

The naked and the read

Inside the library of Norman Mailer

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Books arrived daily by mail. FedEx, or by hand on the doorstep—a half-dozen was not unusual. At social functions, airports, readings, while walking to dinner along the waterfront of Provincetown, or riding the A Train to Manhattan from Brooklyn, people pressed books into his hands. Not that Norman Mailer was short of books: his library at four different locations, amounted to more than 7,000 volumes. His last wife, Norris Church, referred to them as Kodak, the pernicious creeping vine that covers large swaths of the American South. As fast as she gave them away, they reappeared on every flat surface in their two homes. Norman, she said, spent \$1,000 a month on books, and received a large number gratis from writers in search of a recommendation.

He resisted Norris's efforts to shed them, to the extent that those decreed worthy of further examination were retained on the dining room table in his Provincetown home for a week or two, where he would read the opening pages of more than a few. That scented table, large enough to seat twelve, was Mailer's cockpit, the place where he conducted all his business, save writing his books. Every morning he sat there for a couple of hours, always facing a wall to avoid the fierce morning light from the harbour coming through the large west window. Eating his eggs, he read the *New York Times* and *Boston Globe*, and sorted through the mail. He also drew across words to "comb my mind," as he put it before climbing to his attic study, where he would work two shifts, (1) till 2, then 4 till 8. More books were up there, mainly reference works for whatever project was under way, plus a score of dictionaries and thesauruses—some of them neatly glazed to pieces.

On most days during Mailer's final three years, I arrived at his Provincetown home for coffee and talk at around 10 o'clock. Invariably, the table was piled high with books, several days of mail, promissory of email messages (Norris received the latter; he never touched a computer, bound galley and manuscripts, and copies of *Vanity Fair*, the *Nation*, *Poetry*, the *American Conservative* and *Esquire*, among other magazines. When the piles grew too high, they were moved to the west window shelf, eventually blocking the view. When this occurred, Norris and Proctor's assistant Dwayne shined staff to recycling, charity or to the basement, where he had shelves built a few years before his death in 2007. Three or four times a year, I'd call items there for his archive.

My wife and I catalogued the books in the three libraries in Provincetown, about 1,500 volumes in the Brooklyn Heights apartment overlooking the East River's Batterymark Channel, approximately 3,400 in his writing studio in DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass), another 1,500. About 1,200 reference books and numerous foreign editions of his forty-odd published books are part of his archive that went to the Harry Rans-



Norman Mailer's home library, Brooklyn Heights, New York, 2011

son Center at the University of Texas in Austin in 2005. After his death, the rest of his library was donated to the Norman Mailer Center and is now in storage.

Mailer couldn't live without books, but he was not interested in them as objects. When he needed some pages for a public reading, he outsource them out of the book rather than carry it. He gave me a first edition of his *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), with four chunks, totaling 106 pages, missing. The inscription, dated May 1969, reads: "For Mike, this working copy of *Advertisements for Myself* with sections removed. God knows what I wrote them out for." His copy of Priscilla Johnson McMillan's *Leviathan* (1977), dismembered when he went to Dallas with Larry Schiller to interview Marjorie Oswald, was later patched together with that tape. Dobson's *The Idiot* was similarly recombined. One of his favorites for public readings was a six-page description of an embarking from the opening chapter of *Ancient Evenings* (1953). Norris was furious when he ripped this section from her inscribed copy, and then lost it. Books cringed when they felt his hand. Dust jackets were a hindrance, he said, and were often shredded. He felt similarly about book marks. His barbarous method of marking his place was to fold a page or tie a really soft (or) snail on at the top. Limited editions were of limited interest. Unlike John Updike, who published scores of them, Mailer never initiated a single one, but went along cheerfully with about ten proposed by specialty press—*Tapp*, Lord John, Dolmen, Callahan and Franklin Library. Over the course of a week in 1978, he signed 10,180 copies of

Franklin's leather-bound thirtieth anniversary edition of *The Naked and the Dead*, for which he was paid \$2 a book.

His disrespect for books as objects provides a clue to the nature of his library: it was assembled over the decades, to meet his need for models, reference material, to replenish his reservoirs of tropes and techniques, and to keep up with his contemporaries—in short, out of literary need. He didn't collect first editions of his favorite authors, those he listed on seven published surveys. They were: Das Pöbel (on all seven), Tolstoy (six), Spengler, Thomas Wolfe and Marx (five), Dostoevsky, Scandhal, Hemingway and James T. Farrell (four), as well as Mailer and Steinbeck on three occasions. Several other writers are listed twice, including Melville, Borges and E. M. Forster, the only English author. There are many cheap used or paperback editions of his favorite authors, none of them worth much apart from the value of some inscribed copies—from Susan Sontag, Colin Wilson, William Manchester (*The Last Lion*, his biography of Churchill) and James Jones, who inscribed a copy of *From Here to Eternity*, "To my most feared friend, to my most beloved enemy." Instead of inscribing *The Unsettling of America*, his 1966 account of his unsuccessful 1965 run for mayor of New York on the half-title page, William F. Buckley went to the index, knowing Mailer would look his name up. When he did, he would see two words: "Hi Norman."

