

NORRIS CHURCH MAILER:
AN ARTIST FROM ARKANSAS

J O H N B O W E R S

A Ticket to the Circus

By Norris Church Mailer

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When you pick up this marvelous book and read its first pages, you feel you may be eavesdropping on more than you should, like finding someone's private journal that's been hidden away in a drawer. Shortly thereafter, you've forgotten eavesdropping, and find yourself in something more like a novel, a real page-turner, no holds barred. When you've finished you know you've read something that's really something else again. Norris Church Mailer—or Barbara Davis or Barbara Norris as she was known before Norman Mailer stepped into the picture—stands tall and unbridled, an artist at the top of her game.

Life did not begin with Norris upon meeting Mailer. In fact, what has made her who she is, as well as having given her the temperament and ability of an artist, comes from Arkansas. In the now familiar story of her showing the famous novelist her first attempt at fiction, he said, "It's not as bad as I thought it would be." She is tough, whether by means of a hard scrabble Arkansas upbringing or by DNA, and she withdrew the pages from his hands and didn't show him anything else until the galleys of her first novel, *Windchill Summer*, appeared on the doorstep. He started in with corrections, for he was, by all accounts, a fine editor and instructor in writing and couldn't stop his pencil moving once pages came before him, but she was having none of it. "It is *my* book," she told him.

There were fights over many things; there was lovemaking that began in D.H. Lawrence fashion on the first evening she met him in Arkansas and continued on until frailty and illness closed the blinds but never dampened the warmth between them; and there were domestic moments in which the delicate-seeming, softly spoken girl took on the burden of holding a sprawling, diverse Mailer brood together in Brooklyn and Provincetown. But I get ahead of myself. Norris grew up a Baptist in Arkansas, believing and fearing the wrath of the Almighty if she went astray and sinned. She was submerged under water when baptized at 11 and took “Jesus Christ as her personal Savior,” as we say down there. (Full Discloser: I was submerged myself in Tennessee.) Religion has had a lasting effect on her. Her febrile imagination conjured up terrifying vistas of a burning continuous hell that awaited one who saw a movie on the Sabbath or used the Lord’s name in vain.

Her inventive mind in this regard was one of the first indications of later interest, and ability, in creative ventures—such as this memoir. She is busily inventing things from the beginning, imaging outcomes, one of the first orders of business for a writer. What was she thinking when faced with moving to Brooklyn, taking up life with the Mailer and his clan and lifestyle? She simply did it. She has that quality of damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead. She made her first trip on an airplane to meet him for a rendezvous in Chicago when she was living in Arkansas. And she confesses—I guess that’s the word—that she had never said the word “fuck” out loud until Mailer brought it forth. What a combination they became: the author who used “fug” in his first novel for “fuck” and Norris that couldn’t say the word until he came along. Even today, with all the excuses for blowing her top, and there have been many, Norris has trouble swearing.

And she has gone after what she wanted, gritting her teeth, and jumping ahead. When she was three her mother entered her in a Little Miss Little Rock contest and her dramatic flair did not end with her winning the prize on stage. She wouldn’t leave. When a woman in a purple dress and high heels, the MC of the event, tried to take her by the hand and lead her off, Norris wouldn’t go. She had has a taste of the spotlight ever since. Her strong, silent and somewhat shy father had to come on stage and chase her down. She does not like to be left behind and unnoticed and is a natural mimic—a quality found in most actors. When the Baptist preacher was once ranting and raving at the pulpit, she writes, she ran up as a tot and began mimicking his hand gestures so that her father again had to race up and retrieve her.

To not go unnoticed, to act on impulse when the main chance arrives, to see that some situations are untenable and to flee from them no matter what others might think or even what her better judgment might say are constant occurrences in her life. She married Larry Norris whom she met in high school and is not shy about telling us the details of that early romance, which was typical of that Southern place and time. She lost her virginity at seventeen, presumably in the backseat, and writes about thinking, "Is that IT? I felt like I had gotten distracted for a moment and missed it." They got better at it, married, and she followed him to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, the wife of an army officer. It turned out to be a bad situation. Not that he was a bad guy, but she felt hemmed in and restricted. She had a very brief affair (Norris opens the door to her life but never sensationally or ever for shock value), regrets it, and goes back to making do with Larry. Just before he shipped out for Vietnam she becomes pregnant and her son Matthew becomes an all important figure in her life. Larry only sees pictures of him. When he returns from Vietnam and they set up a life together, things begin to inexorably to fall apart. He teaches physics in high school and later sells insurance that puts him on the road a lot. She teaches art. And she now writes, "It was during this time, when I was all by myself, exhausted from lack of sleep and harried from working, taking care of the baby and dealing with the minutiae of life, when a little voice in my ear whispers, telling me I had missed the parade."

