

ADVERTISEMENTS FOR OTHERS: THE BLURBS OF NORMAN MAILER

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WITH *ADVERTISEMENTS FOR MYSELF*, NORMAN MAILER ESTABLISHED an influential foundation in his critique of fellow authors. Additionally, he secured his role as a contributor to the literary marketplace by way of his praise of other works. In over half a century, Norman Mailer composed approximately one hundred and forty blurbs for books on a bevy of subjects. From Hemingway to heavyweight champions, from conspiracy theories to Italian cooking, Mailer has, through his blurbs, shown great generosity to fellow writers, commented on a variety of topics, revealed several personal interests, and developed a poetry of promotion.

Although the 1990s were the peak years for his blurb-writing (he wrote thirty-six of them), Mailer was already punching up endorsements in the first full-year of his literary career. Fast on the heels of *The Naked and the Dead*, he found fascination with a book authored by a thirty-eight-year-old Japanese businessman: a nightclub owner who was “Hawaiian-born, U.S.-educated, and a veteran of the Japanese army” named Hanama Tasaki (“Made in Japan”). Tasaki made his debut with *Long the Imperial Way*—a war novel—and Mailer generously wrote the following one hundred and seventy two words:

I hope *Long the Imperial Way* finds a large audience, and to Americans this picture of Japanese life should prove fascinating. Even more important, the experience of military life seen through a Japanese filter is the possible way to grasp the swindle of modern war: the patriotism, the battle waged in the name of peace, the exploitation of soldiers by their officers—the sad song

is here with all its verses. For undoubtedly the Japanese were more miserable, more subjected, more oppressed than soldiers of any other nation, and the brutalities and excesses they committed became comprehensible here to the Western mind. Or at least it is to be hoped that they do become comprehensible or we shall be in a pretty pass when not only the Russians but the Americans as well begin to commit the extra-curricular butcheries of war, and American soldiers and Russian soldiers will strike out in blind frustration and in desperation, swindled even in the moment of their death by the slogans which have already betrayed them.

The paragraph he wrote in support of James Jones's *From Here to Eternity*, one of his earliest blurbs, presages his relationship with the fellow war novelist—one of great camaraderie and, later, some disagreement. Mailer had received the work through Scribner's editor, Burroughs Mitchell. Sick in bed in his Vermont home during the fall of 1950, with the galleys of *Eternity* to keep him company, Mailer had this to offer:

It's a big fist of a book with powerful virtues and serious faults, but if the very good is mixed with the sometimes bad, those qualities are inseparable from the author. Jones writes with a wry compassionate anger which is individual and borrows from no writer I know. I think his book is one of the best of the 'war novels', and in certain facets perhaps the best.

In a letter to Jones in 1955, Mailer properly framed his contribution, saying, "I remember when I read *Eternity*. I was sick with the grippe at the time and I just got sicker. Because deep inside me I knew that no matter how I didn't want to like it, and how I leaped with pleasure at its faults, it was still just too fucking good . . ." (Dearborn 87). Mailer suffered, surely, but also felt that Jones was "talking" to him, as good writers did through their books, especially a "major work" like *Eternity* (JJLS.org). Later, after the deterioration of their friendship, Jones and Mailer would meet for the last time in Elaine's, a bar in the Upper East Side. An uninformed Mailer suggested that the two "fight it out," to which Jones replied, "I'm sick, I've got a bum heart" (Jones 230).

Norman felt bad about having made this challenge, and relayed the story to Kaylie Jones when the two met at a cocktail party at Jean Stein's in the late 1980s. Eager to heal old wounds, he offered his friendship to the then twenty-something author. Gloria Jones, rigid and quiet next her daughter throughout the exchange, finally spoke. "You can make it up to her right now," she said, "give her a quote for her new book about Russia." Mailer seemed to easily acquiesce, and Gloria added, "If you give her a quote for her novel . . . I swear, Norman, I'll . . . I'll . . . give you a blow job." They all laughed, and Norman wrote the blurb for *Quite the Other Way*, celebrating Kaylie's "great honesty about a tricky and charged subject . . . a portrait of life in Moscow . . ."

The Joneses were not the only major authors to receive blurbs from Mailer. Mailer promoted *The Naked Lunch* as "a book of great beauty, great difficulty, and maniacally exquisite insight," referring to Burroughs as "the only American novelist living today who may conceivably be possessed by genius." Mailer would go on public record in a Boston obscenity trial with his thoughts, along with Allen Ginsberg, to appeal the banning of the book (Lennon 216).

