

ENTANGLED MINDS:  
FORTY YEARS OF ENCOUNTERING  
NORMAN MAILER

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IN 2004 AT THE INAUGURAL MEETING IN NEW YORK of the Norman Mailer Society, J. Michael Lennon kindly introduced me as “an early Mailer scholar.” Since few in Mailer circles had heard from me in twenty years, I was pleased to find that several people actually remembered one of my three books on Mailer or the 1975 *Partisan Review* interview.

Although in the dim past I had considered myself a Mailer scholar, when few of us existed, after changing careers a couple of times I lost touch with the field. My contact with Norman (as I had called him since our first meeting in 1972) since the mid-eighties was sporadic, more a function of my life changes than his. In recent years, through the magic of e-mail, I was able to stay in touch with him and Norris, and am grateful to Mike Lennon, the late Bob Lucid, Barry Leeds and others I knew in the old days for creating the Mailer Society and including me in its work. What is remarkable about the Society is how many of us have had long, fruitful relationships with Norman, his work, and his company of friends. Now that Norman has passed on, their stories will be told. Here is mine.

In 1967 I became a PhD candidate in the English Department of a traditional Canadian university, there because of my then-husband's company transfer from New York to Toronto. The object of faculty comments about my “unfortunate American degrees,” I was determined to tough it out in a graduate school where women and specializing in American literature were anomalies.

One day while browsing in the campus bookstore, I was drawn to a paperback with an intriguing title: *Cannibals and Christians*. After reading an excerpt or two, I bought the book. That was my first encounter with Norman Mailer, and he pushed back the limits of my mind almost immediately. I thought anyone who aimed at changing the consciousness of our time not only through his ideas but also his craft was worth a read. I've since learned of the quantum physics concept of "entangled minds"—fields of energy connected through conscious thought—and now recognize that my own entanglement with Norman Mailer began that day.

Over the next year I read everything he had published. Then it was time to declare my dissertation topic. Needless to say, my faculty advisor was skeptical about the prospect of a study on Mailer. However, the departmental consensus, that one doesn't write about a living author, shifted a few weeks later when I announced my family's transfer back to the United States. At that point I think they figured I'd give up and fade away. Before leaving, however, I did manage to secure a professor's agreement to serve as dissertation supervisor if I could find a counterpart in an American university who knew enough about Mailer to critique the content of my writing.

I was grateful to find Dr. Edward Mitchell at Ohio University, who not only served in that capacity but later recommended my much-revised dissertation to the Ohio U press for publication. By the end of 1971 I defended my work in front of a committee including an eighteenth-century scholar confused about why I had been allowed to write about such a controversial *living* author to begin with. Although I lived in Dayton, Ohio, at the time, I returned to Ontario to receive my doctorate in person, just to show that persistence paid off.

Then the fun part began. With my new PhD in hand, I was hired as Assistant Professor of English at Wright State University in Dayton in the fall of 1972. That fall I learned that Norman Mailer was appearing at Ohio State University and I decided to attend.

He was on the university lecture circuit in those days and clearly loved engaging the crowd. After his talk I waited to see if I could speak with him. Seizing the moment, I explained that I'd written my dissertation on his work and was interested in bringing him over to Wright State for a similar appearance. He apologized for not being available to meet with me and suggested I contact his agent. My first letter to him in October 1972 reminded him of

the encounter, and his December response indicated interest in speaking at WSU. Thus began my relationship with the subject of my scholarship.

Over the years I've come to understand why my faculty advisors were concerned about scholarship on living authors. The canon is incomplete. Nothing definitive can be said. More significantly, a personal relationship with the author shifts our perspectives. Entangled minds influence each other. It would be fascinating to learn how the many of us who have been part of Norman's constellation over the years have been influenced by him and in turn have had an impact on him. I personally had hoped to have one more conversation with him about spirituality before his passing, partly in order to share my own experiences, which I believe could have expanded his own thinking. Now that Norman has passed on, it will still be difficult for those of us who admired and respected his work and loved him as a friend to be "objective" about what he wrote, said, and did, not that objectivity is truly possible (another learning from quantum physics). In a way we are the Mailer literary appreciation society and because of his generosity and loyalty to his friends have benefited in many ways from knowing him. I certainly have.

