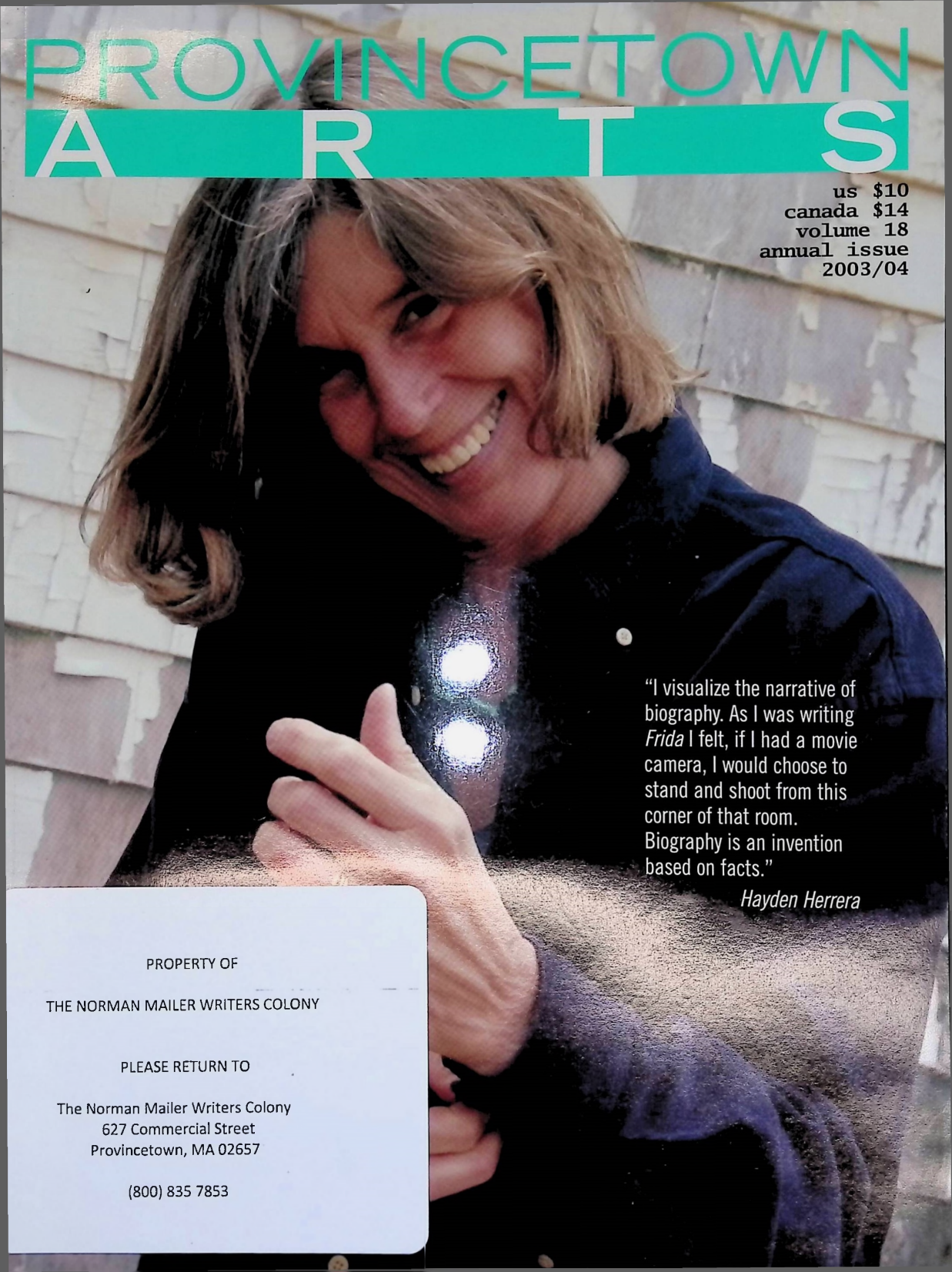


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"I visualize the narrative of biography. As I was writing *Frida* I felt, if I had a movie camera, I would choose to stand and shoot from this corner of that room. Biography is an invention based on facts."

