



LAWRENCE SCHILLER

[WRITER/RESEARCHER/PHOTOGRAPHER/DIRECTOR]

“I SAID, ‘FUCK YOU, O. J.’”

Authors who have written books based on Schiller’s research and ideas:

Norman Mailer

Many other unnamed, well-known writers

Five days before I interviewed Lawrence Schiller, I re-read the last 600 pages of *The Executioner’s Song*, the “true-life novel” by Norman Mailer. The book spins a 1,072-page yarn about the life and death of Gary Gilmore, a now-infamous criminal who murdered two men in Utah in 1976 and received a death sentence by firing squad in 1977. The outcome effectively reinstated the death penalty after a ten-year moratorium on capital punishment in the US.

Most people are familiar with Gilmore’s story because it was national news, or because they read *The Executioner’s Song* (which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1980) or the 1994 book by Gary Gilmore’s brother (Rolling Stone journalist Mikal Gilmore), *Shot in the Heart*. A few people may have seen Matthew Barney’s take on the Gary Gilmore story, *Cremaster 2*, in which Norman Mailer plays Harry Houdini.

I chose to re-read the last 600 pages because Lawrence Schiller is a major character in the second half of the book. What many people don’t know is that Schiller is also the man who chased the story, bought Gilmore’s life rights, and hired Norman Mailer as the writer. Schiller spent hundreds of hours interviewing everyone who appears in the book—but he couldn’t write it, he says, “because of my lack of education and writer’s vocabulary.” A negative review of an earlier book made him doubt that he could effectively intuit the emotional lives and spiritual nuances of the people in his stories. This didn’t stop him from flying out to Utah, pounding around Provo, buying confidence, and witnessing Gilmore’s execution.

Norman Mailer never spoke to or met Gary Gilmore before Gilmore was executed. Instead he worked from more than fifteen thousand pages of transcriptions, and later traveled to Utah to study the landscape and interview the mothers of the victims. As a result of this unorthodox arrangement, Lawrence Schiller holds

half the copyright to the book.

The Lawrence Schiller I met in the pages of *The Executioner's Song* was a barracuda and a hustler—at least as cast in the “true-life novel,” which was the new genre Norman Mailer settled upon for his book. Would the Real Life Schiller be different?

Schiller was present at Ethel and Julius Rosenberg's death march, Gary Gilmore's execution, and Marilyn Monroe's nude float in the pool. He received advice from Bette Davis and Otto Preminger. He lived across the street from O.J. Simpson. I met the writer-researcher-photographer-film director in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where he serves as director of the Norman Mailer Writers Colony, at the home Mailer shared with his wife, Norris.

—Suzanne Snider

I. “I’VE BEEN TOLD BY ALMOST EVERYONE I’VE INTERVIEWED THAT I’M NOT THEIR SHRINK.”

THE BELIEVER: I read that you first conceived of Joan Didion as the potential writer for *The Executioner's Song*.

LAWRENCE SCHILLER: Joan was my first writer, but I never approached her. I had hired a “corner man” named Barry Farrell, a friend of mine. In the book, Barry is somebody that I reach out to because I feel I might be missing something in my interview process. Everything is becoming so intense. Am I missing something because of my lack of education? Being an intellectual—I’m not. So I hire him as a corner man, like a boxer; he watches me and tells me what I do wrong before I go in for the next round. Barry thought he was going to write what became *Executioner's Song*, and I told him he wasn't going to. And Barry's closest friend was Joan Didion.

I realized I couldn't go to Joan, because Barry would assassinate me. So I went to Norman. Because Norman had stabbed his wife, I felt he understood knee-jerk reactions to violence and what precipitates that kind of violence. That was a very basic, childish thought. You may not remember that Norman had stabbed one of his wives. As you know, Norman wrote *Executioner's Song* based primarily on my work and his own....

BLVR: I know Joan Didion ended up reviewing it in the *New York Times*. Did she ever know that she was in your

mind as the potential writer?

LS: She eventually knew.

BLVR: What do you think of Norman's characterization of you in the book? Do you think it's close?