Not long after meeting James Baldwin in Paris in 1956—Jean Malaquais introduced the two at his apartment—Mailer "kindly" provided a blurb for the just-finished *Giovanni's Room* (Dearborn 144). There to decompress after writing for *The Village Voice*, the patriarch of hipsterdom was quitting Benzedrine and Seconal, and composed a simple review of Baldwin's work, saying he "has become one of the few writers of our time . . . [he has written] a book that belongs in the top rank of fiction."

Novelist and screenwriter Don Carpenter has had his share of Mailer praise as well, initially receiving a blurb for his first work in 1966, *Hard Rain Falling*, which read, "Don Carpenter has written a remarkably cool, knowledgeable, sly, subtle, wry, painful novel about some intelligent and violent men and their little trip through life, prison, and the pains of reformation . . . the best novel I've ever read about contemporary show biz."

Over twenty years later, Norman was doing his "church work" as president of the PEN American Center (Lennon 149) and coping with the death of his mother, Fanny Mailer, but perhaps found solace in Carpenter's *The Class of '49*. In an eloquent endorsement, he wrote: "I never knew what they meant when they said so-and-so writes like an angel, but now I do. Don Carpenter

gives us a superb prose, light, fast as the speed of reading, quick in its turns, luminous, tender, humorous, sad, full of wise woe and comic optimism.”

As for Larry L. King, he would comment on *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* in a 1981 letter, saying he “love[ed] the penetration in that one.” Five years later, he reserved his less suggestive admiration for King’s *None But a Blockhead*: “King’s strengths are his wit and his integrity . . . He rings an American bell. His writing is, I dare say, intoxicating.”

As with many novelists, Norman understood the infinite value of poets and their craft. He “accept[ed] the hazard of mentioning [his] own poetry” in a blurb for Florida poet Ed Skellings, and included the refrain: “I want my poems / to be like bones / and shine silver in the sun.” Poet Norman Rosten, who referred to Mailer as “Norm I” (Rosten himself was “Norm II”), would also receive acclaim from his longtime friend. *Over and Out*, however, was not a poetry collection, but a “remarkable novel filled with poetic skills and startling tender sorrows which are blown away with the lightest diffusion of wit . . . the prevailing mood while reading it is pleasure, then more pleasure.” Rosten initiated Mailer’s literary life, helping him to carry the manuscript for *The Naked and Dead* on the subway to meet Ted Amussen. Once, he had even attempted to arrange a meeting between Norm I and Marilyn Monroe, who frequented the kitchen of his Connecticut home in the late 1950s. Mailer, who lived within a mere five miles, would tease Rosten about this, often accusing him of “favoring [Arthur] Miller” (Rollyson 253). During the 1980s, both “Norms” would regularly eat lunch together in New York—it seems that they always stayed in touch.

But Mailer’s interests were never solely literary. Like any sane person, one of Norman’s favorite pastimes was sex. Yet with one book, he proudly announced a bit of ignorance. One Fall evening in 1956, Mailer had tried to prompt a fight between his then-wife Adele and Leslie Aldridge Westoff (then married to John Aldridge) at a party in their Connecticut farmhouse. Over forty years later, Leslie co-authored *Passionate Sex: Discover the Special Power in You* (1999) and contacted him for a blurb, saying “[Y]ou, Norman, have always been known for your witty, provocative, brilliant, and sexy comments . . . so if you could just say one sentence . . . I will be forever grateful . . .” (Greenstein). She knew how to stroke his ego, and Mailer’s response matched her praise in kind: “Working on my own stuff, I haven’t had a moment to look into *Passionate Sex*, but how can others fail to buy it? If the author delivers one-tenth of what is promised in the title, the book will be the bargain of the

year.” He allowed no editing of this blurb—no cuts whatsoever—and amended in an interview, “Why assume that endorsements are holy? I thought it was time to have a little fun with the solemnity of sexual promise. And indeed I did remain true to the endangered principle that information in an information age must strive to be as accurate as possible” (Greenstein 40). Whether he knew it or not, Norman’s comment would be telling of the very origin of the blurb itself, which first came to us on the cover of humorist Gelett Burgess’s *Are You a Bromide?* To promote his 1906 publication, Burgess had included the photo of a buxom woman with the fictional name of “Belinda Blurb,” followed by a brief, and nonsensical, text. This satirical look at self-praise caught on, and the word soon found a more serious home amongst promoters and advertisers (Corey 35–6). With his remarks, Norman had once again cut publicity down to its original chaff.

