

Norman Mailer is a literary giant – but his private life has brought him almost as much notoriety as his novels. Michael Sheldon meets him

Short and barrel-chested, Norman Mailer moves across the wooden terrace of his seaside home in Massachusetts with the swagger of an elderly Popeye. At 79, his legs are a bit wobbly, and his curly white hair is a little sparse, but he still carries himself like a tough guy itching for a good brawl.

Once inside his spacious house at the tip of Cape Cod, he offers me a quick boxing lesson. First, he frames his large head with open palms, and then shifts his neck, alarmingly, from side to side. "A good boxer," he says. "I can slide his head without moving the rest of his body. I spent years practising it. You see the punch coming and you just slide out of its way."

Ordinarily, a great American novelist with a Harvard education wouldn't find many occasions to use his talents for bobbing and weaving in a street fight. But during his prime, Mailer often found himself doing battle with his fists. "I had a lot to prove," he says, with a twinkle in his blue eyes. "Being macho is a bitch."

He mentions the time, in the Fifties, when he fought a street corner bully in a had neighbourhood and nearly had his eyes gouged out. Some might say that he was asking for trouble by taking his two poodles for a walk down those mean streets.

"What was I supposed to do? The guy snickered and insulted me. He called one of my poodles a bitch. I hit him and he stuck his thumbs in my eyes."

So that was the end of that?
"No, when my eyes were back to normal, I knew I had to go down that same street and walk past that guy with my poodles and prove that I wasn't going to back down. You go there at different times until you see him again. You make it clear that he's not going to stand in your way. You have to show that you can't be pushed around."

It's a wonder that Mailer's self-imposed tests of manhood didn't get him killed long ago. Yet the old lion has a lot of fight left in him. He isn't starting brawls with the local constabulary any more – in the Sixties, he successfully defended himself on a charge of assaulting a Cape Cod policeman – but he hasn't lost any of his relentless literary drive. He is planning a new novel and has just finished a screenplay about the infamous mole at the FBI, Robert

Hudson. He's also happy to continue a life-long habit of asking provocative questions about his native land, despite the new mood of national unity sweeping America.

"What happened on September 11 was horrific, but this patriotic fever can go too far," he says. "America has an almost obscene infatuation with itself. Has there ever been a big, powerful country that is as patriotic as America? And patriotic in the tinnyest way, with so much flag waving? I don't really think we were some poor little republic, and that if one person lost his religion for one hour, the whole thing would crumble. America is the real religion in this country."

These days, such talk will definitely start a fight in many American cities, yet Mailer is not averse to throwing the first punch. With a mischievous smile, he says: "The Right wing benefited so much from September 11 that, if I were still a conspirator, I would believe they'd done it."

Like Mark Twain before him, Mailer has a way of saying outrageous things in a perfectly charming manner. At home, he is a congenial host who never raises his voice, and who seems as warm and mellow as a lazy cat at the fireside. To look at him, you would never suspect that he is the same man who, in 1960, was committed for a short period to a mental hospital after repeatedly stabbing the second of his wives.

"I don't like to talk about that," Mailer says, his sunny expression turning grim. "It was 40 years ago, and I may still want to write about it one day. I was living on the edge in those days, smoking a lot of pot and



Picture: STUART CONWAY

Fighting talk: 'September 11 was horrific, but patriotic fever can go too far. Has there ever been a powerful country that is as patriotic as America? And patriotic in the tinnyest way?'

'I never loved the spotlight. It got me into deep do-do'

drinking booze. Things were out of control."

Incredible as it may seem, he was campaigning for mayor of New York at the time and was "scared shitless" by the intensity of the campaign. At 5am, after a drunken party at his apartment, he went over the edge when Adele Mailer called him a name. One of her stab wounds narrowly missed her heart.

Though the judge in the case declared that Mailer couldn't distinguish fiction from fact and was "both homicidal and suicidal", the writer told the court that he was perfectly sane and would still run for mayor as soon as he was released. He didn't help his case, however, when he confessed that one of his ideas for easing social tensions was to hold a series of jousts in armour and on horseback.

As he told the press: "Perhaps once a year, in Central Park, we could have a vast tourney which would bring back the Middle Ages."

The appeal of hand-to-hand combat is something that Mailer seems to have romanticised ever since he failed to grapple with the Japanese enemy during the Second World War. He spent much of that conflict serving as an army cook in the Pacific. "I was an ordinary soldier. I didn't distinguish myself. And that doesn't leave you feeling too good about yourself. If you're in the army, you want to be a good soldier, but I was just adequate. The only thing I could do well was write."

Young Mailer was denied his chance at glory on the field of battle,

but wasted no time winning fame as a fast-talking, tough guy novelist. He gave his book about the war a pulp-fiction title – *The Naked and the Dead* – yet it so impressed the serious critics that he became, almost overnight, America's most celebrated young literary hero.