LS: I've had worse done of me.

BLVR: But do you recognize yourself?

LS: Of course. All is fair in love and war.

BLVR: Did Norman have free reign to write about anything as he wished?

LS: Yes. We disagreed about things greatly, when he put a thought into the head of a character I interviewed.... and when I objected, we didn't speak for almost a year, as I said at his memorial service. Then he sent me a fax one day that said, “If I knew I would have to kiss your ass, I would never have shaved,” and I called him up and said, “Hello, lover.” And we started to talk again....

BLVR: And how would you describe your relationship after that?

LS: By the time *Executioner's Song* is over, we were as in sync as two guys rowing a canoe. We interviewed the two widows of the [murder victims] and survived that experience. The oars were in sync. By the time *ES* was over, we understood the purposes that we each had and how we served each other greatly.

BLVR: How do you feel when you're in the field, doing fieldwork, in a town with which you're not familiar, like Provo? Do you feel energized? Do you feel lonely?

LS: I don't feel lonely. No no no. I feel like I'm jumping in a well that has no bottom, and at some point I know I'll hit bottom. I never put a time limit on it. I'm oblivious to anything except that which I'm doing.

BLVR: I want to know exactly what you handed over, in

physical form, when you handed over your research to Norman Mailer.

LS: I didn't "hand over" anything, first of all; I *shared* with him. Isn't that a better word? I shared with him twenty-four thousand pages of transcripts from interviews I conducted. And then continued to do more interviews. And then after reading those interviews, he saw a uniqueness in my interview process that he had not experienced before. He saw the material that a novelist normally has to dream up or invent or create, but here it was: real. He understood every one of the characters.

I never come with a list of questions when I interview. It's organic. Sometimes they'll go for hours or weeks or months. Sometimes I'm very, very bold. Very bold. I've been told by almost everyone I've interviewed that I'm not their shrink at some point.

There are times when I challenge people. In the end of *ES*, it ends with my interview with Nicole [Baker, the object of Gary's tortured love] where I'm trying to get her to tell me what got her to go out in Midway and fuck all these guys. What did [her ex-husband Jim] Barrett say to her? And she doesn't want to, and I'm pushing her, and I hand her a piece of paper and I say, "If you can't say it, write it."

Her full answer is not in those pages. Norman agreed to leave out part of the answer because I wanted to keep it for my biography, and it was a great, great line. She said, "Barret told me fucking me was like fucking the wind." Even a novelist reading that line has a whole character there. That line told you everything about Barrett and women.... Everything!

How do you get people to spend that time with you? Very simple! You have to convince them that they owe it to history! Sometimes they look at me and say, "Fuck you."

II. "MY CAMERA WAS A SPONGE."

In between his work on *The Executioner's Song* and his charge as director of the Norman Mailer Writers Colony, Schiller wrote several best sellers, and his film *The Man Who Skied Down Everest* (1975) won an Academy Award. Before that, he had a career as a photographer, selling one of his nude

photos of Marilyn Monroe to Hugh Hefner in 1962 for the then-highest price ever paid for a single photograph. He worked with the great W. Eugene Smith on Minamata, a book of photos related to mercury poisoning in Japan.

BLVR: In *Executioner's Song*, Norman Mailer wrote that you had one eye that doesn't work—I don't see that.

LS: My left eye: I'm almost totally blind. I'm legally blind, in my left eye, since I was seven. They saved the pupil. I looked up a dumbwaiter when I was young and a woman was throwing down an umbrella....

BLVR: But then you became a photographer....

LS: But that was because I couldn't read. I grew up not knowing I was very seriously dyslexic (I grew out of it a little bit). I was unable to read properly as a young child. I was unable to read at all. I ran away from classes because I didn't want to be embarrassed. At the same time, my father was in the retail end of selling sporting goods, appliances, and cameras. He was a portrait photographer prior to that, during World War II. So about the tenth grade, he gave me an East German camera called an Exakta.

