

OUR DUTY

JOHN BUFFALO MAILER

A CLOSE FRIEND OF MY FATHER'S and mine, Hans Janistchek, passed away in February. He was an international journalist of Austrian descent, loved by his peers and readers alike. He was there at my Father's funeral in Provincetown, and at one point, he said to me:

"Well, if you think it was hard being Norman Mailer's son before, get ready!"

And he was right. It is harder without Norman Mailer. To accurately describe the sense of loss that no longer having my Father, who was my best friend, in the trenches with us, is a task I imagine I will never have the words to properly convey. But it's not just harder for me and my family. It's harder for all of us. Because now, it's on all of us. It's on every teenager who ever picked up a book by Norman Mailer and realized for the first time, they weren't crazy, just taking a deeper look at life than they were told they should or could. It's on all of us who understand the spirit of Norman Mailer, who share the burning need to leave this world a slightly better place than when we entered it. On us to carry his spirit into the new millennium, that spirit of tackling the truth head on, no matter how beautiful or terrifying. The struggle is in our hands now, but I guarantee you, armed with the words my Father left behind, we are up to the challenge.

The following is an excerpt from an obituary my Father wrote for himself in 1979. When I was fifteen, he showed it to me and asked that I read it here. His title: Novelist Shelved.

"Norman Mailer passed away today after celebrating his fifteenth divorce and sixteenth wedding. 'I just don't feel the old vim like I used to,' complained the writer recently. He was renowned in publishing circles for his blend of fictional journalism and factual fiction termed by literary critic William Buckley, Contemporaneous Ratiocinative Aesthetical Prolegom-

ena. Buckley was consequently sued by Mailer for malicious construction of invidious acronyms.

“At the author’s bedside were eleven of his fifteen ex-wives, twenty-two of his twenty-four children, and five of his seven grandchildren, of whom, four are older than six of their uncles and aunts.

“Talk of near friends revolved around the estate. Executors warn that Mailer, although earning an average income of one and a half million dollars a year, had to meet an annual overhead of two million, three hundred thousand dollars, of which, two million, two hundred and fifty thousand went in child support, alimony, and back IRS payments. It is estimated his liabilities outweigh his assets by eight million, six hundred thousand.

“When asked on occasion why he married so often the former Pulitzer Prize-winner replied, ‘To get divorced. As a novelist with an insatiable curiosity about people, I’ve discovered that you don’t know a damn thing about a woman until you meet her court.’

“At the memorial service, passages from his favorite literary works, all penned by himself, were read, as well as messages from prominent Americans. His old friend Truman Capote said,

“‘He was always so butch, I thought he’d outlive us all.’

“Andy Warhol said, ‘I always thought that Norman kept a low profile. That’s what I liked so much about him.’

“Jimmy Carter, serving his fifth consecutive term as President, replied in answer to a question at his press conference this morning,

“‘It is my wife’s and my regret that we never did get to invite Norman Mailer to the White House, but we will mourn his passing. He did his best to improve the state of American book-writing. Which we all need and applaud.’”