

NOBEL WORTHY NORMAN MAILER

LAWRENCE GROBEL

IN THE DAYS BEFORE THE INTERNET, before e-mails, before cell phones, before fax machines—at least before the cheap accessibility to fax machines—when you wanted to send something quick and urgent you sent a telegram. Just remembering this makes me feel old. But I do remember because it was a telegram I sent to Norman Mailer that convinced him to honor an interview request he had agreed to but then wanted to cancel.

The year was 1983 and I was doing cable television interviews for the Playboy Channel. Mailer was one of my literary heroes. I had been reading him since I was a kid, and I devoured his books (*The Naked and the Dead*, *The Deer Park*, *An American Dream*, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* *The Armies of the Night*, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, *Of a Fire on the Moon*, *The Executioner's Song*) and his magazine pieces whenever he appeared in *Esquire*, *Harper's* or *Playboy*. Mailer could write about shit (literally), sex, superstition, marijuana, race, and angst better than anyone else—at least more entertainingly than any other writer I was aware of. His huge ego put a smile on my face, the way Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali would do some years later. Mailer often liked to compare himself to a heavyweight fighter, and he liked to think that he could go the distance with Hemingway and Fitzgerald and Faulkner, and could knock out his contemporaries, including Philip Roth, William Styron, Gore Vidal, and Truman Capote. He called one collection of his *Advertisements for Myself*. And the thing about him was, like Ali, who called himself “The Greatest of All Time,” Mailer’s work was often that good. He pissed off feminists, rankled gay writers, and got Saul Bellow to say that he’d gladly give Mailer his Nobel Prize, if only Mailer had anything to trade.

When he was young Mailer liked to challenge other writers to fight, arm wrestle, or debate. He once got into a fight with actor Rip Torn during the

making of Mailer's *Maidstone* and bit off a piece of Torn's ear. He headbutted Gore Vidal at a party. He stabbed his second wife and wound up in a mental hospital for seventeen days. (When I asked him about the doctor's diagnosis, that he thought Mailer was having an acute paranoid breakdown with delusional thinking, and that he was both homicidal and suicidal, Mailer answered: "Well, since I didn't kill anybody after that and I didn't commit suicide or have a mental breakdown, my guess is that he wasn't too accurate.")

He also ran for mayor of New York, helped get John F. Kennedy elected with a superb 10,000-word essay ("Superman Comes to the Supermarket") in *Esquire*, and was one of the leaders in the March on Washington protesting the Vietnam War. His books won many of the major prizes (the National Book Award and two Pulitzers) and his work took on the big themes like war, terrorism, the battle of the sexes, religion, art, politics, ancient history and the CIA.

As recently as May 2007, he pinpointed why terrorists are so hated ("because they destroy the idea that you are going to have a meaningful ending to your life") and took a jab at President Bush, calling him "a spiritual terrorist ... creating fear where fear may not necessarily need to reside." He summed up the lunacy of the current conflict in Iraq with the sharp observation we came to expect from him: The terrorists "can't destroy us. We can destroy them, but not through war. We can destroy them through endless careful police work for decades. But instead we go to war, because the war has served so many purposes for people whose motives are neither clean nor illumined. But profit-oriented." And in his last book, *On God: An Uncommon Conversation* published in October 2007, he rejected both organized religion and atheism, and took issue with one of the Ten Commandments—believing adultery a lesser evil than others suffered in a bad marriage. Technology, he professed, was the Devil's most brilliant creation.

By the time I had the opportunity to interview him, Mailer had mellowed enough to be considered an elder statesman (he was 60). He had complained somewhere that he wasn't enjoying being interviewed very much any longer because journalists were giving him too much respect, and he even offered one reporter five dollars for every challenging question. That was reason enough to want to go head-to-head with him. If I were going to make my living interviewing people, then I should challenge myself as well. And getting a rise out of Norman Mailer seemed like a sufficient challenge.

