COURTLY NORMAN: THE LEGACY DERBY

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SOME PRELIMINARY SPECULATION ON NORMAN MAILER'S LEGACY reminds me of a media-fixed auto derby that has already predetermined a Mailer finish as a questionable non-winner at the starting-gate.

Such derby flux began with the news of Mailer's recent demise and became fast-tracked into obvious truth that Mailer's Legacy Quotient (LQ) is unique in that his "character" supersedes and eclipses his canon of work A writer's behavior, in short, is all that matters to some critics. The LQ axiom, in Mailer's case, remains commonplace: character overshadows canon.

Imagine such absurdity, historically speaking. To hell with *The Ring*, Wagner was such a rotter. And up the LQ of Will Shakespeare with his blank bio, but down the LQ of the thuggish Ben Jonson. And give a zero read to Ezra Pound, that Fascist. And don't forget that old goat, Theodore Dreiser, and his whorehouse antics. And, yes, Papa Hemingway, that macho bundle of character flaws. Heraclitus said that "Character is Destiny." Enter Norman Mailer, a literary bundle of flux, perhaps destined to have his ego read more than his books. Also enter the ubiquitous media that increasingly preside over a nation of gawkers rather than readers.

In 1948, a curtain rose and out trots an unknown with a big war book, an overnight best seller and a corresponding big-eyed media. What a ready-made twosome, Mailer and the media, mutual enablers, and Norman Mailer becomes America's leading literary celebrity. Unlike his two nearest competitors, Truman Capote and Gore Vidal, Mailer was typecast as ruffian extraordinaire—a 24/7 bully-brawler in salons and saloons, the epitome of egghead violence. Overnight, Mailer became the undisputed bad boy of American letters, so said the drooling, yet chiding media.

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These developments fed the early LQ verdict in the January 2008 *Smithsonian*, a print-medium legacy bible. The presumptive judge, Lance Morrow, dissects Mailer's "huge ego" and finds it "unpleasant" and "poisonous." Thus, Mailer "[I]n his own ways he embodied America's worst faults: self-indulgence, bullying, sense of entitlement, irrelevant belligerence, the obnoxious American self-importance that is a corrupted Emersonianism—Emerson without the sweetness, the calm, the brains, the transcendence" (97).

Such deconstruction gets a body English treatment when Morrow refers to a 1994 Valentine's Day incident at Carl Bernstein's fiftieth birthday party. Mailer was about to commit a social atrocity and was likened to a madcap Existential killer-driver:

> He rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet in the boxer's way he had, a rhythmic motion meant to conjure menace, as if he wished to let you know that while he had one foot safely on the brake, the other was pressed on the accelerator, his motor surging … so that if he chose, he might release the brake and hurtle across the room and smash through the brick wall and cause God knows what mayhem in the world outside. (94)

What a tell-all negative image! Norman Mailer as boxer-motorist, an all-American arch-menace in the ring, on the streets, and in the salon. Small wonder that Mailer's (LQ) now barely quivered, so spoketh Lance Morrow, prophet extraordinaire.

My recourse to an imaginary auto derby now begins, to expose the audacity and absurdity of judging this contest or any other race at the starting line.

Let me say at the outset that Morrow and I are at opposite poles, except for our general agreement that Mailer in his seventies had mellowed socially, was becoming downright harmless, sporting (in Morrow's apt phrase) "Prospero's winkle" (94). Otherwise, we are at opposite ends of a racetrack. I'm a starter and they are early finishers.

My time spent with Norman Mailer was not ongoing but was rather sporadic. I was an early Mailer scholar (articles and a book) and, later, a Mailer book collector and long-time friend.

Naturally, I differ with *Smithsonian* and Morrow. So, I toured the derby site, did some laps cruising, not speeding, but stopping. I consider my experience with multiple Mailer "stops" or "visits." Over a span of more than

forty years, four visits of them were in-depth and three visits were less so. The following discussion is not a composed memoir, just a series of short-takes. I was looking for "Courtly Norman" and I found him.

I. IOWA CITY (1963)

Our first meeting was a bundle of "hellos" and "smiles." The English department at the University of Iowa had billed me as a pioneer scholar, writing the first doctoral dissertation on Norman Mailer. That fact was what greeted Mailer, who was on a college tour as an "*Esquire* Literary Symposium" panelist. I was only four years younger than Mailer and must have given off a whiff of pre-academic street sensibilities. This part of me Mailer must have sensed or at least that's what his first handshake said: "All's well that starts well."

