

# NORRIS CHURCH MAILER

S U E F O X

*This interview took place on January 18, 2010 in the Mailer Brooklyn Heights home.*

ON THE FACE OF IT, A TWENTY-SIX-YEAR-OLD HIGH SCHOOL ART TEACHER raised by strict Arkansas Baptists whose grandparents were sharecroppers and muleskinners, and America's wildest literary lion—at 52, already a year older than her father—with seven children, five failed marriages and other affairs in his wake—didn't have much going for it. But who is anyone to judge? Men and women with no obvious link in their culture, backgrounds or achievements are drawn to one another and the alchemy works. Norris Church Mailer and Norman Mailer were one of those couples. Apart from their cultural mismatch and age difference, in her platform soles, the strikingly beautiful, willowy five-foot-ten redhead, towered above Mailer, who was barely five-foot-eight.

Their love affair—painful and stormy as it sometimes was—endured until the day Mailer died—November 10, 2007. He was eighty-four. Norris, who shared the same birthday as her more famous husband, January 31, is sixty-one. As she says,

“We were together thirty-three years, which by any measure is a long marriage. Every love story has its ups and downs and we certainly had ours, but I would say it was one of the great love stories. When you think about it, the two of us were kind of impossible. Norman and his wives sounded a bit like Henry VIII. Nobody would have put our two characters in a novel and imagined that the sixth wife would be the big love story.”

Except that, deep in her heart, Norris knew that the barrel-chested, blue-eyed Jewish intellectual heavyweight—one of the great voices of post-war American literature—loved her more than he had ever loved anyone. She writes about it in her memoir.

“Through the years, no matter the circumstances of our passions and rages, our boredoms, angers and betrayals, large and small, sex was the chord that bound us together; it was the thick wire woven from thousands of shared experiences that never broke, indeed was hardly frayed and only got stronger, no matter how the bonds of marriage were tested. Even in the worst times we had many years later, when we almost separated, somehow, inexplicably, at night we would cling to each other, drawn like powerful magnets, the familiarity of our bodies putting salve on the wounds we had inflicted during the day, until over time the warring ended and the love remained. The only thing that brought it to an end was old age, illness and death itself.”

Norris believes that she and Norman stayed together “Because we really loved each other. We loved our kids, we loved our life and we were comfortable with each other. There were dark places and Norman’s philandering hurt me. We sparred but we also laughed a lot. In the end, nothing was ever powerful enough to tear our marriage apart.”

She writes about the rude people: “and there are way too many rude people in this world asking her ‘Which wife are *you*?’” Never for a moment did she doubt her short although possibly not sweet answer: “The last one.”

Love him or hate him, no one ever sat on the fence when it came to Norman Mailer, perhaps the most pugnacious writer of his generation. In 1948, his first partly autobiographical novel, *The Naked and The Dead*, brought him fame and huge public acclaim. He was twenty-five years old. Over the next six decades, center stage, he published more than thirty books, including novels and non-fiction on subjects as disparate as Mohammed Ali and Marilyn Monroe. He twice won the Pulitzer Prize, for *Armies of the Night* (1968) and *The Executioner’s Song* (1979). Mailer wrote essays as well as writing, directing and occasionally, acting in low-budget movies. He helped found *The Village Voice* magazine. He was a regular and highly opinionated guest on TV talk shows who actively sought publicity and public attention.

Mailer once ran for Mayor of New York. He was an anti-war protester, an opponent of women's liberation, and a man who railed against the evils of plastic. He railed against many things and, no mean boxer, could pick a fight at the least provocation. He stabbed his second wife, Adele. Gore Vidal frequently argued with him. In 1984, Mailer wrote asking Vidal to end their feud, inviting him to help raise money for a PEN World Congress by joining an impressive list of writers including John Updike, Susan Sontag, Joan Didion, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Bill Styron, Arthur Miller, William Buckley, Kurt Vonnegut and Norman Mailer. Vidal chose to share an evening with Mailer who, throughout his life, was a great supporter of PEN. According to Norris, "He was also a great supporter of aspiring writers, replying to letters with encouraging words and sending manuscripts to agents. I used to call Norman, 'Henry Higgins.' He was always trying to take someone and make them into someone wonderful. He liked it when one of them succeeded and was generous with his time and advice."

