

NORMAN MAILER: A WARRIOR'S LIFE

S A M R A D I N

MY MOTHER, OSIE REMBAR, was Norman's older, first cousin and perhaps his earliest literary advocate and critic. They were fourteen years apart. From about 1936 to 1943, Norman spent summers at her family's hotel in Long Branch, where the staff was instructed not to disturb him while he was working. It was she who not only encouraged his early writing endeavors, but argued vehemently against his studying engineering at MIT. She believed that he should attend Harvard where, in addition to engineering, he could write and study literature. She was confident in her advice because her brother Cy, who one day would be Norman's lawyer and a leading authority on the First Amendment, had graduated from Harvard in 1935. Norman wrote his prize-winning story "The Greatest Thing in the World" as a sophomore there and proved her correct.

Because of her, I knew Norman for fifty years. As my perspective changed, my regard for him deepened. It was with Norman that I first rode in a true sports car, crammed in the rear shelf of a British racing green Triumph TR3 that he hurled around the roads at Fort Monmouth with frightening speed. From that day, I knew he saw the world unlike anyone else.

Often, I would see Norman at his parents' home for holiday dinners. I remember one such dinner at which my parents and Norman discussed James Baldwin's then-recent *Nobody Knows My Name* in which Baldwin had written about Norman. Not having read the book, I just listened with fascination and expressed my interest in knowing more about him. Norman stared at me with an odd, questioning glance. Toward the end of the evening, Norman stood up, left the living room and returned a few minutes later with a copy of *The Naked and the Dead*. In an act that I have always

regarded as strong literary criticism, he inscribed it “In lieu of Jimmy Baldwin.”

I believe that Norman’s total *oeuvre* will stand as the preeminent American window to the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of this century. Two of Norman’s qualities will make his novels and other writings important for many years to come.

The first was his insatiable curiosity: From war to the CIA, from Picasso and Marilyn Monroe to Hitler, Gary Gilmore and Lee Harvey Oswald. From boxing to graffiti and architecture. From ancient Egypt and god and the devil to the role of the artist and novelist. From politics to sex. Nothing eluded his interest. And it was this curiosity that enabled him to envision the world from a different perspective. Often, he would remark, “As a novelist, I want to put myself in his position to imagine and to understand how he would see the issue and the challenges he would face.”

The second quality was his ability to speak to anyone in a way that was at once engaging and sincere. It made no difference whether they were ordinary people or intellectuals. The person with whom he was speaking was the absolute focus of his attention. Norman could walk into a room of people and instantly bring it to life with his energy, humor or anger. His personality was huge. When he looked at you, his sharp, blue eyes gave only a hint of their magnitude. People wanted to be in his company because it was such a pleasure. The same quality is repeated in his writing.

About two years ago I visited Norman in the hospital after he had had heart bypass surgery. He had been reading the *Iliad* and told me of his epiphany. He said, “You know, in this book, the warriors are killed when their chests are cut open by an opponent’s axe or spear. That’s what I’ve been through. I realize that I’m like them. I am a warrior and I have been all my life.”

To Norman, the warrior.