My brother and I were accomplished tennis players at a very young age (I was skinny at the time). When my brother beat me in the eleven-and-unders, I gave up sports (he went on to be a nationally ranked tennis player). I went toward photography, and I became an accomplished sports photographer at a *very* young age.

I was self-taught. By the age of fourteen I had won second, third, fourth, and fifth in the national Graflex Awards, which allowed me to work in summer of eleventh grade with Andy Lopez of the Acme News Service.

I took some pictures at the death march of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg from Union Square to Knickerbocker Village and I started to publish at a young age through high school and college.... I started to get a big head and a very big ego. I hid my age from all the big magazines around the world. Jacob Deschin, a writer for the *New York Times*, called me a "pro at sixteen," when I was still in high school. By the time I graduated from college I won the National Press Photographers Picture of the Year award.

BLVR: What was the photograph?

LS: It was Nixon losing to Kennedy with a teardrop in his wife's eye. I never considered myself a good photographer. I still don't. I thought of myself as a hard worker. My camera was a sponge and I had an instinct that athletes have—anticipation. Photography really represents an enormous amount of anticipation—understanding what might be there the next moment and being prepared for it. At twenty-two years old, I was driving a Mercedes. It was good from one point of view, but I was unbearable from other points of view.

BLVR: According to whom?

LS: According to my own reality and according to people who wrote about me those days. I was being written up in *Newsweek* and magazines all over the world. I refused to work on staff at magazines because I wanted to keep the copyright to my photographs, so I didn't get the best assignments. Sometimes I would get back at them emotionally, like photographing Marilyn Monroe in the swimming pool, and charge them five times what they would normally pay just because they wouldn't give me some other assignment I wanted to have.

I saw the end of the general magazine business at the end of the '70s, and I knew I had to move into another profession when the advertising dollar moved from magazines to television. The magazine business as we knew it was over. We were no longer the educators of the world. By 1972, I'm conceiving major projects... beginning with an exhibit of twenty-four photographers' works of Marilyn Monroe. I said to a publisher, "Get me Gloria Steinem or Norman Mailer to write the text and you'll have the cover of *Life* and *Time* magazines the same week." Of course, they got me Norman Mailer.

BLVR: Was that the first collaboration?

LS: Right. But remember, ten years earlier I did not read and I didn't go to school. I was shooting Playmates for *Playboy* in my college president's home. I had a D+ average in high school, and Pepperdine was the only school that didn't look at my grades. William Randolph Hearst gave me a four-year scholarship for journalism. In 1962, I started to educate myself. Every-

thing I did, I would do extensive interviews. I would go back to the people, time and time again, or move people into my home for six months and interview them every day—put microphones and recorders in their pockets, and I listened very attentively. This developed a unique style. In 1968, after I had done this big essay on LSD for *Life* magazine, a journalist interviewed me on the phone. When the book is published by the journalist—

BLVR: —this was Tom Wolfe?

LS: Yes. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. I realized then that a good writer doesn't have to be where the story takes place to write about it. So the very next week, I hire Albert Goldman to write *Ladies and Gentlemen—Lenny Bruce!!*, which was the first major book that I published. It was not unusual for me after 1969 to seek out the most important writers I could to write books based on my ideas, my research, my interviews. Many people know of my relationship with Norman, because he decided to reveal it. I wasn't interested in revealing it. There are many, *many* other famous writers that I have worked with—

BLVR: —aside from those that are known...

LS: Yeah. There are *major* writers who have written books [based on my research]. If one looks carefully at the copyright page, you'll see my name. Writers of the stature of Mailer and even bigger. All over the world. I've had failures, don't get me wrong, but it wasn't beneath me to pick up the phone and introduce myself to Bernard Malamud and say, "I'd like to introduce myself to you and to come meet you. I think I might have something that's worthy of your skills as a writer."

BLVR: You talked about moving away as the business of photography changed. Of course, the fine-art photography market has taken off since the '70s. Is photography something you'll return to? I know there have been exhibitions....

