

LET ME NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN

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IT HAS ONLY HAPPENED TWICE IN MY LIFE: a famous writer to whom I reached out not only responded, but made me his friend and disciple. Both men I admired immensely long before we met. The first, in my teens and young manhood, was Rod Serling. The second, in my more mature professional years, was Norman Mailer. Each was a cultural touchstone of my baby boomer generation. Each had a voice as singular in speaking as it was in print or on the screen. And each, through personal alchemy, turned an ardent fan into a real friend. Both of these friendships lasted until the end of their respective short and long lives and enhanced my own life immeasurably.

Both men were innovators. Serling did for the half-hour teleplay what O'Henry did for the short story. Mailer so dazzlingly merged nonfiction into the milieu of the novel, and vice versa, that neither genre has been the same since. And it was these two men, each in his unique way, who inspired and shaped my career as a writer.

A writer, or a young person hoping to become one, needs to be careful about whom he or she chooses to emulate. Serling said that every young wordsmith of his generation went through a Hemingway phase in which each story began with some variation on, "It was hot, and then the rains fell from the sky." But it goes a lot deeper than that.

In my impressionable teens and early twenties, when my professional ambitions were percolating, Serling hooked me with his intensity and charisma, his journeys of imagination, his guts and nerve in relentlessly engaging the central moral issues of the day. I tried to write like him and I tried to think like him. If, eventually, I developed my own style and my own way of thinking, it was through the crucible of Rod's values and way of approaching character and subject. Had I idolized someone else, I might be a different writer today.

You couldn't imitate Norman Mailer the way Rod and his contemporaries imitated Hemingway. He's much too complex, too varied, too protean, although I did write a "true-life short story" in college in which I cast myself as the third-person protagonist in a heroic tale of battling through the winter snows to deliver the then-current girl of my dreams safely home to New Jersey. Fortunately, by the time Mailer loomed as a major presence in my life, I had grown up enough not to try to *be* him, my Mailerian short story notwithstanding.

What seized me was the way he took on every aspect of the American Experience, profoundly elucidating and interpreting the age with writing that was always so damn interesting, and often so damn funny. And always on his terms—that was what really got to me. Despite past success, he was never afraid to try something new, to lead with his chin, fall on his face, or stretch the boundaries of his own art and technique. Part of my fascination was Mailer's own scrupulous and often searing examination of his own motives and behavior, as if acknowledging some literary equivalent of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle that in beholding and describing an event, you cannot help but alter and transform it, often in important and amazing ways. Norman made me believe in that transforming power of good writing.

He exemplified it for me in his own work, most importantly through a concept he said he got from Tolstoy and that he defined as *severe compassion*—the rigorous examination of every character, real or imaginary, without ever forgetting that that character is, at best and worst, human. "It reminds us," he wrote, "that life is like a gladiators' arena for the soul and so we can feel strengthened by those who endure, and feel awe and pity for those who do not."

In my judgment, there are two qualities a decent writer ought to have, beyond the obvious one: talent. Yet to fully realize and exploit that God-given gift, two other considerations come into play: courage and generosity. No one can dispute Serling's or Mailer's courage, either in combat in the Philippines where both served, or the arena of ideas where both waged life-long battles. It is, rather, the other quality that needs to be proclaimed.

From our first meeting when, as a dedicated fan and would-be writer, I engineered myself into Rod Serling's presence at a speech in Washington, he took me in, and took me on. It was as if the fact that my idol befriended and encouraged me, spent time with me, guided me, and cared what I had to say, gave me some much-needed confidence and validated my own worth. When

he died in 1975 at age 50, I was devastated and grieved over his passing. I still do.

I didn't have to jump through the same hoops when I met Mailer. By then, I was chairman of an educational and cultural foundation and I simply used contacts to invite him to receive our annual literary award. To my surprise, he accepted.

When he came to town, we hit it off immediately. By this point I had published thirteen books and written and produced numerous documentary films, so I wasn't as desperate for validation. But the fact that the writer I most admired treated me as an equal and wanted me as a friend, rekindled the passion that made me want to become a writer in the first place. It was a passion Norman had never lost.

When I interviewed him before a large audience after presenting the award, I asked about his fearlessness in always stretching himself and his material. With deprecating humor, he deflected the question. "I think I've had six major literary styles in my career, and I correlate them with my six wives."

"Now I know why I've only had one style," I replied.

"Point taken," Norman grinned, delighted to have been topped on his own terms.

From then on, we became fast friends. My wife, Carolyn, and I were frequent guests in the Mailer home. I was the recipient of a number of Norman's famous letters and even, once, his cartoons. A new circle of fascinating Mailer friends and acquaintances opened up to us; many of them became our friends. Whenever we got together with Norman and Norris, he always wanted first to know what I was doing, then proceeded to give me his well-considered opinion.

We last saw Norman in Provincetown a few months before he went into the hospital for the final time. He was already gaunt and frail, but the glint in the eye and the fire in the belly were still very much in evidence. He and Norris put together a dinner party for us consisting of their son John Buffalo and his girlfriend, Norman's sister, Barbara, and our mutual friend Mike Lennon. The conversation eventually turned to Norman's and Mike's upcoming book, *On God*. At one point I referred to Norman's view of God as metaphor.

Instantly, he took vehement issue, declaring his belief was literal. When I pressed him on how a rugged iconoclast like him could possibly claim such

a notion, he replied that he had thought a lot about it over the course of many years and had come to the conclusion that the universe was more incomprehensible without a god than with one. “The burden of proof is on the atheists to figure out what caused all this,” he declared.

Around dessert time, he told us how his view on abortion was sure to anger both sides in the debate. That was Norman, the self-proclaimed “left conservative” who gave no quarter and would accept none, champion of ideas to the end. Even now, it helps me to ask myself, “How would Norman think about this?”

When he died last October at age eighty-four, I was devastated. I grieved over his passing and, I suppose, I always will.