

READING MAILER IN BROOKLYN

VERONICA WINDHOLZ

IN 1994, I HAD BEEN FREELANCING FOR RANDOM HOUSE for a few years when Jason Epstein decided that I would be the right copy editor for Norman Mailer's next book, *Oswald's Tale*.¹ Epstein was known in the industry as the most demanding and least tolerant editor (with authors and copy editors and with anybody else involved in publishing).

Why me? I wondered.

I was flattered and nervous. Granted, Jason and I had worked together on some challenging projects. We'd only recently wrestled the 1,500-page manuscript of *The Origins of the Inquisition* into shape. The author had been very polite, very gracious, very interested in discussing the details of his work, and almost completely impervious to our editorial advice. Nevertheless, Jason and I had discovered that we thought alike about the process.²

That still didn't make me an obvious choice to work with Norman Mailer. For one thing, I was a woman, and had come of age with the women's movement. It raised an obvious question: Wouldn't Mailer be on his guard against me? After all, for much of my cohort, his lavish literary gifts and innovations—his corrosive honesty in *Advertisements for Myself*; his defiant breaking of the fourth wall of journalism in *The Armies of the Night*; his evocative portrait of America in *The Executioner's Song*—were eclipsed by his confrontational gender politics. (Indeed, later, more than one friend would say to me, accusingly, "How *could* you?")

The decision was a no-brainer, though. Mailer attacked convention, confronted authority, and attracted publicity. He had a reputation that preceded him, but his writing spoke of a refined and nuanced intelligence. Mailer was one of America's most celebrated authors. Professionally, for me it didn't get better than this. Epstein's projects were always demanding, but they were also

intellectually stimulating. I accepted the assignment gratefully, and was immediately seized by excitement and dread.

How would I ever hold my own?

The notion of stepping into the arena with him was particularly fraught for me because Mailer had once been one of my literary idols. At sixteen and seventeen, reading *Advertisements for Myself* and *The Armies of the Night* against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, race riots, political assassinations, and the exploding counterculture, I'd been riveted. I remember admiring his honesty and courage in exposing his most shameful desires, his pettiest jealousies, his most ardent wishes, his darkest thoughts, and his loftiest notions of himself—in *nonfiction*. Then, halfway through *Armies*, when he stepped out of the narrative to address the reader directly to suggest a third—and even a fourth—perspective on the scenario in addition to the second one offered by the character named “Mailer,” reading itself became a mind-altering experience. Had anyone ever done that before?

Mailer's passions attracted me, too: his white-hot rage at America's unfulfilled promise; his insistence on excellence; his contempt for mediocrity; his well-documented struggle to become a man worthy of the name and a writer worthy of Literature. You must have an ideal! Mailer thundered. You must put your nose to the grindstone and your shoulder to the wheel and your every thought and deed, good and bad, under the microscope, and you must drag out the Truth—now poetic, now pedestrian; now divine, now (often) profane: *Inter feces et urinam nascimur*. The subtext of his work was unmistakable: Life is a constant struggle to be at your best.

That was stirring stuff for a teenager living in a bastion of provincialism only twenty-five miles from New York City and straining at its relentless demands—even in the politically turbulent year of 1968—for conformity. Back then, as I counted the months 'til I could get away to college, reading Mailer (among others) felt like an act of resistance.

Regardless of my admiration for Mailer's work, though, his stature would have to take a backseat while we fine-tuned his manuscript. I was sure he would be irritated by the copyediting process. He had railed against every convention his entire life;³ I doubted he would enjoy my pulling apart his sentences clause by clause, comma by comma, uppercase letter by uppercase letter, to uncover minuscule lapses of protocol.⁴ As for me—well, I

wasn't exactly looking forward to being considered a nitpicker by Norman Mailer.

Alas there was no avoiding it. Jason treated his authors' manuscripts with great care, line editing every draft, and he expected the same level of attention from copy editors. He was already well into his work on Mailer's psychosocial portrait of Lee Harvey Oswald. Would I take a look at the first hundred pages and tell him what I thought? Oh, and I should pay special attention to the diction.