Hayden Herrera

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The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing

By Norman Mailer
Random House

Ten years ago I lived in Provincetown, in a swamp on Harry Kemp Way, and every morning when the weather was good I would look up through our large front windows and see a shirtless, somewhat short, somewhat heavyset man slowly jogging by our driveway. "Look," I'd say to my wife. "There he is." And she would come to the window and together we would both marvel at him, at his complete indifference to the mixed blessing of his physical presence, and at the sheer wonder of having him—as it were—traipsing through our front property. He was Norman Mailer, of course. Only in Provincetown, we thought. He wasn't a particular literary hero of ours, at a time when we were beginning to understand that there were no literary heroes, but we admired his boldness, both on the page and on our street. He ran—as I would later tell my students that they should write—with a "fuck you" attitude. By that, I mean that he ran without any care of what anybody else thought of him, and in

We never got to meet Mailer, although at my job directing a local nonprofit I occasionally dropped him a note asking for money, but now we have the next best thing. At 308 pages, Mailer's *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing*, published on his eightieth birthday, cannot be far from spending a day or two in conversation with

him. From the beginning, he invites us to skip and skim, to read in a linear fashion or to read as our curiosities take us, and while it is not a slim volume, the book has only a few tracks to follow. There is the compelling track of his ascent into the literary stratosphere, and with it the concomitant track of his perspective of the treatment he has endured by literary critics, but there is also the track of his keen literary analysis, and, finally, and perhaps sometimes less compellingly, the track of his advice to younger authors. Mailer has stitched it all quite carefully together, so that in fact *The Spooky Art* can be read in sequence, but it is ultimately more entertaining if you skip around, take as much of one line as you care to, then double back and find something else more sustaining.

The actual prose, of course, is excellent. Style, Mailer argues, is "character," "a reflection of identity." And his style, despite his protestations otherwise, is indeed inimitable. He is inviting, charitable, kind, presumptuous, arrogant, snide, defensive, difficult, painful to be around, and utterly charming. "A good skier rarely worries about a route," he notes. "It's the same thing in writing: You have to have confidence in your technique." While the literary world these days is filled with utterly (and perhaps mistakenly) con-

writers, perhaps there is none more deserving of confidence than Mailer. And so, circling back and forth in real time, as a novel. "If you insist on a specific tone, despite all warnings," Mailer writes in one of his moments of more obvious advice, "it can even be a variety of experience that will enter the book." By sewing together this particular patchwork of interviews, essays, rants, rants, and the like, Mailer allows so many of these pages that—despite the fact that it is a book about writing—*The Spooky Art* is the salutary effect of being actually limited to a great conversation with a naturally engaging personality.

So, while there is more than is probably necessary about enduring bad reviews, and while the book is less generally engaging when it clearly intends to offer guidelines to "young authors," because of the inimitable style, *The Spooky Art* actually becomes a book that is hard to put down. In terms of the line by line writing, for example, Mailer's comparisons are always useful and funny in a delightfully bold and offhand manner. Not reading reviews of his work, he writes, "would be like not looking at a naked woman if she happens to be standing in front of her open window. Whether ugly or lovely, she is undeniably interesting under such circumstances."

For the reader who does bear a keen admiration for the man and his oeuvre, Mailer shares intimacies that the aficionado can savor. When he was writing *Advertisements for Myself*, for example, he was also trying to quit smoking, "and as a corollary of kicking nicotine, I was thrust into the problem of style itself." And in regard to his own prognosis for the future of literary art, he admits, "I can only add that I am not able to believe in my own pessimism too thoroughly or why would I have bothered to put together this book?"

And it's a fine book, really. "Name any great novel that didn't weary you first time through," he argues. "It's the guys who pen wonderfully sweet books, however, who are the real monsters. You know—they kick the wife, cuff the kids, and have the dog shrinking in horror. Then their books come out: 'X once again delights the reader with his sense of joy.'" In *The Spooky Art* Mailer once again delights the reader with his sense of self. He knows who he is and he knows what he looks like on the page. And—to his credit—he isn't afraid to appear topless and in motion. The result, like so many of his books, is art and entertainment, excretion and advertisement, pleasure and pain. You land where you want, you hit the ground running, and—like the writing itself—you never seem to end up out of breath.