LS: Those exhibitions have been part ego and part to produce some financial stability for my grandchildren's edu-

cation. I'll give you an example: A very wealthy man calls me from a foreign country who's got a price on his head by two governments and the head of the Mafia in one country. He says, "I want you to photograph me," and I said, "Why do you want me to photograph you?" "Because you photographed Marilyn Monroe." You know that's, like, bullshit. I said, "Well, I charge a lot of money, and all the money has to go to charity." (That usually stops people dead.) He said he's prepared to pay. I said, "It's going to go to a charity for the misuse of donkeys in Israel."

BLVR: [Laugh] Is that your line?

LS: No, it's true. True!

BLVR: Why donkeys?

LS: Because my wife's an animal activist, and we were in Egypt for long periods. We saw how donkeys were mistreated. Therefore, we're involved in a sanctuary in Israel. So the guy pays me this exorbitant amount of money. I fly there—he sends a jet for me in London and I take the portrait. It was extraordinary! He had this face like an El Greco! Truly! He had been run over by a hundred trucks. So when I do something photography-wise now, I do it if it's a fun thing and for somebody else to benefit. I don't want to make my money off photography right now, because I don't consider myself as good as a thousand photographers out there right now. There are a lot of good guys out there—a lot of women, too—I mean, photography has become a women's profession, and, boy, I admire them. Annie Leibovitz, Mary Ellen Mark—whose books were the first books I published. I don't hold a candle to these photographers.

**III. "WHEN YOU'RE BEING
INTERVIEWED OR YOU'RE
INTERVIEWING SOMEBODY ELSE,
YOU ALWAYS HAVE YOUR VOICE TWO
OR THREE OCTAVES LOWER THAN
THE OTHER PERSON'S VOICE."**

It wasn't the death-penalty issue that first drew Schiller to the story of Gary Gilmore. It was a newspaper article that

mentioned the romance between Gilmore and Nicole Barrett and their double (failed) suicide pact that caught his attention. Over the years, Schiller maintained a taste for the sordid and the tabloid, drawn to those forced to air their business in courts. His oeuvre includes a book about JonBenét Ramsey (Perfect Murder, Perfect Town) and another about O. J. Simpson (American Tragedy: The Uncensored Story of the Simpson Defense).

BLVR: Have you ever changed your mind—I'm thinking about the JonBenét Ramsey trial—about the innocence or guilt of someone in your book?

LS: In that book, I refused to say who I thought committed the crime. Joyce Carol Oates in her review chastises me for that. I was flattered that Joyce Carol Oates was reviewing one of my books. But have I ever changed my point of view? No. I mean, O. J. Simpson is a cold-blooded, vicious killer. My daughter was his babysitter. And we lived across the street from him. I know about all the spousal abuse. I've had fights with him about it. In jail, I screamed at him and said, "Look at the good Rock Hudson did before he died, by acknowledging his sexuality and his illness!" I said, "If you get out of this fucking mess"—I didn't say "fucking mess," but—"If you get out of this, if you're judged to be innocent, you should go out and talk about spousal abuse. Do you realize how many women and men you could help?" "I never did anyth—" I said, "Fuck you, O. J. Of course, he continued to deal with me... but he's a cold-blooded killer.

BLVR: Didn't he try to bar publication in the end?

LS: He threatened at the beginning, and when the movie was made, he sued me, and the judge threw it out.

BLVR: I read some descriptions of the courtroom scene in a book called *Anatomy of a Trial*. The author describes you, Joe McGinniss, Dominick Dunne—it sounded like every writer who writes about the legal system and crime was in that courtroom. Where do you think you fit into that landscape?

LS: Hmm... the least professional writer of all of them, the

least original writer of all of them. Uh. But the one that truly is the best Avon salesgirl or Fuller Brush salesman...

BLVR: You can't be this humble and get all this done.

LS: Look, you're interviewing me, so I'm obviously using some of my skills in the interview. One of the skills you may or may not have recognized yet. And that is when you're being interviewed or you're interviewing somebody else, you always have your voice two or three octaves lower than the other person's voice. That produces a certain ambience, OK? Which is very powerful, OK? And that was taught to me by a great great lawyer called Edward Bennett Williams in Washington, D.C., when I was very young.

