

NORMAN MAILER:
AN EXPECTED ENCOUNTER
IN AN UNEXPECTED PLACE

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LINDA PATTERSON MILLER, A FRIEND AND COLLEAGUE IN MODERNISM, writes about Mailer and artist Willem de Kooning in an insightful article that belies her proclamation, “I am not a seasoned Norman Mailer scholar” (299). I am sadly much more qualified to make such a disclaimer, but like Miller as a “fellow” in Hemingway studies, I can’t help but acknowledge the comparisons made between him and Mailer on the literary and personal fronts. Both men were journalists as well as writers of fiction garnering popular and artistic acclaim, each gained fame early on through writing stemming from personal war experiences, both were men who avidly followed professional sport and sometimes participated in spontaneous pugilistic bouts to settle personal scores, and each man married and divorced multiple times, creating in the wake of those unions complicated family structures.¹ These easily identifiable comparisons have already been explicated by others and I can add little to such discussions. My experience is a personal one, solidifying for me a view that Mailer, like Hemingway, often distanced himself from literary progenitors. Nonetheless, he was an avid Hemingway aficionado, and in this case a Hemingway impersonator.

The occasion for the Norman Mailer to Ernest Hemingway transformation was in itself an odd juxtaposition of contrasting entities. In September 2002 about one hundred and fifty F. Scott Fitzgerald scholars from all over the world, along with non-academics sharing a love for the man who named and wrote beautifully about the Jazz Age, had gathered at the Sixth Biennial International Fitzgerald Conference in St. Paul, Minnesota, hometown of

the 1920s icon, to celebrate the author and his work. Rushing from the historic Landmark Center and an earlier afternoon plenary session featuring Frances Ring, Fitzgerald's secretary at the time of his death, and Budd Schulberg with whom Fitzgerald had been hired and later jointly fired from writing the screenplay for the 1939 film *Winter Carnival*, we jaunted a few blocks and settled into seats of the nearly one hundred year old Sam S. Shubert Theater at 10 East Exchange Street, now aptly renamed the Fitzgerald Theater, hoping to watch the resurrection of three figures who were such an integral part of our academic interests and intellectual curiosity.

Fitzgerald Society members and local St. Paul residents eagerly filled the audience that crisp fall afternoon. Of a more famous note in the crowd were Fitzgerald's granddaughters Eleanor Lanahan and Cecilia Ross, memoirist Patricia Hampl, *Les Misérables* lyricist Herbert Kretzmer and his wife Sybil, *A Prairie Home Companion's* author/host Garrison Keillor who broadcast each week from this very stage, and the performance's stars, Norman Mailer, Norris Church Mailer, and George Plimpton. But, most important, we had come to see, or maybe more appropriately to hear Ernest Hemingway and Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald.

The Mailer, Mailer, and Plimpton trio were in St. Paul at the invitation of the Fitzgerald Society to enact their dramatic dialogue co-written by Plimpton and Terry Quinn, although the text was predominantly an arrangement of letters by and between the famous Lost Generation triumvirate. Sitting near the Fitzgerald granddaughters, I heard them whisper to each other at some point in the reading, "Did you grant permission for them to use the Fitzgerald letters?" The response from both seemed to be "no," but no matter; the show was already in progress. Set on the stage were three stations—the table from which "Ernest" wrote and read his letters, "Scott's" writing table, and a stool perch for "Zelda."

This evening was by no means the inaugural performance of the Mailer/Plimpton trio. The troop had previously given readings in 2000 at such prestigious venues as The Getty Art Museum in Los Angeles, the Mercantile Library in New York City, and the Guild Hall in East Hampton. Between 2000 and 2002, in addition to their St. Paul performance, productions were held at the Provincetown Theater, The American Church in Paris, the Folger Shakespeare Library in D.C., the Kaufmann Concert Hall at the Ninety-Second Street YMCA in New York City, the Savannah Arts Festival City Lights Theater, the Rocky Mountain Book Festival in Denver, and the

Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City, sometimes with substitutions in the central players filled by Timothy Hutton, Lee Grand, Terry Quinn, Mary Karr, Calvin Trillin, and Robert Stone.²

For our afternoon's edification Norman Mailer sat at the stage right table wearing, as I remember it, a rather stereotypical khaki flak jacket or maybe something more closely labeled pseudo hunting gear—what Robert J. Begiebing describes on another occasion as Mailer's being “got up in a safari suit” (70). He was decidedly non-representative of Hemingway's physique, much shorter in stature, lacking the proper characteristic Hemingway beard, and sporting a more diminutive barrel chest perched atop a paunch belly. He was, however, exuding a sense of his Hemingwayness or as much as he could muster, and his pleasure in the pretense was evident. Norman Mailer clearly liked being Ernest Hemingway for the space of an afternoon's entertainment.