I was not able to meet with Norman alone and the one-day symposium was hectic and hurried. Mailer, as expected, was the star panelist. He seemed to be on the edge, almost incandescent, a young celebrity in full bloom. Admirers constantly swarmed around him. He answered questions and offered helpful tips and literary contacts. He gave me names, addresses, phone numbers, and said continually, "Mention my name." He was not an offish visitor; on the contrary he was exceptionally friendly. And Norman seemed genuinely interested in both me and my dissertation.

The panel presentation was cantankerous and Mailer was usually the instigator. Afterwards, we promised to meet at the night's big party for a "real talk." Unwisely, I was a little late and Mailer had already left. The party host, Donald Justice (the poet) told me that Mailer and Mark Harris (the writer) had a fracas. Edmund Skellings (another poet and my best friend) had cooled down Mailer and off they went. Knowing Ed, I suspected a flashy Corvette and something hallucinogenic. I asked, "Are they coming back?" My host shrugged poetically. And I waited and waited but nothing happened.

There was, however, an existential dawn, this one smiling. Ed told me that he and Norman had driven around, smoked, and talked, and the latter included me. At evening's end, Mailer said, "I'll be seeing you and Don again." Skellings had work his social magic.

The "*Esquire* Literary Symposium" was not Camelot or Versailles and Mailer was hardly "Courtly," but he was aware, sensitive, amiable, and most promising. Norman Mailer and I had a future, I was sure of it.

II. ALASKA (SPRING 1965)

Our second substantial meeting occurred in 1965 in Alaska during a Mailer "culture shock" visit. He was jolted from a Lower-48 America to a magical Arctic America. In the Lower 48, the media are wired. Up north, there is only skeletal static. Norman had landed, already a product of the early Morrows and the incessant media. He was in transition, as was his "character" and canon. The transformation would last but five days and for the final four days I was an eyewitness.

I was in my first of four years in Aaska, an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, about one hundred and fifty miles below the Arctic Circle. It was called the "Wilderness City," an oxymoron and instant Mailer favorite name. Since Iowa, I had done my Mailer homework. And Mailer was ready for Alaska, later calling it "God's Attic." [1] From his first breath and step, Norman had formed a natural connection to Alaska.

Mailer was instantly at home with frontier moods and manners. For example, Mailer arrived as a reputed barroom drinker. Alaska, especially Fairbanks, had the highest per capita alcohol consumption rate of all fifty States. Drinking was an art form. Norman, after one or two drinks, began to consume his beverages like a veteran Klondike sourdough. Yet he was a positive chameleon. The supposed "violent" Norman Mailer spent three days in Fairbanks, a wilderness City and, overnight, Norman turned absolutely mellow with a barrage of Prospero twinkles. Alaska and Mailer were made for each other in that early Spring of 1965.

There is still mystery surrounding Norman. How compatible, in a Mailer context, is the term, courtly? Assuredly, I did not conjure up courtliness in my Mailer expectations after three years of absorbing Lower 48 media noise. But why courtly as it pertains to his character?

Mailer certainly was not visiting an American Metropolis in the tundra (echoes of his final novel, *The Castle In The Forest*). But he was making the next best "stop" in 1965 America at a three-day wilderness city with *Castle* atmospherics. Although I did not know when Mailer landed in Alaska, he immediately sensed that his Lower 48 self and the media-crafted image of the "big bad celebrity" was a lost art up North. Mailer, instead, sensed both an old and new American frontier atmosphere and merged with both of them. If a passerby New Yorker would have spotted this star visitor, he might well have blinked and said, "Where has the real Norman

Mailer gone?" I would have answered, "He's going back to the Lower-48" with loads of Frontier Charm, and that's why the term—Courtly Norman—stuck.

III. PROVINCETOWN (SEPTEMBER 1967)

Culturally speaking, this visit was a drastic shift from a wilderness city to the "sin center" on Cape Cod. In 1967 Provincetown was Mailer's summer home. Only two years had elapsed since the Alaska trip. How much of that "Arctic Metamorphosis" was still healthy and intact in Mailer?

His summer hangout had obvious cultural compensations. Today's Provincetown had interesting and ironic beginnings. Supposedly, our Pilgrim Fathers made a brief stopover before settling on Plymouth Rock. (A sign on the outskirts of the town states as much.) Since those early days, "Ptown" has undergone remarkable change. By the mid-1960s, Ptown had became the regional vortex of "upscale hedonism." I was a designated weekend house guest in 1967 and this visit would be my first encounter with a discernibly domesticated Mailer.

The Mailer abode on Commercial Street (one of only two main streets in Ptown) had been purchased two years earlier. The day I arrived it was the Saturday afternoon "Open House at the Mailers." At one o'clock it started in high gear in an oversized room as guests, Norman's associates and various friends, past and present gathered, as well as walk-in tourist gawkers. Beverly, Mailer's fourth wife, was the hostess. Early on, Norman was off in his do-not-disturb quarters, writing for posterity.

