more bizarre twists in the case, the defense team leaves the legal maneuvering to their traditional adversary, the Attorney General's office. At one juncture of the evening, Gary offers Moody \$5,000 to change clothes with him so he can slip out through the relaxed security. Moody demurs, and later Gary repeats the offer to Sanger. Apparently, the lawyers conclude, Gary doesn't really want to die. He just doesn't want to live in a prison.

On the legal front, Earl Dorius gets a call informing him that Gil Atley, attorney for the black Hi-Fi Killer, is seeking a stay in Ritter's court and that he is teaming with Jinks Danby of the ACLU, who is pursuing a stay on the basis that federal taxpayer money is being used by the State of Utah to carry out the execution. They have waited until the eleventh hour, reasoning that the other side will not have sufficient time to overturn a



stay before the scheduled 7:49 a.m. execution time. Both sides give a good deal of thought to the issues of the precise execution time and whether or not the warden might delay the action until later the same day. They also consider whether or not the annual \$50,000 Utah receives for its Corrections Department from the federal government constitutes sufficient standing for a taxpayer suit. The conclusion is that the exact time of day is not very relevant, according to Utah statutes. The A.G., however, prepares to get Judge Bulloch, who issued the original order of execution, to amend the wording of his order.

The taxpayer standing issue, however, is less clear. Judge Ritter, who considers himself "a bastion of good sense in a desert of craziness" (i.e. Utah), denies that he has a vendetta against the Mormons. Rather, he claims, he does not deem the Mormons worthy of a vendetta. His religion is the U.S. Constitution. Ritter does not condemn the Mormon Doctrine (he considers all those Joseph Smith miracles merely silly), but he despises the way the Mormons control Utah land, banks, the legislature, the media and the politics at all municipal levels. Ritter grants the stay the petitioners are seeking, triggering a marathon effort by the Attorney General's office to get it overturned by a higher judicial authority. At 1:00 a.m. on the morning Gary is scheduled to be shot, while the lawyers are wrangling in Judge Ritter's court, Gary calls Larry Schiller at the Travel Lodge Motel to give the showman one final interview. The interview reveals no new great truths or insights about Gary Gilmore, but a legal bombshell brings an abrupt end to the chat. Gary interrupts the tape-recorded interview with the comment, "Lieutenant Fagan (Gary's guard) just told me that Ritter issued a stay. Son of a bitch, goddamn foul motherfuckers...Says it's illegal to use taxpayer money to shoot me." After blowing off some more steam, promising to commit suicide and offering to pay the riflemen out of his own pocket, the convict settles into a deep funk, exacerbated when the pharmacy cuts off Gary's speed supply. Such luxuries are apparently reserved strictly for imminently condemned men. Ordinary death row inmates need not apply.

Dorius, Barrett and Deamer, each at the Attorney General's office, have hardly gotten back to their digs in the courthouse when they get a call from the boss. Hansen has already been in touch with U.S. Tenth Circuit Court's Judge Lewis. The judge has agreed to hear an immediate appeal but will not make a unilateral decision on such an important issue. They will have to roust three other members of the court for the hearing. The court is in Denver. Hansen has also arranged for a twin-engine private plane to ferry the barristers over the Rocky Mountains during the unsettling winter weather. It is a harrowing trip, with enough turbulence to entice Judge Lewis to resume his recently discarded tobacco habit. After bumming a pack from the pilot, Judge Lewis declares that, "when I lit the second one, I knew I was a smoker again."

Attorney Judy Wolbach represents the ACLU, and she, along with a colleague and a reporter from a Salt Lake TV station, cram into the little King Air along with Judge Lewis and the A.G. team. Judy has a visceral dislike for Earl Dorius and is disgusted at having to be cramped up in the plane with him for the tumultuous journey. Throughout the flight, according to Mailer, Judy is thinking the following thoughts:



"She hated blood atonement. A perfect belief for a desert people, she thought, desperate for survival, like those old Mormons way back. They had believed in a cruel and jealous Lord. Vengeful. Of course, they grabbed onto blood atonement. She could hear Brigham Young saying, 'There are sins that can be atoned for by an offering on an altar. . . and there are sins that the blood of a lamb, or a calf, or of a turtle dove, cannot remit. They must be atoned for by the blood of a man...'

"Yessir, satisfy your blood lust, and tell yourself you were good to the victim because blood atonement remitted the sin. You gave the fellow a chance to get to the hereafter, after all. This business of living for eternity certainly contributed to capital punishment, brutality, and war. Why, Brigham Young with his countless wives pining on the vine had the gall to state that if you discovered one of your women in adultery, it would behoove you as a good and Christian act to hold her on your lap and run a knife through her breast. That way she'd have her whack at the hereafter; that she wouldn't be relegated to the outer darkness. Judy made a noise of disgust. Primitive Christianity! She was glad she'd gone to Berkeley...

"Mormonism, thought Judy, plain old primitive Christianity. So literal. She thought of devout Mormons, like her grandparents, still wearing undergarments they never took off, not even when they went to bed or copulated. Once a week, maybe, they dared to expose their skin to the contaminating air. Might just as well be Pharisees. Always the letter of the law."

The only part of the appeal that Judge Ritter supports is the part having to do with the use of taxpayer's money, the issue being whether or not the ACLU has sufficient standing to bring action on behalf of a single taxpayer. The three judges hear both sides and determine the ACLU's standing is not sufficient. There is still a small question as to whether the event has to occur at the precise moment of sunrise, but the prevailing opinion on both sides is that "sunrise" is gratuitous, somewhat romantic, military language that has no real authority. Nonetheless, Hansen gets the presiding judge to amend his original wording. The on-again, off-again execution of Gary Gilmore is on again.

Schiller, who has already ensconced himself within the prison's fence, suddenly realizes that he has forgotten to bring a notebook for the copious notes he intends to take to record the actual execution. He has even been practicing writing notes without looking down at the paper, so as not to have to take his eyes off the details of the event. Now he has no paper. The only paper he can find is his checkbook, and he nearly panics at the notion that some other reporter might see the alleged huckster at the execution with his checkbook in hand.

Although the execution does not come off exactly at 7:49 a.m., it is a close run. Judge Lewis affirms the A.G.'s Writ of Mandamus at 7:35, and the warden gets the show on the road shortly thereafter. When the media realizes that the show will indeed go on, they extricate themselves from their warm vans and cars. Some of them half in the bag or hung-over, they gather together their ethics and dignity to join the mindless herd in a





stampede to the killing ground. Mailer pretty well sums up the attitude and behavior of the press in the following description:

"Directly in front of the prison building, Geraldo Rivera, attired in black leather jacket and jeans and looking cool, the way only Geraldo Rivera can look cool, is shouting into his mike. 'Kill the Rona segment. Get rid of it. Give me air. You'll be able to hear the shots. I promise. You'll be able to hear the shots.'"

As a final act of defiance, Gary puts up a fight when the guards put shackles on his ankles. He is not resisting the walk to the death house, but he doesn't want to suffer the indignity of being paraded in front of all of those people taking the mincing steps of a bound prisoner. While the car takes him from maximum security to the old prison canary where he will be killed, all other vehicular traffic in the compound is halted. Thewitnesses and reporters make their way to the show. Reporters are kept outside, but many, Schiller says 40 or 50, bureaucrats and law-enforcement types elbow their way in. Apparently the execution is the hottest game in town, and any official can call in outstanding IOUs in exchange for an unofficial ticket.