Less convincing was the George Plimpton to F. Scott Fitzgerald transformation. Plimpton seemed too tall for the young co-ed, whose somewhat diminutive size contributed to his failure at Princeton football, too old for the man who died in his forties, too East Coast bred for the “Middle-wester” from St. Paul, and he was not sporting a Mid-western accent, whatever the machinations of that might be. Fitzgerald's own dialect was hard to characterize, and in the one recording of him I've heard, his voice resonated a slightly affected British twang, obviously not indicative of St. Paul. There was, however, on Plimpton's part little or no attempt to recreate the Fitzgerald look, even in something as relatively easy as 1920s clothing. He relied simply on the power of Fitzgerald's words to weave the spell, and for lovers of the author's highly poetic prose, perhaps that was enough.

Norris Church Mailer portrayed Zelda Fitzgerald, the complex woman with whom she had much in common. Like Zelda, Norris Mailer was Southern bred, although from Arkansas rather than Alabama, had married a Northerner, was known for her beauty, and was also like Mrs. F. Scott Fitzgerald, an artist, a novelist, and a multi-talented woman who played second fiddle to a famous literary husband. Bringing to life the voice that had drawn assorted comments in letters about its unique and engaging qualities and had no doubt inspired such famous lines as, “Her voice is full of money,” no easy task. Norris followed the usual route of actors playing Southern belles and attempting to recreate a dialect that becomes generic rather than particular to a distinctive region. Zelda's voice exuded cigarette-smoking huskiness and a dialect most likely born and bred in the advantaged

neighborhoods of Montgomery, Alabama. But like her husband, the passion and affinity Mrs. Mailer felt for the persona she inhabited was evident. Confirming that sense of sisterhood between herself and Zelda in correspondence with Cathy W. Barks, co-editor of *Dear Scott, Dearest Zelda: The Love Letters of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald*, Norris penned a note of thanks for a photo of the youthful Zelda that Barks had sent her. She wrote, "I have Zelda's photo in a little grouping of my ancestors, and she looks right at home!"³

The context for the Hemingway/Fitzgerald exchange was excised primarily from their workaday correspondence, but the prose had many shadings of the more polished fiction each writer carefully crafted with a clear eye toward posterity. These men were after all great writers, and their letters demonstrated this prowess and provided us with multifaceted and valuable insights. They wrote about their craft, their relationship to shared editor Maxwell Perkins and to colleagues in the literary world, and about their families and the struggle to work under the burden of wives, children, and paying the bills. The tensions and rivalry that existed between them at some points was palpable, to be sure, but their bond and mutual respect shone through as well. They were two men in an exclusive, lonely, and hard-earned but highly coveted club.

The Fitzgerald epistles were something of a different note. These letters between Scott and Zelda were not filled with the mundane details of ordinary days and nights spent apart. The sense one always had when eavesdropping on this legendary couple's correspondence, although at times rife with painful, angry, highly personal accusations, was that their letters were far more frequently emissaries of deeply embedded and lasting love. Regardless of the tragedies that befell their relationship, the bitterness of lost opportunities, self-indulgence at the expense of unity, or the alcoholism or mental breakdown that haunted their marriage, they maintained and professed their love to the end. Better drama than this couldn't be written.

That September afternoon's performance was what it was: three large personalities offering up homage to three larger than life figures from the golden era of modern American literature. Most all of the letters' content we heard that afternoon was already well known to us. We had reveled in it before, scoured through accumulated volumes seeking this or that piece of information to explain something for which we had our own theories. We were not enlightened or presented with secrets previously unknown about Ernest,

Scott, or Zelda. But we were, as always, enthralled to hear the spoken cadence of good writing, especially from people we had chosen to follow with such professional vigor that every two years we travel to a relevant part of the world to celebrate their work. For bringing Fitzgerald back to St. Paul along with his wife and their compatriot, Ernest Hemingway, we were grateful to our afternoon's entertainers.

NOTES

1. Tina Brown offers a similar view about Mailer saying, "He subscribed to the Hemingway model, but kicked it up a notch and made it his own" (20).
2. The production would continue past the Fitzgerald Theater performance, mostly at an international level with venues like Paris, Amsterdam, Moscow, Vienna, Berlin and London. In addition, a production entitled "One Sunday at the Fitzgeralds" and also co-authored by Terry Quinn and George Plimpton would take the stage featuring essentially the same set of players.
3. My deep thanks to Cathy Barks for sharing this personal correspondence from Norris Church Mailer, and for her work in bringing forward the beautiful collection of Scott and Zelda's love letters.

WORKS CITED

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