Boring in on the details allowed me to forget for the moment the size of the task that lay ahead. *Oswald's Tale* was a thoroughly reported 800-page nonfiction narrative based on hundreds of interviews (conducted by Mailer and his friend and longtime associate Lawrence Schiller), scores of books, and reams of documentary evidence.⁵ The action took place in both the Soviet Union and the United States. There would be a lot of excerpts from primary-source materials, and they would all have to be meticulously footnoted. Rendering a well-copypedited manuscript that lived up to the ambitions of this book would be a challenge. Many different elements had to fall into place, not least Mailer's cooperation.⁶

I knew that until I got some feedback from him, I'd be flying blind. My husband suggested that I could save everyone a lot of anxiety if I started by copyediting a sample of, say, 50 pages. Let Mailer and Epstein review it, and then we'd all know if we were on the same wavelength. Jason readily agreed to the plan.

I started as I always do—an amateur reader, abandoning myself to the prose and allowing it to make its demands on my attention. Mailer's voice is mesmerizing in the opening passages of the book. I was immediately drawn into the story of Marina Oswald's family. I read maybe five or six pages without pausing, and had to force myself to slow down.

A closer reading showed that everything was subservient to style and that cadence was at the top of Mailer's style pyramid. The rhythm did the heavy lifting in his language. His grammar, punctuation, and syntax were idiosyncratic. I began to see where small improvements might help the rhythm.

So, she lay in bed waiting, her eyes on the door, and when she saw that door open, she was so weak she could only say, "Guri, please take care of our children," and then she died.

That comma after the first word—"So,"—was unnecessary, I thought. I put a check mark in the margin and noted the page number on my scratch pad. A few pages later, I came upon another one:

So, all the Russians who were working for the Germans in these villages were worried.

Hmm. One "unnecessary" comma like that might be an aberration, or maybe a typo.⁷ Two? Hmm. That can already be a style. A few lines down, I found a similar construction:

Yet, she was never a collaborator, never.

I hated the artificial pause created by that opening comma.⁸ It also looked fussy, and called attention to itself on the page. A distraction as minor as that can be disproportionately annoying for (some, albeit very sensitive) readers.

So it went. The same kinds of riffs that had thrilled me as a young reader now made me sweat as an editor. It was impossible to find order in, or to impose order on, this writing. Of course with Mailer that was the whole point. That's what made his language so powerful and unique. But preserving his Maileresque prose rather than ruining it in my attempt to remove any technical fouls—well, that was going to be tricky.

Our first meeting was over the phone. It was August and I was working from out of town. I'd sent off the sample a few days earlier and was moving ahead tentatively with the copyediting while I waited for our scheduled conversation. That morning, I called Jason in a panic.

"What's the problem?" He growled, not unkindly. Mailer had had my copyedited pages in hand for a couple of days and no one had heard any explosions. Why was I alarmed?

Was Jason being deliberately obtuse? "Because he's ... Norman *Mailer!*" I said.

For a moment there was silence on the other end. Then he said: "So what? He's just an author."

In his usual brusque way, Jason meant to remind me that the work of all authors has to stand up to editorial scrutiny (in order to withstand the later scrutiny of reviewers—and, perhaps, posterity). Right. I composed myself, but I was still a nervous wreck.

On the phone, after a short conversation, during which Mailer's tone was curious rather than accusatory—Why did I lowercase the letter “T” on page 12? Why did I delete that comma on page 35?—he asked if we shouldn't rather meet face-to-face in New York in a week's time. It would be more convenient.

Shortly after Labor Day, I went to Random House for our scheduled meeting. Jason was still out of town. Norman and I should meet without him, he said. We could always call him from the office if anything came up. By then, I'd completed work on 100 pages, but Mailer hadn't yet approved the style points I'd established in the first 50. If he decided to overrule any of them, I'd have to go back over a lot of work I'd already done.

On the elevator, I rehearsed my bottom-line position about the style points that I'd become attached to. By the time I reached Jason's office, however, it had all gone out of my head. I was distracted by the life-size cardboard cutouts of a white T-shirted, muscle-bound *A Streetcar Named Desire*—era Marlon Brando that were set up at thirty-foot intervals along the hallways. (They were promotional materials for Brando's memoir, *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, which had just been published. Very effective!)

As Norman got up from the table where he'd been sitting, I considered what to say. It was impossible to avoid mentioning the presence of this *other* larger-than-life Random House author to the one I was about to meet, especially since his cardboard cutout was standing just a few feet away from the door to Jason's office.