The hosts of the party strap Gary into an old office chair, which has been set up in front of stacked sandbags and an old mattress - apparently an afterthought - to prevent the bullets from ricocheting after they pass through Gary Mark Gilmore. About 25 feet in front of the chair is a curtain with five rifle slots in it, behind which the gunmen wait. By all accounts, Gary looks terrible, but he keeps his spirits buoyed. The man is crashing off speed, a regimen the pharmacy has discontinued because of the stay and failed to resume when the stay was overturned. He is physically exhausted from a night without sleep, and he has been emotionally tortured by the legal shenanigans that played a shell game with his life and death in the name of competing ideals and values. The officials allow Gary to say goodbye to Vern, Moody and Schiller. Gary has already willed his eyes and other organs to others, and he jokes with his balding lawyer, Moody, that he is going to leave him his hair. He is allowed to speak with the prison chaplains, one Mormon and one Catholic. Although Gary had been raised as a Mormon, he attended Catholic school but subscribed to neither doctrine. When asked if he has any last words, he replies, "Let's do it."

Those, in fact, are not truly his last words, but only the ones that reach the public record. After Gary utters those words that the public later cherishes, the Catholic priest steps up to administer the *extreme unction*. When the last rights have been set right and the attendants are advancing with the hood, Gary says quietly to Father Meershman, "*Dominus vobiscum.*" The priest instinctively replies, "*Et cum spiritu tou.*" This is a common greeting of a priest to his congregation and their response. Gary has reversed the order, putting the priest in the subordinate position of supplicant. It may have been his final way of saying, "I'm still in control here."

When the priest retreats, the attendants place the hood over Gary's head . Someone begins a "three, two, one" countdown, and the prison canary erupts in gunfire. When the physician checks Gary's heart, it is still beating. Twenty seconds later, it is not. True to his commitment, Schiller gives an objective eyewitness account of the event to all of the



press represented there, eschewing the \$125,000 offer from Murdoch of the *Post* for an exclusive. A fellow journalist from the Los Angeles *Times*, a friend of Schiller's, complements the producer on his generous gesture. With a wink, Schiller reveals that he has not told them about the Latin phrases that passed between Gary and the priest. When his colleague questions his honesty, Schiller replies that, in his press conference, he said that "Let's do it," was the last thing Gary was heard to say. He still has the Latin zinger for his own production, and although he is clueless as to its meaning, he assures his friend that he will find out.

## Book 2, Part 6 Analysis

On the surface, all of the legal shenanigans may seem silly. They are also evidence of the tremendous resilience and dexterity of the American judicial system. In a matter of hours, attorneys, who are ostensibly motivated purely by ideals, are able to convince a state judge to hand down a stay of execution. Prosecutors are able to get a federal judge to a session in district court several hundred miles away. This court overturns the stay in time to get Gary Gilmore executed within minutes of the sundown deadline. Still, the urgency is self-inflicted by the ALCU attorneys, who purposely delay until the last minute to try to outfox the court, but the full process is played out by the book nonetheless. Without regard to the merit or standing of the taxpayer's suit, some will no doubt find it refreshing that a court system that often appears to be somnolent, or even moribund, can react so quickly when the chips are down.

Mailer does a good job of explaining the complex goings on of the lawyers and courts. Here, he produces something resembling true journalism, but he continues to romanticize and apologize for the serial murderer. Throughout the description of the party that precedes the execution, Mailer uses sarcasm and understatement to demonize the "system" while painting Gary as a hail-fellow-well-met, full of *bon ami*, laughing in the shadow of the gallows. To be sure, Gary Gilmore goes to his death bravely, or at least defiantly, but it seems the victims and their survivors receive short shrift. One omission in Mailer's account of the post-death scene illustrates this tendency, which he has demonstrated throughout *Executioner's Song*. Mailer is keen on describing the disrespect shown by the authorities to Gilmore when they add a dirty mattress at the last moment to decrease ricochet danger, while pointing out that the curtain behind which the riflemen work has been painstakingly sewn.

Mailer describes in detail the blood that drips down onto the floor after Gary is shot and condemns by inference the discussions among the firing squad of the type of ammunition used to prevent mutilation of the body. Likewise, by implication, he criticizes the firing squad's examination of the exit wounds to see how well the ammunition worked and how tight their pattern is. This may seem crass to city dwellers, but it is wholly logical to people who live in game-hunting venues. Like most hobbyists, athletes and aficionados of most any discipline, shootists seek to improve their skills and knowledge by examining results. The objective of the sport is to kill as cleanly as possible, causing the least possible pain to the target. Shooters examine their kills and tweak their craft in order to kill more humanely. Should a condemned man receive less



consideration than a deer, elk or moose? Do you agree with this analysis, or do you agree with Mailer's implication that the shooters are callous - perhaps comparing Gilmore, indeed, to an animal to be hunted for sport? Do you have another, different, perspective on this scene?

Mailer goes to great pains to describe the horrific scene in the cannery after the execution. One detail he omits, however, is the odor of evacuated bowels and bladder that almost always accompanies a scene of sudden death. It is unlikely that Mailer omits this because of some scatological sensitivity, given that he devotes considerable ink to Schiller's diarrhea when he has a pang of conscience. More likely, Mailer doesn't want to tarnish the image of Gary Gilmore with his shit on the death house floor.



## Book 2, Part 7

### Book 2, Part 7 Summary

In the final chapter of *Executioner's Song*, Mailer deals with some of the loose ends of the many minor characters he has introduced throughout his 1,000-plus page tome. A few of the loose ends he ties up, but for the most part, he just teases them a bit. Earl Dorius gets his nose bent a little out of shape because, after all of the work he did, he doesn't get much ink until Mailer's book. That may not be as petty as it seems, given what publicity might do for a young attorney's career. Pete Galovan, the religious fanatic whom Gary fought, has a Mormon vision - visions happen a lot to Mormons - in which Gary comes into his room while he is praying. Gary is in a white robe, while two men who accompany him are clad in natty white suits. Gary is just stopping by to let Pete know that everything is hunky dory on the other side and that it is cool to walk through walls. While Brenda is in the hospital recuperating from major surgery to heal a uterine condition, Geraldo Rivera calls to see if he can do an interview. The notion repulses her, and she declines. Her doctor is with her when a nurse brings the news that Gary is dead, and the doctor replies, "Oh, that's really too bad. They should have wasted him a long time ago."

Shortly after the execution, Utah releases Nicole from its state hospital. Schiller gathers her up, along with her mother and children, and trundles them off to Southern California to spend a few months in the sun. Nicole seems to fit into that niche nicely for a while, but eventually she moves to Oregon. She reports sensing Gary's presence for some time, and she tries to keep her promise not to have sex with other men. She soon discovers, however, that she is simply too lusty for sexual abstinence - or even monogamy with a ghost. Nicole picks up a hitchhiker during an episode of loneliness, beds him and reverts to type.

Mailer treats the disposition - or disposal - of Gary's remains with the same drama and attitude with which he chronicles the killer's life and execution. Even in death, Gary emerges as some sort of folk hero in Mailer's prose, the victim of an unfeeling society. The author goes into gruesome detail, describing the autopsy, which is entirely routine except for presence of several physicians harvesting the eyes and other organs the murderer willed to others. He covers the cremation with equally gruesome prose, describing in detail what happens to a body when exposed to the extreme temperatures of the kiln and what is left in terms of gray ash and bone fragments. Ostensibly, these descriptions emerge from the mind and the mouth of State Patrolman Jerry Scott, who is assigned to transport the corpse and witness its destruction. Jerry Scott is apparently as erudite and creative as Mailer himself, using the powerful language and detailed insights one might normally expect from a practiced and professional writer. At least Mailer relates the artful descriptions as if they were voiced by Scott.