Mailer’s attention to sex was matched only by his early interest in fighting and its various styles. During the winter of 1956–57, Mailer was visited in his Connecticut home by Lyle Stuart, the publisher who would encourage him to begin writing about race in America, sending his statements to Faulkner and even Eleanor Roosevelt. Stuart was aware of Mailer’s interest in combat, and during this trip encouraged him to take jiu-jitsu classes in New York. Norman took to it immediately, and when he discovered that Stuart was publishing a book by his own jiu-jitsu professor, he matched the fifteen-hundred-dollar advance, and profited from the investment by well over twenty-two thousand dollars (Mills 184). He even wrote a blurb, tout-ing Kiyose Nakae’s 1958 *Jiu-Jitsu Complete* as “coherent and practical in its every detail.”

An affinity for boxing took Mailer from spectator to promoter to inside the ring. In the same above letter to King, he quipped, “I have to laugh when I think of all the dedication and abstention I’ve put into a sport where on my greatest days I rise within sight of being a mediocre amateur-gentlemen-boxer.” Norman would extol Larry Fink’s 1997 collection of boxing photographs, proclaiming them to be “very good at capturing the dignity, the dread, the sense of doom and the desire to bring doom upon others that is the subtext of every fight . . . and every boxing gym.” He took to early sparring with Adele Morales’ father, Al, who always had a place to practice or a bag to swing at, and had associated with the likes of Roger Donoghue, Mohammed Ali, and very closely with light-heavyweight champ Jose Torres, whom Mailer financed for the 1965 title. Both men took great pains with

each other as they traded punches and pages in the summer of 1972, Torres—who rented a nearby house in Jamaica, Vermont—was teaching Mailer the ropes, Mailer teaching Torres the pen (Rollyson 189). By the end of it, Torres completed his book on Ali, the well-known *Sting Like a Bee*. Mailer's blurb would prove a quick jab of friendship: "Fantastic . . . Goddamit."

Just as he was no stranger to taking a swing, Mailer would have a deep interest in the concepts of God, the devil, and the everlasting fight between the two—a fight taking place in the ring of one's very soul. Myron Kaufmann, a Jewish classmate from Harvard, was present when Bea Silverman (Mailer's girlfriend at the time) turned to the other women eating dinner at Dunster House and asked "Do you girls fuck?" (Dearborn 34). For Kaufmann, author of the 1957 bestseller *Remember Me to God*, Norman would state his "extraordinary honesty" in saying that the book would "cause a noticeable shift in the consciousness of the American Jew and the American Protestant" and would credit it for awakening him to hints of anti-Semitism at Harvard, though he "never felt ghettoized" (Dearborn 24).

Sandra Harmon, who booked Mailer for his infamous appearance with Gore Vidal on the Dick Cavett show, received his nod of approval for her novel, *A Girl Like Me*. The blurb, written soon after his return from Africa in 1975, took up the entire back cover. "We are entering a literature where all the lives which used to be silent now speak," the comments began,

Now, in its way, *A Girl Like Me* is the most startling manifestation of this phenomenon. For no matter who else would write a book, how could we expect a novel as unendurably honest as this to come from that female Jewish world which is triangulated between Brooklyn, Miami and Los Angeles, that secretive, plotting, self-calculating and wholly materialistic world, especially when its heroine is beautiful, sexually centered, victim and exploiter, as calculating and ambitious as the rest, and yet divinely, incomprehensibly honest. . . .

It seems appropriate that Harmon's book made it to Mailer's reading pile. It was around this time that he met Norris Church at a party thrown by long-time friends, Francis and Ecey Gwaltney. Opposite those "lives which used to be silent," he filled his life, and his reading hours, with people of great fame. It is no secret that Norman was obsessed by the iconic Marilyn Monroe

(evidenced by his much disputed biography, *Marilyn*). The same year his name appeared on Harmon's novel, it appeared on Robert Slatzer's *The Life and Curious Death of Marilyn Monroe*, hailing it as good enough to re-open the investigation on the starlet's suspicious death:

[I]n fact I would say on the basis of hard evidence he has collected it would now be more difficult to prove she took her own life than that she was killed. It is already boring to say, 'in light of Watergate . . .' but *in* the light of Watergate, Dallas, Martin Luther King, Bobby, Malcolm X and Chappaquidick, I do not know how anyone could read the end of this book and think that a Coroner's Inquest on the death of Marilyn Monroe can or should be avoided. The trouble is that public opinion must first call for it. . . .