So I got in touch with his publisher and made the request. Mailer had a new novel coming out about ancient Egypt (*Ancient Evenings*) and he was coming to Los Angeles to promote it. He agreed to meet with me. I read an advanced copy of his long novel and did my research about his life. But a few weeks before our interview I got a call from his secretary saying that Mr. Mailer had decided to cancel. There was no explanation. I had put in a lot of time preparing for this and I didn't want to let him off the hook easily. So I thought about writing him a letter, and then decided that a telegram would be more immediate, and more impressive, since it wasn't cheap. In fact, the two-page telegram I composed citing reasons why he should honor his agreement wound up costing \$90 to send. But it was worth it, because Mailer reconsidered and in April 1983, I met with him at a hotel in L.A. and, though nervous to interrogate a favorite writer of mine, I knew one thing for sure: I wasn't going to toss him any softballs for him to hit out of the park. I was going to be tough, and if he were up for it, it would be an interesting meeting.

In the hour and a half we spent together, Mailer was definitely up for it. He didn't like it when I brought up the stabbing of his wife and he asked me why I wanted to know about that. He felt uncomfortable when I pursued this line of questioning, saying that he wrote a book of poetry with the title *Death to the Ladies*, and he wrote about using a knife, and it was obviously a subject worthy of exploration. His discomfort and my questions led to some good television, not the kind you see very often. I even told him I knew about his five-dollar remark for challenging questions, and he said that I had risen to that occasion.

What I found upon editing that interview later was that Mailer had a very precise way of thinking. His sentences were complex yet clear. He didn't hem and haw. He spoke in perfect paragraphs. And he had interesting things to say.

Grobel: You believe that in Hemingway's time there were great writers like Faulkner, Steinbeck, Wolfe, Fitzgerald, and, of course, Hemingway. But that's not true today. Why not?

Mailer: We're getting to questions that are too large to answer. It's probably because of the prevailing currents of the age. Hemingway and Faulkner between them captured profound elements in the American soul. At that time, reading was the most profound way to deepen your knowledge of exis-

tence. So writers were respected more. They were more important. We're moving from writing into electronic circuitry, television, computers. Print, as such, is going to disappear. It's a long way from going away, but there is a point where the act of reading a book may become a rare luxury, equal to eating Russian caviar. People now read off word processors on screens where not only are the letters abominable but the image is full of flickering. If you could normally read a hundred pages without stopping, will you be able to read ten or fifteen under those conditions? It's as if the very sensuous qualities of reading are being taken away from us. In other words, reading's become an effort, equal to, say, having a pair of uncomfortable plastic ear-phones on, the sort they give you in an airplane, where it hurts your ears and your head and the sound's not very good. So you've got to work for the movie that you're seeing.

Grobel: Your editor compared you to Picasso in terms of your range, your refusal to age or to lose energy. Is that an agreeable comparison for you?

Mailer: It's a little on the grand side. Picasso's a great artist who made huge changes in the world. There are two kinds of artist. There's the artist who essentially has an identity, and we turn to that artist to feel the resonance of that particular identity. Matisse, Renoir, Cezanne, to a lesser extent Van Gogh. We know what we're going to get when we look at their work. But with Picasso, he was interested in throwing away his own identity in order to find a new one. Style for him was not something that was attached to his identity; style was a cutting edge with which he attacked the nature of reality. So he went through a whole series of phases and changes. I find literary style is that for me. But don't trust what I say because it's self-serving, as all writers' remarks are. The negative aspect of that is, 'He can't write good any more so his new style is a departure.' Take your pick.

Grobel: You once told Mike Wallace that violence and creativity have a twin-like relation. Do you still believe that?

Mailer: I think it's still true. That's part of the problem: if you cut all the violence out of society, you also cut out all the creativity. In fact, that's just what we're doing now: working for a law and order society that will not have any violence in the streets. At the same time things are getting less and less creative. I've never taken myself so seriously as to speak of Mailer's Law of this or that, but I finally have one. It's Mailer's Law of Architectural Precedence

in American Universities. Go to any university in the country and you have no problem determining the order in which the buildings were erected on that campus. The more atrocious the architecture, the newer the building. If the building next to you is less atrocious than the one you're in, it was built before. The oldest building on the campus is invariably the nicest. That says something about creativity going out of life. It also says something about violence going out of life, because there's a tendency in American life to become more and more safe.