Otto Preminger also taught me some good things. And Bette Davis was my best teacher when I photographed her. She'd sit on the steps of her house and tell me what was going to happen in my first divorce, because she knew.... Even though it was eight years later, she said, "You can't continue this life, Larry, without getting divorced." But I haven't always been this way. I've certainly mellowed as time has gone on—just as Norman mellowed. He was the boxer in the '60s and became the rabbi in the '80s and '90s. We both gained weight, we both have heart conditions, and we both lived on pills. I have five stints in me. There's a defibrillator in that room and one in the apartment. Since I had my heart attack, in 2002, we haven't had to use it. I want to be alive when I die. Honestly, I'd rather drop dead during this interview than die in a hospital bed the way Norman Mailer did....

BLVR: Not in *this* interview [*knocks on wood*].

LS: No, I'm very serious about what I said. I've been many things in my life, and that's what's very confusing even to me. Now I sit and I look at a dog and I try to figure out why a dog doesn't know the difference between right and wrong. My mind is occupied by things like that. Why do certain animals not know the difference between right and wrong? I guess those are things theologians think about. I don't know if that's a sign of where I am.

BLVR: I want to talk to you about reciprocity with all

the people you've interviewed over the years. I know you do pay people for their time, in accordance with what they normally make sometimes.... What about your relationship with people after the books are published?

LS: Well, Nicole Barrett drove up here in a truck. She arrived five days ago, and I had dinner with her, and I knew she was driving across the country to see me. She's still in my life. [Lee Harvey Oswald's widow] Marina Oswald is still in my life. There are a lot of men who are still in my life. I think some of them, like [Gilmore's uncle] Vern Damico, don't understand the business aspect of it, so they get a bit confused. But when you irrevocably alter someone's life by something you do, you have an obligation not to disappear, unless they want you to disappear. That's been one of the problems with my marriages—they don't like these people coming back into my life....

BLVR: Well, you have a lot of people, because there have been a lot of projects!

LS: That living room—[former FBI agent and Soviet spy] Robert Hanssen's children sat with other members of his family and his closest friend—he's still in my life and one of his kids is. Sometimes I don't speak to them for a long time. I've got as many enemies as those that have stayed in my life.... I guess you have to make some enemies... and if you're as immature as I was in some of my ways for many years, you make stronger enemies.

IV. "I DON'T WANT [MY BIOGRAPHY] PUBLISHED WHILE I'M ALIVE, BECAUSE I WANT THE WRITER TO BE TOTALLY, TOTALLY FREE TO WRITE WHATEVER HE WANTS TO WRITE."

Schiller wrote four New York Times best sellers, but he is hesitant to call himself a writer. Now he's heading a decidedly literary pursuit. Even at the writers colony he directs, Schiller has an air of someone who doesn't quite belong. Provincetown is certainly different than Hollywood, where he lives the other ten months of the year. He uses his status to his benefit; it defines his drive as an overachieving outsider with creative problem-solving

skills. When he was squeezed out of the O. J. trial, for example, he squeezed himself back in by making himself part of O. J.'s defense team.

Lawrence showed me Norman Mailer's study upstairs, promising that Norman's study "hasn't been touched, or even dusted, since the day he died." The room had a large Nautilus machine over to one side, and two desks. One of those desks was covered with his last project.

Mailer wrote longhand. His typical process involved faxing handwritten pages to his secretary in New York, who typed it up and sent it back to Norris, who printed out copies to give back to Mailer. Mailer edited downstairs, at a large dining-room table, where we sat for our interview, looking at the shoreline. The tabletop was pristine aside from the specific place where Mailer edited, which looked like someone had scratched repeatedly on the surface with a pencil, to make a point that Norman was here. I sat at the head of the table, with Mailer's scratches on my right and Schiller on my left. On the porch, a group of poets-in-residence were working with a visiting critic from Oxford.

Schiller feels a tension that has dogged and will continue to dog him: how to keep his own legacy separate from Mailer's.

