

Norman Mailer, Towering Writer With Matching Ego, Dies at 84

By Charles McGrath

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Norman Mailer, the combative, controversial and often outspoken novelist who loomed over American letters longer and larger than any writer of his generation, died today in Manhattan. He was 84.

He died of acute renal failure at Mount Sinai Hospital early this morning, his family said.

Mr. Mailer burst on the scene in 1948 with “The Naked and the Dead,” a partly autobiographical novel about World War II, and for the next six decades he was rarely far from the center stage. He published more than 30 books, including novels, biographies and works of nonfiction, and twice won the Pulitzer Prize: for “The Armies of the Night” (1968), which also won the National Book Award, and “The Executioner’s Song” (1979).

He also wrote, directed, and acted in several low-budget movies, helped found The Village Voice and for many years was a regular guest on television talk shows, where he could reliably be counted on to make oracular pronouncements and deliver provocative opinions, sometimes coherently and sometimes not.

Mr. Mailer belonged to the old literary school that regarded novel writing as a heroic enterprise undertaken by heroic characters with egos to match. He was the most transparently ambitious writer of his era, seeing himself in competition

not just with his contemporaries but with the likes of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky.

He was also the least shy and risk-averse of writers. He eagerly sought public attention, and publicity inevitably followed him on the few occasions when he tried to avoid it. His big ears, barrel chest, striking blue eyes and helmet of seemingly electrified hair — jet black at first and ultimately snow white — made him instantly recognizable, a celebrity long before most authors were lured out into the limelight.

At different points in his life Mr. Mailer was a prodigious drinker and drug taker, a womanizer, a devoted family man, a would-be politician who ran for mayor of New York, a hipster existentialist, an antiwar protester, an opponent of women's liberation and an all-purpose feuder and short-fused brawler, who with the slightest provocation would happily engage in head-butting, arm-wrestling and random punch-throwing. Boxing obsessed him and inspired some of his best writing. Any time he met a critic or a reviewer, even a friendly one, he would put up his fists and drop into a crouch.

Gore Vidal, with whom he frequently wrangled, once wrote: "Mailer is forever shouting at us that he is about to tell us something we must know or has just told us something revelatory and we failed to hear him or that he will, God grant his poor abused brain and body just one more chance, get through to us so that we will know. Each time he speaks he must become more bold, more loud, put on brighter motley and shake more foolish bells. Yet of all my contemporaries I retain the greatest affection for Norman as a force and as an artist. He is a man whose faults, though many, add to rather than subtract from the sum of his natural achievements."

Mr. Mailer was a tireless worker who at his death was writing a sequel to his 2007 novel, “The Castle in the Forest.” If some of his books, written quickly and under financial pressure, were not as good as he had hoped, none of them were forgettable or without his distinctive stamp. And if he never quite succeeded in bringing off what he called “the big one” — the Great American Novel — it was not for want of trying.

Along the way, he transformed American journalism by introducing to nonfiction writing some of the techniques of the novelist and by placing at the center of his reporting a brilliant, flawed and larger-than-life character who was none other than Norman Mailer himself.

A Pampered Son

Norman Kingsley — or, in Hebrew, Nachem Malek — Mailer was born in Long Branch, N.J., on Jan. 31, 1923. His father, Isaac Barnett, known as Barney, was a South African émigré, a snappy dresser — he sometimes wore spats and carried a walking stick — and a largely ineffectual businessman.

The dominant figure in the family was Mr. Mailer’s mother, Fanny Schneider, who came from a vibrant clan in Long Branch, where her father ran a grocery store and was the town’s unofficial rabbi. Though another child, Barbara, was born in 1927, Norman remained his mother’s favorite; she declared him “perfect” — a judgment from which she never deviated, no matter how her son behaved in later life.

When Norman was 9, the family moved to Crown Heights, in Brooklyn. Pampered and doted on, he excelled at both P.S. 161 and Boys High School, from which he graduated in 1939. The next fall he enrolled as a 16-year-old freshman

at Harvard, where he showed up wearing a newly purchased outfit of gold-brown jacket, green-and-blue striped pants, and white saddle shoes. Classmates remembered him as brash and jug-eared and full of big talk about his sexual experience. (In fact he had had very little, a lack he quickly set about rectifying.)