“Did you get a load of Brando?” I asked as I walked toward Mailer and extended my hand. It was awkward, but it was the best I could do.

Mailer was seventy-one, the same age as my father. He was short, burly, and vital. It exuded from him. He chuckled as he shook my hand. His eyes sparkled under bushy white brows. They were bright blue. He seemed relaxed, comfortable in his own skin. At the same time, he was hyper-alert. His gaze was penetrating. He missed nothing, though I think he worked hard to avoid giving that impression.

“Sure,” he said amiably, and settled back into his chair. “I used to see Marlon pretty often back in those days, you know.” Pause. “When we were young.”

He enunciated clearly, and spoke in a funny, changeable accent that was impossible to pin down. He was precise in his choice of words. There was

often the hint of laughter to come in his voice. His tone was warm and inviting.

Norman had no social pretensions. It was one of the first things I noticed about him: He was polite and solicitous, almost courtly. That was no small matter, since I was “only” the copy editor. (A few years earlier William Safire had published a short piece titled “Let’s Kill All the Copy Editors”⁹—ha ha ha! My colleagues and I were not well loved, we were aware of it, and there was no way of knowing ahead of time what the reaction to our work would be.) Norman, famously a nonconformist—and, even more famously, in his writing a harsh judge of character—took people as they came. He was generous and big-hearted, but he was also all business.

Both of us were ready to dig in. We set about the work right away. It was clear that he’d scrutinized every mark I’d made on his manuscript. He asked me about the changes, one by one. (Did I really want him to change that dash to a period? What’s a dangling modifier? “I’m not much of a grammarian, you know.”) Once he understood my reasoning, he was open-minded about the edits, with a few exceptions. He hated semicolons. He liked capitalizing certain nouns: the “Left,” for example.

Fine! I thought. Who knew what issues might lie ahead? I knew I had to hold my fire.

After a few hours, we were done. The work had gone well. I’d taken a lot of notes, but I would have to make only minor revisions to the copy style I’d hoped to establish. More important, we’d hit it off. Norman was easy to get along with, interested in the editorial process, and good company—full of conversation. He liked to talk. Perfect: I liked to listen.

That night, I was exhausted but exhilarated. It was slightly surreal. Norman Mailer, the fiery inspiration of my youth, was still present somewhere in my consciousness. But the egomaniac I must have been expecting to meet in the flesh hadn’t materialized. Instead, I’d met a curious, gregarious, deeply intelligent, knowledgeable, jocular, voluble man—coincidentally also named Norman Mailer—who was writing a book about Lee Harvey Oswald and wanted to do whatever it took to make it good.

I chided myself for having second-guessed Jason’s judgment.

We settled into a work process that would produce an edited, copyedited, and author-reviewed manuscript. We had about three months to get it ready to go into production. The first half of the book (Oswald’s stay in Russia) was complete; Mailer and his longtime assistant, Judith McNally, who worked

out of a tiny office in the Mailers' Brooklyn Heights house, were still organizing the second half. Norman and I agreed that we'd meet again after I'd finished the next 150 pages.

After that, we'd meet every time I'd completed 100 pages. It would be tricky to shift back and forth between active copyediting, in which there's a forward momentum, and manuscript review, but I wanted to take advantage of Norman's energy. After our meeting at Random House, he was raring to go.

Sometimes it took us two full working days to get through a batch of pages. Norman was a workhorse. Occasionally we'd go from eleven to six, with a half-hour break for lunch (Chinese food or tuna salad) and a few cigarette breaks for me. (Norman disapproved. He'd quit smoking at fifty, he told me repeatedly. I went downstairs to Judith's office to indulge my vice.) I didn't mind the pace. We had a lot of territory to cover. If a batch of Jason's edits had arrived in the meantime (the four of us, including Jason and Judith, were all working on separate tracks), Norman and I would go over them together. We used whatever still fit into the manuscript, parts of which Norman was still rewriting. (As he reconceived parts of the second half of the book, he had to go back and make certain adjustments to the first half.) Everything else—including a lot of material Norman had written that no longer fit—got tossed.

He was a ruthless editor of his own material and unsentimental about throwing it overboard if that served a higher purpose: the integrity of the work. His talent was a very deep well. He knew there was always more to draw from. He wore the knowledge lightly but appreciated it deeply. It was a pleasure to watch him dip into the well again and again.