In the later afternoon Mailer made an appearance and it was quite casual, only a little soft mixing with the crowd. For hours that afternoon, I enjoyed chatting with the hip Mailer folk, with an endless supply of fizz drinks and finger food. We all stayed until the end of the open house.

At sundown, all three weekend evenings, Mailer and "company" went nightclub hopping. Ptown was jammed with tourists and the Manhattan Bohemian set out for an artsy-lusty weekend. As a houseguest, I was seated at the Mailer table at restaurants and was included in the spotlight. I felt as if I were at an after-hours Cape Cod Camelot.

Norman was masterful at "working the room." And make no mistake, Norman was a true code man. This Norman, significantly domestic, was new to me, although he had told me that he was very close to his mother. Norman was an incredibly attentive son. His mother, Fanny, had his constant ear

and he told me that he called her at least once a day. Norman also told me that Fanny was his literary archivist.

Their spiffy bayside home with a dock over the water seemed more "his" than "hers." Beverly called it a "part-time hotel," but I saw it as "full-time party pad," but this weekend a partial exception. On my last Ptown night in a bedroom on that dock over the water, I reviewed a weekend's appraisal of "Mailer's "character" that also examined his literary canon. The body of his work, indeed, was wide and deep. What about Mailer as a good family man?

IV. TAMPA (FEBRUARY 1972)

The caption of this trip might well read: the Norman Mailer meltdown that never was. Norman had exemplary existential timing. The local media were primed and there was a scheduled one-day Mailer stopover at the University of South Florida. It was at his time that I met a new Norman, the media's "Prisoner of Sex." This controversial topic and book rocked the feminist movement, and marked Mailer. Gender warfare was stormy and blistery in 1972.

Once again, I found myself at center stage. I taught at the University, and had played a role in bringing Norman to Tampa to give a podium lecture. I also volunteered to organize and finance the twenty-four hour agenda, which included hosting a big party for our embattled visitor. I was excited. The local media and campus police were on alert. Why? Mailer was about to meet his gender-slayer. Kathy Freeperson and her militants were out to bloody this advertised chauvinist. I wondered how Mailer's character would hold up. Would it turn good or bad?

The Mailer agenda began, tastefully, with an early four o'clock dinner in Tampa's historic Ybor City at a renowned Cuban restaurant. I suspected that Mailer would be enthralled with its classic interior of early Spanish tiles and mosaics and so he was. Among the twenty or more dinner guests, some came from Miami and Orlando and some were Norman's personal friends, seldom seen. His mood soared and the cuisine outdid expectations. For a festive two hours we dined. Norman, charmingly blended with the setting, its cuisine, multiple conversations, and companionship. Norman sat content, obviously very comfortable with himself. I sat and squinted and imagined the atoms of all those tiles and mosaics reassembling into an original Castilian Court, with Norman at the head table.

At four o'clock the following day, I took Mailer to his motel for a rest period before his eight p.m. podium appearance. I told him I could not be there for his speech speech. I also warned him about hecklers. He shrugged and said, "What do you want me to do tonight?" "Do what you want to do," I replied, and we both smiled.

I missed the podium fireworks. Only later when the evening's party was in full swing did I hear about how Mailer stunned everyone by turning "trickster." This February night had turned frigid, but over a thousand people filled the auditorium, including the panting media and Kathy Freeperson and her shock militia. The stage was set for gender warfare and cultural mayhem. Mailer's speech, whatever its merit, was greeted by bedlam. Kathy was leading the audience in jeers, boos and catcalls. Mailer and his speech were being snuffed out.

What to do? Mailer calls on Kathy and two lieutenants to come up and share the spotlight. Instantly, a college junket speech became a 1960s "happening." Kathy was ecstatic. She was now an instant celebrity, as were her militia. For over an hour, Mailer alternated between mock-opponent and stage jester. The audience roared and roared. Many from the audience stayed with Mailer and crashed my party.

I had invited a select group, about one hundred University people, but I did not expect a horde. The party house, borrowed from a friend for the evening, was spacious yet had only minimal furniture. I was told that on stage both Norman and Kathy alluded to the late-night party and several hundred people took those words to constitute an invitation. And they came, like locusts, through doors and windows. I did not dare call the police: that would generate a media report and possible "Riotous Mailer Party" headlines.

He entered, the vanguard of the horde, and rushed up to me. Norman pointed at the center of the room and said: "I'm going to stand over there and every twenty minutes you come and see if I need a whiskey refill." I kept my eye on the guest of honor. He stationed himself at the center of the room, but this time he didn't work the room. It worked him.

