

entertainment

The Executioner's Song

by Eugene Meese
THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG, by Norman Mailer; McClelland & Stewart, Toronto; pp. 1056; \$19.95.

In its beginnings, the story of the last nine months in the life of Gary Gilmore is not so unusual—unseemly, yes, and sordid and cruel and brutal, but not unusual.

A raging ne'er-do-well who had been in and out of prison for most of his life, and mostly in, Gary Gilmore in early April, 1976, was out again. On parole from the United States Penitentiary at Marion, Ill., Gilmore was in Utah, in the sagging bosom of his family—naive and ordinary people who thought love and a job, "a fair shake", were all that was needed to turn him around, to get him to go straight.

They took him in. They gave him shelter. They loaned him money. They helped him find work. They hoped, even prayed, for him.

It was in vain. It was too late.

Gilmore abused his family's hospitality, his friends' trust, his employers' patience, his own last chance. What Gary Gilmore could not wait to have (and he could not wait to have anything), he took—perhaps because he had been denied so much for so long; or because he had never learned as a child that one cannot always have whatever he wants whenever he wants it; or because he was without conscience, evil.

When he wanted some time off work, he took it. When he wanted some beer, he took it. When he wanted some love, he took it, or tried to. When in the end he wanted some money, he took it, and in the taking killed a couple of innocents for the same reason that other men climbed mountains: because they were there.

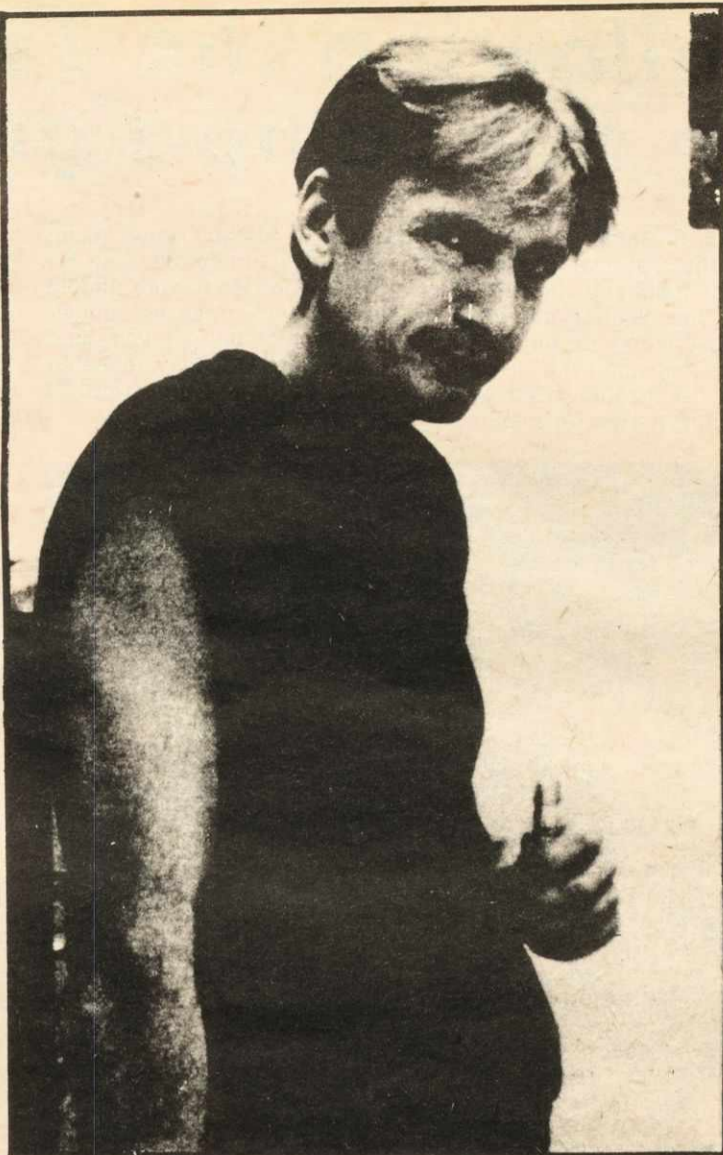
The end, in a haze of beer and pills and loss and despair, came about three months from the day he had been released from prison. Gary Gilmore quickly was arrested, charged

with the two killings, tried, convicted and sentenced to die.

In those beginnings, the story of the last nine months of the life of Gary Gilmore is not unusual. It is a story that has been told too many times in too many places for it to be that. And hardly a week passes that the newspapers do not tell it again: some punk somewhere kills somebody who got in his way, or who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, who happened to be there.

But the convicted killer Gilmore then did a very unusual thing, something that set him apart from all the other convicted killers, something that made his name, and made this book: he decided to die.

The killer's decision to let himself be killed—at least to see if the state had the internal steel to kill him—captured the U.S. consciousness. No American killer in a decade had been killed. All had sought every avenue of ap-



Gilmore in his last hours



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peal, had taken advantage of every possibility of delay, had snatched at every scrap of hope. Here was a man who seemed not to hope, who asked no delay, who made no appeal, who said, "Let's do it."

What should have been the most private of acts—a decision to die—quickly became a public circus. The press swarmed on Gilmore, hung on his every word, searched every angle of his crooked, broken life. Like vultures the promoters hovered, hoping to purchase the rights to Gilmore's death story, to make a killing from his killing.

One of them was Lawrence Schiller, the "carrion bird"—a photographer-producer who had made a bad job of a book on Susan Atkins, one of Charles Manson's zombie-groupies, and who wanted to make a good job of a book on Gilmore. Schiller once had "put together" a book on Marilyn Monroe with Norman Mailer. Norman Mailer would do "the Gilmore book."

The Executioner's Song is it. From the tangled seamy facts of the case; from taped interviews with Gilmore himself, and with the child-woman he had loved and lived with and lost and who had tried to die with him, and with dozens of others; from news clippings; from his own observations and imagination—from all that, Mailer has fashioned this "true life novel," a book the reviewer in *The New York Times* called "astonishing."

Perhaps it is. Certainly it is a compelling, breathtakingly readable book, for all its 1,000 pages and more. In it there are snatches of brilliant reportage, rendered in precise, telling detail, and narrative

stretches as good as any Mailer has written. From Gary Gilmore's release from the U.S. penitentiary in Marion, Ill., in April, 1976, to his final "release" on the morning in January, 1977, when four slugs slammed into his heart at the Utah State Prison at Point of the Mountain, Utah, the tale unravels with the inevitability of classical tragedy.

That is what is so profoundly disturbing about the book. It is a flaw even more troubling than the fact that in this "true life novel," fact and fiction are so blended that all too frequently it is impossible to tell which is which. By trying to tell both the artistic and/the objective truth here, Mailer may well have told neither.

But more serious than **The Executioner's Song's** failure to meet the standards of the non-fiction novel set so brilliantly by Truman Capote's classic, **In Cold Blood**, are its pretensions to tragedy. **The Executioner's Song** is heroic in size, in ambition, in narrative sweep; it is heroic in almost every regard save one: subject matter.

The Executioner's Song is flawed in much the same way that Raymond Chandler once said the ordinary mystery novel was flawed. The mystery, Chandler observed, had "...the elements of tragedy without being tragic, and the elements of heroism without being heroic."

There are no heroes in **The Executioner's Song**, only victims and victimizers. And its characters are not larger than life, but smaller; not tragic, that is, but pathetic.