A LATE LUNCH

WILLIAM KENNEDY

I want to salute my dear friend Norris Church Mailer and express my gratitude to her for asking me to speak today.

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I met Norman in late 1968 in New York when I was a movie critic and he was editing his film, *Maidstone*. I wanted an interview but he said no. I don't hold grudges for more than five years, so after a while we got to be friends. I valued him enormously, but our friendship developed in a peculiar way. Let's face it, Norman was peculiar. He had been trying to change my consciousness since before I could read, and then I grew up and found out he was trying to change *everybody's* consciousness. Did he? Who else was as rewarding and brilliant and exasperating for the past sixty years?

In recent speeches Norman warmed up all his audiences with one particular joke. He forgot where he heard it until Mike Lennon said I had told him. You've probably heard it—maybe from Norman—but I'll tell it anyway in homage to his low threshold for sexual irony.

> Max's wife dies and he's so depressed he won't go out. His doorbell rings and it's a gorgeous young woman wearing a mink coat and nothing else. 'Max,' she says, 'your friends sent me to cheer you up.' 'Come in, girlie,' he says, and she takes off her coat and hugs him and says, 'Max, your friends want me to give you a night of *super* sex.' Max smiles and says, 'That's very nice, girlie. I'll take the soup.'

I don't think Norman would've taken the soup.

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He came to Albany last May to read from his Hitler novel at the Writers Institute and Russell Banks and I talked to him for an hour on tape, and there sat the venerable atheist justifying his belief in God, reincarnation, and the devil, but also—and this impressed me most—asserting the primacy of fiction in everything he ever wrote, including his combative essays, his spectacular journalism, and his books of nonfiction.

"It's all fiction," was his line, and he added: "It's a great swindle that civilization is pulling on itself, that there are two literary forms.… Nonfiction is *fiction* because you never get it right." His rationale is too dense for a three-minute speech, but it partly hinges on the presence of his novelist's consciousness on the page. He said more than once that the novel was on the way out, but he had single-handedly kept alive the archaic concept of the great American novel. He decided neither he nor any writers of his generation ever achieved it, but he was resolute that the novel was how you reached the broadest and deepest possible meaning of human experience.

Four months later, in September, I was at the Cape and my wife, Dana, and I drove over to see Norris and Norman. He got out of bed to greet us, much frailer than he had been in May. The multiple assaults on his body had further crooked his back, shrunken his face, and wasted him into a 90-pound specter of the old electric Norman. He speculated he had a secret cancer.

His rumored memory loss was not on display, but his spirit and wit were, and with our wives and an old Mailer friend, we lunched on lobster and wine, hashed over my novel in progress and the play he'd convinced me to write. We talked about Texas Hold 'em and Brando and movies and Fidel and Cuban politics and how he might telescope his colossally ambitious Hitler trilogy into one sequel. He knew any sequel was beyond him, but there it was—the big novel—still driving the creative impulses left to him.

Our talk was unpredictable and funny—as usual. But after two hours he slapped the table with the palms of both hands and said, "Gotta go up. I'm really tired." We agreed that, without a doubt, this had been one of the great lunches, and he pushed himself back from the table.

We shook hands.

And we said so long.

Then he picked up his two canes and went slowly upstairs to lie down.