The final disposition of the ashes, too, is a dramatic - and fittingly illegal - event. Prior to scattering Gary's ashes from a small, six- seat private aircraft over the town of Spanish



Forks, the killer's apologists stage a memorial service. The location is concealed from the press, and Schiller really pisses off Tamara because he won't allow her to attend. As is traditional at such maudlin spectacles, friends and relatives of Mr. Gilmore fill the air with prose dripping with pathos, syrupy poetry that rhymes and songs extolling salvation and eternity. There is no mention of the murders, but both Mikal and Vern honor the victims' families with veiled hints that Gary Mark Gilmore might not be eligible for sainthood anytime soon. Father Campbell, the Catholic Chaplain at Utah State Prison, not only sets the apologist mood for the memorial service, but also inadvertently sums up the central message that has emerged from Mailer's long and tedious work:

"Our Eternal Heavenly Father, with deep humility we pause at the beginning of this special memorial service, on behalf of one of our departed, Gary Mark Gilmore, with a deep sense of respect and awe for the great character which he was and is and shall forever be. Father, a great tragedy has taken place many years ago in the juvenile justice system to throw a young man, a great person, a child of Thee, into the courts and confinement in this country. We knew him as a great, lovable person. We shall always retain and keep that memory..."

## Book 2, Part 7 Analysis

Unfortunately, perhaps, Father Campbell's prophesy is correct. The public image of Gary Gilmore is still, in some circles, one of the poor victim, mistreated, abused, corrupted and made to commit serial murders by an unfeeling society. Among other circles, that image is repugnant. The last section of Mailer's work is a culmination of all of the sympathy and pity he has heaped on his readers through more than a thousand pages of superficial, tedious detail. He even describes the autopsy, a process that occurs probably thousands of times every day, with gratuitous morbidity, a transparent attempt to garner sympathy from his readers for his subject.

In an Afterword, the author categorizes some of his more obvious journalistic sins, followed quickly by rationalizations. For example, in the first line, he hedges his work by saying, "The book does its best to be a factual account..." It is curious, though perhaps revealing, that Mailer chooses the passive voice for that statement rather than saying "I did my best to write a factual account..." It is almost as if the author himself is picking up his work between two fingers and holding it at arm's length. On the same page, he explains that often witnesses recalled incidents differently from one another and that, "in such conflict of evidence the author chose the version that seemed most likely." Why, one might ask, in a book of such laborious and often irrelevant and redundant detail could the author not provide both versions and allow the reader to make up his or her own mind?

Mailer also explains that the taped interviews are heavily edited and, "occasionally a sentence was transposed..." This is standard practice when taped interviews are transcribed from an audio medium into black letters. Contrary to the common wisdom of third grade teachers, none of us really wants to write like we speak and, if we were forced to, probably wouldn't write much. On the other hand, it is conventional journalist

practice to quote written documents precisely as they are written, using such grammatical devices as ellipses and "(sic)" to indicate where the writer has or has not tampered with the text. Mailer does not do this, further fictionalizing his work.



# Characters

## Gary Gilmore

Gary Gilmore is a career criminal convicted of two senseless murders in Provo, Utah while he is out on parole in 1976. He had been serving time in Marion State Penitentiary in Illinois, where he had been transferred after helping to instigate a riot at Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem, Oregon. Although Gary had lived in Provo as a child, where he developed a special bond with his cousin, Brenda, his criminal career begins as a pre-teen in Oregon after he, his mother Bessie and two brothers move to Portland. He does his first hard time in McClaren School for Boys in Woodburn, Oregon, midway between Portland and Salem.

*Executioner's Song* begins with correspondence between Gary and Brenda, which results in Brenda and her sister Toni sponsoring Gary while he is on parole and finding him a place to stay and a job with their father. Gary, who has spent most of his life in prison, has a tough go of it from the outset. He is intelligent, a gifted visual artist and a real charmer, but he doesn't have a clue how to behave on the sunny side of the bars. He dresses weird, brags about stealing and is rude to the women he meets when they won't instantly gratify him. He cheats at poker until no one will play with him, and then he drives around town in Provo, chasing women. It's all much like a film clip from *American Graffiti* until a frustrated Gary suggests they just grab a couple of girls and rape them.

When Gary meets the young vixen Nicole at a party, it is lust at first sight. By this time, Gary is no longer working for Brenda's dad, but has gone to work for a man whose company installs insulation in local homes and businesses. His new employer has also helped him acquire an old Mustang which, coincidentally, is the exact same make and model as Nicole's, a coincidence of significance to the pair. Gary and Nicole have their arguments, peccadilloes, infidelities, jealousies and other hassles common to young, deluded lovers. Nonetheless they stay more or less together until Gary dies before a firing squad after killing two young men - one at an all-night self-service gas station and one who was the desk clerk at a Provo Motel.

Gary is caught, stands trial and is condemned to death. When asked to choose the method of his execution, he says he wants to be shot. At the time, Utah law permits execution by firing squad. That in itself would probably have drawn some national attention, but two other issues intrigue the world. First, Gary's execution will be the first in the U.S. since the Supreme Court ban on death penalties ten years previously. Second, the condemned man forbids any appeals on his behalf and insists that the sentence be carried out as ordered, within the 60 days required by Utah law. The first is a matter of geopolitical interest. The second sets Gary up to become a sort of perverted antihero, insisting on death with dignity as a just punishment for his crimes.



## Nicole

Nicole is the source of Gary's greatest pleasure and his greatest frustration. At 20 years old, Nicole with her elfin body and beautiful face is a prize most lusty men would like to notch onto their bedpost. She does not look at all like a three-time wife and mother of two, but in fact that's what she is. She attributes her overt sexuality, something she is totally unable to control, to the serial sexual molestation she is exposed to from age eight by one of her father's Army buddies. Nicole has a well-earned reputation as a young slut, a belief to which even her own family adheres. Her list of sexual encounters is so long and so random that she doesn't bother to keep count.

Almost immediately, Gary and Nicole become intensely and intimately involved. They practice wild sex involving all available orifices and appendages, and they spend long hours sharing their life stories and most intimate secrets. All the time, however, Nicole is continuing to sleep with ex-husbands, old lovers and the occasional random new guy. At first, Gary doesn't say much, but after his arrest, jealousy at the thought of Nicole's sex life drives him nuts. It becomes an obsession more important than life itself. Napve Nicole continually falls into Gilmore's hypnotic spells, promising to be faithful while he awaits execution. She always fails, overcome by her hormones. Gary becomes so obsessed, in fact, that he wants her to pledge monogamy even after he is dead. What he really wants, however, is for Nicole to commit suicide so that he can go to his death knowing she will never know another man in the Biblical or any other sense. If there is something Gary wants, but he can't steal it, he will destroy it so no one else can enjoy it.

## Brenda

Gary Gilmore's cousin Brenda has harbored a sort of childhood romantic bond with Gary, who has always favored her when his family comes to Provo to visit. A very optimistic person, Brenda expects great things from Gary when she sponsors him so that he can get out of prison on parole. Happily married to Johnny, Brenda does not have romantic designs on her cousin, although such ties are common among Provo's Mormons. She is fascinated by the different life he has led, one that, from a distance, seems exciting and adventurous. Gary plays to that, regaling Brenda and anyone else who will listen with stories of his cleverness and courage in prison. Some of the stories are true, and some are not. Still, they all are interesting to the sleepy residents of sleepy Provo. In the end, Brenda helps the police capture Gary, something he doesn't forgive her for until the last few days of his life.

## Vern Damico

Brenda's father Vern gives Gary his first job at Vern's Provo shoe-repair shop and welcomes him into his household. Vern is a solid, honest businessman. He is ostensibly a Mormon, but he is not too serious about all of the rules. Through it all, Vern emerges as one of the few heroes in an otherwise tawdry tale of villains and profiteers. Vern believes in the inherent good in people - even Gary Gilmore - but he is a straight





shooter. When Gary asks why his uncle isn't afraid of him, a hardened criminal, Vern replies, "Because I can whip you." Vern referees a fight between Gary and Peter Galovan when Galovan accuses Gary of trying to seduce Ida's 12-year-old niece. When Gary sucker punches Peter, Vern chastises him, saying it was cowardly. Peter ultimately wins the fight but develops a lingering fear of Gary.