As a matter of principle, Mailer avoided reading his books after they were published; he changed his style for many of his books,

sometimes radically—in *The Executioner's Song* (1979), perhaps the best example—and he wanted to avoid being tempted by old narrative modes and gambits. But there were exceptions. When I brought copies belonging to friends of mine for him to sign, he would leaf through, reading a few pages here and there. I remember giving him a copy of *An American Dream*, the 1965 Andre Deutsch edition with a wonderfully garish jacket illustration, and he read for several minutes from chapter four. When he closed it he said that it depressed him: "I'll never write that well again." Another time, while signing a copy of *The Executioner's Song*, he remarked that his style was changed by the prose of this narrative: "It was never the same," he said. "That tended out, less lively."

Perhaps the first thing one would have noticed about the Brooklyn library is the amount of poetry. Mailer said once that he loved poetry, but added, "I don't approach it critically. To be a great critic of poetry would take a lifetime of work. I read it to replenish myself." In addition to the anthologies of American verse he kept in the box, perhaps half of the 300 volumes of poetry in a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf in the living room of his apartment are by American poets. It was the only one of the twenty-odd bookcases in the apartment devoted to one genre. Some of the volumes came from poet friends—James Dickory, Sandra Hechtman and Norman Rosten, the last poet laureate of Brooklyn, who signed his letters to Mailer "Norm II"—but most reflect Mailer's catholic tastes. There are volumes by poets as different as Wallace Stevens, John

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AMERICAN LITERATURE

7

Barryman and Amy Lowell, as well as several by her cousin, Robert, whose poem, "For Norman Mailer," appears in his *Notebook* 1967-68. Lowell's inscription, "For Norman. This brief though true return for your kind poem, Cal," refers to Mailer's depiction of Lowell in *The Armies of the Night* (1968), which Lowell said was "the best, almost the only thing written about me as a living person." There are seven Ezra Pound titles. Mailer visited Pound in Venice in 1970, and gave him a copy of *Deaths for the Ladies* (and *Other Diversions*), his 1962 collection of epigram, Pound-like gists and pills. Asked which of Mailer's poems he liked, "the old eagle," as Mailer called him, said, "All of them!"

There are fewer French poets than British, but a large number of French novels. Mailer studied French at high school, college and at the Sorbonne, where he attended on the GI Bill in 1947-8. His written French was good enough to translate portions of *Somerset's poems*, the memoir of Picasso's first mistress, Fernand Olivier, for use in his biography *Pierre, Mailer & Picasso as a Young Man* (1995), and he spoke it well enough to converse with French friends such as Jean Malraux (the translator of *The Naked and the Dead* into French, published in 1950 with an introduction by André Malraux), and Roman Gary, Malraux's son, who Mailer said "had more influence on my mind than anyone I ever knew," introduced him to the work of André Gide, whose collection of Socratic dialogues, *Corday* (1924), spurred Mailer to write two long philosophical self-interviews, "The Metaphysics of Time," published in *Confessions and Christianity* (1966). His interest in French literature began in his senior year at college when he read André Malraux's *Man's Fate*. Shortly after graduation from Harvard in 1943, he told a friend, "I'd like to be another Malraux." It could be argued that Mailer became the American equivalent of Malraux, the writer as engaged intellectual. Malraux was Minister of Culture under Charles de Gaulle, and in the early 1960s Mailer hoped to become a key adviser to President Kennedy, a cultural Cardinal Richelieu who would link the White House to the most exciting currents and actors on the American scene. He wanted a seat at the Camelot round-table, an aspiration which was extinguished after he stabbed his second wife, Adele Morales, with a penknife.

In a 1963 letter to Pierre Brodin, a French critic who asked about his interest in French literature, Mailer said that "the French novel has always been more congenial to me than the English," and goes on to name his favorites. They include not only Proust, Flaubert, and Boris-Karl Housmans (Mailer adapted his Satanic *Le Has* into a screenplay, published in *Playboys* in 1976), but Georges Simenon, of whom he said, "He is never a great writer, but he is certainly a marvelous one, so natural, so effortless." Mailer got hooked on Simenon during the war when he read *Fandora* (*Home Town* in Stuart Gilbert's 1944 translation), and over the years assembled a collection of over 200 of his novels. He numbered them so he could reread them in sequential order, which he continued to do until the end of his life.

Mailer mainly read translations of the French writers, but owned several in the original, including Proust's *Un Amant de Swann* and *Le Baronnement de Lol V. Stein* by Marguerite Yourcenar. His favorite French novel was Situ-

dual's *Le Rouge et le Noir*. He used the novel's protagonist, Julien Sorel, the ambitious young man from the provinces as a touchstone in several of his essays, most memorably in a 1968 review of Norman Podhoretz's *Making It*, where he compares his erstwhile friend's move from Brooklyn to Manhattan ("one of the longest journeys in the world"). Podhoretz wrote to Sorel's ascension to Paris from Verrières. In 1949, when Mailer and Malraux were writing screenplays in Hollywood for Samuel Goldwyn, Mailer tried to convince Montgomery Clift to play Sorel in a film version of the novel that he would write. Clift was interested but got called away to another project.

