

NORMAN'S CRYSTALS

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LARRY SCHILLER, THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND CO-FOUNDER with Norris Mailer of the fledgling Norman Mailer Writers Colony in Provincetown, told me that a year ago he knew little about how to run a writer's colony. He is still trying to figure out how much he knows, now that the workshops have begun in the large house that Norman lived in up to the time of his death. The idea of gathering writers in this brick mini-mansion-by-the-sea is to perpetuate the kind of life and activity that fueled Norman's own writing. Schiller, the photographer, filmmaker, longtime collaborator with Norman, and a founding member of The Norman Mailer Society, envisions the Colony as something of a performance piece, an enactment that takes place in the very house where Norman wrote the bulk of his books. Indeed, Schiller is actively filming long segments of interactions and conversations. His concept of creating the Colony must have its model in documentary filmmaking, and may embody Boswellian lessons in Schiller's unstoppable commitment to this project. Johnson once said to Boswell, "Why do you write down my sayings?"

There is history in every crevice of the East End neighborhood; the fellows live nearby in a large house divided into condominiums with glimpses of the sun-spanked bay. In the backyard of their house, a used car, bought for summer use, died before a Labor Day in the late sixties, and people gathered around a hole dug in the ground by a bulldozer. The lapsed automobile was interred vertically with its windshield skyward. Norman was writing *Of a Fire on the Moon*, and wandered out from his studio on this sunny afternoon to witness the strange religious ceremony that he wrote about in the chapter titled "Burial by the Sea."

The Colony was born on the occasion of Norman's death. Four months earlier Schiller was visiting and sitting in Mailer's dining room. Norman

looked up at him and noted, “I’m prepared to die, Larry. I won’t be alive by the end of this year.” Schiller found *élan* in the example of Mailer’s wild ride through life, meeting ambitious challenges or failing so completely as to succeed artistically. Mailer’s failures were akin to those Joyce spoke about: “A man of genius makes no mistakes. His errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery.”

People always asked Norman why he didn’t write an autobiography. He answered me in an interview that was published in *Provincetown Arts* in 1999: “The main reason is that I don’t want to use up my crystals. What I mean is that certain experiences have an inner purity to them. They remind me of a crystal. I use the word advisedly. Your imagination can project through this experience in one direction, and you can have one piece of fiction. You can project through the same crystal in another direction and have another piece of fiction. What I call a crystal experience is not a simple one, rather a most complex one, but it has this other quality that it can be studied from many different angles to produce many results. So, whenever you write about a crystal experience, you are dynamiting one of your richest narrative sources. I don’t want to write an autobiography, because that would mean I’m done as a writer. I’ve never written about any of my wives, for just that reason.”

Norman seems to be saying that the light of his imagination is cast in a cone through a crystal experience, becoming prism-like in its power to divide the light into the revelation of the full spectrum of its colors.

The inaugural events of the first weeks of the Colony included Robert Begiebing’s workshop focused on “self-editing for writers.” J. Michael Lennon gave a workshop on novelistic techniques of the new journalism. A week later Kaylie Jones would be teaching memoir. An award sponsored by the Colony and Provincetown Arts Press selected Salvatore Scibona as the winner of the 2009 Norman Mailer Award for Exception Writing on Cape Cod. Scibona’s novel, *The End*, was nominated last year for the National Book Award. He wrote most of the book in Provincetown as a fellow and future writing coordinator of the Fine Arts Work Center.

Norman always fostered developing writers. According to Schiller, Norman wrote 50,000 letters in his life, with maybe 8,000 to writers of all ages: “Norman responded, and that impressed me. At the end, a nurse sat on his bedside and asked, ‘Do you think you could teach me how to write?’ Norman was reading the *New York Times*. He lowered the paper and asked, ‘What are you doing this weekend?’ She was going sailing with her boyfriend. A week

later, I'm back to visit and Norman is editing her manuscript, making comments. He handed her four pages, all marked up. He went back to reading the *Times*. She read the manuscript over and over and she started to cry. That's where the Norman Mailer Writers Colony was born. When I saw this happen in the hospital, I saw something needed to be done. Now I knew I had to make time and devote part of my life to this cause. I went to Norris and Norman's children. I reached out to many others in many directions to develop a program that is as unique and different as Norman was—work on the edge.”

Schiller told me, “Norman’s death was more traumatic than the death of my own father. My father represented complacency and security and Norman represented confronting the unknown, which keeps one alive. I am consumed in making this work. The Colony is an extension of Norman. People admired and respected his need to challenge himself.”

On June 6 at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, the Colony collaborated with the Museum to host a gala fundraiser with architect Richard Meier as keynote speaker. Following Meier’s presentation, I introduced Salvatore Scibona and handed him his check and trophy of clear crystal formed in the shape and heft of a thick book. In the center, an etching of Norman’s visage floats like a hologram above the name of a newly successful writer. Norman was famous for telling young writers, “If you get hung up, give me a call.” Now Salvatore need only adjust the angle at which his desk lamp shines on his crystal model to call up inspiration for new books.