In the beginning, Vern is very considerate of Gary, giving him money when he asks for it and keeping Gary in his job at the shoe shop, even when he becomes an unreliable employee. After the murders, however, Vern really rises above many of the characters in this work. After the murder, Vern becomes a go-between for Gary and Larry Schiller, the producer who buys the rights to Gary's story. He travels to Portland, Oregon to talk with Bessie, Gary's mother. To assure that the survivors of Gary's crimes will receive some compensation, Vern secretly withholds money that Gary wants to fitter away in foolish, magnanimous gestures. Throughout all of the negotiations with the media and all of the other drama surrounding Gary's execution, Vern never forgets about the victims, nor does he turn on Gary. He even assists Schiller in smuggling in some liquor for Gary on his last night before the execution.

## Noall Wootton

The Utah County Prosecuting Attorney is a straight shooter (pun incidental) who is not particularly in favor of the death penalty. He asks for the death penalty because it is his duty. He fully expects and desires the penalty phase of the trial to be re-examined on appeal and the death sentence overturned. He does not want to witness the execution, but he is required to. He is surrounded by ghoulish, un-likeminded county and city bureaucrats and peace officers who have called in favors and IOUs to gain unofficial access to the show.

## Larry Schiller

Larry is a former *Life* photographer of some fame turned journalist, promoter and would-be TV producer. He has a sleazy reputation among his colleagues in the media, all of whom are jockeying and bidding for a piece of Gary Gilmore - or his corpse - to entertain and titillate the folks at home in the coastal cities. Schiller is the better businessman of the bunch, and he lands the near-exclusive rights to the Gary Gilmore Story, which he peels and deals off to such media giants as *The National Enquirer* and *Playboy* to finance his own dreams of restoring his reputation with a piece of serious journalism.

## Mont Court

Mont Court is Gary's parole officer in Provo, and he emerges from the story as something of a benign villain. His naivety, laziness and misguided compassion allow Gary Gilmore to roam free, killing the innocents of Provo. Gary has violated his parole multiple times, and Court has ample reasons to re-incarcerate Gary. Without Mont



Court's complicity in Gary's crimes, the killer would have been in jail at the time he committed the murders.

## **Toni**

Toni is Brenda's sister, who although she never writes to Gary, agrees to co-sponsor him with Brenda. She meets Gary a couple of times but doesn't really get to know him until the night before the execution, when she attends the party he holds in his suite of cells at the Utah State Penitentiary. While there, Gary turns on the charm and is probably trying to seduce her. As far as he gets, however, is slow dancing to recorded music on a portable record player.

## **Bob Moody and Ron Stranger**

Bob and Ron are the two Provo attorneys representing Gary and Vern. They handle both criminal matters and civil issues involving negotiations with Larry Schiller for Gary's copyrights and for the dispersion of funds thus derived. They also become the chief interviewers of the condemned man, recording two long sessions each day and passing the tapes on to Schiller for transcription.

## **April**

Nicole's underage sister is with Gary, spaced out on drugs, when he commits the first murder at the service station, and she is reportedly oblivious to the murder. Later, she spends the night with Gilmore in the local Holiday Inn, where they both insist they didn't have sex.

## **Max Jensen**

Max Jensen is Gary's first victim, a young Mormon with plans to attend Brigham Young University. He is basically just having fun with his new wife as they settle in to a 'till-death-do-us-part' lifelong marriage. Thanks to Gilmore, death cruelly parts them far sooner than anyone expects.

## **Colleen Jensen**

Max's newlywed wife, Colleen, is the first widow Gilmore creates for the sake of a white pickup truck.



## **Ben Bushnell**

Ben Bushnell is Gary's second murder victim. As night manager of the City Center Motel in Provo, young Bushnell politely gives Gary the cash drawer. By way of thanks for his courtesy, Gilmore bids the young man lie down on the carpet, where Gilmore shoots him through the head.

## **Debbie Bushnell**

Ben Bushnell's nursing wife Debbie becomes the second widow Gilmore creates in two days. In the same fell swoop, the poor misunderstood young man Mont Court could have locked up a couple of days earlier creates his first orphan and second widow, while trying to raise money for the white pickup truck.

## **Peter Arroyo**

Peter Arroyo is a patron at the City Center Motel, returning to his rooms with his children after dinner at a local restaurant. He sees Gary through the window of the motel office, and then he sees Gary retreating carrying a cash drawer and a gun.

## **Greg and Julie Taylor**

Greg and Julie are friends of Gary's to whom he flees after the motel murder. From their house - or rather their porch - he speaks to Brenda on the phone while the police are preparing to apprehend him.

## **Grace McGinnis**

This elderly lady was a schoolteacher in Milwaukie, Oregon, a bedroom town for Portland. She is a friend of Bessie's, Gary's mother, whom she came to know while teaching her younger sons. She meets Gary on visits with his mother in the Oregon State Penitentiary and blames medications Gary receives there for his murderous behavior.



# Objects/Places

## Provo, Utah

Provo is the county seat of Utah County. It is perhaps the strongest Mormon stronghold on the planet, home of Brigham Young University. Provo is the community to which Gary Gilmore is paroled in 1976 from Marion State Penitentiary in Illinois. Almost all of the action in the first book of *Executioner's Song* takes place in Provo, its the sister city of Orem, and a couple of outlying suburban communities such as Spanish Fork and Springville. Provo remains a focal point in Book 2, but some of the action moves to Salt Lake City and Point of the Mountain, where the penitentiary resides and where the execution occurs. Point of the Mountain is approximately equidistant from Salt Lake City and Provo. Book 2 also involves trips to and from Portland, Oregon, where Gilmore's mother resides, and Denver Colorado, home of the Tenth District U.S. Court of Appeals. Certain legal characters also make trips the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., but by and large, *Executioner's Song* is home grown in Utah.

## Oregon

Bessie, Gary's mother, lives in Portland, Oregon. This is also where Gary goes to Catholic school and where he first crosses swords with the law. From Portland, Gary goes to the state's reform school for boys in Woodburn. Woodburn is about equidistant between Portland and Salem, where Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP) is. Gary graduates (i.e. is released from) McClaren and graduates (i.e. is incarcerated) almost immediately to OSP. Mailer visits Oregon frequently in character flashbacks, and Vern and Ida make a trip there prior to the execution.

## Denver, Colorado

Denver is the home of the Tenth District Court of Appeals, to which prosecution and defense attorneys, as well as those representing the ACLU and NAACP, travel during various appeals and set-aside actions. The most dramatic trip is one in a small plane during a storm over the Rocky Mountains. The passenger manifest includes both defense and prosecution attorneys, an ACLU attorney and a U.S. federal judge who resumes his recently relinquished tobacco habit during the turbulent, perilous journey.

## Washington D.C.

Attorneys for the defense, the prosecution and third parties argue before a Supreme Court panel the constitutionality of Utah's death penalty law, which does not include a mandatory appeal. The panel overturns a stay that has been granted by Utah's governor.



## Gary and Nicole's Mustangs

Automobiles have been described as many different things in their relationships to American owners - phallic extensions, bedrooms, girlfriends, fashion statements, status symbols. Gary and Nicole take that fixation to a new limit. They interpret the fact that they own identical Mustangs as clear evidence of spiritual kinship and a damned good reason to fuck on their first date, an occasion to which the beery Gary cannot quite rise.

## Gary's White Truck

Gary's white truck is a step up even from cosmic Mustangs. It is a solid reason to become a serial murderer. As with many parolees who have spent a long time behind bars, Gary expects the fantasies of freedom that he has keenly and wistfully honed during periods of incarceration to be fulfilled miraculously by a signature on a release form. The fantasies focus more on the trinkets of freedom - cars, a home, family, a drop-dead beautiful sex partner - than on the mundane elements, such as responsibility, patience, discipline and hard work required to attain such things legitimately. Gary seems to have an attitude of entitlement for such things, and the white truck he can't afford becomes the icon of his desires and frustrations. In pursuit of money to make a truck payment, Gary decides to rob two businesses and kill two men.