In the ICU at New York's Mount Sinai Hospital, a nurse mentioned to Mailer that she liked to write. Norman told her to write about her weekend, then went through each typed page with her line by line. As Norris recounts,

"Norman used to say that if we had money he would have liked to start a school for writers. But with nine children (When she first met Mailer, Norris had been divorced for a year, and already had three-year-old Matthew. Their son John Buffalo, was born in April of 1978), money was tight. Norman worked very hard to run our enormous family—especially the time when we had six children in private school."

One of the darkest times in the Mailer marriage was when Jack Abbott came into their lives. Norman was writing a book (*The Executioner's Song*) about a murderer, Gary Gilmore, who was executed in 1977. Jack Henry Abbot wrote to Mailer from prison. He had a history of violence and had killed an inmate. His letter was well written, useful for the book, and they began corresponding. Mailer told Abbott that he thought the correspondence would make an interesting book and his publisher took on the project. Then Abbott was granted parole. Norris had no idea that Norman had committed himself to helping Abbott until the night he announced that he was off to pick him up from the airport and bring him home to dinner.

According to Norris, “John Buffalo was not yet three. It was a scary time. The most scary thing was Norman’s lapse of realism. He genuinely thought [that] talent would override everything—that with his book—Jack would be transformed. But a psychopath, even one who has written a decent book, is still a psychopath. That was Norman—idealist and optimist who woke up to a new world every day.”

In May 2007, I went to see Mailer in Provincetown. It was six months before he died. Physically frail, he was combative and thrilling company. I told him that I had once worked in Cuba with a photographer to find Gregory Fuentes who had known Ernest Hemingway and was featured in his novel *The Old Man and The Sea*. Norman was amused to hear that we found Fuentes who, wheelchair bound, was wheeled out for tourists by his grandson. Just like Mailer, Fuentes had his life etched into his face. For \$5 we could kiss Fuentes and take a photograph. As I left, I joked to Norman, “I’m going to kiss you good bye but I’m not giving you \$5!” At eighty-four, in his old man’s slippers, he didn’t argue. I left, haunted by what he had said about writing. “A novel is like falling in love. You don’t say, ‘I’m going to fall in love. It has to come to you. It has to feel just like love.’”

And love is what I came to talk about with Norris in the lovely Brooklyn brownstone house that has long been the Mailer’s New York home. The apartment is up three flights of stairs. You huff and puff your way up flights to be rewarded by the sight of her striking portrait of Humphrey Bogart hanging jokily outside the entrance.

Inside, on a clear blue sky day such as this, your breath is taken away by the view from the huge living room windows over the East River to Wall Street straight ahead. Slightly to the West is the Hudson River and the Statue of Liberty. Norris has filled her home with books. It’s an Aladdin’s cave of objects and memories. There are festive music boxes—a carousel, a circus tent and an enchanting Ferris wheel that lights up. Her home is an oasis of calm green walls and different textures—of stencilled furniture, plumped up velvet cushions, walls and surfaces covered with family photographs and paintings—some of hers—others done by Mailer children. The apartment is a celebration of her love for family and home. It radiates Norris’s artist’s gift for colour and delicious sense of humor. When you’re in her company, it is hard not to smile. She recounts, “I’m anally tidy. But it wasn’t always like this. When I first came to New York, this place was such a mess. I scrubbed it clean, and didn’t give it a thought. There were ropes and trapezes for the

kids hanging from the ceiling—a complete jungle gym. You can't imagine what it was like. But I'd never been out of Arkansas until I met Norman. I'd never been on an aeroplane. And here I was, in New York, totally in love. To me the apartment was exquisite!"

Although we have been corresponding for the past couple of years, it is a year since I've seen Norris. She looks her usual amazing self in rich colors complementing her red hair and bold make up. But I'm shocked at how thin she is. She was thin when we met last year, but now she looks less than a size two. It is not her choice, but the result of a particularly nasty cancer, which she has been living with for ten years. She's had surgeries and procedures that someone less strong and sunny might not have endured, with so little apparent fuss.