Not quite yet. The big parade came to town when Norman Mailer arrived to visit an old Army buddy, Francis Irby Gwaltney, called "Fig" by intimates, who was the prototype for the Southerner Wilson in *The Naked and the Dead*. By that time Norris was divorced from her husband Larry and was making ends meet as a single mom by teaching art in high school while hanging out with a small literary circle that read *The New Yorker* and, in Norris' words, "considered ourselves to be intellectuals." Gwaltney was part of the team and had himself written a memoir called *Idols and Axle Grease* that Norris illustrated. The stars were now aligning themselves for a cataclysmic event in Norris and Mailer's lives. Norris inveigled her way into a party Gwaltney was throwing for his old Army buddy, and the narrative itself should best be left with Norris. She writes, "His clear blue eyes lit up when he saw me. He had broad shoulders, a rather large head (presumably to hold all those brains) with ears that stuck out like Clark Gable's, and he was chesty,

but not fat, like a sturdy small horse. (I once drew him as a centaur, which delighted him.) He didn't look old at all. Nor the least bit fatherly."

The party continued, with many opportunities for both to call it a night, but neither would. It would not be over until it was over. Norris fought being left out and others taking the famous author away. Understandably and naturally, Mailer fought through party chatter and social protocol—torpedoes be damned!—and ended up taking Norris home. He was not one to miss the main chance either. Her account of their entwining finally on the floor of her living room has comic elements, with Norris receiving rug burns on her back and neither fully out of their clothes, but also the drama of much, much more to follow that neither recognized at the time. She pulls no punches and she leaves nothing out. Coming to Gwaltney's party, Norris had brought a copy of Mailer's book *Marilyn* for him to inscribe but thought better of it after their intimacy on the floor. Later, when she moved to Brooklyn to be with him, he signed it and 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

Norris and Mailer have the same birthday, almost down to the hour, and they became entwined in more ways than one. He was instrumental in her final name changes that began some time before as Barbara Davis, became Barbara Norris when she married her first husband, and then after she and Mailer got together turned into Norris Church (he liked the sound of it) and finally in later years into Norris Church Mailer. The changes clock her progression though life where Norris has proven to be her own person, someone who sticks to her guns, not ultimately malleable. She can't be bullied around. It is ironic that Mailer liked being a director. It figured in his fantasy life and in reality. (He directed movies, one of which of course was *Maidstone* in which Rip Torn went famously off-script and struck him over the head with a hammer.)

So they began their acquaintance with almost immediate sex and went on from there. "Through the years," she writes, "no matter the circumstances of our passions and rages, our boredoms, angers, and betrayals large and

small, sex was the cord 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, 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 . . .”

And up's and down's they certainly had in Norris' chronicle. When she came to New York at his behest to take up residency she expected . . . what? She writes, “Norman had been regaling me with descriptions of the magnificent apartment he had there (it sounded like the Taj Mahal), with its soaring glass skylight, the view of the skyline of lower Manhattan, the harbor and the Statue of Liberty . . .” Her description of what she found shows a journalist's (or novelist's) eye for detail—among others: a climbing rope and ship's ladder that led to a little room over the living room. Ladders everywhere. One went up to a sort of crow's nest that you finally had to walk to across a naked plank, stretched over an abyss. The Taj Mahal was a mess. “The place looked like it hadn't been cleaned in many months,” she writes. “Many.”