For over two hours Norman stood his ground, sipping whiskey, and allowing his public to invade not only his public space but also his body, his personal space. His *modus operandi* was that of a many-handed Heraclitus doing simultaneous multiple good deeds: a frantic go-round of book signings, hip small talk, verbal nuggets, and other celebrity mannerisms. But most telling was how he allowed his body to be violated by mostly women,

both lovers and haters, stroking or pawing or worse, here and there, even erogenous zones. At times, Norman looked like a piece of meat. Why such acquiescence? Only Norman knew.

As for the host, I was trying to survive the plague of the locusts. Besides those Mailer refills, I squeezed out a path here and there and talked to everyone and no one. As long as Norman remained, so did his admirers. He finally quit after two long hours. I had counted seven whiskey refills, and some were doubles. On the way to his motel we spoke little. He was dead-tired. At the motel door I said, "Norman, Tonight, you surprised me." "Sometimes I surprise myself," he replied.

Ah, Norman. He had conned Kathy and Company into switching a stump speech into a hit show. Moreover, he earned a five-figure speaker's fee while Kathy's group worked for free. Mailer also outdid a common media prophecy—that he could never ever resist violence. In fact, he stamped it out. His Tampa visit did not create headlines, only modest coverage. Everybody won, and that included Kathy, Norman, and his Legacy Quotient.

V. MIAMI (1972)

This "visit" was a Miami peepshow, mostly a three-day blur, because I was no longer at stage-center, relegated to become one of those proverbial lost souls in the crowd, even as was Mailer himself lost among fellow celebrities. For once, Mailer and his "character" were too obscure to probe.

The "show" was the 1972 Democratic Party National Convention, all geared-up with celebrity overload. Norman did have a spotlighted niche. He was in full throttle as the arch-practitioner of the New Journalism, today's creative nonfiction. *Life* magazine had contracted Mailer to write a convention *exposé* and the focus was to be the McGovern-Eagleton Democratic ticket for the Presidency. Norman on deadline—and busy, busy.

I was in the vicinity although I was only another of many unknowns, a nightclub gawker. I stayed at a nearby hotel in Mike Gravel's suite, a volunteer as support staff for the Alaskan senator's bold but failed bid for the Vice-Presidency. Thus I had enough political credentials to station myself in Mailer traffic, mostly fleeting—smiles, nods, occasional terse friendly "newsy" remarks. These encounters were hardly the stuff of a memorable adventure.

But there was one event where I could watch Norman in slow motion. A mutual friend from Tampa hosted a glitzy Fort Lauderdale party. Our host

was a high-flying attorney (Rolls, yacht, and much more) and he had show business connections. Word got out. Local newspapers were alerted, especially society editors. There were multiple guests of honor and Norman was one of them. Although the Tampa party was Maileresque, this Lauderdale bash promised a new Mailer perspective—his behavior among his social peers. Would there be party room peace or conflict?

Once again, the combative Mailer failed to show. He was in a very good mood. Other celebrities were also quite subdued combative. There was Johnny Weissmuller (an elderly Tarzan) and Mickey Rooney (a bit grayish and wrinkled but as short and peppy as ever). Always looming in the room was Senator Mike Gravel, a proven scene-stealer. Norman worked the room the best he could.

VI. FORTUNE ROCK (1980)

Mystery framed this event. When I arrived at Mailer's summertime Maine retreat, a secluded lovely blend of lake and mountains, which offered a whiff of Alaska. Carol Stevens, his fifth wife, greeted me, a bit wide-eyed, "Who are you?" she asked. "Norman very seldom clears the house for a solo visitor." I said that I was a longtime scholar and friend and, currently, a book collector and that I was driving an authentic 1972 muscle car, its trunk boasting two heavy big boxes of Mailer collectibles, some quite rare.

So, too, was Fortune Rock, a geographical rarity. Norman's driving instructions actually included unmapped lanes, dense foliage, and even tree-markings. I felt lost all the way.

Where was Norman? Carol was talking about jazz (she sang it) and mentioned how Norman told her and the kids, as well as the help, to "get lost" upon my arrival. I was greeted by three frisky pugs, otherwise known as Chinese Emperor Dogs. I could hear distant kids and I glimpsed a nanny or maid. Carol stressed that this breed of dog was ideal for children. She added that Chinese Emperors favored them as pets of good omen. Mailer entered the room and Carol vanished with the dogs.

My first thought on seeing Norman was that he can't wait to get those books in his hands. And Norman acted as such—he was full-speed. He told me to get those boxes inside and we would make dinner. I had forgotten about food, although it was past the dinner hour, and I assumed that my host was hungry and not just for books, so tonight would be makeshift eating. Norman said, "Open up the fridge and make your-

self at home." Supper meant creative sandwiches, beer, and whiskey—boilermakers.