In the spring of 1973 Norman did come to speak at Wright State, and I introduced him to the community. Even today a large photograph of Norman and me walking onto the stage before his presentation hangs in my living room. Between picking him up at the airport, taking him home to meet my family, and depositing him back to catch his flight, I had an opportunity to begin to know the person behind the persona. His traveling companion, Suzanne, and he stayed at our house talking until 2 a.m. I remember his saying to me that he was the most unpopular man in America—next to Richard Nixon. I reminded him gently that most of the population of America had never heard of him. He seemed startled by that thought, but conceded that most of his critics were concentrated in the Northeast. I think he appreciated my pushing back a bit in ways that made him think. My own revelation was that he was a kind, generous man, as well as an endlessly fascinating intellectual and risk-taker.

Between Norman's generosity and that of my English department, I felt as though I'd emerged into a benevolent universe that supported and valued my work. An intense period of Mailer scholarship and friendship followed for me. I was able to publish a collection of essays offering a variety of perspectives on Norman's life and art as well as a comprehensive bibliogra-

phy in 1974. The bibliography included unpublished work, which I was able to list through a connection and subsequent friendship with the late Robert F. Lucid, Norman's first official biographer and a distinguished English professor at the University of Pennsylvania. Norman, his secretaries, and his mother wisely saved old manuscripts and memorabilia (much of which now resides in the Mailer archive at the University of Texas). Most of these early papers were stored in a vault in Manhattan for many years. Bob Lucid and I spent a splendid day in 1973 sorting through the vault for unpublished manuscripts, mostly short stories and essays going back as far as 1938, when Norman attended the Bronx High School of Science. These were listed in the bibliography, along with Bob's account, in his gracious introduction, of how the papers were assembled.

During this period I asked for and Norman granted me an opportunity for a major interview with him. In May 1975, we met for lunch in the Algonquin Hotel in Manhattan, a traditional favorite gathering place of the New York literati, then went up to a room Norman had arranged for us to use for the interview. Over the next several hours I asked Norman everything I wanted to know about his thought and his work. My questions pushed him in ways that now appear to me to have been toward getting him to agree with my own perceptions. I recorded the entire interview, then had it transcribed. I sent the entire fifty-page manuscript to Norman, who edited it carefully in his own hand, using purple and black pens. I sent him a clean copy of the edits, which he tinkered with a bit more, then approved. Through his literary agent, Scott Meredith, we were able to get the interview placed in the finest literary journal of its time, *Partisan Review*. In a letter to me dated August 13, 1975, Norman wrote, "Just a quick line to tell you that I finally received *Partisan* and read the interview and am really pleased with it. I think it's the best expression of what I think that's appeared in interview form, and the structure and tenacity of your questions had of course everything to do with that. . . . If it's in *Partisan*, it'll be read, and I think sooner or later it will have as much quiet influence as any interview can have. . . ." In later years the interview was reprinted in two collections of Norman's work, thanks to the efforts of Mike Lennon: *Pieces and Pontifications* and *Conversations with Norman Mailer*. Needless to say, I was very grateful to Norman for granting the interview and working so hard to make it matter.

Finally, in 1976, a book stemming from my doctoral dissertation was published by Ohio University Press as *Existential Battles: The Growth of*

*Norman Mailer*. In it, I argued for a critical approach to his work that would “accept Mailer’s givens as its own and judge him by his own standards rather than insist that he conform to accepted literary tastes and practices.” Such an approach would “view his work as a process aimed at exploring the human subconscious and expanding its consciousness and would measure his success or failure in each undertaking by the extent to which he had done so as well as by the effectiveness of the form and his style.” Three decades later, I’m amazed at how “out there” such an approach was, although I’m still convinced it has merit for a writer of Mailer’s talents and interests. I’m also amazed at how much this approach explains my own life and work. Entangled minds again.

When *Existential Battles* was in press, I decided that the next Mailer project I would tackle was cataloguing the foreign editions of his work as a kind of coda to my earlier bibliography. This turned into a lengthier and more interesting project than I’d imagined. I had no idea how extensive these editions were. Even Norman’s agent, Scott Meredith, couldn’t provide a complete list. The hunt led me to correspondence with a number of European, Russian, and Japanese Mailer scholars and an exchange of our books in their original languages. I was amazed at the popularity of *The Naked and the Dead* in Germany and Japan, although I never did figure out how “fug” was translated into Japanese.

