

Q&A IN 1984 WITH NORMAN MAILER

JOHN WHALEN - BRIDGE

ONE DAY IN 1984 when I was working for a moving company, I rushed to finish the job because that night Norman Mailer would speak in Providence, Rhode Island, at Brown University. I had to rush it, so I showed up in my boots and sans shower. "I am imprisoned with a perception," he wrote, "that will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time." Since I was exactly the audience he was hoping for when he said this, I was quite sure, there was no worry about my failure to look like an Ivy League kid. There would be a movie, too, a documentary called *Norman Mailer: The Sanction to Write*.

My advisor John Abbott liked Mailer and had assigned *Of a Fire on the Moon* in his Introduction to Literature class. Mickey Stern from UConn, who would eventually grade my Honors Thesis and scold me for my solecisms, told wonderful stories about Norman's visits to UConn, about the American mythos. (Stern's stories were mainly about the American mythos with a nod toward head-butting.) Anyway, after reading *Fire*, I went into the attic of my father's house and looked through the pyramid of paperback books he'd built there after years of overstuffing the shelves. It was about three feet high at the pinnacle and was, I swear, pyramid shaped. From that pyramid I still have the following books in my library: *Genius and Lust*, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, *An American Dream*, *Cannibals and Christians*, and especially *Existential Errands*. Mailer's self-interviews about doing drugs and was it worth it to be high or drunk for a day if you were wiped out for two? Scatology, orgasm, and Henry Miller. I became a real reader, of a sort.

After Norman made some comments, he offered rules for the game. First we see the documentary, then he would answer any questions that could in

some way be linked to the documentary. Mailer, we learned, hadn't gotten past the bananas when he attempted *Gravity's Rainbow*. Magic spell! First time I tried to read that book, I was blocked and confounded by the same bananas. Here's a snippet of the film that was collected in *Pieces and Pontifications*:

Michael Lennon: Are there any Latin American writers you are familiar with?

Norman Mailer: Well, I think Borges and Márquez are the two most important writers in the world today.

Lennon: Why Borges? In political terms he is a reactionary, is he not?

Mailer: Well, he is a conservative, but ... I detest having to think of a writer by his politics first. It's like thinking of people by way of their anus.

Mailer walking through Berchtesgaden while talking with Mike Lennon, if I remember correctly, was a key point in the film. It seemed so to me then, and it seems so now, for other reasons that should be obvious.

I was writing an undergraduate Honors Thesis about the political significance of Mailer's use of first-person point of view, but I probably was not very clear at the time. Probably? I can be sure, actually, for when Q&A time came, I leapt to the microphone and asked a question that went something like this:

John Bridge: I'm wondering about the relationship between genre and politics in your work, since on the copyright page of *Ancient Evenings* the book, in the Library of Congress section, describes the book as, first, about Egypt, and then about "history" and then finally as fiction, which makes me think of how, in *The Armies of the Night*, you say that God is the best—

Norman Mailer: Are you putting me on?

This question was followed by 600 people laughing, but what impressed me most about the whole evening was the next part, when Norman said, quickly and firmly, "No, I'm not laughing at the young man—it was an honest question, I can see that. But we're at a great impasse, and it would take some *time* to get across it, and I'm not sure we'll get the chance tonight, so ... next question?"

I'm always impressed when a speaker can take the dumbest question of the evening and, somehow, get just a bit of charity out of that rind.

After the talk, people milled about and walked away. As we left, I saw Norman heading down a sidewalk with his daughter on his arm. I scampered up and wondered if maybe sometime...? He said, "Why don't you just come to the reception?" So I did, and I dragged along my (future) wife, Helena, and my friend Mary Talbot, who was then doing a PhD at Brown. Before Mailer spoke with all the people he must have known for years, he spent a goodly hour talking to, well, us kids. One Brownster tried to get Mailer to sign a notebook, but Norman refused. I was so happy to have my first edition of *Ancient Evenings*, my 1983 birthday present from my parents that is now also inscribed

To John Bridge
after meeting tonight
at Brown
Salutations
Norman Mailer

which, as I look at it now, was clearly an homage to William Carlos Williams. I told Mailer about my backpacking trip in Egypt, and he wanted to know a bit more about the Deirdre Bair biography of Beckett. One Brownster made fun oh so ironically of "the American *mythos*," saying that last word with contempt. Norman said, "But I like that stuff." One young person asked what we should do to be writers, and Norman said, "I shouldn't be able to hold you back!" Ms. Helena Whalen (we are now married, hence the double-barreled name) asked Norman what he said to people who deny that evil exists in the world. "I throw up my hands!" he said, throwing up his hands. I quote this bit in a footnote in my book *Political Fiction and the American Self*, which was probably written in such a way that I could talk about Norman Mailer and the American mythos without seeming too retro to ever get a job.

I'd written to him, and I continued to write. We met a few times, I'm honored to say. When I wrote to Mike Lennon asking why we couldn't have a Norman Mailer Society for the ALA, Mike said Norman wouldn't have any of it. Didn't want people interviewing his barber or bothering his children. Didn't want cheerleaders or people to lip-flap about "egotistical Norman Mailer." I wrote my letter assuring him that nothing like that was intended, and that we were at a disadvantage since there were Philip Roth and Toni Morrison and other such societies, so we had trouble getting our panels accepted, so could he help us out and stop the embargo?

I was summoned to P-town. Barry Leeds and I had never met before, but we'd corresponded a lot, so we set up a road trip and got to know each other in the best of all possible ways—a pilgrimage should have true devotion, miller's tales, and dirty jokes—So priketh hem Nature in hir corages, as the saying goes. We met Mailer at his home and were instructed to come at 5 p.m.—not 4:45. Mailer explained later that you get much more done in those last 15 minutes than in the first. I introduced myself to Mr. Mailer, and he said “you’ve wasted your time if you drove all that way to call me Mr. Mailer.” We talked and drank the bottle of Laphroaig that I bought. I foolishly asked him to sign the bottle—had I learned nothing at Brown University? Tough guy writers don’t sign whiskey bottles. Undeterred, and not really used to sharing a whole bottle of single malt scotch with my seasoned chums, I asked Norman to punch me in the stomach, but he took me gently by the elbow to a framed photo on the wall of himself sparring with Muhammad Ali. “I can’t hit you because you might get hurt—I’ve boxed with Ali.” I never got punched, but I can say that I took charm lessons from the master.

At dinner I could not get in a word edgewise. At one point I mentioned the idea of the society, but Norman brushed it off. But a bit later, such is the working of *Ma’at*, a feather of fate fell on a scale, and so Barry and Mike had to go pee at exactly the same moment. Seizing that moment, I said “Norman, perhaps we can discuss the society quickly. Mike says you’re worried about sycophants or people who’ll say who knows what. Let me just say that I think your best book, your most perfectly realized novel *An American Dream*, is infected with evil—but it’s still a good book. I promise we won’t only say nice things.” He looked at me a moment and said, “I s’pose you’ll be okay.” That moment Mike and Barry returned from the powder room, and Norman and I lifted our glasses. My toast was, and is: “Welcome to the Norman Mailer Society.”