While we talk, a specialist nurse calls to brief her on tomorrow's hospital appointment to replace a kidney stent. "Oh it's just a little day trip to the OR," she says in her soft, infectious Steel Magnolias lilt. "When it's over you get cookies and tea and go home." I say I'm in awe of how brave she is. Sometimes, in email she might just mention feeling a bit under the weather but it is always incidental to news about the family and her memoir. As she says, "I'm not brave. You'd do it too. I wish it wasn't like this, but I have to get on with it. It could be my muleskinner genes but I've never thought I could just curl up into a fetal ball and say I can't do it." The year after Norman died, Norris went to the hospital five times. "I'm not in a hurry to leave this life, but I won't be greedy either."

In April 2008, the week before Norman's memorial service in a packed to the rafters Carnegie Hall, she emailed to say she wasn't sure she was going to be able to attend. But she was there, sitting serenely in her big hat and understated clothes, seeking not one jot of attention, surrounded and protected by generations of Mailers who love her. And not just because she made Norman Mailer happy. Norris Church Mailer was no trophy wife. She is a remarkable woman in her own right—a gifted writer and painter who has also been a teacher, model and actress. Norris didn't speak at what was a tender, and often hilarious, celebration of her husband's life. Instead, there was a big screen video sequence of photos portraying an impossibly handsome man with his impossibly beautiful wife. It was screened to a recording of her singing "You'll come back. You always do."

Norris Church Mailer was the name Norman made up for her. She was born Barbara Jean Davis in Moses Lake, Washington where her father, James

had a job on the O'Sullivan Dam and the family joined the Freewill Baptist Church. They moved to Little Rock. Feisty, three-year-old Barbara won Little Miss Little Rock and grew into a beautiful young woman—think Julianne Moore colouring and bone structure and then some. Norris was deeply conflicted between rebelling against her strict Christian upbringing and worrying about sin. Larry Norris, her first husband, was two years ahead of her in high school. They started dating in 1966. Vietnam was just beginning. Larry paid his way through school on a scholarship, which meant joining the army when he graduated. At 17, she lost her virginity to Larry. The earth didn't move, but in the eyes of God she knew she was married. The sex improved. She entered Arkansas Technical College to major in art. They married in August 1969. Aged 20, she knew she was making a mistake but was saving her soul from hellfire. Matthew was born in 1972. Both parents adored him but they divorced in February 1974. As Norris recounts, "The break up was my fault. We'd met as children. I always felt, in some part of me, that I was just marking time until my real life started."

The ex-Mrs. Norris then taught Art in Russellville High School. Her students voted her Outstanding Teacher of the year. She caught the eye of a charismatic twenty-seven-year-old man named Bill Clinton who was running for Congress. One of the wittiest lines in her memoir recalls when, years later in New York, the scandals broke and a man she knew socially who was in politics said, "I guess he slept with every woman in Arkansas except you Norris." "Sorry," I replied. "I'm afraid he got us all." Norris knew that Clinton would become President and she recalls: "I even wrote in a little book I gave him: See you in The White House." He was and is pretty hard to resist. But let me put it this way. Although he's lovely, I would not have wanted to marry Bill Clinton."

Francis Irby Gwaltney—Fig—was a soldier with Norman Mailer in World War II. An English teacher at Arkansas Tech, he and Mailer kept up a friendship. Norris was also friends with Fig and his wife. In April 1975, Norris took her senior class to the Tech to hear a talk on film animation. Next door, in an English class, Fig was introducing his friend, the writer Norman Mailer to his English class.

Norris remembers, "I had a copy of his book on Marilyn Monroe and persuaded Fig to invite me to the party he was making for Norman that night so he could sign it. The last thing on my mind was romance. I had Matt, who my parents loved and were happy to mind when I was working, I owned my

house, and I had a fulfilling job. I was dating a lot. I knew Norman Mailer was older than my dad, but when we met at dinner later (Norman had taken one look at Norris and insisted Fig invite her to dinner), he didn't seem old. He looked young and attractive and was obviously very interested in me. When some one is interested in you—really concentrating and not looking over your shoulder, which considering my shoes would have been easy for Norman—well, I was interested too.”

At the time Mailer was separated from his fourth wife, Beverley, but not quite separated from Carol, with whom he had a daughter, Maggie, who was six months older than Matt. At 9:30 pm Norris had to leave the party to collect Matt, who was with his father. Norman suggested that they pick him up together. Norris recounts, “Watching him hold my sleeping boy touched me.”