Mr. Mailer intended to major in aeronautical engineering, but by the time he was a sophomore, he had fallen in love with literature. He spent the summer reading and rereading James T. Farrell's "Studs Lonigan," John Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath" and John Dos Passos's "U.S.A.," and he began, or so he claimed, to set himself a daily quota of 3,000 words of his own, on the theory that this was the way to get bad writing out of his system. By 1941 he was sufficiently purged to win the Story magazine prize for best short story written by an undergraduate.

Mr. Mailer graduated from Harvard in 1943 determined on a literary career. He began work on a thousand-page novel about a mental hospital (never published) while waiting to be drafted. He was finally called up by the Army in the spring of 1944, after marrying Bea Silverman, in January, and was sent to the Philippines.

Mr. Mailer saw little combat in the war and finished his military career as a cook in occupied Japan. But his wartime experience, and in particular a single patrol he made on the island of Leyte, became the raw material for "The Naked and the Dead," the book that put him on the map.

Mr. Mailer wrote "The Naked and the Dead," which is about a 13-man platoon fighting the Japanese on a Pacific atoll, in 15 months or so, and when it was published, in the spring of 1948, it was almost universally praised — the last

time this would ever happen to him. Some critics ranked it among the best war novels ever written.

“The Naked and the Dead” sold 200,000 copies in just three months — a huge number in those days — and remains Mr. Mailer’s greatest literary and commercial success, even though it is in part an apprentice work, owing a large and transparent debt to Dos Passos, Tolstoy and James T. Farrell.

Mr. Mailer later said of it: “Part of me thought it was possibly the greatest book written since ‘War and Peace.’ On the other hand I also thought, ‘I don’t know anything about writing. I’m virtually an impostor.’ ”

‘Daring the Unknown’

His second book, “Barbary Shore” (1951), a political novel about, among other things, the struggle between capitalism and socialism, earned what Mr. Mailer called “possibly the worst reviews of any serious novel in recent years.” A third, “The Deer Park” (1955), in part a fictionalized account of Elia Kazan’s troubles with the House Un-American Activities Committee, fared a little better but not much, and for the rest of the decade Mr. Mailer wrote no fiction at all.

For much of the ’50s he drifted, frequently drunk or stoned or both, and affected odd accents: British, Irish, gangster, Texan. In 1955, together with two friends, Daniel Wolf and Edwin Fancher, he founded The Village Voice, and while writing a column for that paper he began to evolve what became his trademark style — bold, poetic, metaphysical, even shamanistic at times — and his personal philosophy of hipsterism. It was a homespun, Greenwich Village version of existentialism, which argued that the truly with-it, blacks and jazz musicians especially, led more authentic lives and enjoyed better orgasms.

The most famous, or infamous, version of this philosophy was Mr. Mailer's controversial 1957 essay "The White Negro," which seemed to endorse violence as an existential act and declared the murder of a white candy-store owner by two 18-year-old blacks an example of "daring the unknown."

In November 1960, Mr. Mailer stabbed his second wife, Adele Morales, with a penknife, seriously wounding her. The incident happened at the end of an all-night party announcing Mr. Mailer's intention to run in the 1961 mayoral campaign, and he, like many of his guests, had been drinking heavily. Mr. Mailer was arrested, but his wife declined to press charges, and he was eventually released after being sent to Bellevue Hospital for observation. The marriage broke up two years later.

All told, Mr. Mailer was married six times, counting a quickie with Carol Stevens, whom he married and divorced within a couple of days in 1980 to grant legitimacy to their daughter, Maggie. His other wives, in addition to Ms. Silverman and Ms. Morales, were Lady Jeanne Campbell, granddaughter of Lord Beaverbrook; Beverly Rentz Bentley; and Norris Church, with whom he was living at his death. Lady Campbell died in June. In the 1970s Mr. Mailer entered into a long feud with feminists and proponents of women's liberation, and in a famous 1971 debate with Germaine Greer at Town Hall in Manhattan he declared himself an "enemy of birth control." He meant it. By his various wives, Mr. Mailer had nine children, all of whom survive him: Susan, by Ms. Silverman; Danielle and Elizabeth Anne, by Ms. Morales; Kate, by Lady Campbell; Michael Burks and Stephen McLeod, by Ms. Bentley; Maggie Alexandra, by Ms. Stevens; and John Buffalo, by Ms. Church. Also surviving are an adopted son, Matthew,

by an earlier marriage of Ms. Norris's, and 10 grandchildren.

