

A TRIBUTE TO NORMAN MAILER

L O N N I E A L I

WHILE WE ARE HERE TODAY TO CELEBRATE the life of a great literary giant, the irony of his life and the great affection he had for my husband does not go unnoticed.

I had the personal pleasure of meeting Mr. Mailer for the first time when he visited our Michigan farm in the spring of 1997 while attending a nearby literary festival. I remember how nervous I was to have Mr. Mailer visit because he was very much a celebrity and a legend in his own right. I'm not sure what I expected but I remember drinking coffee with him and Muhammad and how at ease he was sitting there talking to someone he had just met a few minutes earlier and how at ease I was with him. He reminded me of my uncle with his beautiful white hair that sort of went everywhere in wild curls around his head with no sense of direction.

He was warm, affable, lovable and funny. He and Muhammad had a great time reminiscing and catching up. I remember looking at Muhammad during his exchanges with Mr. Mailer and he would have that devilish, boyish look on his face and Mr. Mailer would be in a full grin and laughing at whatever Muhammad was saying, which was usually some recounting of things that happened long before, but most likely mischievous in nature.

They reminded me of two lions who had ruled the jungles in which they lived and now had reached an age where their growls were not as loud or threatening but their presence was just as intimidating and their belief that they were still the kings of their profession still held truth.

So it was obvious even to the casual observer that these two were kindred spirits who were separated by age and profession but shared a bond with all things that made life interesting; good and bad. Both had lived and were still living very full and colorful lives and neither took where they had been or where they were going to end life for granted. They were still hope-

fully expectant—expecting life to bring them something more wonderful, more laudable to add to the already vibrantly rich life tapestry, they each had woven. And for the short time they had to spend together before Mr. Mailer had to rush off to his appointed engagement, he and Muhammad reaffirmed that life had indeed been anything but boring and the ride had been well worth all of the efforts they had expended over the course of many years.

I remember thinking when he left, how incredibly nice it was of him to go out of his way and take time to visit, to take time to spend time. Something we don't do enough of anymore, with our cell phones, Blackberries and e-mails and text messaging.

Obviously, Norman Mailer saw in Muhammad reflections of himself; the struggle for all things great. In that vein, I would like to offer just a few adjectives that describe them both. Although this list is full it is by no means exhaustive.

They were loud, loquacious, self-promoting, larger than life icons of opposition and champions in their respective professions. They were lovers of life, humanity and women. Dreamers with vivid imaginations, jokesters with huge egos who were ambitious, confident and at times irreverent. Only the biggest and the best. Colorful, refusing to be defined in socially acceptable terms. Fighters forever, vanguards for social justice, larger than life, stubborn, mischievous, controversial, philosophical, loveable, no sense of self-pity, slowed but not stopped by human afflictions, always courageous, admired by many, historical, legendary, real men to the end. Both will leave and have left large footprints to fill.

Although Mr. Mailer has left us to ponder a better place, his legacy is rich. Hopefully all of us here, and those who are not, will find comfort in his spoken and written words and our memories of the times we spent together.