I was stunned. My host, this Norman, seemed a stranger, beyond my imagination. The 1972 visits were eight years ago. During the interval, we never met physically. Communication had been adequate: phone messages, personal letters and other correspondence, but for eight long years, I had not been up close and personal with Norman

We finished dining, cleared and cleaned the outsized kitchen table, and I opened my two boxes next to Norman's chair. Once he had graced the table with the first collectibles, nothing matter but the books and the boilermakers.

Would tonight's kitchen talk reveal more or less of an older, more seasoned Mailer? One by one, Mailer began to open his books, his creations. Most of them were stellar finds: first editions, galley sheets, proofs, pamphlets, stage dramas, screenplays, and loads of ephemera, especially costly "high-spots" of an already distinguished literary career.

I sensed a deep awareness in Norman. He did not just turn pages; he touched and caressed the binding and pages. We talked and talked. As I listened, I was reminded of that 1967 Ptown weekend when Norman and I occasionally turned literary and went off together to read passages and discuss his canon. Then I had brought just one box, a much smaller one. Mailer would pore over each book, ruddy-faced and wide-eyed and occasionally would howl in disbelief, "Beverly, Come in here and see. I'd forgotten I wrote this." Beverly, dutifully, read and nodded, somewhat motherly.

Tonight's table talk, so remote and personal, might prove to be ideal. Norman, as I knew him, always distrusted the media. They were often anti-Mailer, Norman said, particularly concerning private matters, "Never talk to the media," he said to me.

For about four or five hours, we talked. I listened less as a visiting collector and more as a character in a dramatic narrative. Norman's most vital body part was his mind or, more aptly, his brain because Norman was always mimicking other writers who see their literary creations as their real children. My two boxes, figuratively, were filled with "brain children." And what father can resist being fascinated by his offspring.

By reappraising and reliving "live" books, Norman was tempted to tell all. We sat, sipped whiskey, and he pored and recited over his creations, hours of speed-modulated authorial utterances, including his own extensive evalua-

tions of his body of work. All those printed wonders: their genius, from first drafts to final proofs, the forms and techniques, messages or themes, pre-publication joys or blues, and their eventual public airings, and those biased unsympathetic critics, more panning than praising, and those final sales.

The Fortune Rock kitchen talk was beginning to sound like the demystification of an author's legacy potential. It was a surreal evening. A major writer discusses so much of the background of his life and work.

I did not count how many or how fast Norman and I drank as we sipped rather than gulped. We were never drunk. Instead, we got high, a gradual adrenal surge. Our table talk vacillated from foggy to crystal clear. It began with the host opening a book and providing running commentary. There was some question-and-answer, a mixture of wisdom and booze. Hours and hours of slightly impaired language, yet Norman and I persevered. Our exchange was not the Socratic method, but it was much more than monkey talk. None of what transpired was premeditated. I had brought no memory devices: camera, recorder, notebook, paper, pencil or pen.

In LQ terms, this visit was only partly forgotten. Ordinarily, my memory is good, well above average, but nothing rote or photographic, no magic total recall. When I exited Fortune Rock, my memory was in near-collapse. In my motel, I was still high and didn't bother to fill a notebook. I wrote nothing and began to remember tantalizing vagueness. I am not a journal or diary type, and my long-term memory slowly faded. But in that motel on the morning after, I realized that all that Fortune Rock "tell-all" and "hear-all" was indeed recorded in my memory bank.

That Fortune Rock kitchen talk was mostly a riot of irony, which describes Stephen Crane's early canon. (Crane's themes echo Mailer's). Mailer has a complex character inside of him that resists facile explanations. But Mailer also exhibits a riotous ironic sensibility. That is why readers and critics, friends and foes, liken him to Proteus and Heraclitus. A flux-man creates flux-works. Thus goes the Mailer Paradox. A paradox-man is more at home, not with certainties, but with mysteries.

The mystery of this Fortune Rock table talk was that it was a paradox. What happened really didn't happen, that is, as a useful "on the record" encounter. It is virtually impossible to examine a writer and his work in any grand manner. Common sense dictates that most writers live and create off—and not on—the record. I am speaking of Norman Mailer and not

other writers, especially his LQ competitors, who sometimes allow their behavior and creations to speak for themselves.

For my own posterity commentary on this Fortune Rock visit, I cannot offer either sound bites or scripted wisdom. As to whether or not Norman was "courtly," all I can say is that the booze and our talk seemed fine and we remained friends and there were no operatic bodies on the floor. When I departed Fortune Rock, Norman was alone at the door. There was no wife, no children, not even good omen Chinese Emperor dogs.