Norman Mailer was the first man Norris ever brought back to her house while her son was there. She told Norman about her desire to write, about her marriage and her divorce. He told her about his life, his wives, his children and how he was being pulled in so many directions—and not only Carol—there was another relationship he was trying to get out of too. Curiously, both of them had first married when they were twenty.

They made love on the floor, which wasn't that great. Norris writes about it: “How could it have been? But then there are few great ones on the first try. Most guys never get *near* to great under any circumstance.” Norman left the next day without ever signing her copy of his book on Marilyn Monroe. He invited Norris to meet him in New York. As Norris says, “I lied to my parents who looked after Matt. I told them I was going to an art convention.” Her close girlfriends, whom she still has to this day, thought that she would go to New York and get Norman Mailer out of her system.

Eventually they had to confront the truth. Norris had fallen in love with a man of fifty-two who lived in New York, was a lousy marriage prospect, and had fathered more than anyone's fair share of children. Norris recalls, “When my father realised I was serious about Norman he said, ‘Well you know that in twenty years time you're going to end up as his nurse. He's going to be an old man.’ I told him. ‘Well daddy, I may go first and why give up 20 years of happiness for something that might never happen?’ I'd say that again. None of us know what's going to happen. If you're happy right now, that's more than most people get.” Later, whenever another Norman Mailer story hit the headlines, Norris would call her parents to warn them about what was in the papers. Norris summarizes, “I didn't like it and neither did they but that's

how it was.” Norman and her parents didn’t have much to talk about, “But,” Norris recounts, “they respected each other and got on fine.”

Mailer used to tell Norris that she was the only woman he had ever picked who had as much common sense as his mother. Norris remembers, “It wasn’t necessarily a compliment! But I loved Fanny Mailer and she loved me. She was a character—curious, clever, down to earth. She wasn’t erudite or well educated—and I’m not either. His mother adored Norman. As long as Norman was happy, that was ok with her. She taught me about Judaism and how to cook the food he enjoyed. Fanny and his sister, Barbara, were good friends to me. That meant a lot to a girl who didn’t know anyone in New York. And Fanny adored John Buffalo, who was a sunny, sweet baby.”

John, with his movie star good looks is, like his father, a writer and actor. He says that he was brought up with “An obscene amount of love.” He is travelling with Norris on her publicity tour. As his mother says, “To look after me, and carry the bags!”

What did Norris have that so endeared her to Norman’s children? Why did she succeed where the other wives failed? She is never going to say anything about any of the other wives: “I was an only child so having this huge family was wonderful. Susan, Norman’s oldest was the same age as me. It was like gaining a sister. The older kids were like siblings, the younger ones loved Matt and when John came along, they loved him too. Most of the time the kids lived with their mothers. They had their own lives but they spent summers with Norman in Maine, swimming, canoeing, climbing and being this big family. Norman was a wonderful father. They could see how happy he was. That hadn’t happened in a long time. Norman was very outdoorsy. During those first family summers I pretended I was more athletic than I really was. By the time he found out it was much too late. He was pretty formidable, radiating energy like a steam heater. But he didn’t phase me. I think that’s one of the reasons he found me attractive—the fact that I wasn’t phased.”

Did Mailer ever sign her copy of his book on Marilyn Monroe? “He didn’t write in it until I was already living with him in New York,” Norris recalls: This is what he wrote—To Barbara. Because I knew when I wrote this book that someone I had not yet met would read it and be with me. Hey, Baby, do you know how I love Barbara Davis and Norris Church?” Norman. Feb ’76.”

By any standard, Norris Church Mailer has had an unbelievable life.

Against all odds, she and Norman had a marriage that lasted, as the line goes, “Till death us do part.” She is not unhappy living on her own and has no interest in a relationship with another man. As she says, “I’m not someone who feels lonely. I’m painting again and working on another book. Six of our children live in New York, so I’m surrounded by family. And my mother, who’s 90, lives fifteen minutes away. We see each other all the time and I go out a lot. Of course I miss Norman. There’s so much going on in the world. I want to know what he thinks and what he has to say. If we’d never met, I guess I’d have been happy enough. I’d have painted. Maybe I’d have got married again and had a couple more kids. But I wouldn’t trade my life with Norman Mailer for anything.”