LS: Norman was very special. He was one of the few writers in the world who was truly accessible to almost anybody. He would talk and relate to anybody whether they thanked him or not. He wrote about fifty thousand letters in his life. Eight thousand came from writers; sixty-five hundred were answered. Norman Mailer was interested in nurturing young writers.

He never wrote two books the same way. You have to constantly work on your craft. The word *intellectual* doesn't exist in my mind. If I were to appraise my capacity to have an intellectual conversation, it would be very low on the totem pole.

BLVR: Well, what's your relationship to reading and writing now?

LS: I have to get on an airplane and fly around the world to read a book. I have to be totally isolated. The first book I wrote [*Ladies and Gentlemen—Lenny Bruce!!* "by Albert Goldman, from the journalism of Lawrence Schiller"] was a *New York Times* best seller. I admire those people who can write great nonfiction or fiction or poetry, because they're

creating something. I absorb. Norman and I built a relationship because he saw a uniqueness in my interview process. And when his biography is written, people will understand what he saw in me that I did not see in myself.

BLVR: Why were you doing this, hiring these writers?

LS: These stories interested me, but having a book written was part of a larger plan. First, find a story that has depth and general appeal. Pray you can find a writer who has the same interests as you do. Second, once you have a finished manuscript and, if you're lucky, a best seller, you go looking for the right screenwriter. Third, with a good screenplay you have a movie.

BLVR: Are you still chasing stories?

LS: Well, the word *chasing* is a good word. I did chase stories in my life. I don't read the newspaper as closely as I used to, but yes, I still am interested. I think I care less about financial security now—it doesn't matter to me. One person has already accused me of hooking on to Norman's legacy, but Norris knows that's not true. I mean, the public doesn't know my real involvement, and maybe they never will, and that's fine. The colony is something that everybody said could never happen. I got it off the ground in nine months.

BLVR: I heard Don DeLillo was here....

LS: Sure. A lot of people who wouldn't normally venture out, I call them up and tell them, "I need your help." That's my first line: "I need your help."

A lot of people don't like my personality. They don't like me. But they see there's value in what I could achieve.

BLVR: What's it like to work alone, since so much of your work is interpersonal?

LS: I don't work alone. I surround myself with talented people.

BLVR: Do you ever work alone?

LS: What's the definition of working alone?

BLVR: Sitting in a room. Writing by yourself.

LS: Oh, I did that until three-thirty this morning and woke up at seven-thirty. I forgot about your interview, but it beeped me on my cell thing. But quite honestly, yes, I work alone, but I called someone halfway around the world in the middle of the night to ask how to spell a word—all the way in Australia, because of the time difference.

BLVR: What was the word?

LS: That's immaterial! I'm not afraid! I stopped Christopher Ricks in the middle of a sentence over dinner and said, "What does that word mean, Chris?" Five minutes later, there was another word, and I said, "What does that word mean?" I mean, I've done that my whole life.

BLVR: How will you measure the success of this colony?

LS: If writers talk about the colony and writers are able to see something that benefits them, then it's successful. I've had failures—I've been in bankruptcy. I over-extended myself on a movie in Chernobyl, and I pulled myself out of that in two years. I've made my mistakes.

BLVR: What kind of plans did Norman leave, in terms of the colony?

LS: Zero. He had no money. No life insurance. He left virtually no funds for his family. The family doesn't support this financially. I rent this from the family. This is an independent 501(c)(3). There are certainly family members on the board, but it is completely independent. That's the biggest battle I have. People don't understand that Norman has no money.

BLVR: How did you decide this needed to be done?

LS: About six months before he died, we were sitting here, and he said, "Random House likes this book, so I'm rushing to publish it." He says, "You know I'm not

gonna be here by the end of the year, Larry." I didn't know what to say. A few minutes later he says, "You better figure out what's going to happen to this house and my legacy." Norris was talking to my wife in the other room. Four weeks later, he was in the hospital. He said, "I can hardly breathe." He said, "The scar tissue is strangling my lungs."