## Stolen Guns

Gary steals many things with impunity, and nobody seems to care. He shows up one day with expensive water skis, which he tries to peddle to his friends, all of whom are as clueless as he is about water sports. His most significant heist, however, is a bunch of handguns he acquires by breaking into a Provo gun store. With one of these guns, a .22 caliber pistol, he kills his victims and shoots himself in the hand.

## Gary's Love Letters to Nicole

Gary writes long letters to Nicole, sometimes several times a day. For the most part, these are filled with near photographic depictions of sexual acts they have performed or ones he is fantasizing about. The letters are remarkably well written for a self-educated author who has learned his literary skills in various institutions of incarceration. At least, it seems that way until, in his Afterword to *Executioner's Song*, Mailer reveals that he edited the letters so that Gilmore wouldn't sound stupid. The letters become a huge bargaining chip for Larry Schiller as he deals away the exclusive copyrights he has bought from Gary. Gary considers them sacred, not to be publicized, but Schiller peddles them across Europe and releases certain excerpts to domestic publications to keep attention keen. After all, what is a condemned man going to do, sue him? When the word gets out, however, Schiller is deathly afraid that Gary will cut off the flow of information. He doesn't.



## Gary's Paintings

Gary Gilmore is reputed to be a gifted artist, and his paintings keep showing up as sentimental gifts throughout the pages of *Executioner's Song*. The people evaluating his work and proclaiming an artistic genius, however, are not exactly art critics with credentials in aesthetic disciplines. Their tastes likely run more to pictures of Elvis on black velvet than the Dutch Masters, and they describe the work in such terms as, "just like a real artist."

## Gary and Nicole's Poetry

Gary and Nicole write a lot of poems to one another, usually involving romantic and spiritual themes, often tinged with graphic sex. Most of it is syrupy and cloying. Much of it is gratuitously obscene, and some of it is not too bad.

## Social Sensitivity

In *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer narrates the life of condemned murderer Gary Gilmore and of the age in which he grows to kill. Much of the early part of the book concerns Gilmore's parole and his inability to adjust to life outside of prison. He is a solitary character who finds it virtually impossible to connect solidly with other people.

Many of the people he meets share a similar fate. There is not only Gary's girlfriend Nicole, who can seem to live only for him, but also Pete Galovan, who beats up Gilmore in a fight, but who has been on a similar quest, to find himself through a series of failed jobs and relationships. Gilmore, the quintessential outsider, the man who cannot fit in, nevertheless becomes a representative figure in the very loneliness and incorrigibly individual Americanness of his frustrating efforts to live in a Mormon community.

# Themes

## Themes

In *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer is exploring the uncertainties of an American selfhood and a society that build up into an intolerable tension in his main characters. Gilmore, for example, cannot control his compulsive and ambiguous behavior. He arbitrarily kills a clean-cut gas station attendant and provides no convincing explanation. Yet by implication, by the way Mailer sets his scenes in this understated "true life novel," it is clear that Gilmore cannot abide the antiseptic neatness of the gas station attendant, for Gilmore "was marked up much more than" his cousin Brenda (who arranged his release from prison) expected. Just looking at one of his very bad scars she feels a "strong sense of woe." This is a telling phrase in a book that does not attempt comprehensive explanations of human behavior. Rather, the themes are rigorously understated, and the writer's style is meant to evoke a kind of emptiness in the environment that cannot be easily filled or rationalized with words.

## Nurture vs. Nature

There is an ongoing debate among behaviorists about what forces shape the character of an individual. Opinions traverse a wide continuum. On one end, some believe that an individual's genetic code has little to do with behavior. Genetics may control intelligence, physical stature, the acuity of the five senses, deformities and the like, but environment shapes just about everything else. On the other end of the spectrum is the belief that a person's character is pretty much set in stone when mom's chromosomes get together with dad's to produce a unique genetic entity. The nurture theory is inherently more democratic than the genetic one, in that it denies the so-called purity of bloodlines that kept the same families in power for generation after generation in the European aristocracy. Proponents who lean toward genetic control, on the other hand, cite identical twin studies in which siblings separated at birth find in adulthood that they have developed remarkably similar behaviors and tastes although they grew up in very different environments. They also note that in the breeding of all other animals, both domestic and wild, it's all about bloodline. Many hold views in between these two extremes, that a person is the product of both genetic makeup and environment.

Gary Gilmore is the product of a strict Mormon community in early childhood, a Catholic school experience, a reform school education and the prison culture. *Executioner's Song* builds the case for Gary as a victim. The author, through some of the characters he creatively portrays, seems to shift blame and responsibility for the murderer's actions to others. Gary becomes a serial murderer because he goes to reform school, or because he goes to prison or because they give him bad drugs in prison to control his anger. One character insists that Gary murders the two young men because he is angry with the Mormon Church for not paying the back taxes on his mother's house. Another





refuses to accept that Gary had a relatively normal childhood, without severe parental abuse, working from the firm belief that all violent behavior grows from childhood abuse.

The counter argument - the nature, or bad seed, argument - is not well represented in *Executioner's Song*. The behaviorists label Gary as a psychopath, but they do not consider the possibility that he was born that way. Those who favor the death penalty for Gilmore are portrayed as ignorant, bucolic bumpkins, driven by the doctrinal blood lust of a cultist religion, unversed in the more benign belief system of psychologists and sociologists. In fact, this schism is representative of a general trend of thought on post-Vietnam America, which led to extreme leniency toward criminals, and the ultimate backlash of more prisons and harsher sentences that now guide the formation of criminal policy.

## The Death Penalty

Abortion and the death penalty are perhaps the two most divisive social issues on the American political scene. Certainly they are the most enduring. The debates are unending. No one is executed in the United States unattended by groups and individuals morally opposed to putting to death even the most egregious and despicable members of our species. On the other hand, death penalty proponents argue that society must be protected from such creatures, and a life sentence doesn't accomplish that end in a vacillating judicial system. Both sides use the deterrence argument as a sort of low trump card. One side claims that it works, and the other side claims it doesn't. At the core of the issue in both the capital punishment and abortion debates is the sanctity of human life, and this creates a curious dichotomy.

On the freedom-of-choice/right-to-life front, people who support abortion tend to be left of center on the political spectrum, arguing for women's rights. Those who oppose it are to the right, advocating protection of the unborn. Conversely, death penalty proponents tend to emerge from the right, while their opponents come from the left. Withdrawing to a God's-eye view of these debates, assuming the role of objective philosopher, these juxtapositions of belief systems regarding the value of human life can be puzzling.

Although there is no mention of abortion in *Executioner's Song*, the book is very much about perception of the death penalty in the United States. The comparison to the abortion issue, however, helps draw into focus the confusion and conflict many Americans seem to feel when confronted with the philosophical notion of taking a human life. In *Executioner's Song*, all of this gets thrown on its ear. All of the arguments - pro and con - about the death penalty are predicated on the assumption that the convicted person wants to live. Gary Gilmore wants to die. This simple innovative step in the carefully choreographed public death dance throws the nation and much of the western world into something of a moral frenzy. It isn't fair, because Gary isn't playing by the rules. As a result, defense and prosecution attorneys are on the same team against the ACLU, NAACP and other third-party interests trying to count some sort of political coup, with virtually no regard for Gary Gilmore's desires. One erudite pundit in New York City even goes so far as to declare Gilmore insane and incapable of making such a



decision - without ever meeting the man or even reading the records of his psychiatric evaluations.

