MY FRIEND, NORMAN

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NO WRITER ON THE AMERICAN LITERARY SCENE could get people steamed up the way that the writer Norman Mailer, who died last Fall at the age of 84, could. While few questioned his skill and his name always elicited a certain kind of awe, it seems that nearly every special interest group, none more than feminists, had a gripe against him. Literary aficionados treated him as a sort of writer's Richard Burton, someone who squandered his talent in futile projects or never quite fulfilled the promise of his first novel *The Naked and the Dead* written at the age of twenty-four. This was not the Mailer I knew.

I first met Mailer in the Spring of 1978. I began reading Mailer in earnest while preparing for my PhD at UCSB. My focus was the then burgeoning field of American-Jewish novels, and since Mailer did not figure high in that canon, I had left him until last to read. When I did, I became fascinated with his work and shifted the entire focus of my thesis. Through a friend, I got Mailer's home address and wrote a note to him about my ideas. He replied by mail, and so began our correspondence. Mailer did not like writing letters and, although they were brief, they encouraged further contact. Eventually, we met. Ironically, we looked a little like each other: stocky Jewish types, about the same height with curly hair—his a grizzly version of mine. But his eyes, a Mediterranean sea blue, were his most startling feature. He greeted me warmly and I discovered that contrary to the newspaper reports, he had an ingratiating personality, was quick to laugh, and did not hold himself with any airs. The rapport was instant.

We spoke of many things: about my being Irish and how he was often mistaken for an Irishman in his younger days; his work on Gary Gilmore which was about to be published as *The Executioner's Song* and which would win him his second Pulitzer; and another project that was to emerge years later as *Ancient Evenings*, the only Mailer work, I must confess, I could not

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get through! He spoke of his Jewish upbringing, his grandfather who was a rabbi, and his distance from the faith. He had never written anything negative about it though, as he had promised his mother he would not. He was at heart "the nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn."

When the time came to part, Mailer told me that he goes on feeling. He said he got a good feeling from me from my letters and our conversation and that "we would be friends for life." He was true to his word. Our friendship lasted from that day until his death last week. Over the years whenever I went to New York or he to LA, we met. There are wonderful memories: a Passover seder I conducted in his home in Brooklyn Heights; a hilarious evening with his sixth wife, Norris, and several of his children (eight from six different marriages); and numerous dinners and chats. He was truly a family man, and his marriage to Norris that lasted twenty-seven years till his death was an unending love affair. I saw none of that pugnacious personality that he was infamous for, not even when I once was twenty minutes late for a lunch date with him. Nor was I just the acolyte at the feet of the master. His friendship was a two-way street. He encouraged my literary pursuits, got me an agent, and put me in touch with several of his literary and nonliterary friends. Mailer told me that I was his unofficial rabbi. He even initiated a correspondence between me and the murderer Jack Abbott, who for a time considered converting to Judaism.

As happens over the years, our contact dissipated, though at my birthday I always received one of his hand-drawn self portraits. Knowing that time was short, I went to LA in March when he came to discuss his final novel, *The Castle in the Forest*. Mailer by then was weak—he walked with two canes, was hard of hearing and could not see well—but his mind was as astute as ever. He spoke like he wrote, in ornate, somewhat opaque sentences, the ideas probing deep into the psyche of America. He kept us enthralled for over an hour. After he finished, I went to greet him. "Hello Norman," I said. "Who is that?" he asked, like the aged Isaac in the Bible when Jacob comes for a blessing. "It's Mashey," I said, leaning in so he could see me more clearly. He grabbed my arm and held on. "Mashey, Mashey, how wonderful, how wonderful that you came." His eyes glistened with tears and mine did too. We talked for a few minutes and made plans to meet later that year when I was to come to Provincetown for the annual meeting of the Norman Mailer Society, one of the few such societies devoted to a living author. Alas, it was not meant to be. He took ill a few days before I arrived. And now he is gone.

Mailer writing on Henry Miller once noted that "a writer of the largest dimension can alter the nerves and marrow of a nation." I think it is an apt appraisal of Mailer's *own* contribution to our nation's literature and consciousness. Like a true prophet, Mailer was not always appreciated in his own time—he was dropped by the *Norton Anthology of Literature* in its latest edition—but he will always be someone whose work speaks to what it means to be an American. I will miss my friend dearly.