

MEMORIES OF NORMAN MAILER

By Michael Ventura

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When I heard he died I unwrapped from its protective cellophane my tattered, 75-cent, 1964 Bantam Pocketbook edition of *The Presidential Papers of Norman Mailer* -- heavily underlined, held together with rubber bands, this was the book that jump-started my intellectual life in the spring of my 19th year. Mikey gave it to me. And I thought of the Bronx, back in the day, Mikey and me ("Mikey and me" is grammatical in the Bronx) -- drunk, walking under the Jerome Avenue El, 8-ish on a cold New Year's Eve. It's a long story, how Mikey had Mailer's phone number. Mikey and me were without a New Year's Eve party (also a long story), and we decided that Mailer -- who lived in Brooklyn -- would know where to find a wild bash. At a corner phone booth we drank more courage and I called. "Can I speak to Norman Mailer?" A woman's voice: "Who's calling?" "Just a guy in the Bronx." A moment's silence. Then Mailer, his imitation-thug voice: "Ya got 60 seconds, pal." If only I'd stuck to the plan I still think he might have laughed and invited us to a party. Alas, my courage failed, I mumbled something being a writer and got the dial-tone I deserved.

Fast-forward to autumn, 1972: a lecture-hall on the Berkeley campus filled to bursting with the shrillest of feminists, the gayest of gays, fringes left and right, and lit professors leading packs of profs-to-be -- all eager to bait Mailer, whose work they found too forceful to ignore and too paradoxical to embrace. They were after something very like blood -- its literary equivalent, some greenish substance, part pus and part sperm, that would surely flow all over the stage if *one* of them could get at this guy where he lived, best or shame him in front of a crowd. It was a den full of Daniels waiting to leap upon one middle-aged lusty lion.

Make that bear. When Mailer strode from the wings to the podium, he walked as though leaning into a wind, his chest out before him, looking at the crowd with a game and greedy smile. No stew of emotions would be too rank for *him*, that smile said. They booed, they hissed, they applauded, all at once, and he inhaled it as if to say, "Is that the best you can do? You don't stink enough!" They got louder. His smile got sly. They finally subsided into a vaguely hostile yet appreciative murmur. Everybody was having a good time.

The Sex Pistols were still six years away, so none of us knew that this atmosphere of mutually excited antagonism between audience and performer was pure punk.

I'd come early to secure a seat on the aisle, third or fourth row. To my knowledge no American writer had yet been assassinated or kicked half to death -- not, at any rate, for his writing -- but if it was going to happen that year it was going to be Mailer. In every niche of America, from Nixon's White House to academic lefties, from Marxist feminists to far-right cabals, *somebody* was pissed at Mailer. So that night I had a Maileresque idea of being a hero. I was skinny, unpublished, trembling with rages I could not yet name, and eager for a fight. So I sat three steps and a leap from the stage, thinking that if it came to a rumble I was on Mailer's side.

Mailer's *Presidential Papers*, *Advertisements for Myself*, *Cannibals and Christians*,

and *The Prisoner of Sex* had been intellectually crucial to any vision of America I was ever going to have, and Mailer's audacity as an essayist had shown me what was possible in that form. (James Baldwin and Murray Kempton were his equals as essayists, and no doubt wiser, but I wouldn't see that until I was wiser.) *The Deer Park* and *An American Dream* were novels that taught me I wasn't crazy, or, if I was crazy, I wasn't alone in how I felt my magic. So I figured I owed Mailer. My fantasy went something like: We'd fight side by side, get the shit kicked out of us, and later he'd read my stuff and introduce me to Mr. Simon, Mr. Schuster, Mr. Scribner and whoever else published masterpieces. (The inner life of a serious unpublished writer is humid with such fantasies -- they fog the eyes from the inside.)

But I had underestimated Mailer's ability to master a crowd. He opened by announcing that he'd come with important tidings and didn't want to be interrupted, so would the feminists and gays please do their hissing and booing now. The house hissed and booed to a fare-thee-well. When the last hiss faded he peered over the podium, waited a beat, and said:

"O-beeeeeeeed-iant little *bitches*, aren't you?"

It was a ploy that had to work beautifully or start a riot, and it worked beautifully. This was a house that could appreciate a masterstroke when it saw one, and it laughed and applauded accordingly. There would be a couple of demonstrations -- gays dressed as pricks dancing onto the stage, that sort of thing. There would be arguments. There would be cat-calls and boos at various pronouncements. But the crowd was in his hands that night, they listened, they participated, they appreciated. I don't think I've ever been in a room where so many people cared so much (and with such vitality!) about ideas. Like I said, everybody was having a good time -- my desperate assistance was not needed.

Fifteen years later, autumn of 1987, Los Angeles... Mailer and I had changed a lot. Me, I'd made my bones as a working writer and published my first book. As for Mailer -- he no longer wrote frequent essays about every American crisis and social shift, and his hefty early-Eighties novel, *Ancient Evenings*, I'd found unreadable. Even admirers like myself, ready then and now to defend Mailer against all comers, no longer suspected that he might write the great American novel of the late 20th Century. He didn't seem to expect that either. He'd just directed a movie based on his entertaining but forgettable novel, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* -- a movie of excesses (of course), silly flaws (of course), but (of course) gutsy and (surprisingly) well-crafted. We met for an interview at a fancy hotel on Sunset Boulevard.

Mailer no longer walked like a bear. His was a sailor's walk now, and an old sailor's at that -- an easy roll from the hips. Mid-60ish, gray, a little shorter than me, robustly affable, a sweet sparkle in his blue eyes (as blue as Frank Sinatra's, as blue as Bob Dylan's). His voice, richly modulated and gentle. His manner -- courtly, in a sense that you almost never see in this country. The presence of a man who had nothing left to prove.

Norman who?!

By 1987 I'd met a lot of famous people, famous for many different things, but I'd never met anyone so different in private from what he'd appeared to be, for so long, in public. He had the humility of one who has found the limits of his rage. Twenty or so books, six marriages, umpteen newsworthy hassles, thousands of public appearances, each met (if we are to believe his writing, and I do) as an exploration, a test, an attempt

(as he'd written) "to take an existential turn, to walk into the nightmare"... all seemed to have resulted in a weirdly radiant sweetness.

But then, I was meeting Mailer in his capacity as film director, and directors (considering the demands of their business) are a suspiciously calm lot. It is a calm achieved by enacting one's excesses through others. And while, as a dynamic, it is not all that different from many marriages and nearly all child-rearing, it is certainly one of the dirty little pleasures of directing films. But no, Mailer had lived out enough of his excesses for one to feel that he'd come by this surprisingly calm presence honestly. For anyone to whom he's been important, as teacher or as antagonist, it's worth reporting that Mailer's attentive, interested calm seemed to be the signature of that rarest creature of all: a human being who has gone his distance and can look in his mirror without shame, artifice, or surprise.

I never told him I was the Bronx guy who'd intruded a sour note on a long-ago New Year's Eve. He never knew what an irony it was that one day he'd pick up a phone and invite me to a couple of parties. (The first was dull. The second... noir actor Lawrence Tierney, now deceased, painfully twisted my arm and popped my elbow. It hurt for days. I never thought to hit him back -- he was old. Anyway, even old, Tierney could probably whip my ass.) A greater irony: Mailer contributed a blurb to my first novel -- just what that drunk kid wanted, in that cold phone booth under the thundering Jerome Avenue El. Let's end with a sentence of his, let it be his epitaph, a sentence even his fiercest detractor must reckon with. "For there was that law of life, so cruel and so just, which demanded that either one must change or pay more for remaining the same."

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