It is fitting that this award is first given to a novelist, since it was as a novelist that Norman defined himself, despite the attention he received for his invention of a novelistic kind of nonfiction. The truth is Norman believed that history itself was the fiction of a writer; yet he kept a laser-like line of respect for the way the novel could exceed the gravitational pull of historical fact, however brilliantly interpreted by the astute reporter he was. Norman once said to Schiller, “Once a philosopher, twice a pervert.” Schiller retorted, “And three times an historian,” which made Mailer fall silent. The two bantered; sometimes they quarreled; once they did not speak to each other for a year. Then Norman called Larry: “If I knew I had to kiss your ass, I wouldn’t have shaved.” To which Larry, imp that he is, replied “Hello, lover.”

Schiller’s relationship with Mailer began in 1972 when the photographer asked the author to write a 12,000-word introduction to a proposed book of his photographs of Marilyn Monroe. Norman surprised Schiller with ten times the word length he’d requested. Mailer was inspired by Schiller’s idea

of writing about Marilyn, perhaps because he was developing an ideal woman as a counterpart to his exploration into what makes a man macho. “Elegance” became the defining attribute of a woman’s essence. Schiller also possessed extraordinary interview and research skills, especially for book-length projects, where he can amass forty hours of interviews with a single subject. Schiller is able to mine details that the subject had forgotten were buried. Cops and KGB operatives fall under Schiller’s spell of giving up everything to history. Mailer learned from Schiller and Schiller learned from Mailer. These lessons are worth a future book enacting a series of creative collaborations functioning at the highest level.

At the Colony, every Monday morning a new group of six or seven fellows arrive for the week. Mike Lennon, Mailer’s authorized biographer, shows them around the house, finding their way through the labyrinth Norman had woven around himself—a house warm with family photographs and the paintings and sculptures of his wife and children. The arriving fellows are marched up the winding stairs to Norman’s study, nestled in the apex of the attic. A large picture window faces west, overlooking the little houses tucked along the curving harbor. The houses become backlit with reddish halos when the sun sets behind them; the glare made Norman tack up a heavy curtain. As his eyesight faded, becoming especially sensitive to flashes of bright light, the curtain was never lifted.

The workshop meetings and seminars are held downstairs around two conferences tables abutted together. On the occasions I visited, each person seemed to have accumulated an ample stack of copies of each other’s work, plus handouts from the presenter. Light from the bay floods the room and the breaking waves begin to sound in intervals that govern the pulse of the listener. In such a setting, conversation can be calm as a flat sea or hyperbolic as a hurricane, each mood achieving its own natural, authentic measure.

I had attended several sessions when I met with Larry for a lunch. Schiller said, “The workshops, to my surprise, have really worked well.” Next year he will enlarge the summer programs with additional week-long sessions: one on the art of interviewing, one on what agents know and writers need to know, and another on how writers and photographers collaborate. The future is concurrent with the present, in Schiller’s Maileresque existentialism, and I am apprised of forthcoming surprises. Don DeLillo will show up sometime this summer on an unexpected weekday, joining the Mailer fel-

lows. DeLillo will get up to speed with the group, have lunch, go fishing, and then have some brilliant things to say the next day at breakfast. Schiller intends to spring a series of these spontaneous interruptions, calling them “Conversations with the Fellows.”

These surprise visits are not meant to surprise, but to serve as coaxing catalysts, encouraging casual brilliance, much as Norman fostered in the circles that surrounded him. The vortex of Mailer’s creative energy was sociological in its theatrical presentations, and Schiller’s jolting “conversations,” may foster genuine opportunities for discourse.

The Colony received almost 500 applications for summer fellowships. Six Guggenheim recipients and four Rhodes Scholars applied. The manuscripts of writers, educators, and working journalists were read blindly, with numbers taking the place of the author’s names and credentials. A senior in high school, soon to be a freshman in college, wrote a winning twenty pages and made it into Kaylie Jones’s memoir workshop. For the winter fellowships, forty people have applied for a dozen opportunities to do little but come to town and write for up to three months.

Schiller is happy about the success of the program, but unhappy that people who promised financial support failed to deliver. He said that without the generous patronage of Tina Brown, Spas Roussev, and close to another 100 contributions, the Colony would not exist. His benefactors were mindful of his great admiration for Mailer and trusted his determination and commitment. Schiller has worked with kings, queens, murderers, and rapists. Now he has departed from Los Angeles and taken on Provincetown, which Norman once called “the wild west of the east.”

One day when I spoke with Schiller at the Mailer house, as a session was breaking up, I saw that he was wearing a white shirt with the stitched blue-and-gold cloth badge of the Connecticut State Police. The shirt was a gift from Dr. Henry Lee—worn on Court TV for the mini-series Schiller produced about the forensic expert’s investigations. Schiller is a short fellow who weighs 240 pounds. A former athlete, he learned not to be afraid to use his weight to achieve a goal.

Embossed on a brass plaque beside the entrance to the edifice.

The Norman Mailer Writers Colony
Established 2008