Grobel: Do you think American life is safer now than in the past?

Mailer: No, of course not. Because it can't be done. It's a vain, false enterprise. A pious enterprise. We're doing it as a cover, which politicians talk about all the time, in their efforts to legislate it. Concomitant with the growth of technology there's a sort of spiritual software that accompanies technology, and that is control over our lives. You push a button delicately here and a button delicately there to adjust the situation. Those people detest violence because they keep breaking up the patterns, and the control. More than half the people in this country opt completely for control of their lives. What they don't control is their death, and that drives 'em right up the wall. One big reason why I'm so obsessed with Egypt and decided to write *Ancient Evenings* is precisely that I wanted to write about a culture that gave great preface to death; that lived for it, prepared for it, dwelt within it, in which virtually all of one's acts in one's life were steered toward one's death. It seemed to me that this is much more profound than what we have now. That's why people have such extraordinary reactions to *Ancient Evenings*, they love it or they detest it. Because people, without exception, who hate it are people who love a lot of control and high tech in their lives and don't like to talk or think about death.

Grobel: Do you still reflect much on the horror of modern life?

Mailer: We're in danger of a nuclear war until we get to a point where the sustenance of existence is almost entirely leeched out. About the time that we live with too many people on earth, all living in high-rise buildings, all utterly colorless, dull, and oppressive, and every building put up is as ugly as the one before, and when we drive we breathe nothing but polluted fumes on superhighways and there's smog everywhere, and all the palm trees are wilted as they are in Mexico City, and the rivers are filthy, and everything is flat and

dull, and sex is merely an extension of herpes, etc., etc., and people are dying of AIDS all over the place—at that point, the nuclear bomb is going to seem welcome to people. Because at least it'll be their last shot at transcendence. We'll all go up together in that great white light. And at that point, we're in danger.

Mailer has written thirty-six books, a third of them novels. And though many critics believe that some of his best writing is his journalism, he always played that down in favor of his fiction.

“The only important piece of nonfiction that I wrote was *The Armies of the Night*. *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* is a good piece of reportage. *Of a Fire on the Moon* [his book about space and the astronauts] is a very good book. *Marilyn* is a good biography, but tainted to a degree. Where's all the great nonfiction? The novels are much better.”

Before he published his novels about the CIA (*Harlot's Ghost*) and the young Adolf Hitler (*The Castle in the Forest*), I asked him which of his books he thought he'd be remembered for. He answered, “*The Naked and the Dead*, *The Deer Park*, *An American Dream*, *The Armies of the Night*, *Marilyn*, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, *The Executioner's Song*, and *Ancient Evenings*. Those will probably be the ones.”

His last novel, *The Castle in the Forest*, was his attempt to explore the evil that was Hitler. Like his books on space, Egypt, and the CIA, this too had been planned as a trilogy. But like the others, he was too old and too fragile to reach his ambitious goal. His working title for the novel was *Hitler's Mother*, which probably would have attracted a wider audience. When I saw him again, in July 2007, he told me, “*Hitler's Mother* would have sold more copies, no question, but on the other hand I didn't like it, I thought it was ‘right on the nose,’ I don't like titles that are too head-on. I thought *The Castle in the Forest* was such a pretty title for a book that's not that pretty. I want to go on with the Hitler book but whether I will or not remains to be seen. I've made too many promises over the years for books I didn't write. It's probably my last novel. It's a matter of having the energy to keep writing and I may not have the stamina.”

His stamina had taken considerable blows that would have destroyed most men. He had heart surgery a few years ago, and both his lungs collapsed and he was in intensive care under critical conditions. He had arthritic hips, forcing him to walk with canes. He had asthma, which made

it difficult to breathe. He had lost a great deal of weight because he had no appetite for food. But he hadn't lost his fire. He still spoke out. He still wrote about the horror of modern life. They awarded the Nobel Prize to Doris Lessing in 2007. They should have given it to Mailer. It's the one prize that evaded him, so that he might finally have been able to have an answer to Saul Bellow's cutting remark. Only if they gave Norman Mailer the Nobel Prize, he wouldn't have traded it.