For all his hipsterism, Mr. Mailer was an old-fashioned, attentive father. Starting in the 1960s, the financial burden of feeding and clothing his offspring, as well as keeping up with his numerous alimony payments, caused him to churn out a couple of novels, including "An American Dream" (1965), for the sake of a quick payday and also to take on freelance magazine assignments.

A series of articles for Esquire on the 1968 Democratic and Republican conventions were the basis for his book "Miami and the Siege of Chicago," and some articles for Harper's and Commentary about the 1967 antiwar march on the Pentagon became the basis for the prizewinning book "The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History."

'Servant to a Wild Man'

The beginning of "Armies" is both a good summary of Mr. Mailer's life to that point and an example of how he had begun to turn himself into a character in which literary style and selfhood were virtually indistinguishable:

"As Mailer had come to recognize over the years, the modest everyday fellow of his daily round was servant to a wild man in himself: The gent did not appear so very often, sometimes so rarely as once a month, sometimes not even twice a year, and he sometimes came when Mailer was frightened and furious at the fear, sometimes he came just to get a breath of fresh air. He was indispensable, however, and Mailer was even fond of him, for the wild man was witty in his own wild way and absolutely fearless. He would have been admirable, except that he was an absolute egomaniac, a Beast — no recognition existed of the existence of anything beyond the range of his reach."

The critic Richard Gilman said of the book: “In ‘Armies of the Night,’ the rough force of Mailer’s imagination, his brilliant wayward gifts of observation, his ravishing if often calculated honesty and his chutzpah all flourish on the steady ground of a newly coherent subject and theme.” Alfred Kazin praised the book for its “admirable sensibilities, candid intelligence” and “most moving concern for American itself.”

Somehow in this busy decade Mr. Mailer also managed to write “Of a Fire on the Moon,” about the 1969 lunar landing, which began as a series for Life magazine; to make his most famous movie, “Maidstone,” during the filming of which he bit off part of an ear of the actor Rip Torn after Mr. Torn attacked him with a hammer; and to run finally for mayor of New York, this time as a secessionist candidate, campaigning to make New York City the 51st state. He also proposed to ban private automobiles from the city.

The writer Jimmy Breslin, who was also on the ticket, thought the race was a lark until, at a disastrous rally at the Village Gate nightclub, he discovered that Mr. Mailer was serious. Mr. Breslin later recalled, “I found out I was running with Ezra Pound.” (The Mailer team eventually lost in the Democratic primary to Mario Procaccino, who was beaten in the election by John V. Lindsay.)

In an interview in September 2006, Mr. Mailer said his favorite novel, if not his best, was “Tough Guys Don’t Dance,” a mystery thriller he wrote, under extreme financial pressure, in just two months in 1984. He was in tax trouble, he explained, and needed to crank something out quickly. “I was prepared to write a bad book if necessary,” he said, “but instead the style came out, and that saved it for me.”

His best book, he decided after thinking for a moment, was “Ancient Evenings” (1983), a long novel about ancient Egypt that received what had by then become familiar critical treatment: extravagantly praised in some quarters, disdained in others. About the book that many critics consider his masterpiece, “The Executioner’s Song,” he said he had mixed feelings because it wasn’t entirely his project.

“The Executioner’s Song,” which is about Gary Gilmore, a convicted murderer who, after a stay on death row, asked to be executed by the state of Utah in 1976, was the idea of Lawrence Schiller, a writer and filmmaker who did much of the reporting for the book, taping Mr. Gilmore and his family.

But in “The Executioner’s Song,” Mr. Mailer recast this material in what was for him a new impersonal voice that rendered the thoughts of his characters in a style partly drawn for their own way of talking. He called it a “true-life novel.”

Joan Didion, reviewing the book for The New York Times Book Review, said: “It is ambitious to the point of vertigo. It is a largely unremarked fact about Mailer that he is a great and obsessed stylist, a writer to whom the shape of the sentence is the story. His sentences do not get long or short by accident, or because he is in a hurry. I think no one but Mailer could have dared this book. The authentic Western voice, the voice heard in ‘The Executioner’s Song,’ is one heard often in life but only rarely in literature.”

