THE NOVEL WAS ALL

J. MICHAEL LENNON

NORMAN MAILER HAD ONLY ONE SALARIED JOB. He served as a clerk, rifleman and cook in the U.S. Army. It was, he said, the worst experience of his life and the best. After his discharge, he wrote a novel based on his two years in the army. It appeared when he was twenty-five and rocketed to number one on the *Times* best seller list on June 20, 1948. Although *The Naked and the Dead* was his only book to reach number one, ten more of his books made the list, including *The Castle in the Forest*, published a week before his eighty-fourth birthday. No other writer of Mailer's generation had best sellers in each of six consecutive decades.

Norman was biologically a writer. He was also a man of action—making movies, running for mayor of New York, lecturing at colleges, serving as an unpaid (and usually unheeded) advisor to presidents, launching the *Village Voice*, protesting American imperialism—but except for his profound family commitments, all these activities were in liege to his writing. The "assorted bravos of the media and the literary world," as he referred to them in *The Armies of the Night*, criticized him for making movies, debating feminists, boxing on the *Cavett Show* and getting into scrapes at cocktail parties, never entirely grasping his need to mix it up, get a black eye perhaps, so he could return, enriched, exhausted, chastened, to his monkish life. "I'm an old club fighter," he would say, "I get mad when you miss."

As Joan Didion once pointed out, Norman was "a great and obsessed stylist, a writer to whom the shape of a sentence is the story." He sounded out, again and again, every sentence he wrote. In his Provincetown study, there are bookcases filled with etymological dictionaries and handbooks, some of them almost clawed to pieces. He had no care for books; when he needed some pages, he tore them out, sometimes using duct tape to make them whole again. In his later years, he began each day with a crossword

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puzzle and a few hands of solitaire—"combing his mind," as called it—and then trudged up to his third floor study to write.

Under the biological genus, writer, is the species, novelist. For Norman, the novel was always the high road, so much so that he insisted much of his nonfiction was really fiction: *Armies* was "history as a novel"; *Marilyn* was "a novel biography"; *The Executioner's Song* was "a true life novel." Most of the protagonists in most of his fiction, from Sam Slovoda, Sergius O'Shaugnessy and Rojack to Harry Hubbard and D.T., are storytellers.

On the day he finished *Castle*, April 3, 2006, we went to dinner to celebrate. I expected he would want to savor the accomplishment. Not hardly, he was moving on. He wanted to talk about the recent Provincetown town meeting, which had given him the idea for a novel. "Let's say," he began, "that a fifty-year-old writer was looking for new material and so got himself elected selectman for a term so he could immerse himself in the issues and problems of a small town." At eighty-three, it was still a novel-centered world. Norman believed that a great novel could change your life, put you through a wringer. Asked why he thought fiction was so important, he said "I think it's the place where art, philosophy and adventure finally come together. I love the idea of a novel; a novel is better than a reality." He was a great friend to the Lennon family. We salute Norman Mailer, novelist.