In an interesting side-note, biographer Carl Rollyson twice requested Mailer's endorsement for his own book on Monroe: "He replied quite courteously, saying he hoped he would have time to read it—although he had stacks of books from friends who hoped he would write blurbs for them" (Rollyson 371).

Another iconic starlet, socialite, actress, and model—Edie Sedgwick—once auditioned for Mailer's stage adaptation of *The Deer Park*, though he thought she "wasn't very good . . . she used so much of herself with every line that we knew she'd be immolated after three performances." This quotation comes to us from the *Edie: An American Biography* (1982), by Jean Stein and longtime friend George Plimpton, which bore a blurb by Mailer: "[she] was the spirit of the Sixties . . . While it is not a novel (although it reads like one) I still will say: *This is the book of the Sixties that we have been waiting for.*" In 1985, he would comment: "*Savage Grace* has to be the best oral history to come out since *Edie*" (Robins). Norman Mailer managed not only to get his name *in* Edie's biography, but also *on* its cover, as well as mention it on *another* biography altogether—about *Fatal Relations in a Rich and Famous Family*, the doomed Baekelands.

One cannot mention Mailer's association with fame and doom without also invoking the Kennedy name. In the late 1980s, he would mirror his comments on Marilyn Monroe with Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins*, detailing the JFK shooting as "a conspiracy." Of Summers' *Conspiracy: The*

Definitive Book on the JFK Assassination he would say, “I began it again as soon as I finished.” However, none of these was as lauded as *Symptoms of Withdrawal: A Memoir of Snapshots and Redemption* (2005). At 82, Mailer was still going strong—the University of Texas had just purchased his archive for \$2.5 million—and he was more than willing to contribute this blurb for Christopher Kennedy Lawford’s book:

Books about famous American families usually land with a pious splat, or look to excavate a mud hole, but this one is a beauty. The Kennedys have had more achievements and more God-size disasters than most of us can ever know, but not one of the Kennedys has been a good writer. That verdict can now be altered . . . given as far as he chooses to go, he certainly tells it like it is. Three cheers.

Such a prominent and sprawling family name brings to mind Mailer’s own blood, specifically Cy Rembar, whose work, *The End of Obscenity*, came only a few years after Norman’s testimony in favor of *The Naked Lunch*. Rembar’s work was supported by his cousin as “a quiet and essentially modest account of a legal revolution,” and would be bookended in 1996 by Mailer’s approval of Peter Alson’s *Confessions of an Ivy League Bookie* as

[T]ough, vulnerable, poignant . . . Alson’s achievement is to limn the spiritual pain of a well-educated Yuppie who is not on his uppers. This he does as no one has before. So, his confessional becomes one of those few books which captures a generation. Since I am Peter Alson’s uncle, I will probably be accused of nepotism, but to hell with that—I would stand by the first paragraph if he were your nephew. Literature is thicker than blood.

In his contributions to covers, Mailer even took the time to contemplate the minutiae of modern life. There is joyous disgust in his blurb for Fenichell’s *Plastic: The Making of a Synthetic Century*, “At last! For anyone who hates plastics and loves good writing, this is the book to satisfy your anger, your passion, and your instinctive judgment, and all at once.” And one cannot ignore *Vittorio’s Dog Book*, a collection of drawings that inspired the novelist to admit, “Dogs have souls. The only question, in my mind, is

whether theirs are more noble than ours. And I say this despite having seen a great deal of execrable behavior in the canine species.”

Few subjects have escaped Norman Mailer’s interest, and even fewer observations his keen eye. The collection of his blurbs is a collection of reflective vignettes, and serves as a testament to his relationship with the spooky art, his munificence toward fellow conjurers, and his role as a quick-change artist; a Renaissance man; a broker of the literary marketplace. When considering the endorsement of fellow authors, it is perhaps best to heed Mailer’s advice, included in a 1974 letter to Richard Goodwin for his work *The American Condition*:

If your publishers wish to cut [the blurb], that’s all right with me, but I’d like them to show the rare courtesy of indicating how and where they’re going to make the cuts . . . it creates good will and the opposite causes a quiet rancor to build in people who begin as your champion . . . don’t [take] the blurb and pull out of it ‘a great book.’

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