Much of the novel's popular suc-



cess arose not so much from its literary merits as from Mailer's effort to test the repressive censorship laws of the period. One critic hailed it as "a Kinsey Report on the sexual behavior of the GI". Yet what seemed bold then looks rather quaint now, especially the novel's repeated use of "fug" for "f---". Like a naughty schoolboy recalling old triumphs, Mailer still speaks proudly of his "fugs". "The publisher thought that there were too many fugs in the book and kept trying to take them out. But a young editor who was a great fan of the novel kept putting them back in.

Norman's conquests: Mailer with three of his six wives – from left, Jeanne, granddaughter of Lord Beaverbrook; Adele, whom he stabbed after a drunken party; and Norris, his current wife

Those were the days when everyone in publishing was dead drunk after their three-martini lunches, so the publisher had a difficult time keeping track of the fugs that were subtracted in the morning and added in the afternoon."

These days, he is very much aware that the freedom he craved in print

Hollywood and enjoyed a brief period of celebrity as a budding screenwriter and free-wheeling party animal. But Luncaster and Charlie Chaplin became pals.

Chaplin was out of the country then, as a lot of the people I knew in Hollywood were. So I didn't get very far in my ambition to become somebody in the film business. It was a mistake, but I didn't leave in bitterness. I wouldn't trade anything now for those days when I could rub shoulders with the greatest of the time."

Mailer says of his early times: "I was shot out of a cannon. I was 25 and, suddenly, reporters were taking down every word I said. It was all terribly unreal. Though it makes people throw up when they hear me say this now, I used to feel sorry for myself. I suffered from an identity crisis."

The world certainly didn't know what to make of Mailer. Was he simply a popular novelist with a tremendous talent for self-promotion? Or was he a literary giant in the rough, grooming himself to write the Great American Novel? Fifty years later, opinion is still divided. Some say that Mailer has blossomed into the Great American Journalist, pioneering a new way of seeing contemporary events through such epic works as *The Armies of the Night* and *The Executioner's Song*. His detractors say he is nothing but a publicity hound, who long ago abandoned literature for the cheap thrill of celebrity.

But, rather disingenuously, Mailer

insists that he has never liked being in the spotlight. "I never felt good about publicity. It always comes out wrong, and it always gets me into what George Bush Sr used to call 'deep do-do'. What would happen is that I would get bad publicity and then seek more publicity to set things right. But that doesn't work. I accept now that we move forward not on a wave of truth, but on a wave of disinformation."

He is proud of his reputation as the Father of New Journalism, but he still regards fiction as the superior art form, and still yearns to win greater recognition for his skills as a novelist.

"A novel is a gift. Getting it right is like falling in love. It happens just a few times in your life. And you never know what's going to happen. With non-fiction, I can sit down and arbitrarily choose a subject and write a book in a short period without much trouble. You can't do that with a novel. You can't force it. The difference between writing non-fiction and fiction is like sparring with your friends and sparring with someone who's out to beat you."

His obsession with fighting may help to explain why he's had six wives and fallen in and out of romances more times than anyone can count. Yet his most recent wife – Norris, a writer and ex-model who is 28 years his junior and the mother of one of his eight children – seems to have mastered the fine art of sparring with Norman.

She has been with him for more than 25 years now and, despite many ups and downs, they seem content with each other. During my visit, she hovers affectionately over her husband and serves him homemade cream puffs with his tea.

But don't get the idea that Mailer is completely domesticated. He still gets a gleam in his eye when he talks about sex, especially as he knew it in the Fifties. "Back then, it had to be dirty to be good," he says, gleefully. It is not surprising that one of his most successful works of non-fiction was his 1973 biography of Marilyn Monroe. He adored the sultry, forbidden glamour of Hollywood's sex queens, and his book on Monroe is one long tribute to her kind of erotic charm. It is also much concerned with Mailer's fantasies, including a convoluted effort to draw some mystical connections between his own status as a "great novelist" and her immortal place as a sexual icon.

Perhaps inevitably, one critic has complained that much of Mailer's writing is "masturbation". Several years ago, this same critic was asked by the *New York Times* to review one of Mailer's novels, and the author exploded with indignation. He complained that much of Mailer's writing is "masturbation". Several years ago, this same critic was asked by the *New York Times* to review one of Mailer's novels, and the author exploded with indignation. He complained that much of Mailer's writing is "masturbation".

It's probably just as well that Mailer never achieved his ambition to serve as New York's mayor, given his fondness for fights. Rudy Giuliani's recent example of grace under pressure has left Mailer uncharacteristically in awe of the job's challenges.

"I have respect for Giuliani because he had one moment when he really could become much larger than he ever was before, and he rose to the occasion."

It is not lost on the writer that Giuliani's triumph took place in the aftermath of the mayor's embarrassing public battle with his wife, who sought a divorce while she was performing in a sexually suggestive play. That's the kind of scandal that tugs at Mailer's old heart.

"What a lot of grief that man had to go through. I mean, to be mayor of New York and have your wife doing *The Vagina Monologues*..."

Mailer pauses and shakes his head in wonder. "That can't be easy to face, can it? I'll tell you, whatever that guy's got, it's good stuff."

As part of the *Orange World season*, Norman Mailer will be talking to Norman O'T'Leagan tonight from 6-7pm at the Apollo Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, London W1. Tickets cost £5; call 020 7494 5070

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