

IN MEMORIAM
NORRIS CHURCH MAILER
A COMPLEX SIMPLE WOMAN

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THE MORE I KNEW NORRIS, AND I KNEW HER QUITE A LONG TIME, she always confused me with her adopted persona of unsophisticated, gracious, and accommodating Arkansas beauty. But over time a totally different Norris emerged from time to time from an office far different than central casting. The only qualities that were constant were beauty, fierce loyalty to family and friends, and her commitment to making Norman's life as smooth as possible.

I first laid eyes on her when I emerged from a conference room in my law firm where Norman and I had been holed up for days vetting his enormous *The Executioner's Song* rough manuscript. There in our reception area on a chartreuse suede couch was a beautiful young woman with the longest legs I could recall. Returning to the conference room I asked Norman who she was (he was married to someone else I knew) and he replied, "My new wife to be." There appeared to be not the slightest doubt in his voice, which of course was classic Norman.

Gradually I came to know Norris as Norman and I worked on various projects and our lives intersected in New York, Boston, and Provincetown. She quickly became extremely close to my late mother-in-law, Mardi Hall, whose friendship with Norman stretched back to the 1950s and that often brought us together as well.

Few women's egos could survive long exposure to Norman's and his unfortunate want to move abruptly from intimacy to public humiliation of the women in his life. When at a dinner or party I heard Norman's voice rise to

criticize Norris, whom he always called “Barbara” at such moments, my own hackles would rise as well, for Norris was the target. I found Norris Church could give as good as she got and still find room to forgive if not forget. She just chose to do it in her own way, either in private or by abandoning the field to Norman to display his boorishness before others.

As you came to know her you realized she was both totally sexually secure as a woman in a man’s world and as a mother and most importantly as what she was not: classically educated, Eastern establishment or reserved. She was what she was, a multi-talented painter, model, actress and finally a writer, and a damn fine one with a voice totally her own. She was inordinately proud of her extended family, including all of Norman’s children, his mother and, most importantly, his sister, Barbara. She delighted in her own taste in clothing, furnishings and culture, regardless of others’ imposed standards. She was first an American, proud of her Arkansas roots, her humble but unique religious upbringing, and most of all (as an only child) her beloved Mom and Dad.

She was enormously tolerant given the America she grew up in. I never felt she ever had any prejudices regarding race, religion or sexual preference. Bring ’em on, bring ’em all on was her mantra and she alone would decide whom she liked and whom she did not.

When Norris did not like someone, the only way you could usually tell was her reversion to her roots as she would say about such a person, “Bless their little hearts.” When you heard that you knew you were unlikely to see them again!

When her cancer began she faced it as she did most things that were personal, with few complaints and a sense that ultimately all would be well. As it slowly ravaged her it also transformed her back in time to her youthful beauty, model slenderness, and high cheekbones. She lit up the room and it was hard to believe she was slowly vanishing before our eyes. Her only regrets were about children and grandchildren and her mother abandoned. Her own work as a writer and muse to a writer had been completed and completed well.

I, however, want my phone to ring and hear that gorgeous husky southern voice say, “It’s Norris.”