Most importantly, the foreign editions project led to a friendship with Norman’s mother, Fannie Mailer. Mrs. Mailer (whom I could never bring myself to call “Fan,” as she requested) graciously invited me on a number of occasions to her apartment in Brooklyn Heights, where copies of most of Norman’s foreign editions were shelved on bookcases in her living room. She followed closely the course of his career as well as his life. After I would spend an hour or so cataloguing books, Mrs. Mailer would bring out a drop-leaf table covered with white linen and serve tea while we talked about Norman, his childhood, family, reputation, and work. I loved those times, and I’m sure she appreciated the opportunity to share her pride and affection for her son with someone who also cared about him. She made it clear that she was proud of her daughter, Barbara Mailer Wasserman, too, who in her own right had a distinguished career as an editor. I saw Barbara (who now looks very much like her mother did then) at the 2007 Mailer Society meeting in Provincetown a month before Norman passed on, and told her a story I had shared with her brother years earlier. It now seems almost prophetic. Shortly

after Fannie Mailer's passing in 1985, I wrote my condolences to Norman, then shared this experience: "Last night [August 30, 1985] I had a dream in which God came to your mother and said it was time to meet Jesus. She responded that she'd rather see her husband. Sure enough, his spirit appeared and they were reunited. You, Norris, and I were among those observing all this...." Norman wrote back, astonished at the dream, saying that it was just what his mother would have said and done: picked her husband over Jesus! I have a feeling she was there to meet him on his passing. Mrs. Mailer continued our friendship after I completed the foreign edition project, sending me occasional greeting cards and notes, and we would sometimes see each other at one of the gatherings of Mailer friends and family.

In the seventies and eighties Norman befriended many of us who cared about his work and saw its importance. But I was truly surprised early on at being included in his circle of friends and acquaintances who seemed to show up for all his parties and major presentations. I particularly remember the summer of 1975, shortly after the *Partisan Review* interview. My family and I had just moved again, this time to Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Leaving my husband to unpack, I headed to the Berkshires, to one of Norman's weekend parties to which I'd been invited. It was held at Yale Hill in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, the home of Norman and his fifth wife, Carol Stevens. The usual entourage was there. Jose Torres, the boxer, a couple of Norman's ex-wives, several of his children, and Molly Malone, then his secretary/assistant with whom I'd been corresponding and conversing for several years, were among them. I observed more than participated, amazed at how many people formed Norman's constellation and glad that I was one. There wasn't much time to talk with Norman. Too many people demanded his attention, something that still happened years later when he and Norris hosted the Mailer Society members first in New York, then at their Provincetown home.

I recall something else from that June night in Stockbridge. I was walking to my car to return to my motel when Norman caught up with me. We stood in the moonlight for a few minutes and talked—I have no idea about what—and then there was a silence when we just looked at each other. I felt what was between us shift to a different level of entanglement, when we could have crossed a line we'd both held in place. The moment passed, and there was never another.

I attended quite a few Mailer gatherings in New York in the next few years. I divorced, moved to New Jersey, and into academic administration rather than teaching. My days of writing about Norman were nearly over, although I did present a paper on his foreign editions at the first Mailer panel at the Modern Language Association, thanks to the efforts of Mike Lennon, with whom I had become friends in the mid-seventies. Mike was absolutely crucial, as were Bob Lucid and now Phil Sipiora and others, to the academic development of Mailer studies. Their far-sightedness and persistence in promoting Mailer's work has paid off in recent years, with the formation of the Mailer Society and the inception of the *Mailer Review*.

Some of the most memorable gatherings in the late seventies to mid-eighties included a party at Kathleen Kennedy Lawford's apartment overlooking the East River and a conversation I was surprised to find myself having with Arthur Schlesinger; a reading Norman did with Gore Vidal at which I sat behind Kurt Vonnegut and saw Paul Newman in person (short with great blue eyes); an exhibit of Norris's paintings in Soho at which I introduced my husband-to-be to the Mailer family; visits to Norman's Brooklyn Heights brownstone where the Lego sculpture of New York that's on the cover of *Cannibals and Christians* graced his living room, and conversations with Norris, as we developed our own friendship around our spirituality and mutual affection for Norman.

Although by 1984 my career path moved away from higher education, in recent years I have been pulled back into the Mailer orbit by the Mailer Society meetings and have been grateful to renew acquaintance with the Mailers and their community. Since Norman's passing, I've had occasion to reflect on these past forty years of a mind, heart, and spirit entangled with the subject of my scholarship. I'm not the one to offer a measured account of the Mailer canon. I leave that to younger scholars who didn't know him personally. Instead, I celebrate his life—all of it—which taught him and those of us who explored deeply with him much about being human, indeed heroic, in a confusing universe, where courage, intuition, and love guide your way. Over his seventy years of literary production and uncompromising engagement with the powers that be and the ones he imagined, Norman Mailer gave voice and form to generations seeking to understand and experience the deepest issues of our time. There was little separation between his life and his art, and it was in the juncture of the two that most of us who were drawn to him met him. When his full legacy is finally known and writ-

ten, I have no doubt that it will acknowledge how much he and his work changed the consciousness of our time. I know that he profoundly changed mine.

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