Mailer may have been more influenced by French novels than British ones, but he nevertheless addressed the skills of the latter. During a visit to London in the autumn of 1961, he told an interviewer, "Science for science, the good British authors—write better than we do. I'm thinking of people like Austen, Waugh, Graham Greene. Some are bad. I've never been able to read Joyce Cary." He may have stumbled when reading the late and largely forgotten novel *The Forsyte Wife* (1947), the only Cary novel he owned. On the other hand, he owned most of Forster's novels. Forster was not "one of the novelists I admire most. But I have loved a lot for a long time." He was stunned when an important character in *The Longest Journey*, Gerald Dawes, was killed in a football game part way through the novel, causing the other characters to change to unknown ways. "It angers me," Mailer wrote, that "character can dissolve in one such event and re-form in startling new fashion." In a *Paris Review* interview in 1964, Mailer said that "Forster gave my notion of personality a sufficient shock" that after *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) he stopped writing in the third person for over a decade. Forster, he said, "had a developed view of the world: I did not."

His best-loved British novelist was Graham Greene, because said that *The End of the Affair* was the best anatomy of a love affair he had ever read (the fact that Greene wrote to him to say that he was "moved and excited" by the "magnificent" *Adventures for Misses* did no harm to their relationship). Besides Greene's great early novels, Mailer owned three later works: *Dr. Fischer of Geneva* (1960), *Monsieur Quven* (1962) and Greene's nonfiction account of his long relationship with the Panamanian dictator, Omar Torrijos, *Getting to Know the General* (1984). He also owned the three-volume biography of Greene by Norman Sherry. Speaking on the BBC programme *Omnibus* in 1971, he praised *Nineteen Eighty-Four* for its "profoundly prophetic vision of a world filled with dull, awful, profoundly provocative little wars . . . that would kill the world slowly." Orwell admired Mailer's work, and said in a letter in 1949 that *The Naked and the Dead* was "awfully good, the best war book of the last war yet," a comment that appeared on paperback copies of the novel for decades. Some of the other British books on the shelves are *The Mill on the Floss*, *Women in Love* (discussed at length in *The Picture of Sex*, 1971), *The Good Soldier* and Cyril Connolly's *The Missing Diplomat*, a reflection/examination of the scandal surrounding the Cambridge spies Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, which Mailer probably consulted for *Horatio's*

Gloss. The earliest book by a British writer is Charlotte Brontë's final novel, *Villette* (1853), a Folio Society edition which shows no dog ears. There is nothing by Austen, Dickens, Trollope, or Hardy.

Dostoevsky's struggle to write *The Idiot* month by month (as a serial while suffering from epileptic fits) was in Mailer's mind when he was under commensurate pressure in the eight-month span during which he published his serial novel, *An American Dream*, in *Esquire* in 1964. *Crime and Punishment* is another obvious influence; Mailer's protagonist, Stephen Rojack, like Raskolnikov, is an intellectual murderer interrogated by the police and goes into spiritual exile, although Dostoevsky's man goes to Siberia, while Rojack goes to Guatemala and Yucatan. He read Henri Troyat's biography, *Tolstoy* (1965; translated from the French by Nancy Amphoux, 1967), shortly after his eightieth birthday and told me it was the finest biography he had ever read, superior to Richard Ellman's biography of Joyce.

Many of his large collections of books on Hitler and Nazi Germany are listed in a six-page bibliography appended to his last novel, about Hitler's youth, *The Confessions of Joe Turner* (2007). Just as large is his collection of books about the Kennedy assassination, including two sets of the twenty-six-volume Warren Commission Report. He also owned several works by Freud, quite a number by Jung, and several books by Wilhelm Reich, including *Character Analysis* (1933), which he said was not a liter-

ary influence but valuable for "the idea that a man's physical posture is his character," which he memorably applied to Richard Nixon in *St. George and the Godfather* (1972). He had all the books by the psychologist Robert Lindner, including *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Prescription for Rebellion*. Lindner and Mailer became friends in the early 1950s, and Lindner, who died suddenly in 1956, gave extensive feedback on Mailer's unpublished 1954-Smartian journal, "Lipson's" (Lipson was then slang for marijuana).

Another essay would be needed to comment on Mailer's collection of Judaism, especially the work of Martin Buber on the Hasidic movement, and yet another on the large number of philosophical works, from Aristotle to Kierkegaard to A. J. Ayer. One influential volume must be named: Walter Kaufmann's 1956 anthology, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, which Mailer read during the seventeen days he was confined at Bellevue Hospital in New York while awaiting a determination of his sanity after stabbing his wife. It is more than likely that he read the chapter on Nietzsche. "Live Dangerously!" and the passage from which it comes: "For believe me, the secret of the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment of existence is to live dangerously! Build your cities under Vesuvius! Send your ships to uncharted seas! Live at war with your peers and yourselves!" One can imagine what resonance this must have had for the lonely reader in the violent ward of Bellevue.