VII. SAINT PETERSBURG / TAMPA (FEBRUARY 2004)

Only a fool expects a rare occasion to have an encore. I was wise enough not to expect a Fortune Rock repeat, yet, here I was waiting for Mailer. After not seeing him for over two decades he was coming to Tampa and St. Petersburg. I expected that his brief stopover would be a ho-hum encore of that 1972 podium fireworks visit, but again Mailer surprised me. He brought a new companion, Father Time.

As for the two decades of hiatus, it is somewhat complicated and not worth explaining, except to say that major writers are very busy and, if you know one, you must stay in contact to nourish the relationship, which I did not. I had some personal problems that preoccupied me. Norman and I had no breakup. We simply faded out.

I was stunned at the first sight of Norman. He no longer walked unaided. Instead, he relied on twin canes. Indeed, a labored walk. He told me later that he would never go into a wheelchair. His hair was still a healthy gray and his face still mostly intact and intense, as were his eyes, especially when he flashed those Irish smiles. Overall, his body was in decline but his mind and intellect were still remarkably sharp. (I was later told that Norman kept sharp by daily workouts on the *New York Time*'s tough crossword puzzles.)

My shock was understandable. At Fortune Rock, Norman was still in high gear mid-fifties. He was now eighty-one. Who could imagine an old Norman Mailer, an octogenarian, albeit a very tough one.

This visit, by necessity, was tightly structured around a foursome: Norman, Mike Lennon (who now accompanied and watched over him), I, and Phil Sipiora, my colleague and friend and our official host as chair of the English department. An aged Mailer now seldom visited academe. This trip was an obvious exception, yet he still had star billing as the featured speaker at the well-attended Suncoast Writer's Conference, a three-day multiple

event at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg campus. All four of us stayed at the St. Petersburg Hilton. The Tampa-based farewell event was the Sipiora party and Phil had assured me this event would probably not be a "happening." "Let's see" I remarked dubiously.

Phil was right. Father Time did happen to tag along.

Our evening started and ended at Tampa's most unlikely restaurant, Bern's Steak House in old South Tampa, a local and tourist favorite, with its lurid decor, a virtual clone of an eighteenth century "Elegant Bordello." The foursome arrived and Norman and Mike were hungry but tired.

There was the usual wait for a table, so we stationed ourselves in an alcove between the bar and foyer, both of which were crowded. We sat and paired off: Mike and Phil to get acquainted; Norman and I to share some privacy. We spoke for twenty minutes, not much time to rehash twenty years. But we tried and Norman's sharp intellect and memory helped considerably.

Later, in my motel room and on the verge of sleep, I suddenly remembered sitting in the restaurant's alcove when a semi-drunk New York gentleman looked at Norman and blurted out: "Hey, there's Norman Mailer." The upscale restaurant was crowded and dimly lit, but that tipsy gent was the only person who recognized *the* Norman Mailer.

At four years younger than Norman, I wondered: Would I live long enough to see which Mailer would fade—the celebrity or the creator?

At one o'clock in the afternoon of the next day, Norman entered the university auditorium. He winced, ambling on twin canes as the audience became hushed, a full house reverence. What fortuitous staging. An elderly Mailer appearing in St. Petersburg, a longtime urban refuge for retirees. Over five hundred people were in the audience, mostly women, generally over forty and genteel, and many aspiring writers. Norman entered as most everyone's Grandfather or Elderly Uncle, trying to stay alive, as was most of the audience. And Norman bore the ultimate message: "How To Become A Published Writer."

Norman Mailer, as performer, old or young, never had it so good.

His presentation lasted forty minutes. The first twenty minutes he stood at the podium, but he had weakened and needed to sit, his canes parked alongside. He lectured on writing skills, drawn from his recent book, *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing*. But Grampa Norman made the "spooky" more folksy, including helpful tips, breezy anecdotes, and always a touch of profundity. The applause was deafening.

Later that afternoon, after signing books, Mailer was near exhaustion. I was walking alongside him and he and his canes were barely making it up a steep ramp. Near the top, I either saw or thought I saw that he was falling. My instincts took over and I grabbed him, and momentarily held him. He roared: "Get off me. Leave me be." His eyes momentarily flashed anger, even near-hatred, and I let him go. He regained his balance, opened the heavy door and I followed, in full knowledge that I had violated his untouchable independence. Norman would stay alive strictly on his own terms.

Later, when alone, I mused whether I had momentarily held on to Norman Mailer or Father Time.

Neither Phil nor I wanted a repeat of the 1972 mayhem of the Kathy Freepersons and other "Prisoners of Sex." I was worried, after that ramp episode, that tonight's honored guest might morph into the "Prisoner of Aging." Again I was wrong. Norman, refreshed, turned up early at Phil's house and stayed late. He was in a youthful high gear.