Mr. Schiller also assisted Mr. Mailer with “Oswald’s Tale: An American Mystery,” his 1995 book about Lee Harvey Oswald, President John F. Kennedy’s assassin. In a review for The Sunday Times of London, Martin Amis called the

book a “remarkable feat of imaginative sympathy.” But Mr. Amis but also noted that it recalled Mr. Mailer’s championing of the convict Jack Henry Abbott, which displayed, he said, the author’s “old weakness for any killer who has puzzled his way through a few pages of Marx.”

Mr. Abbott was serving a long sentence in a Utah prison for forgery and for killing a fellow inmate when, in 1977, he began writing to Mr. Mailer. Mr. Mailer saw literary talent in Mr. Abbott’s letters and helped him publish them in an acclaimed volume called “In the Belly of the Beast.” He also lobbied to get Mr. Abbott paroled. A few weeks after being released, in June 1981, Mr. Abbott, now a darling in leftist literary circles, stabbed to death a waiter in a Lower East Side restaurant, and his champion became a target of national outrage.

Black-Tie Benefits

The episode was the last great controversy of Mr. Mailer’s career. Chastened perhaps, and stabilized by what would prove to be a marriage with Ms. Church, a former model whom he wed in November 1980, Mr. Mailer mellowed and even turned sedate. The former hostess-baiter and scourge of parties became a regular guest at black-tie benefits and dinners given by the likes of William S. Paley, Gloria Vanderbilt and Oscar de la Renta. His editor, Jason Epstein, said of this period, “There are two sides to Norman Mailer, and the good side has won.”

In 1984 Mr. Mailer was elected president of PEN American Center, the writers’ organization, and was the main force in bringing together writers from all over the world for a much publicized literary conference called “The Writer’s Imagination and the Imagination of the State.” For a change, Mr. Mailer even found himself attacked from the left as many of the attendees protested about his

inviting George P. Shultz, then secretary of state, to address the opening session. Mr. Mailer dismissed them as “puritanical leftists.”

In the '90s Mr. Mailer's health began to fail. He had arthritis and angina and was fitted with two hearing aids. But his productivity was undiminished, especially after he embarked on what he called a “monastic regime” in 1995, swearing off drinking when he was working.

“Bellow and myself and a couple of others were very much smaller than Faulkner and Hemingway,” he conceded early in the decade, but he never backed off from the claim that among his contemporaries he was the heavyweight champion.

In 1991 he published “Harlot's Ghost,” a 1,310-page novel about the Central Intelligence Agency, in which he conceived of it as a kind of cold-war church, the keeper of the nation's secrets and the bearer of its values. A poorly received biography of Picasso came out in 1995, followed in 1997 by “The Gospel According to the Son,” a first-person novel about Jesus. It gave some critics the opportunity they had been waiting for. Norman Mailer thinks he's God, they said.

Mr. Mailer's next novel, “The Castle in the Forest,” which came out a decade later, was about Hitler, but the narrator was a devil, a persona he admitted he found particularly congenial. “It's as close as a writer gets to unrequited joy,” he said. “We are devils when all is said and done.”

Interviewed at his house in Provincetown, Mass., shortly before that book's publication, Mr. Mailer, frail but cheerful, said he hoped his failing eyesight would hold out long enough for him to complete a sequel. His knees were shot, he added, holding up the two canes he walked with, and he had begun doing

daily crossword puzzles to refresh his word hoard.

On the other hand, he said, writing was now easier for him in at least one respect. “The waste is less,” he said. “The elements of mania and depression are diminished. Writing is a serious and sober activity for me now compared to when I was younger. The question of how good are you is one that really good novelists obsess about more than poor ones. Good novelists are always terribly affected by the fear that they’re not as good as they thought and why are they doing it, what are they up to?”

“It’s such an odd notion, particularly in this technological society, of whether your life is justified by being a novelist. And the nice thing about getting older is that I no longer worry about that. I’ve come to the simple recognition that would have saved me much woe 30 or 40 or 50 years ago — that one’s eventual reputation has very little to do with one’s talent. History determines it, not the order of your words.”

Shaking his head, he added: “In two years I will have been a published novelist for 60 years. That’s not true for very many of us.” And he recalled something he had said at the National Book Award ceremony in 2005, when he was given a lifetime achievement award: that he felt like an old coachmaker who looks with horror at the turn of the 20th century, watching automobiles roar by with their fumes.

“I think the novel is on the way out,” he said. “I also believe, because it’s natural to take one’s own occupation more seriously than others, that the world may be the less for that.”

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