Norris set to work. She cleaned and scrubbed and put things in order, proving she is at home with making a home a home. She immediately bonded with Fanny, Mailer's mother, and Barbara, his sister. They had seen wives and girlfriends come and go, so perhaps they were used to the drill. There were seven children to consider, ex-wives to contend with, and learning the byways and subtleties of the imposing Big City. After all, she had been raised as a small town Arkansas girl. She wasn't worried about it. Neither was Mailer. He thought, in Norris's estimation, that he was about to inherit an Eliza Doolittle whom he was going to mold into a star. They did make the rounds of parties where she glittered with her flaming hair and tall lithe body and soft intelligent voice. Norris did get to mingle and size up those of celebrity status. But she remained who she was. No one changed the Arkansas girl whose mother opened a hair salon in their car port to bring in money. No one fundamentally changed her. Modeling jobs came her way because of her looks and grace. She painted, something she had always been good at back home where she taught art. She wrote novels without help or correction from the master. (She did collaborate on three film scripts with him.) She even acted in soap operas and appeared as Zelda Fitzgerald in an

ensemble that included George Plimpton as Scott and Mailer as Hemingway, reading from the letters of those notables. She was Dona Ana in *Don Juan in Hell* (Mailer's idea) with Gore Vidal as the Devil (big applause), Mailer as Don Juan and good friend Mike Lennon as the Commodore. (The book is filled with delightful anecdotes about such events.) She gave as much as she got. I believe she would have done very well by herself, thank you, if Mailer had never come along. But it was a match made by the gods, complete with thunder and lightning.

For awhile they did seem to have everything. They even had a fine son, John Buffalo, to cement their lives. But increasingly there were trips that Mailer took, never quite explained. There were charge card bills for restaurants and hotels in question. Strange women came up to him when they were out, acting a little too familiar for comfort. Norris woke up finally to the fact that the leopard had not changed his spots. Mailer was carrying on. Not with just one person but all over the place. She found a cache of letters and notes and pictures in a drawer that Mailer had, either subconsciously or on purpose, set her up to find. Maybe he was weary of his endless deceptions, wanting to be caught and stopped. Maybe. After much prodding and discomfort he began confessing. And then comes a most unusual turn of events, which some might find amusing. Norris may have thought she wanted a full confession and then they could go on, but I'm sure she didn't realize how much detail and accounts of the past would follow. You can give her high marks for a sense of humor in the telling. She couldn't get him to stop. They might be in a taxi cab, and he would confess to yet another. A high point was his introducing her to "the woman in Chicago," someone he had had a long-term affair with. She had expected a vixen, a *femme fatal*. She met a woman his age if not older, weighing at least 250 pounds. What was going on? Norris felt sorry for her. And Mailer said, when confronted with what one might imagine, to what was found, that sometimes he needed to be the good-looking one. You can't forget that line.

No matter the pain and fireworks they remained in love. They made peace. It's hard to imagine Mailer, at heart a family man, letting go of what he had found. Norris is a survivor and wouldn't give up. And then the ravages of age and the body's lack of endurance struck home. Mailer begins a slow but inevitable decline, using two canes, going through operations, getting exercise by slowly walking the deck of their home in Provincetown. And just as it seems the couple had taken a crippling blow, Norris suffers cruel

cancer just as Mailer begins his descent. She gives a full account of its treachery. She undergoes chemo, she has surgery and more surgery, and at the last operation the family was told that there was a 99 percent chance of non-survival. At the end of an eight-hour surgery, she found a note on her pillow when she woke from her son John that read, “Mom, you’re the 1 percent!”

She outlived Mailer. His death is told about in a brief but highly effective way. His son Stephen was with him at in the hospital room, sleeping on a fold-out cot, when monitoring machines started going off around four in the morning. Stephen called for help, but before it arrived, Mailer sat up, eyes wide open . . . then, “. . . he looked away, toward the distance. His mouth spread in a huge smile, and his eyes were alive with excitement, as if he were seeing something amazing. Then he was gone.”

Read the book and pivotal events—those that made the papers, those that were meaningful but before now private and guarded—unfold without shame or apology. She is simply seeking the truth about one of the great love affairs of our time that fought against the odds of its ever happening. And while we see it documented by anecdotes and insights we also read about, for instance, Jack Henry Abbot coming into their lives and its aftermath. We find the smallest of gems that crop up unexpectedly but come with a wallop. I’m thinking of her account of Gore Vidal (the Devil) flying in to appear in *Don Juan in Hell* with them in Provincetown. He brought along only “a small duffel bag of the sort cosmetic companies give away with purchases of perfume and [when he turned in for the night], he brought out a framed photograph of himself and his parents taken when he was about nine. He looked at it for a moment and lovingly set it on the bedside table in a gesture that brought tears to my eyes.” It almost brought them to mine.

You can look at *A Ticket to the Circus* as Norris’ last will and testament to their union. You can also imagine, if you’re like me, Mailer gazing on from somewhere, a pencil in hand, making marks, but without doubt approving of the bravery and talent that made this book possible.