

ABOVE ALL, HE WAS NEVER AFRAID

M I C H A E L K . G L E N D A Y

IN BRITAIN THE MANY APPRECIATIONS, tributes and obituaries that followed Norman Mailer's death were overwhelmingly generous in their acknowledgement of his life and creative gifts. They recognized how at its best his dissenting voice had challenged the complaisance of an increasingly illiberal American world, challenging the fatuities and suppressions of his time and place. In the best of these tributes there was also a noticeable willingness to see Mailer's passing as that of the last of the literary lions, the last of a generation of American novelists who brought a war-hardened scepticism to bear upon new postwar tyrannies—as the *Observer's* editorial “Farewell to the Tough Guy” lamented, “in a world where novelists are nurtured in creative writing schools and garlanded by Oprah, he is taking a rougher-edged era with him to the grave. He fought and cursed and roared his way through an astonishing career that lit up America's cultural life for more than half a century. We won't look upon his like again” (32).

The same newspaper's front page carried two columns, the largest of which appropriately referred to Mailer as “a giant of American literature and one of the English language's greatest writers.” Toby Allen-Mills writing from New York for the *Sunday Times*, described Mailer as “an outrageous genius who wrote some of the finest books of the 20th century” and further consolidated the generational lament in his citation of “Stephen Amidon, the British writer, who said yesterday: ‘For a novelist of my generation, Mailer was an icon in so far as he combined being a great novelist with being a great engaged, political and cultural figure ... a public figure in the tradition of Hemingway. I don't think we will see anything like him again’” (18). Christopher Hitchens, for the *Guardian's* “Front Page Column Five,” headlined “Farewell to a Literary Great, with Chutzpah” could also offer little conso-

lation for the world Mailer leaves behind, commenting that “it’s quite surprisingly difficult to picture the cultural scene without him” (1).

In the *Guardian*’s extensive two-page obituary, James Campbell remembers James Baldwin’s memoir of his relationship with the young Mailer, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” which gives us an iconic picture of him in full possession of his vitality—“confident, boastful, exuberant, and loving—striding through the soft Paris nights like a gladiator” (34), an early insight into Mailer’s humanity that is sustained in the words of those who knew him personally. Campbell himself found in Mailer what he calls “a generosity of spirit, a willingness to share ideas and help younger writers” (34), while years after Baldwin’s observations, Christopher Hitchens was brought to know that “Norman Mailer was always somehow life-affirming, and his justly famous cocky grin was something that even his enemies had to envy” (2). In later years the young gladiator would turn into what the *Sunday Telegraph* termed “a rumbustious colossus” (19), who saw writing as nothing less than a courageous confrontation with the truth. For Bonnie Greer in the *Independent*, this was the irreducible Mailer, an artist who “believed that telling the truth was the only thing a writer could and should do. Above all, he was never afraid” (37).

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