## Mormon Culture

Provo, Utah is an enclave of strict Mormonism, a Mecca for members of that peculiar faith. While Salt Lake City houses the headquarters for the Latter Day Saints, plus the vast administrative and commercial headquarters, the Tabernacle and the grandest of the Mormon temples, Provo is the home of Brigham Young University. BYU is the Church's proudest institution of Mormon learning, and although rated in the B List of American Universities by others, BYU is commonly held by locals as a font of knowledge, the equivalent of Harvard or Oxford. Unlike Salt Lake City, Provo is neither a transportation hub nor a center of commerce. It is a small town posing as a city. It is isolated, and it is the site of much inbreeding from its earliest days. Thus, it has a shallow gene pool with many tangled branches in its big family tree.

Almost the entire population of Provo is Mormon, and even among Mormons from other areas, Provonians are held to be among the most arrogant and the strictest adherents to doctrine and behavior codes. The residents see themselves as the guardians of the morals, behaviors and hormones of the students who flock to BYU each spring. You may not hold a dance in Provo if you are not a religious organization. You may not legally buy a beer in Provo on Sunday, not even the 3.2% beer available in grocery stores and taverns on weekdays. If you order a cup of coffee in Provo, a common response is, "Do you mind waiting while I make some?" or the waitress may bring you an envelope of instant and a cup of hot water. When the President of the Mormon Church requested municipal governments not to hold meetings on a particular day of the week, which should be reserved for Mormon family activities, the Provo City Council was among the first to comply. An international corporation, 24 Hour Fitness, maintains a fitness center in Provo. It is the only one in the world that is closed on Sunday, and that is on behalf a group of local Mormon women who were afraid BYU students would go to the gym on Sunday instead of to church.

As with many cultish religions, Mormons do not treat flaunters and habitual violators of religious norms kindly. One's worth to the Mormon Hive (their metaphor) is determined largely by how you are perceived by your neighbors. Such dysfunctional dynamics as incest, child abuse and domestic violence are recognized even by the Church as problems among the flock, and the Utah County rate for abuse of prescription drugs is among the highest in the country. Mormons are a lusty lot with a recent history of polygamy and a tradition huge families, but they demand abstinence until marriage. Drinking and smoking are mortal sins, although many Provonians travel to more distant towns to imbibe. They make almost inhuman demands upon their children, requiring near-perfect accomplishment in all endeavors. Fierce sibling rivalries develop and are often encouraged by parents to extract even greater degrees of excellence from their issue.



People who do not measure up are cast aside. Many children are disowned by their parents when they become involved in alcohol, drugs, premarital sex or any sort of crime. If the child is no longer of the family, the shame he or she brings to the tribe is lessened. When things get bad enough, the Church excommunicates, and once a person is excommunicated, he or she must submit to servile and humiliating penance to be reinstated. Many, such as the characters who surround Gary Gilmore, simply don't bother. They rebel with a vengeance, joining the underclass of the Mormon community. Many of them still believe, or at least partially believe, in the teachings of the Church, but they pretend not to fear the consequences. If you are arrested for drinking and driving in Provo, you are required to fill out a form listing your religious preference. Your choices are *Mormon* (which appears at the top of the list), *Catholic*, *Islamic*, *Buddhist* and *Other*. If you select "Mormon" from those choices, you are routed to a 12-step program based on the Mormon belief system, which is conducted by Church volunteers rather than as an open forum. The self-introduction, "*My name is so-and-so and I am a recovering Mormon*," is common in many of Provo's non-Mormon drug and alcohol 12-step recovery programs.

Gary Gilmore is an early childhood product of this culture, literally born into the underclass because his parents are not strict adherents to the faith, and his mother, Bessie, is considered a wanton rebel. The author, and many behavioral technicians, consider this to be the root cause of his failure to assimilate into civil society and the formation of his murderous intent.

## The Media Circus

Since the advent and ascension of broadcast journalism in America and the western world, what used to be called *The Press* is now called *The Media*, or in the case of spectacular breaking events such as the Gilmore trial and execution, *The Media Circus*. The history of journalism shows a conflicting force between the desire to report objectively and without bias and yellow journalism, which sensationalized every story, concentrating on its most visceral and emotional elements. In the mainstream media which strove to remain unbiased, professional journalists were encouraged to remain invisible in their stories. The point of view might be that of the person being interviewed, but never of the journalist him or herself. Reporters were rewarded with bylines for exceptional work, a part of the criteria being objectivity. Still, a reporter chooses what stories to tell, what people to interview, what to include or not to include, and objective reporting can be difficult to attain. Since newspapers were granted certain perquisites and access under the First Amendment, it was generally accepted that, by and large, they would do an honest and balanced job of reporting. Editorials could express whatever view the writer or editorial board chose, but these articles in a reputable newspaper were clearly labeled as opinion. Readers expected the news to be simply facts, strung together in an informative or educational fashion. Even human-interest news was labeled as something other than just hard, factual reporting. Leading newspapers in most cities were designated as *Newspapers of Record*, appropriate forums for disseminating legal declarations into the public record.



With the rise of television reporting, however, things changed. Gradually the pursuit of truth was replaced by the pursuit of image. Television is a far more emotional medium than print, requiring little intellectual processing to internalize content. There are no letters to mentally shape into words, no words into sentences, no sentences into thoughts and conclusions. Moving images go directly from the screen to the emotions with very little rational processing in between. When a viewer sees a street full of dead bodies, he is more likely to condemn war on purely emotional grounds, without considering the complex geopolitical intricacies that led to the war. News can be exciting and entertaining. It can give people something to become adamant and vocal about without having to make a significant intellectual investment. Television news needs to attract viewers in order to attract sponsors. Sensationalism and entertainment are popular, and so they pay best.

In *Executioner's Song*, good and bad reporting of the trial and death of Gary Mark Gilmore is a constant back-and-forth theme. There is, for example, a former *Life* photographer of good repute who gets sleazy when he turns writer and would-be TV producer. Gary Gilmore is his chance to restore his reputation, but he employs highly questionable ethics to accomplish his ends. TV mavens manage the story's daily content from the bar in the Salt Lake City Hilton, building their reports on hearsay and rumors - essentially interviewing one another - rather than going directly to the source. When something spectacular occurs, however, such as a court appearance, a prisoner move, the suicide attempts, the death watch or the execution itself, the reporters flock to the scene, spewing their pre-digested barroom knowledge of events for the unquestioning TV masses back home in the big-city markets. Judges move to larger courtrooms to make room for TV cameras and delay appearances until the reporters can get their lights set up. The prison also goes to great pains to accommodate the media.

Various bidders try any number of questionable business tactics to gain exclusives or buy copyrights. As the bidding and bargaining goes back and forth between these truth merchants, TV producers change their planned specials on the spot, depending on who holds the high hand. Documentaries become tales that are "based on a true story," and when even that fails, the show becomes a fictional drama about somebody kind of like Gary Gilmore who falls in love with a cute, freckled country girl.

In my opinion, perhaps the most blatant media hypocrite in *Executioner's Song* is the author himself. Norman Mailer appears to assume the moral high ground as he rats out his fellow journalists, painting them as unethical money-grubbing "Media Monkeys," while he feeds off Gary Gilmore's corpse. In his Afterword, Mailer admits that he cooked his book, but he attempts to justify it by saying he has invented a new genre - The Factual Novel, itself an oxymoron. This book seems to be more of a lazy attempt at historical fiction, sans any credible scholarship. Still, in his view, and those of the others, Mailer's work passes for modern journalism.