Grammar and syntax were alien to him. He was good-natured about it, but I soon gave up trying to explain anything technical to him (not that this was my strong suit, either—I worked mostly by ear—but I knew more than he did). He wasn't interested. Eventually, once we got to know each other better, I'd simply make a note in the margin: "grammar."

"What about the grammar?" he'd ask when we landed on that manuscript page.

"Uh ... you can't say that."

"I can't?" After a while, he didn't even bother to ask why. What would be the point?

"Nope."

“Okay.” He’d pick up his pencil—he used #2 lead; he wrote longhand, on unlined paper—and would start revising the sentence immediately. “There. Can I say that?”

If, for grammatical reasons, I suggested (until I learned better) that he insert a semicolon somewhere, he was capable of rewriting an entire paragraph just to avoid being forced to add that one fussy little punctuation mark that irritated him so much. He wrote with ease—fast, fluently, and with a smile of satisfaction when he was finished. He loved to write—he loved the challenge of expressing himself just so. Our painstaking *modus operandi* didn’t annoy him. That was a relief, but it did extend the life of the project, and my involvement. I witnessed and waited around for a lot of rewriting.

Especially in the beginning, before he was familiar with my work, any query or small change I had made would cause him to reread the entire passage—and sometimes, if he found something in his own writing that he didn’t like, a whole page. He’d take the paper in both his hands, lean back in his chair, and recite the prose to himself, rocking back and forth as he said the words out loud. He listened to—and for—the rhythms of his language as if he were composing music. If something was off by even a fraction of a beat, he knew it immediately.

Norman was very demanding—first of all, of himself. It was as if there existed only one perfect way to render a thought and nothing else would do. He wouldn’t wait around too long for it to come to him. He’d move on. But he’d go back and fuss over it again and again. He aimed to hit the sweet spot with every sentence, and with every paragraph, and with every page, in order to build the perfect book.

In *The Spooky Art*, he says that writers are like athletes: With a grueling discipline, they have to keep themselves in shape to do the job. Norman kept in writing shape by writing—a lot. He kept himself interested in writing by mounting new challenges for himself with each new book.

When he hired me for *Oswald’s Tale*, Jason was deep in conversation with Norman about a Russified style that flavored the first half of the book. The aim had been to render some charming quirks of speech that Russians have when they speak English (incorrectly)—for example, when they drop the articles “the” and “a” in front of nouns. Norman thought he was communicating more about his characters by using this device. Jason disagreed. By the time I saw the manuscript most of the offending quirks were gone. I argued that the remaining ones might be interpreted as typos—mistakes—by flu-

ent readers of English, who were his primary audience. It seemed like a high price to pay for a doubtful reward.

In the end, he cut back dramatically on the device and wrote a “Note on Style”:

The definite and indefinite articles are not employed in Russian. Nor is the verb “to be.” One would not say, “The man is in the room,” but rather: “Man in room.” . . .

One was tempted, therefore, to dispense with articles and the verb “to be” during the first half of the book.... A full effort in that direction would, however, have tortured the English language beyond repair, and so only a suggestion of this difference is present.

In retrospect, this elaborate disclaimer seems unnecessary. I like seeing it there, though. It reminds me of the enormous effort Norman put into just this one of his dozens of books. Norman liked it because it ended with a little joke he was fond of:

Let me, then, wish you good reading and happy accommodation to small liberties taken with King’s English.

While Jason was worrying over Norman’s style, Norman was worrying about Lee Harvey Oswald’s severe dyslexia (unknown as a medical condition at the time), which had made writing difficult for him. Oswald’s “Historic Diary” entries were riddled with errors that made him look stupid. Mailer’s central thesis hung on the fact (for which there was evidence) that Oswald was anything but stupid. Indeed, this misapprehension about Oswald might have acted as a force multiplier for his rage, Mailer speculated. Norman was going to excerpt parts of the Historic Diary; he spent a lot of time thinking about how to handle Oswald’s spelling—how much to correct silently and how (and where) to account for the corrections.¹⁰

