

IN MEMORIAM

PETER LEVENDA

NORMAN MAILER VERY KINDLY SUPPLIED A FOREWORD to my *Unholy Alliance*. That foreword became part of his chapter on the occult in his book about writing, *The Spooky Art*.

I had known Mailer over a period of almost thirty years, since the time he began writing *The Executioner's Song*. That was because a friend of mine—the late Judith McNally—became his assistant then (the mid-1970s). We all lived in Brooklyn Heights in those days, and Mr. Mailer's brownstone was across the street from where Judith lived and about a block from my apartment.

This was not a relationship I deliberately cultivated, largely because I was certain that a lot of would-be writers were always trying to get him to read their manuscripts or open doors for them in the publishing world, or maybe they just wanted his autograph. Instead, I maintained a kind of professional distance from a man I admired greatly (hey, I'm a New Yorker and that's pretty much what we do!) but helped out from time to time: when his printer wasn't working, or by locating some research materials he needed to which I had access. I would meet him and his wife, Norris Church Mailer, on those too rare occasions and they were always gracious and charming.

When *Unholy Alliance* was first published in 1994, however—as a rack-sized paperback—I found I had attracted a fan. Although my friend Judith would opportune him occasionally by pushing one manuscript or another of mine in front of him—those of my (still) unpublished novels—and he would always react favorably, I was still very shy of actually seeking his advice on anything I was working on. After all, the gulf between his craft and mine was considerable. I knew I still had a lot of work to do. As one of the most prolific authors I had ever known, he was always very busy.

But *Unholy Alliance* got his attention. He has stated publicly that he read the book three times, and I can assure you that is so. Mailer was not the sort to hand out praise where it wasn't due, or to suffer fools gladly (as anyone who has read his work will realize at once). I am not putting all this down to brag; far from it. What I want to emphasize is the nobility of a writer of his stature in dealing with a relative unknown. Because of what is not discussed in the obituaries you will read about: his kindness and generosity towards other writers. And I am not the only one, not by far.

I admired his political position on the Vietnam War and, later, on the Iraq War. I admired his approach to culture and the politics of culture. I admired his lack of fear in approaching everything he thought worthwhile, whether it was running for political office or directing films or making his contribution to the JFK assassination literature. If you doubt he was a great writer—probably the greatest American author of our generation—you need only pick up *An American Dream*, *Of A Fire on the Moon*, *The Armies of the Night*, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* ... or just read the *first page* of *The Gospel according to the Son*. Only Mailer would dare to write in the first person as Jesus one day, and as the Devil the next (*The Castle in the Forest*). Questions of life and death, God and the Devil, good and evil, and the war between the sexes occupied him for most of his life but especially in the last twenty years or so. He became almost a Gnostic in the way he dealt with these issues. He could cut through a theological argument with a mind sharpened on first-hand experience of war, marriage, politics, and of course literature. His novel of the CIA—*Harlot's Ghost*—is truly one of his best works and very probably the best novelization in existence of the CIA and its history up to the Kennedy election and the Bay of Pigs invasion. Again, I ask you to suspend any disbelief for a moment and go back and read Mailer. You will be struck by a kind of weird nostalgia for a time when values were being earnestly discussed—not from a tediously dogmatic religious position, but—from the perspective of a cultured, literate author who wrote as easily in fiction as in nonfiction and for whom fiction was just another way of writing nonfiction. The noise that passes for debate in the dawn of the twenty-first century is all form and no substance—cotton candy and Wonder Bread—when set against the red meat of Mailer's journalism. He takes no prisoners; not even as a *Prisoner of Sex*, a book that caught the most flack from the feminist movement even as he believed himself to be a defender and apologist for women and women's rights.

But it is the man I knew in the past few years that I memorialize here. Visiting him in Provincetown during the annual Norman Mailer Conference, reacquainting myself with his accomplished wife and children, I was able to have some long conversations with him on a wide range of issues. The first year I attended the conference, Judith McNally—who was still working for him all these years, more than twenty-five as I recall—was there and in fine form. We sat and listened to him discuss the ancient Egyptian concept of the soul, talking about all of this in detail, off-the-cuff and without notes, in the Provincetown Theatre before an audience of his close friends and admirers before reading some pages of *Ancient Evenings*, his sprawling novel of death and reincarnation. It was an event that still resonates with me, several years after the fact: Norman Mailer, in person, talking about Egyptian religion, mummification, and the *ka*.

By the same time next year Judith had died, tragically young. Preceding him in death by only eighteen months, I like to think that she has been making arrangements for Norman's reception in the Afterlife (a suggestion for which I am sure my ears will be boxed when it is my turn to ascend the Chariot!).

There is really too much to say. My condolences go out to Norris, Norman's wife for twenty-seven years, and to the rest of his family, his friends, to Mike Lennon his archivist and biographer, to Dwayne who was Judith's opposite number in Provincetown and a writer himself, to the members of the Norman Mailer Society, and to all those readers and fans who recognize that a giant has passed among them, and disappeared ... only to leave his writing as testimony to his genius.

During my last conversation with him, he expressed a desire to know how many more years he had to live. He had just finished writing *The Castle in the Forest*—a novelized biography of Adolf Hitler, told from the point of view of a Demon—and it was designed to be the first volume of a proposed four-volume work. He said that if he knew he had five or six more good years, he would take that time to finish the other three volumes. If he knew he did not, then he would do other things.

He did other things.

Good-bye, Norman. Thank you for everything. It has been a privilege to know you.