# Style

## Point of View

*Executioner's Song* is written in the third person narrative voice, but the narrator makes no attempt to remain invisible. He takes on for himself the persona of his characters, speaking - even from the omniscient perspective - in a mock dialect and lexicon intended to mirror the status and near-illiteracy of his characters, who live in a semi-violent world of drugs, rip-offs, deceit and double dealing. Norman Mailer is an erudite author who has turned out some very good work, and he looks foolish trying to dumb down for effect. At times, it appears that he is ridiculing these supposed real-life characters, and at others it appears he is trying to be just one of the guys. He also uses this technique when describing the antics and insensitivity of the reporters and TV types who descend on the bar in the Salt Lake City Hilton to more or less vote on what the facts are and how they will report them to their readers and viewers. This is familiar ground for Mailer, and his efforts are somewhat more successful than with the Provo trailer trash. One might label this point of view as *The Omniscient Perspective with Multiple Personality Disorder*. The result is clownish, and one might occasionally find one's self embarrassed for the author. The great irony is that, while condemning the mercenary motives of the mainstream - and not-so-mainstream - media, he is painting himself with the same brush by the very act of writing *Executioner's Song*, which was hardly a *pro-bono* exercise.

## Setting

The bulk of *Song* takes place in Provo, Utah, a bucolic Mormon stronghold and the home of Brigham Young University. Gary Mark Gilmore spends much of his life in Oregon, where he moves with his mother and brothers while he is still a child. He was born in Provo, however, and that is where he dies. The author details his early childhood experience under the stern and sometimes cruel scrutiny of the pious, and always sanctimonious, citizens of this strict Mormon enclave. Some of the action also takes place in Denver, Colorado, the seat of the Tenth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. One of the more exciting and entertaining scenes in *Executioner's Song* occurs in a small twin-engine airplane in route to Denver, flying over the Rocky Mountains in a thunderstorm, racing toward an eleventh-hour hearing to lift a stay of execution just hours before Gilmore is executed. Gary Gilmore also makes a run to rural Idaho, where he steals a truck and assaults its homosexual owner. There is one scene in Washington D.C., where the Supreme Court overturns a stay of execution imposed by Utah's Governor. Many of the incidents in Provo take place in the houses and mobile homes of the friends Gary makes in the brief period between his August, 1976 parole from Marion State Penitentiary in Illinois and his execution on January 17, 1977. There are numerous lengthy flashbacks to, and brief present-tense incidents in, the state of Oregon as the author relives Gilmore's past. Courtrooms, prisons and mental institutions provide the backdrops for many of the incidents described by the narrator.



## Language and Meaning

Norman Mailer is both a journalist and a novelist and has dealt deftly with the English language in both genres. He falls short on both counts with *Executioner's Song*, however, by trying to meld both genres into a single work. During many of the author's descriptions of the seedy characters who populate the tome, he attempts to emulate their street, gutter and prison lexicons, while remaining in the omniscient narrator's voice. His effort fails, and the hybrid genre he calls a "*factual novel*" dies before it is born. As an erudite, educated author, Mailer comes across as a clown when he mimics convicts and trailer trash, straining his objectivity and intellectual integrity to the breaking point. On the other hand, by pretending to stick to the facts where convenient, he self-inflicts constraints that prevent him from splicing a really good yarn - a freedom he would have if he abandoned his pretense of objective journalism. As a result of all this juggling of genres, *Executioner's Song* comes off as an almost amateurish experiment. If he had approached the work with more scholarship - say in the style of John Hersey or Colleen McCullough, drawing clear lines between fact and speculation - he might have produced a memorable historical novel. In that mode he might have developed genuine-sounding dialogue between the low-lifers that would have created a convincing ambience. The reader could then have sorted out the real from the imitation through judicious use of comprehensive footnotes. As it is, what Mailer produced is, to me, a thoroughly forgettable hybrid.

## Structure

*Executioner's Song* is a long work of more than 1,000 pages, divided into two approximately equal books. It purports to be a work of non-fiction, but many literary critics - including the Pulitzer Prize Committee - view it as a work of imagination built around some central facts. The dates, times and places of Gary Gilmore's life and death are accurate, but the mental processes of the characters are largely editorial speculation. Mailer deals with events between August 1976 and January 1977, at which time Gilmore dies in front of a firing squad at Utah State Penitentiary.

The first book covers the background leading up to the conviction of Gary Gilmore for murdering two young men in Provo, Utah. Through flashbacks gleaned from relatives, friends, correctional officials and others, the author reconstructs Gary Gilmore's troubled youth and life behind bars in Oregon's McClaren School for boys, the Oregon State Penitentiary and Marion State Penitentiary in Illinois.

Book 2 covers the period from Gilmore's conviction until his execution as the first man to be legally put to death in the U.S. following a ten-year U.S. Supreme Court ban on the practice as a cruel and unusual punishment. Book 2 is less about Gilmore himself than the swarms of media representatives, including some well-known personalities, who hover around the event, eking out every ghoulish detail they can uncover from whatever source they can find. Credibility is the popular victim of sensationalism, and the result is

a long, tedious and somewhat pompous tome that wanders through more than a thousand pages trying to find itself.



## Quotes

"The apartment in Springville was not as nice as the house in Spanish Fork. It was just a two-room cinder-block apartment in a two-tier development of cheap apartments on a little old side street. There were kids around, and dog shit on the stairs and in the parking lot. The day she moved in, three rotting mattresses were leaning against the side of the building, and an overturned tricycle was lying in a mud puddle. The doors to the apartments were plywood, and her bathtub had been painted blood red by the last tenant. Still, she had a view from her balcony. Just two blocks away, the town came to an end, and the land went up into the mountains. She was free of Gary. Free to feel a lot of fear. Her breath was heavy."

"It was a bathroom with green tiles that came to the height of your chest, and tan-painted walls. The floor, six feet by eight feet, was laid in dull gray tiles. A rack for paper towels on the wall had Towel Saver printed on it. The toilet had a split seat. An overhead light was in the wall."

"Gilmore brought the Automatic to Jensen's head. 'This one is for me,' he said, and fired. 'This one is for Nicole,' he said, and fired again. The body reacted each time. 'He stood up. There was a lot of blood. It spread across the floor at a surprising rate. Some of it got onto the bottom of his pants.'"

"In a few days, Court would have to make a recommendation on the pre-sentence investigation, and he had about decided to propose a week of jail. It would give Gary a taste. Court didn't look forward to that, however. Gilmore was using every opportunity to manipulate his environment but still it was hard not to feel sorry for him, particularly on a day like this."

"Then she got herself together, and walked through the living room into the kitchen and peeked into the office through the narrow space between the television set and the square hole in the wall that separated the kitchen from the office. You could sort of squint into the office through that space. She got there in time to watch the strange man walk out the door. Then she walked in. Ben was on the floor. He just lay there face down, and his legs were shaking. When she bent over to look at him, she saw his head was bleeding. She had had first-aid courses once and they told you to put your hand to a wound and apply pressure, but this was awful heavy bleeding. A wave of blood kept rising out of his hair. She put her hand on it."

"Just listen - and don't become rebellious or stubborn or independent as is often your immediate reaction when told to do or not to do a thing. Okay. What I am telling you is this: You are not to go before me. You mention this in your letter and I always take you serious. I don't like to tell anyone, but especially you, to do or not to do anything without giving them a reason. The reasons are this: I desire to go first. Period. I desire it. Second, I believe I may know a bit more ABOUT THE TRANSITION FROM LIFE TO DEATH than you do. I just think I do. I intend and expect to become instantly in your physical presence - wherever you are at the time. I will do all in my power to calm and





soothe your grief, pain, and fear. I will wrap my very soul and all of the tremendous love I feel around you. You are not to go before me, Nicole Kathryn Gilmore. Do not disobey me."

"First thing Tuesday morning, he [Schiller ] called Lou Rudolph at ABC, and told him of his great interest in the story. There were a lot of different ways to do it, Schiller said, and quickly laid out a number of possibilities. He had learned a long time ago that in television you had to sell executives on the subject first. Had to establish it would still be bona fide television even if you did not obtain all the rights. If, for example, he got Gilmore's okay without Nicole's, a scenario could be worked up of a guy who comes out of prison and struggles with his old con habits, but finally kills a man, a real study of the pains of getting out of jail. That way they could do capital punishment and whether a man had a right to die, and never need to touch upon a love story. On the other hand, said Schiller, if they got the girl, but couldn't succeed in signing up Gilmore, they might do an interesting struggle of two sisters both in love with the same criminal. They'd have to substitute a fictionalized criminal, but could still explore the triangle. Or they could focus completely on Nicole and turn the thing into a study of a young girl who has been married a few times, is saddled with children, then falls in love with a criminal. Play down the murders, but emphasize the romantic difficulties of trying to live with a man that society does not trust."

