

THE MEMORABLE NORRIS

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THE FIRST TIME THE MAILERS INVITED MY WIFE CAROLYN AND ME TO DINNER at their home on Cape Cod, everything was memorable: the intellectually and philosophically challenging conversation supported by a full bottle of Balvenie and the view over Provincetown Bay; the wonderful company: Norman's sister and brother-in-law, Barbara and Al Wasserman; the exquisite salmon and fresh vegetables Norris prepared while Norman presided over the dining room. But what I also remember is my confusion over Norman calling both his sister and wife by the same name.

At a certain point, I got Norris alone in the kitchen and said, "Am I missing something, or is Norman calling you 'Barbara,' too?"

"That's my real name," she explained. "Barbara Jean Davis. So he usually calls me Barbara."

"What shall I call you?" I asked.

"Anything you like!" she replied with what I came to realize was her unique and characteristic sparkle.

That, in a nutshell, was the essence of the woman who came to call herself Norris Church Mailer.

There are many accurate descriptors to describe her: loving mother, caring teacher, talented artist, beautiful New York fashion model, gifted writer. And she gave equal and passionate devotion to all of these undertakings. But she was also the sensitive pilgrim soul who captured Norman's heart and mind and held them, with all the ups and downs, for the last three-plus decades of his life. This was the innocent small town southern girl who wasn't afraid to go mix it up with the toughest town and largest literary ego in the nation.

What Norman saw quickly spread to everyone who knew her. She pulled together the eclectic Mailer clan as no one else had or could. On more than

one occasion he observed to me, “If Norris and I were both drowning, there is no question in my mind who my children would rescue first.”

She was, quite simply, whatever you most needed her to be, and you couldn’t help loving her for it. Norris was just that kind of person.

The entire time I knew her she was battling the aggressive cancer that ultimately took her life. Yet never did any of us ever hear her complain, bemoan her unfair lot or give up hope or optimism. When our keynote speaker dropped out at the last moment before the 2009 Norman Mailer Society conference in Washington, D.C., Norris agreed to replace her and read from her forthcoming memoir. We tried to be frugal in expending her limited energy, but she insisted on participating in everything, telling us she would rest when she got home. She was always thinking of other people.

During the next year Norris grew weaker, and in October, with no expectation, I called to ask her if she’d like to come to the 2011 conference in Sarasota. To my great surprise, she said she would and we started making plans for her trip.

A week or so later, I got a call from John Buffalo, saying that it didn’t look like she’d be able to travel after all. I said that, of course, I understood. Still, Norris felt the need to follow up—no self-pity, merely explanation—and sent me an email:

John said he already told you I have backed out on the Florida trip, I was waiting until the last minute, I guess, to tell you, hoping I would get better, but in fact I have not had a good week at all, the pain is worse and I have a bad infection that we are trying to get under control. I have to stop thinking I can do what I used to, because I can’t, as much as I want to. I know it will be a big success and please give everyone my best regards and tell them how much I appreciate their loyalty, just as I appreciate yours. I think Norman is there with us, whenever we have one of these gatherings—I know he is watching us, still enjoying making a splash. Best love, Norris

I responded as I had to John, assuring her she would be with us in spirit and ably represented by John. Within minutes, I received a response:

Thanks for being so understanding, Mark. Please give my best love to Carolyn, and have a wonderful time at the conference. I'm sure I'll be better one of these days. Love, Norris

A few weeks later, she died.

If my memories of Norris or her outlook on life ever begin to fade, I am confident I can re-conjure them. All I will have to do is take down one of her two novels, *Windchill Summer* and *Cheap Diamonds*, or her memoir, *A Ticket to the Circus*. In the real self of the memoir and the surrogate self of the novels, Cherry Marshall of Sweetwater, Arkansas, this extraordinary woman comes across in all her beautiful, vulnerable sensitivity, her wounded, naïve optimism, her steely strength and determination, tempered by humility and self-doubt. And most of all, her amazing openness, wide-eyed curiosity and out-and-out love of the human race and the individual members who compose it. She was that fine and memorable a writer.

She was that fine and memorable a person.