There was a lot of material to wrestle with, and it was dizzying trying to keep track of it all. Jason, Judith, Norman, and I all had our assignments, and we all plowed ahead. I hopped on the R train a few times a month for our meetings in Brooklyn, and occasionally consulted Norman

on the phone in between. (He hated talking on the phone, I found out.) As our deadline got closer, Judith and I would speak several times a day. She had the unenviable job of nailing down the final details for endnotes; it took a long time.¹¹

Norman and I developed an easy rapport. His wife, Norris, was gracious and easygoing and didn't mind our hogging the family's kitchen table with our many piles of paper for days at a stretch. The Mailers' kids who were living at home or in the neighborhood came and went. Once, I brought along my own nine-year-old daughter, because her play date had fallen through.¹² Judith was up and down the stairs between her little office and his apartment a lot. The atmosphere was homey.

We talked while we worked—about politics, movies, actors, acting, current events, our least favorite *New York Times* columnists, our families. There was nothing Norman wasn't interested in, and nothing he couldn't speculate about endlessly. He was full of advice, some of it good. He was opinionated but not overbearing. If we disagreed about something (which was often—he had a lot of crackpot ideas), he wanted to know my reasoning. He was insatiably curious. He always wanted to understand, to *know*. This, I came to think, was the secret to his extraordinary insight: As confident as he was in his powers of perception, he always kept digging. He was never quite satisfied that he'd gotten something right. He was humble in that way, and intellectually honest.

After I'd been working on *Oswald's Tale* for a couple of months, Norman asked if I'd copyedit another book he was working on (*Picasso*, which he would publish with Grove Atlantic). Judith would have the first few chapters ready for me in January or early February.

Would I? What a question.

We worked together for seven or eight consecutive months. Just after Judith sent me the first few chapters of *Picasso*, the galleys for *Oswald's Tale* arrived. Norman was rewriting them. Would I read after him and make sure that everything still hung together?¹³ Of course. We went back and forth between the two projects. By the time *Oswald's Tale* was published (in April 1995, right around the time of the Oklahoma City bombing), we were almost done with *Picasso*. Norman was about to go on tour, and he wanted to celebrate the end of our labors. He'd just received a gift and wanted to share it. He unwrapped a box with a great deal of fanfare and asked Norris to bring a lot of glasses and a pitcher of water and a bowl of ice. Then he taught us

how to drink single-malt whiskey: neat, in one long swallow, with an ice-water chaser (from a separate glass).

A year later, we worked together on *The Gospel according to the Son*, and a year after that, we tackled his massive retrospective, *The Time of Our Time*.¹⁴ Every time I went to the Mailers' now, there were changes in the household: Norman and Norris spent most of the year in Provincetown, and their sons Matt and John Buffalo weren't around so much; Judith had moved her office out of the house. For a few years, Norman and I were both involved in other projects. Finally, at one of his readings, I had a chance to introduce him to my son. By the time we were reunited for *The Spooky Art*, Jason had retired from Random House. Norman and I no longer worked elbow to elbow. He didn't need me to walk him through his copyedited manuscripts anymore. But I like to think that we both missed those long sessions we'd put ourselves through in 1994.

On those fall afternoons when it got dark early and I stood at the window, gazing out at the lights of lower Manhattan while Norman toiled over his prose, I couldn't quite forget that I was in the presence of one of America's greatest authors. What tugged at me, though, was a feeling I remembered from childhood, from those long afternoons when I got to roam, unsupervised, through the Westfield¹⁵ Public Library while I waited for my mother to pick me up after my weekly piano lessons. That had felt like being in church—or, rather, what I imagined the faithful felt when they sat in church.

I felt it here, too.

Norman wasn't cast in the role of God. No. We were supplicants, he and I, worshipping together at the altar of the Bitch Goddess.

NOTES

1. It was unusual for an editor to select a freelance copy editor (Random House had three full-time copy editors on staff at the time), but Jason took a particular interest in Mailer's work. He was also the editorial director of Random House and could make his voice heard.
2. Copyediting entails fine-tuning a manuscript's many details (usually) after the substantive editing has been completed. The goal is to make a book internally consistent (and, when possible, consistent with commonly accepted "rules" governing grammar and punctuation) while at the same time preserving the author's style. Copy editors read for voice, point of view, syntax, diction, spelling, punctuation, and grammar, among other elements, and make their changes (or suggestions for changes) directly on the manu-

script page. The author then reviews the copyedited manuscript line by line and answers every “OK?” with “yes,” “stet,” or a change of his or her own.