"...too macabre. Would you like your death televised? At the same time, I really don't give a shit."

"WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE WILL HAPPEN TO YOU AFTER DEATH? I could speculate, but I don't know - if the knowledge of death is within me, as I believe it is, I can't consciously bring it to the surface. I just think it will be familiar. . . I must keep my mind singular and strong - in death you can choose in a way that you can't choose in life. The biggest mistake you could make when you die is to be afraid."

"The prison had moved Gary back to the hospital and today they could not see him, only hear his voice over the telephone. It sounded acidulous. 'Black people ,' he said, 'learn by rote more than anything else. You show them how to do something, and they can do it.' He paused as if imparting valuable information. 'On the whole continent of Africa, they never found the wheel or anything more deadly than a spear. That's what I think of black people. It ain't hatred, just fact. I don't care if one guy did something with some peanuts a long time ago.' Ron could feel the growling in Gary's empty gut and the hatred coming through the telephone wires. A dark side of Gilmore was running like a current into his ear. Man, he had an evil nature when he felt like it. Sanger was very happy at this moment that he had never belonged to the NAACP or the ACLU."

"And I cannot stand the thought of some man holding your naked body and watching your eyes roll back sleeping in your arms, I can't share you - I won't. You've got to be all mine. I don't care that you say you have this crazy heart that won't let you refuse any request to make another happy, I have a crazy heart too. And my crazy heart makes a request of your crazy heart - don't refuse my request to be only mine in heart mind soul and body. Let me be the next and only man to have you."



"I've told you that I haven't slept lately - the ghosts have descended and set upon me with a force I didn't believe they possessed. I smack 'em down but they sneak back and climb in my ear and demons that they are tell me foul jokes, they want to sap my will, drink my strength, drain my hope, leave me derelict bereft of hope lost empty alone foul demon motherfuckers with dirty furry bodies whispering vile things in the nite chortling and laughing with a hideous glee to see me toss sleepless endurance truly vile they plan to pounce on me in a shrieking mad fury when I leave with their hideous yellow long toe and finger claws teeth dripping with rank saliva and mucous thick yellow green. Dirty inhuman beasts jackals hyena rumor monger plague ridden unhappy lost ghostly foul ungodly things unacceptable creeping crawling red eyed bat eared soulless beasts. They won't let the o1' boy have a nites sleep. God-damned lost motherfuckers."

"...with Gary on her case about it, she decided Monday morning was the time to pass them over. So she split the stuff down the middle, twenty-five Seconals and ten of the Dalamanes for Gary, same for herself, and put Gary's capsules in a kid's balloon, two balloons, in fact. Both yellow, one inside the other. Then she inserted the balloons up her vagina."

"As she sat on his lap, Gary made a pass with his finger for the balloon, but got nowhere. It was too far up. Finally Nicole had to stand by the window with Gary hugging her from behind so the guard couldn't see her body. In that position, with his arms around her shoulders, she reached down under her skirt to get the balloon. It was a real sweat. She had shoved it up so high, there was nothing to touch with her fingers, and she got to the point where she had to try to push it down as if she were pushing a baby out...she pressed so hard while reaching up so far with her fingers, that before she finally got hold of it, her head hurt."

"After she gave him the balloon, Gary sat down and reached through the front of his big, wide, floppy, loose pants, big baggy things, to push the balloon up his rectum. It was a slow, tricky business, not at all easy, and took over a minute...Then she sat on his lap and kissed him."

"Instead of working with the antisocial impulses of each patient as it came into conflict with the group interest, instead of the group being the anvil on which each patient's personality might get forged into a little more social responsibility, the emphasis would now have to be on surrounding Nicole, insulating her and cutting off the day-to-day influence of Gary, so that he could not brainwash her with the idea - oh, beautiful guru! - that their souls were scheduled to meet on the other side. Woods would have to issue orders that no aide or patient was to mention Gilmore's name. Not ever. If he was going to keep Nicole alive, he had to neutralize that relationship. Woods could recognize that if nobody would talk to Nicole about Gary, she was nonetheless going to think about him all the time. Woods couldn't stop that. He just didn't want Gilmore able to influence her thinking anymore."

"Ritter regarded himself as an outpost of good sense in a desert of craziness. He disliked the accusation that he was carrying on a vendetta against the Latter-Day Saints. It wasn't true, he would say. He didn't regard Mormons as worthy of a vendetta."



While born a Catholic, and now a subscriber to no religion but the U.S. Constitution, the Judge had no patience with any desire to sway people's minds through religious doctrine. Still, he disliked the manner in which the Mormon Church owned the land, ran the banks, and controlled the politicians. That offended him more than their religious doctrine. That he merely considered silly. All those Joseph Smith miracles. On the other hand, he would never decide against them just because they were Mormons."

"Schiller heard three shots, expecting four. Gary's body did not jerk nor the chair move, and Schiller waited for the fourth shot and found out later that two must have come out simultaneously."

"...and removed the breastplate and set it in a big, open sink with running water. Then, he took out what was left of Gilmore's heart. Jerry Scott couldn't believe what he saw. The thing was pulverized. Not even half left. Jerry didn't recognize it as the heart. Had to ask the doctor. 'Excuse me,' he said, 'is that it?' The doctor said, 'Yup.'"



## Topics for Discussion

Would you say human life is sacred, no matter how vile a murderer, and that the state does not have the right to violate this God-given gift through a mandated death-penalty?

In light of the Gary Gilmore case, do you believe in the liberal application of capital punishment, capital punishment in only the most extreme instances or no capital punishment at all? Do you have a different take on the matter? Defend your position.

Discuss several of the characters in *Executioner's Song* belief that Gary Gilmore's early childhood experiences in a stifling, restrictive Mormon culture in Provo, Utah, and his later experiences in McClaren School for Boys and Oregon and Marion State Penitentiaries are responsible for his murderous behavior once he is paroled to Provo.

Discuss the possibility that Gary is a congenital psychopath or sociopath, and he is incapable of foreseeing the rational consequences of his actions.

How much effect do you believe genetics have on adult behavior, as compared to environment?

Can you discern any possible political agenda that might make proponents on either side of the argument want to believe one way or another?

Do you believe that, because TV reporters and print journalists are granted special protections under the First Amendment and special access and perquisites by government, they have a corresponding responsibility to report issues of local, regional and national importance honestly and objectively?

## Literary Precedents

The Executioner's Song reads like a latter day *An American Tragedy* (1926) because it emulates the size of Theodore Dreiser's huge, compelling epic.

Like *An American Tragedy*, *The Executioner's Song* has a documentary doggedness. It refuses to explain in definitive terms its main character. It follows Dreiser in projecting an ambitious appetite for encompassing the whole of American experience, for painstakingly recording the myriad details of individual lives, and — most importantly — for arousing wonder at the ambiguities of human identity. Dreiser's attention to the Western and Eastern voices in Clyde Griffiths's story, to the great social and psychological gap between the Western and Eastern branches of his family, and to Clyde's gradual absorption in the imperatives of the Eastern Establishment, including the "gross publicity . . . attending everything in connection with him," with his murder of his fiancée, Roberta Alden, strongly prefigures Gary Gilmore's story. Even in terms of its two-book structure, "Western Voices" and "Eastern Voices," and of a country divided against itself, *The Executioner's Song* resembles *An American Tragedy*.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994