When I first saw him in the hospital, there was a nurse that just walked in and said, "I know who you are, Mr. Mailer, and I was wondering if you could give me some tips on writing." He looked at her and said, "What are you doing this weekend?" She said, "I'm going sailing with my boyfriend." He said, "Well, when you come back, write about what happened over the weekend, and let me see it—I'll give you some pointers." So, ten days later, she walks in with the papers. He's got more IVs coming out. Here he is editing her manuscript. He finally hands it to her and goes back to reading the *New York Times*. She starts reading it over and over, and she started crying. There the foundation [for the colony] was being laid.

Later, he was buried here in Provincetown, and I'm standing over there by that clock with a couple writers. One of them says, "What do you think is going to happen to the house, Larry?" I said, "I know Norman doesn't want it to be lost to history." A few minutes later somebody said, "Maybe it'd be nice to have a writers colony." I walked upstairs and stood in the room late that night where Norman wrote, and the next morning I said to Norris, "What do you think of turning the house into a writers colony?" She said, "That would be a nice idea." I said, "Would I have your support?" She said, "You'd have my support in anything you do."

I put some of my money in, called Günter Grass, Joan Didion, asked for their help—advising me and lending their prestige and their names. And then I was on the phone for three days. In three days, I had everybody. I don't think everybody thought it would happen. I called Tina Brown and said, "I need to have breakfast with you. I need you to teach me what fundraising is about." Of course, that's my biggest problem—my personality doesn't raise money. It goes against raising money.

Twenty-five years ago, my personality would have chased everyone away. I couldn't have run this colony. But my personality was doing other things—it was getting into prisons. Or the attorney general's...

Norman and I had a big fight in Belarus where we hit each other and pushed each other down a flight of stairs. It was all about whom I was going to bribe and whether we were being set up, and why I had to bribe someone.... We had our differences. Everybody changes.

BLVR: Is there anything I haven't asked you?

LS: You didn't ask me who I slept with last night....

BLVR: Who did you sleep with last night?

LS: Nobody.

BLVR: Do you know what's next?

LS: Everything just happens with me—nothing's thought out. I mean, there are lots of projects that aren't finished... but I think this project is worthy of the time that's put in. If we get one person out of the sixty scholarships, then it's worth it. My grammar has improved. I know the difference between *there* and *their* now.

BLVR: What about your biography?

LS: It's being written. I've given two years of interviews, twice a week, two hours at a time, eight months out of every year. The interviews are almost done. It will be published after my death. I don't want it published while I'm

alive, because I want the writer to be totally, *totally* free to write whatever he wants to write

BLVR: Did you choose the author?

LS: No. Several authors asked, and I'm giving complete access to one.

BLVR: Is that a secret?

LS: Yes. There's a working title, which is *I Survived My Mistakes*. Some people see a story in it. I just hope it's not episodic. If someone can find a through-line, that's fine. I can't. I'm very eclectic. I can't find a through-line.

BLVR: I wonder if you think writers need to be *more* eclectic. You have the longest hyphenated career....

LS: Well, it certainly happened by accident. I've been married three and a half times, so I changed my life four times. I reinvented myself four times. So each morning brings a little wisdom, and then you find out how stupid you were for most of your life.

BLVR: I want you to sign my copy of *The Executioner's Song*.

LS: Norman should sign it.

BLVR: [*I look at the empty seat to my right*] I want you to sign it.

LS: OK. Not on the title page—that's Norman's page. ★

Namwali Serpell, continued from page 51

a house. As Ganin looked up at the skeletal roof in the ethereal sky he realized with merciless clarity that his affair with Mary was ended forever. It had lasted no more than four days—four days that were perhaps the happiest of his life. But now he had exhausted his memories, was sated by them. This is a predictable Nabokovian twist. I should be relieved: at least the romance crumbles because Ganin, with whom I iden-

tified against my gender, changes his mind, exhausts his memories. It would have been worse if Mary had vanished, an ending that might have raised the spectre of Lo's fleeting affections.

I am distraught the next day when I realize the error in this first reading, the unwitting reversal I made. By any logical interpretation of the textual and personal situations, I am not Ganin, the man sated with his first love, ready to move on. I am Mary. ★