He settled, as usual, in the center of the room, comfortably seated with his canes parked, as he personally welcomed one and all. Norman was fully enjoying himself and the crowd of approximately sixty people. There was no waiting line to speak to Norman. In fine fettle, Norman rose to the occasion,

The party played on: catered home food, a well-stocked bar, and a lovely spacious setting. It was a well-behaved gathering, clearly the antithesis of the 1972 "Hippy Happening."

I surveyed the room. It looked idyllic, harmonious, except for a possible minor eruption. There was a faculty colleague and possible troublemaker, who was a born celebrity confronter. He loved to muscle in, razz and rattle, and out-argue and outwit the honored guest. Most celebrity guests thought him harmless, but what about the legendary Mailer volcanic temper? They sat and huddled. I looked away, cooled down and counted, and when I looked again they were both laughing. Score one for the jovial octogenarian, who was, literally, the life of the party.

Phil mentioned to me that his 13-year-old son, Phil Jr., was a baseball pitcher and asked Norman to autograph his prized baseball. Norman did so, saying, "I've signed all kinds of things, even body parts, but this is the first time I have ever signed a baseball." So Norman Mailer and his mighty pen and "America's Favorite Pastime" put a signature on the evening. The Tampa farewell party could not have been better.

The next morning, Norman and Mike kept saying to Phil and me, "We're going to be seeing you two again and again." On the way to the airport, I overheard Norman say to the driver, "I was looking forward to this visit, and it was even better."

After his departure, I was left with one pensive question. On this visit did I learn more about Norman Mailer or Father Time and, if the latter—were my future Mailer "visits" on a shortlist, numbered?

VIII. PROVINCETOWN (2005–2007)

What remained of the Mailer future was stark. In October of 2005–2007, The Norman Mailer Society held its annual conference in Provincetown. Norman was an active participant each year, hosting a party at his house on Saturday night for all conference participants.

The Society conference headquarters were located each year at the 1920s art deco Provincetown Inn. The conferences lasted three days and included scholarly papers, panel discussions, and film presentations. The tough Octogenarian was very active and participated in live dramatic performances early on Saturday night. Occasionally, the Spartan Mailer, with his trusty canes, ventured out into media glow, podium appearances, and TV spots. At home, he still mind-wrestled the daily crosswords and other memory preservers, such as doing first draft with pen, pencil and paper, a literary rarity in our electronic age. Yes, Norman was still writing feverishly: nonfiction, projected fiction, and a novel (title and content unknown; Mailer never revealed major work-in-progress). The "last secret" became *The Castle In the Forest*, his novel chronicling the young Hitler novel that was part of a projected trilogy, but Father Time said "No."

Yes, the Mailer mind still pumped prime, but not the body. Mailer was still spurning the wheelchair but was slowly failing. Yet Norman was always enthused to greet the guests at his annual Saturday night party. He was always eager to be with his admirers.

Before the Commercial Street finale party, there was the customary Mailer "warm-up," a live performance at the small, intimate Provincetown Playhouse. This second "house" was always packed with Society members, along with Ptown friends and neighbors. Norman's stage outings were brief, perhaps an hour or so. There was a one-time dramatic reading with wife, Norris. On another weekend, a reading with his and Norris's son, John Buffalo. And yet another time an original Mailer one-act play. There were also ran-

dom readings of works-in-progress or favorite oldies. The exit was always the same: audience on their feet applauding and Mailer, center-stage, bowing. As I watched the indomitable Norman Mailer, I often wondered how he would be remembered.

At each October party at the Mailer home, I was one of the first to arrive, and one of the last to leave. Each time I could sense that iron-man Norman was showing cracks. That's body-parts talk. I had heard rumors that the bad days were slowly outnumbering the good days. My fear was that Norman would become a homebound prisoner of aging. The last Mailer Saturday night party that he attended was when I came closest to Fortune Rock, but only momentarily, because there always were bystanders. I could never get Norman alone. However, I glimpsed the inner Mailer after the last guests left.

Such a dark future, I also sensed, was unthinkable for this small throng so devoted to Norman. The parties purred on with typical staging: Mailer seated, room-center, surrounded by autograph seekers, well-wishers, all waiting their turn to park themselves alongside those canes and the host, for brief interludes of big or small talk, or just long hellos. Norman frequently flashed his signature big smile.

I recalled that St. Pete episode of the defiant "hands-off," and wondered whether it might be recurring. Mailer's combative intensity, such as many long-minutes of struggling to go places alone, on his twin canes, yet still too proud to use a walker "Do not go gentle into that dark night," so said the poet, Dylan Thomas, in his bedside battle cry. I can't resist conjuring up the vintage "Open House Mailer," still determined to play in prime time. I now know about his health-related calamities, but still I can't forget our host revealing survival under pressure. Miller still possessed an indomitable mind and spirit, an obvious manifestation of his sterling character. Some might call such behavior courtly.