The depth to which copy editors can or do go in their work depends on the length and degree of completion of the manuscript; the time allotted to complete the job; the demands of the given project (fiction? nonfiction? long? with notes and bibliography?); and the specific needs or requests of the editor, author, or the publishing house.

Copy editors refrain from making too many substantive changes or suggestions. Their work is done directly on the manuscript—that is, they make changes, but they don’t meet face-to-face with authors. Absent the opportunity to explain their reasoning, they are discouraged from making changes that fall outside commonly accepted “rules” as outlined in various style manuals.

3. There is an image in Bob Dylan’s song “Jokerman” that always makes me think of Mailer: “You were born with a snake in both your fists while a hurricane was blowing.”
4. Clear writing indicates clear thinking. That’s the minimum standard for an author of Mailer’s professionalism, talent, and ambition. Copy editors are there as backup, to ensure that the standards authors expect of themselves are reflected in their books, which are often written under time pressure and amid other stresses. The copyediting process produces a lot of anxiety. Understandably, authors are protective of their work.
5. In preparation, Mailer had read—and taken notes on—all twenty-six volumes of the Warren Commission report and a lot of the assassination literature from archives as well as the public library; in addition, he’d gone through the transcripts of countless audiotapes of Oswald recorded secretly by the KGB.
6. I needn’t have worried. Being an author was Norman’s full-time job. He attacked it as if it were blue-collar work and took pride in the details. His assistant, Judith McNally, was just as hardworking, and very skillful and devoted besides. When she died unexpectedly (and way too young) in 2006, it was a terrible blow to those of us who had depended on her dry wit and good cheer, among her many other virtues. She’d worked as Norman’s assistant for more than twenty-five years.
7. Soon enough, I would find out that there were hardly ever any typos. Judith, who did the typing in addition to running Norman’s busy office, had attended parochial school and then Swarthmore. Her diction was flawless, she was a shrewd thinker, and she had enviable research skills.
8. To me, it suggested the set-up to a comedian’s joke: “So. I was at the bank the other day.” I knew it was a comma, but I heard it as a period. Besides, there was no method: He didn’t always use a comma after the word “so” in similar constructions. We argued over this, and I lost. Readers will find the commas on pages 5 and 8; *Oswald’s Tale* (New York: Random House, 1995).

9. Sfire's satire appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* on October 6, 1991.
10. He settled on clarifying the matter in the Notes section:

Lee Harvey Oswald was dyslexic, and this was apparent, to varying degrees, in virtually all of his writing. For the reader's convenience and in fairness to Oswald's ideas, his errors in spelling and punctuation have been corrected in all excerpts from his letters, Historic Diary, and other writings unless otherwise noted in the text.

—*Oswald's Tale*, Appendix, p. xxii

11. We felt rewarded when an excerpt of the book was published by *The New Yorker* and it passed muster with the magazine's intimidating fact-checking department.
12. Norman was amazed that she sat there for an hour and a half without bothering us once. So was I. His kids would have asked to watch TV, he said. In fact, she was sitting at Norman's massive work table, which abutted the wall of windows in the Mailers' living room. Their balcony overlooked the Promenade in Brooklyn Heights. The view from the windows was of lower Manhattan, directly across the East River. It was breathtaking. I think she spent a long time looking out the window.
13. For Norman, last-minute rewriting was an ingrained habit. Any text can be endlessly refined, and he kept trying until the bitter end, sometimes making corrections in blues (the last stage of book production). But he knew that the likelihood of introducing new errors increases when you make last-minute changes (because there's not much time left to consider all the changes properly, in context). At that stage, he was particularly concerned about "bad reps": repetition of words. Norman had an immense vocabulary. He was bored by repetition, and didn't want to bore his readers.
14. "Yep, it's going to be another doorstop," Judith teased Norman while telling me about it. He looked on, beaming. For Norman, less was not more—*more* was more. It was a bear of a project. Norman's friend and archivist Mike Lennon had helped him select the material from his huge and varied body of work. The excerpts were presented chronologically according to when the action in a given piece takes place rather than the year in which Norman wrote it. It took many attempts at organization, and much reorganizing, before he hit upon the final presentation.
15. New Jersey.