

THE DEATH OF NORMAN MAILER; THE BIRTH OF THE NORMAN MAILER SOCIETY

B A R R Y H . L E E D S

MY FRIEND NORMAN

I have returned from the funeral in Provincetown of a beloved friend of forty years. It was a beautiful but emotionally exhausting experience. My friend was generous of his time, treasure, and spirit. He was deeply loved by his nine children, most of whom spoke at the grave site. I never knew him to be less than great of heart and mind. He was known to the world in various degrees of exaggeration or oversimplification, and police were necessary to keep paparazzi from the dignified private ceremony. By the way, he wrote more than forty significant books, won almost every known literary prize (including the National Book Award and two Pulitzers), and left his indelible mark on American literature in his sixty-year career. With the passing of this great man, an era ends.—Barry H. Leeds, Ph.D.

This letter, which appeared in *The Hartford Courant* for Tuesday, November 13, 2007, would seem to be the end of the story. Far from it. I have written elsewhere* at length of the development and fruition of my friendship with Norman Mailer. But there's at least one more chapter to the story.

MY FRIEND JOHN WHALEN-BRIDGE

In the late spring of 2002, a new player, a new colleague, a new friend strode upon the scene. John Whalen-Bridge, an English professor at the National University of Singapore, contacted me first by email, in which he immediately impressed me as a Mailer critic of acute perception; then by telephone,

which established him as an incisive man of letters. From his gentle, soft voice and precise articulacy, I could picture him: a benign, bespectacled man in early middle age who weighed about 125.

I was right: 125 kilograms. When I first met John, I saw that although he was about my height (six feet) he weighed about seventy-five pounds more (I weighed 200), all muscle mass and sinew. An accomplished martial artist, he would later become heavyweight grappling champion of Singapore. With the large Buddhist tattoo on his massive bicep, he looked like nothing so much as a Hell's Angel named "Tiny." Yet the rest of my initial impressions were true: he was gentle of voice and demeanor, and very smart.

John came to my home in Connecticut, delivered by his wife, Helena, and two sons, by prior arrangement so that I could drive him to Provincetown in order to try to persuade Norman to allow us to start a Norman Mailer Society, something that he had steadfastly opposed whenever Mike Lennon or I had broached it. Thus began what I thought of as our Road Warrior mission.

As I drove, my Jeep seemed to fly as fast as the time did, not on fossil fuel so much as intellectual flights of critical perception: John was bright; he was open; he was funny; he was ravenous. We didn't stop more than three or four times each way to score and inhale grinders. Upon reaching Provincetown, we checked into the Cape Inn and went directly to Mike Lennon's home, where John ate a can of mixed nuts and we each had a couple of drinks, except me. I was still driving. We discussed our chances of convincing Norman and arranged to meet at the Mailer house for drinks before dinner.

After freshening up at the motel, we walked over to Norman's place. John and I had each brought a gift of single malt scotch. Since I was no longer the designated driver, it seemed only right to join the others in drinking the first bottle over a couple of hours of spirited conversation. Mr. Mailer, as John addressed him, insisted on being called Norman; but he brooked no mention of the Mailer Society.

It was on this occasion that I first met John Buffalo Mailer, Norman's youngest son, as an adult. He soon left us to our own devices, and Mike took us over to the Martin House, where Norman treated us to a sumptuous dinner and we regaled one another with hyperbolic tales and raunchy jokes. Still, no mention of the Mailer Society was allowed to intrude.

Between dinner and dessert, both Mike and I felt the urge to release liquid bodily wastes through voluntarily controlled valves in our lower abdo-

mens. When we returned two minutes later from taking a leak, John said, “Welcome to the Norman Mailer Society,” while Norman merely looked at us puckishly. That was it: simple as that.

And that’s where a big new story starts, but that’s for another time and place. Except that as a coda to the evening, we sat up celebrating the new Society with the second bottle of scotch. When that was gone, we retired to our beds for a few hours of sleep before Jeeping back to Connecticut, mission accomplished thanks to John.