FRED LEEBRON is author of three novels, *Out West*, *Six Figures*, and *In the Middle of All This*. He teaches at Gettysburg College.

A CHAT WITH PAUL LISICKY by Sherry Ellis



Paul Lisicky's books include the recently published memoir *Famous Builder* (2002), a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award, and the novel *Lawnboy* (1999), a BookSense 76 selection and an American Library Association Honor Book in GLBT Literature. Currently he is at work on *The Gods of Luna Township*, a novel set in New York City and on the New Jersey shore. He teaches fiction and creative nonfiction at Sarah Lawrence College and has led writing workshops at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Truro Center for the Arts at Castle Hill, and at other writing conferences. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, he received fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, and the James Michener/Copernicus Society. He divides his time between New York City and Provincetown, where he is a member of the Work Center's Writing Committee. Recently he spoke with me by phone from his apartment in New York City.

SHERRY ELLIS: You've written *Lawnboy*, a novel, many short stories, and now *Famous Builder*, a memoir. How does it feel to read about your own life in print?

PAUL LISICKY: In any memoir, the writer must pick and choose the images in support of the theme. That's not to suggest that I've soft-pedaled anything, but any life is so fluid. I think we're all capable of thinking one thing one day, and something else entirely the next. So *Famous Builder* is a version of my life, but not my life. I think every moment in time is too complicated to dramatize in all its dimensions. You try your damndest to do that, but the fact that there's always more to say makes the task of memoir bearable.

SE: In her book *The Situation and the Story*, Vivian Gornick states, "the narrator becomes a persona... a tone of voice, its angle of vision, the rhythm of sentences, what it selects to observe and ignore are chosen to serve the subject." How do you think you've created a persona as the result of writing *Famous Builder*?

PL: I'm drawn to any kind of art that embodies the stamp of individual character. In writing *Famous Builder*, I tried my best to enact speech

patterns and points of view that I like to think of as unique to me. But there's a bit of distance between who I am at any given moment and who the speaker is. The speaker's tone, his choice of detail—both are impacted by the moment in time from which the writer creates. There's no reason to think that I couldn't write about the same material covered in *Famous Builder* at a later date from a different point of view. The actor Dirk Bogarde apparently did that in a series of memoirs he wrote over the course of a lifetime. In one book his mother is kinder than a saint; in another, she's a disaster!

SE: *Famous Builder* begins when you are in elementary school, with you and your fellow classmates changing identities with one another and trying to fool a substitute teacher as to who you are. Why did you choose this beginning?

PL: It seemed false to me to write a book that explored just one thread of my identity. If I were writing a book that focused only on my life as a gay man, I'd have to leave out too much of what I know about myself. Similarly, if I wrote about myself solely as the grandson of eastern European immigrants, I'd run into the same problem. That's why the opening paragraphs are about the frustration of carrying a single name to the grave. I wanted to write a book that represented the complexity of how we understand ourselves. By foregrounding that classroom scene, the book argues against the notion that anyone is built of a singular identity.

I also thought it was important to open with a group drama. The boundaries in that classroom loosen, and there's a sense of joyousness about the collective. A certain anarchic spirit emerges again and again in the book, in which the speaker understands himself not as a single being hemmed in by his mortal body, but as a part of something larger. His participation in the collective enables him to participate in eternity, if only for a moment. If you're not pinned to a single name, then you can keep going on and on, right?

Overall, the opening is there to warn the reader that this isn't going to be a conventional memoir in which the speaker comes to some radical self-understanding following a series of crises. The book's work is to ask questions about identity.

SE: From age nine to 14 you designed your own communities, inspired by Levittown in New York. Do you find that writing is also a way of building communities?

PL: Any writer is engaged in the work of naming, making shapes, structures, circulation patterns—all the tasks of the city planner. A book is a community. It's brought to life with characters and houses that the reader enters imaginatively.

SE: How has music inspired your writing?

ABOVE: EVERY DOG GETS HIS DAY. ON THE EVENT OF MAILER'S EIGHTIETH BIRTHDAY AND THE PUBLICATION DATE OF THE SPOOKY ART, TOWN MANAGER KEITH BERGMAN PRESENTS A CITATION DECLARING JANUARY 31st NORMAN MAILER DAY IN PROVINCETOWN.