

THE MYSTERY OF NORMAN MAILER

BARBARA WASSERMAN

AS AN AMATEUR PIANIST, I've always liked the story about Vladimir Horowitz, perhaps apocryphal, that when asked by someone how to get to the stage of Carnegie Hall, he said, "Practice, practice, practice." However, he didn't have it quite right. It turns out you can also get here by being related to Norman Mailer.

People sometimes ask me what it was like to be Norman's sister. Some of them are delighted and some dismayed when I say that, mostly, it was wonderful. He was loving and supportive, and he was certainly exciting to be with. Not only did he include me in much of what went on in his life, he always made me feel that he really liked having me around.

Since we had grown up in the same household with the same parents, he was in some ways just my brother. But as time went on, he began to evoke in me a strange mixture of familiarity and astonishment. Where, really, had he come from? I never bought into his belief in reincarnation, but I've often thought that he was his own best argument for it. Indeed, I think *Ancient Evenings* is his most autobiographical novel, although whether he was Rameses or Menenhetop, I really couldn't say.

One day last summer, we were talking and I had a small epiphany. I don't remember what we were talking about, but I told him that I had just decided that the reason I always found him interesting was that I never knew what he was going to say next. He laughed and said, "Neither do I."

So, perhaps he was a mystery even to himself....

Shortly after Norman died, I received a letter from my good friend, Jillene Lowe. She had not seen him for a number of years, but she wrote that when she heard the news, color faded from her world. I thought yes, that is the way it feels, and the way it is going to be. But for those of us for whom the world seems grayer now, there is comfort in all that Norman has left—his books,

of course, memories, ideas, the sense of his spirit. And, to use one of his favorite expressions, most agreeably, his large, wonderful family, Norris and all the kids. Now his children, all nine of them, talented, interesting individuals, imbued with his *élan*, along with my son and our cousin, will talk and reminisce.