TRIBUTE TO MAILER

TINA BROWN

ON NOVEMBER 10TH, 2007, I was in a hotel room in Udaipur, India, channel-surfing for something that wasn't a Bollywood soap opera. Suddenly that familiar and beloved wide face with the questing blue eyes and the halo of white curls and the koala bear ears appeared on the TV screen, ablaze with life. He was holding forth, of course, with great animation—but I couldn't hear his voice, that unmistakable cultivated growl. The CNN commentator was talking over him so I knew instantly that he had died. Not even CNN would dare to talk over one of the best conversationalists in America when he was still here.

Norman Mailer was everything I came to America for. His large scope, his flamboyant risk, his vast imaginative sympathy, his refusal to be defined by anyone but himself. There was no writer remotely like him in England.

I come from—and fled from!—the land of the writer as monk, sequestered from the fray. Mailer was the glorious opposite of that. He subscribed to the Hemingway model, but kicked it up a notch and made it his own, the Mailer model: the novelist as pugilist, the novelist as man of action, the novelist as fighter, doer, provocateur, the novelist as beater of worlds—and maker of worlds.

He was interested in fame; it was one of his great subjects. And his own fame was honestly come by. He earned it at his desk, with pen and paper.

He was already well into his fourth decade of fame by the time I first met him. A few weeks after I arrived from London in 1984 to edit *Vanity Fair*, he suddenly showed up in person at our office. We were working on an excerpt of his new novel, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, but this visit of his was unannounced and unexpected. I was barely out of my twenties and completely ready to be intimidated by this man, who after all was not only the most famous writer on earth but also the most notorious male chauvinist.

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My anxiety didn't last beyond his first gregarious greeting. From the moment he barreled through the editorial corridor in his dandyish three-piece suit and sat down in my office with his legs splayed like a boxer on a bar stool, I was in his camp, permanently. After that first meeting he often dropped by when he wanted to get my involvement in a cause or promoting an idea. Sometimes he would open up the conversation with a riff that had clearly been forming in his head on his way up in the elevator. One I won't forget began "I've never met a beautiful woman who wasn't angry."

Actually, you could argue that Norman never seemed to meet a woman of any kind who wasn't angry—usually at him! But the truth is that he loved us and understood us even as he drove us nuts.

One of the causes he lured me into was fund-raising for PEN when he was president in 1986. That was the year he bullied and charmed fifty major writers from overseas and a hundred from here to participate in its international Congress in New York. Such a tremendous turnout gave Norman an unparalleled opportunity to break all his own records for getting into it with his fellow writers. One of his verbal sparring partners in that week-long literary smack down was E. L. Doctorow, whom I happened to run into the other day. Ed remarked that Mailer's decision to make of himself a public figure was a calculated risk. It had the larger social benefit of keeping alive the idea of the novel as a major act of the culture. But there was a downside too in that his rambunctious personality often stood between readers and his books.

Scholars and readers, said Doctorow, have been set free to rediscover Mailer's work now that it is out from under the shadow of his public persona. That is the only consolation I can think of today for having lost him—that as the immediate memory of Mailer the celebrity fades, the stature of Mailer the writer will grow. That is certain to happen, because Norman Mailer's body of work is unparalleled.

This semester our 17-year-old daughter will be reading her first Mailer essays at school. We can be sure that when she and other young readers of the twenty-first century set out to understand what American life was like in the second half of the twentieth, Mailer will be there to show them. The Second World War, the corruptions and glories of politics and protest, the sexual revolution and the conquest of the moon, an astounding array of full-blooded characters—grunts and presidents, criminals and champions, killers and saints. It's all there, in the fullness of its texture and history, between covers, waiting. We miss you, Norman. But we have you.