

ANOTHER LOOK
AT NORMAN MAILER,
FASCINATED WITH GOD
AND RELIGION

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NORMAN MAILER HAS BROKEN HIS LAST TIES WITH TIME and made passage “Into the Mystery,” the title he wanted to give to his latest book summarizing his fifty years of reflections on God. His publishers, seeking a counterpoint to a temporal market of best sellers doubting or indicting Divinity for ineptitude, insisted on *On God: An Uncommon Conversation*. Mailer took existence and God more seriously than many a theologian and most bishops of my acquaintance do. Taking these seriously may be, in one of his favorite phrases, as good a definition of morality as we are likely to get.

Mailer has been well remembered as a great writer and, at the very least, an interesting if overpowering presence in American culture for almost sixty years. It was inevitable that more than a few memorials would be generated from newspaper clips by those who never knew him. These tend to portray the sensational rather than the sensible and sensitive Mailer, a burly tousle-haired genius who grew old along with us battling at one time or another with just about everybody in his life, ex-wives, tax collectors, critics, actors in his movies, fellow guests on talk shows, and any writer contending with him for the championship crown of American letters.

These recollections are filled with such adjectives as “pugnacious” and salted with the lime of his many marriages and of his giving one of his wives a superficial stab wound in the wild earlier passages of his extraordinary life. But for me, and for many of his amazingly large circle of close friends, the

words beyond *genius* that rise unbidden to describe Norman include *dear*, *loyal*, *good-humored*, *well-mannered* and *fun to be with*.

These friends understand what Norman meant when he once said to a writer who had profiled him at length, "You missed the twinkle." Even in the midst of vigorously pressing some contrarian argument on you, he would give away his good nature by pointing to his eye and saying "Notice the twinkle!"

Let's stipulate that if Norman twinkled he also knew that he was, mostly with great charm, self-absorbed. After all, he entitled an early book, *Advertisements for Myself*, and soon became Boswell to his own Doctor Johnson, making himself the refracting lens for the American experience that he observed so accurately in many of his later books and articles. Woody Allen got a laugh in his 1973 movie *Sleeper* by claiming that Mailer had left his "ego to Harvard." A generation ago Norman identified "ego," regarding himself and his times ruefully, as "the word of the century."

It is also true that Norman signaled to his readers as Teddy Roosevelt did his Rough Riders, waving them forward, follow me and feel what I feel and see what I see of the great events of our time. These included World War II and the CIA, the polished rise of John F. Kennedy, the unruly armies of the anti-Vietnam War movement, that era's noisy counterpoint political conventions, America's seemingly Boy Scout virtuous astronauts, such as John Glenn, and their journeys into space and fame, and America's seemingly damned psychopaths, such as Gary Gilmore, and their one-way tickets into notoriety and oblivion.

But beyond all of what Emerson called "noisy fame," one met Norman the friend who would let his world fall aside so that he could concentrate on and understand you. These simple, profoundly human exchanges were never reported in the newspapers, however. Let me share just a few of mine with you.

I recall meeting Norman for a drink at Elaine's in Manhattan at a rather early Thursday afternoon hour. He explained that he had to leave that evening to spend the weekend giving such support as he could to an old friend who was going to prison on the following Monday.

And I remember lunching with him in Chicago on his journey to visit Jack Abbott in a maximum security prison in southern Illinois, drawn there to encourage this man who possessed such literary gifts that Norman enthusiastically paraphrased them as he described his mission as one of working

so that this man's now-muffled voice would be heard by the world. After Norman worked for his release, Jack Abbott brought him great grief by murdering a waiter while on a pass from the halfway house in which he was living in New York. Mailer decried the crime but, bringing down lightning bolts of criticism on himself, spoke up for what he found good in this man at his subsequent trial.

If you asked him for his opinion of something you had written, you received a clear, direct response that neither spared nor indulged you. He was tough on telling you what to leave out, especially on when "to kill your little darlings," and he was sympathetic about the truths he wanted you to get in. He once urged me to write a novel about the sex abuse scandal among Catholic priests, less to condemn than to explore the imperfect humanity of the priests caught up in molesting children.

Norman knew how to counterpunch with his adversaries but, like the old club fighter he claimed to be, also knew when to return to a neutral corner. John Blades, then editor of the *Chicago Tribune Book World*, once asked me to pass on his request to Norman to review a new book by Germaine Greer, the famous feminist with whom Norman had had famous public differences. He demurred with the words, "Some checks should not be cashed."

It was the experience of a lifetime to read and comment at his request on the theological conversations that his old friend Michael Lennon conducted with him that became his final book. It was a time of hard work and rollicking good humor as I made observations and answered questions about Catholic teachings in long e-mails that went back and forth like the tides. One sensed, and Mike confirmed, that, although failing physically, Norman was at full strength spiritually, taking delight in entering the bull ring of making a book for the last time.

I was a fairly well known priest when, over thirty years ago, I decided to leave and marry. I experienced a strange reaction from Chicago's then John Cardinal Cody, who wanted to force me to move out of the city and from many priests who stopped sending me Christmas cards but wrote letters of condolence, as if I had died, to my mother.

Norman did not alter when alteration he found, however, and stood with me through all these months while I waited for permission from the Vatican, writing to me once of how he felt that I was going through something more difficult than anything he had experienced in his own life. This was hardly true but it was typical of the moral support he provided so simply

and directly, indeed, to use a word few have associated with him, so purely, that is, so clean and free of other motivations, resonating as truly as a church bell across a hushed valley. This was, as hundreds of others can attest, the way Norman gave of himself without reserve, caution, and with never any bill included in the envelope.

He became a close friend to my wife, to us, I should say, and stayed with us on trips to Chicago. We visited him and his remarkable wife Norris, surely Katharine Hepburn to his Spencer Tracy, many times in Provincetown on Cape Cod, the last time when he already very ill but had finished his last book and understood that he would soon enter “into the Mystery.” He asked us to sit on either side of him at dinner that evening and hugged and kissed us both and whispered softly, “I love you,” as we prepared to leave. That is how I remember Norman, uncomplaining, unafraid, and without self-pity, the gracious host who was saying good night but knew that he was really saying goodbye.