Norman Mailer, in a New York hospital, died on November 10, 2007. He had been scheduled for an encore October podium appearance at the University of South Florida and a reunion with Phil Sipiora and me. Such was not to be.

Norman was laid to rest in his beloved Provincetown, reinvoking memories of my visits and I recalled the earlier 1960s events when Ptown was still the "Wild East" with Mailer the local celebrity in full bloom. Existentialism was the fad back then. Ptown had its local joke. It ran thus:

"What is the best definition of a Ptown Existentialist?"

"Someone in the front passenger seat with Norman Mailer, the driver."

That dated joke was rekindled when I first read Lance Morrow's eyewitness account of that 1994 Mailer social atrocity and, as follow-up, a caustic metaphorical image of this targeted Salon Bad Boy as a maniacal killer-driver: "[H]is motor surging … so that if he chose, he might release his brake and hurtle across the room and smash through the brick wall and cause God knows what mayhem on the world outside" (94). Well, I survived such advertised mayhem. Once, in Provincetown, I was the lone passenger in the front seat, next to Norman, my weekend host and exclusive driver. For about ten minutes, I was Ptown's foremost certified "live" existentialist.

Norman's jump-start, high speed in reverse down a long narrow alley startled and scared me. Momentarily, I wanted out but, mysteriously, the longer in wild reverse, the more quickly my fear subsided. When Norman shifted from reverse to forward onto wider streets, I experienced some comfort allied with a sudden realization that my driver knew every inch and snag of our route home. Norman and I arrived at our destination, unruffled friends. It were as if Mailer could have driven home blindfolded. For a substantial fee, you can go to certain race tracks, and take "thrill laps," sitting next to a veteran racecar driver. You are guaranteed to experience "safe thrills." That sounds like my existential ten minutes with Norman Mailer. Such was the legacy of the Mailer aura at that wheel.

But I still have the LQ Derby in my sights. That ride makes LQ sense.

So, what is the ado about a dated joke and a more recent Morrow critical barb? I believe that both joke and barb are loaded with LQ ammunition. I also believe that Morrow's LQ Derby verdict was both premature and useless. I'm still at the starting gate and Morrow should be here, too.

Consider the conspicuous Mailer canon: two Pulitzer Prizes and other major awards (except for the Nobel). Over forty books, several truly weighty novels, stories and poems, and much nonfiction, including and essays, articles, literary criticism, stage and screenplays, TV and film ventures (actor, director, critic), and much ephemera. There is also, perhaps, this age's most voluminous letter writing, many of which are astonishingly creative and revealing.

Yes, I'm still at the starting gate, and I'm supposedly destined to assume that Norman Mailer's "bombastic behavior" (aka Shakespeare's "Sound and Fury") signifies nothing in a LQ endgame. But such would not be the case if you, Lance Morrow, would consider your attack article to be a trial run of an

equally trial derby outing to advertise resumés and establish odds and starting positions for other obvious literary entries such as Bellow, Capote, Malamud, Morrison, Oates, Roth, Vonnegut, Vidal and others.

Please take a fresh long look at the real upcoming LQ derby, make some relevant visits, and do a more thorough probe of Mailer's character. Try, yes, try to ignore the media whose essence is to magnify the minuscule and overkill rarity. The media result: a hyperinflated ratio between "character flaws" and their equivalent LQ value. For example, a "wife stabbing" equals two major novels, or five public brawls eliminate *The Naked And The Dead*.

Absurd, you might say.

Take Shakespeare. We know next to nothing about the "real" Avon Bard. Imagine that we suddenly discover historical proof that "Old Will" was an absolute scoundrel (even a knife swipe or two). Would we automatically delete or "snuff out" his unsurpassed "canon." One knife swipe—no more *Hamlet*!

What absurd criteria for establishing LQ for Mailer or any other literary great. Why not take a media hiatus and see for yourself if there were a "Courtly Norman." That might bring an end to sudden death judgments.

But I must admit that your clarion call to ignore the canon for character makes some small historical and LQ sense. Heraclitus's offers an ancient echo: "Character is Destiny."

But flux is constant and legacy so tenuous, destiny so final—so why not imagine yourself Heraclitus presiding over a mystical yet purposeful LQ Derby, and put a certain writer's character on your back burner and do forward-reverse. Why not invert your earlier hasty derby result with a more authentic and just call for canon as destiny?

I offer an early oddsmaker's tip: a LQ "slow starter" like Norman Mailer (read his canon carefully with future eyes) might surprise the ultimate judge: Posterity.

NOTES

1. See my article on Mailer's trip to Alaska.

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