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Still growling
Norman Mailer
on Tyson, Enron
and the war
against terror

PHOTOGRAPH BY MURDO MACLEOD

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Fistfights, headbutts, drunken brawls, attacks on feminism: Norman Mailer's reputation as a bruiser has overshadowed his life – and fuelled his writing. **Oliver Burkeman** meets the hard man of American letters

'Machismo isn't that easy to wear'

*The underlings and the cowboys
are the ones*

Would you like a drink?" asks Norman Mailer. There was a time when the way that you answered the question might have determined whether he would bother to carry on talking to you at all. Drinking-like writing, fighting and womanising – is a sport he has pursued with reckless force ever since he crashed on to the literary landscape at 25, and it has led to fistfights in the street, headbutttings of hostile reviewers, and a vicious clubbing from a policeman whose car he was trying to hail as a taxi. Well into his 60s, he stumbled drunk on to stages and television shows, all the time railing against feminism, friends and fellow writers; he famously helped sink his 1969 run at the New York mayoralty with a speech to unpaid campaign aides telling them they were "nothing but a bunch of spoiled pigs" who should go fuck themselves.

Now, two days before his 79th birthday, in the sun-drenched living room of his redbrick house in Provincetown, Cape Cod, with its breathtaking view of sand dunes and the glistening Atlantic beyond, he hurriedly qualifies the question: "Coffee or tea?"

Mailer shares the house with his sixth wife, Norris, a painter and writer, though he has lived here with several of the others. Bright portraits decorate the walls and there are cut flowers everywhere, the remains of a birthday party they threw for a neighbour the night before. If you were to have a drunken brawl here, you would knock over tens of framed photographs of Mailer's nine children and countless grandchildren.

Norris brings tea and profiteroles and then vanishes. The profiteroles don't seem very Mailer, somehow, either.

And Provincetown is the last place you might expect to find the leading proponent of machismo in American literature: the vast majority of its population is gay, and the colourful, laid-back cafes and restaurants of Commercial Street, the main seafarers' road

where Mailer lives, are hardly the Brooklyn bars of his young adulthood. There was a time when Mailer was notorious for lunging at those who questioned his heterosexuality; once, his biographer Mary Dearborn records, he beat up a sailor in a Manhattan street because he thought he had questioned the heterosexuality of his dog. But he has lived in Provincetown, on and off, for three-quarters of a century; he writes well here. He is working on another book – two hours' writing in the morning, two in the evening before dinner – but only Norris knows what it's about. "I tell no one about it," he says. "One of the reasons for that is the joy of telling no one about it."

He walks painfully and arthritically, with the aid of two canes; he sits with his back to the sea

view because he's had operations on his eyes, he explains, and the strong, pure, Provincetown light bothers him. The pockets of the blue denim shirt encasing his barrel chest are stuffed with several pairs of glasses. He is going deaf. To look at him you might think the fight had gone out of him, but you would be wrong.

Take the whining chorus in the media about Mike Tyson: "As long as I can remember, people have been hating boxing because something in the rational, corporate vision of existence doesn't like people hitting each other," he says, the gravel voice accelerating like an engine. "That's just too brutal. Destroy them spiritually, but don't beat 'em to a pulp."

Some of Mailer's most acclaimed writing captures the choreography of his idol Muhammad Ali in the ring, and he thinks of the sport as an artful safety-valve for male aggression. "The very people who are complaining about the brutality of boxing would be screaming when they got mugged on the street by some of these guys," he says.

Then there's the Enron scandal: "I'm sure those guys in the corporate high-rise said: 'Let's call it End Run, and we're gonna make an end run around that whole stupid fucking money business that's so backward, we're gonna really show them how to make money out of money!' And they did, for a while."

And then, of course, there is the war on terror. War is the subject that made Mailer; in 1944, aged 21, he was drafted to fight in the Philippines, and the novel he wrote on his return, *The Naked and the Dead*, catapulted him to disorienting celebrity. It is a pounding, unflinching study of men in war; of strength and sadism and masculine rivalry amid the colossal waste of conflict. It was also, according to the *Sunday Times*, a book that "no decent man could leave... lying about the house, or know without shame that his womenfolk were reading it." It was energetically obscene – even though, at the publisher's behest, it was full of "fugs" and "fugging" – and that was what made its heroes heroic, Mailer argued. "What none of the editorial writers ever



The harder they come... Mailer in his 70s (above); stepping out of a police van in 1960 after being sentenced to a psychiatric hospital for stabbing his wife (left)



mentioned," he later wrote, "is that the noble common man is as obscene as an old goat, and his obscenity was what saved him. The sanity... was in his humour; his humour was in his obscenity."

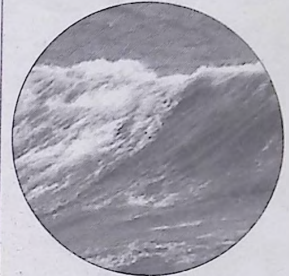
Manliness is what is missing from the current conflict, he says: America is behaving like a timorous giant. "What would we think of someone who was seven-foot tall, weighed 350 pounds, was all muscle, and had to be reassured all the time? We would say that fella's a mess!" The sentimental patriotism engulfing the country appals him. "My feeling is that you're patriotic about America if you're obsessed with America because it's a democracy, and its obligation is to improve all the time, not to stop and take bows and smell its armpits and say 'Ambrosia!'"

In the 30 books that followed *The Naked and the Dead*, machismo was never far from the centre of Mailer's preoccupations. That must lend a special poignancy to growing older and more frail? He laughs, a gritty chuckle. "I'm laughing because I'll be 79 in a couple days – machismo is that faint zephyr I can still barely hear on the other side of the hill. But listen:

PHOTOGRAPH: BEBETO MATTHEWS

Pass notes

No 1,992
Fitzroy



Status: A huge area of the Atlantic that stretches out north and west from the north-west tip of Spain. Bordering Sole and Biscay.

Conditions: Southwesterly six to eight. Occasionally severe gale nine. Rain or showers. Moderate to good.

Doesn't sound that good to me. This has something to do with the shipping forecast, right? Right.

Dogger, Fisher, German Bight . . . Fitzroy, you say? Why doesn't it sound familiar? Because it only came into being yesterday. Before that it was Finisterre.

Ah, yes, from the Latin *finis terrae*, the end of the earth, a favourite among sailors, early risers, poets and artists. That's right. During its 75 years, the shipping forecast has featured in novels, poems, songs and paintings. While for some it's just that incomprehensible, monotonous, early-morning weirdness on the radio, for others it conjures up images of romantic distant seascapes. And Finisterre was a special favourite.

So why the change? It seems that the Spanish had already named another area Finisterre, and that could be confusing for sailors.

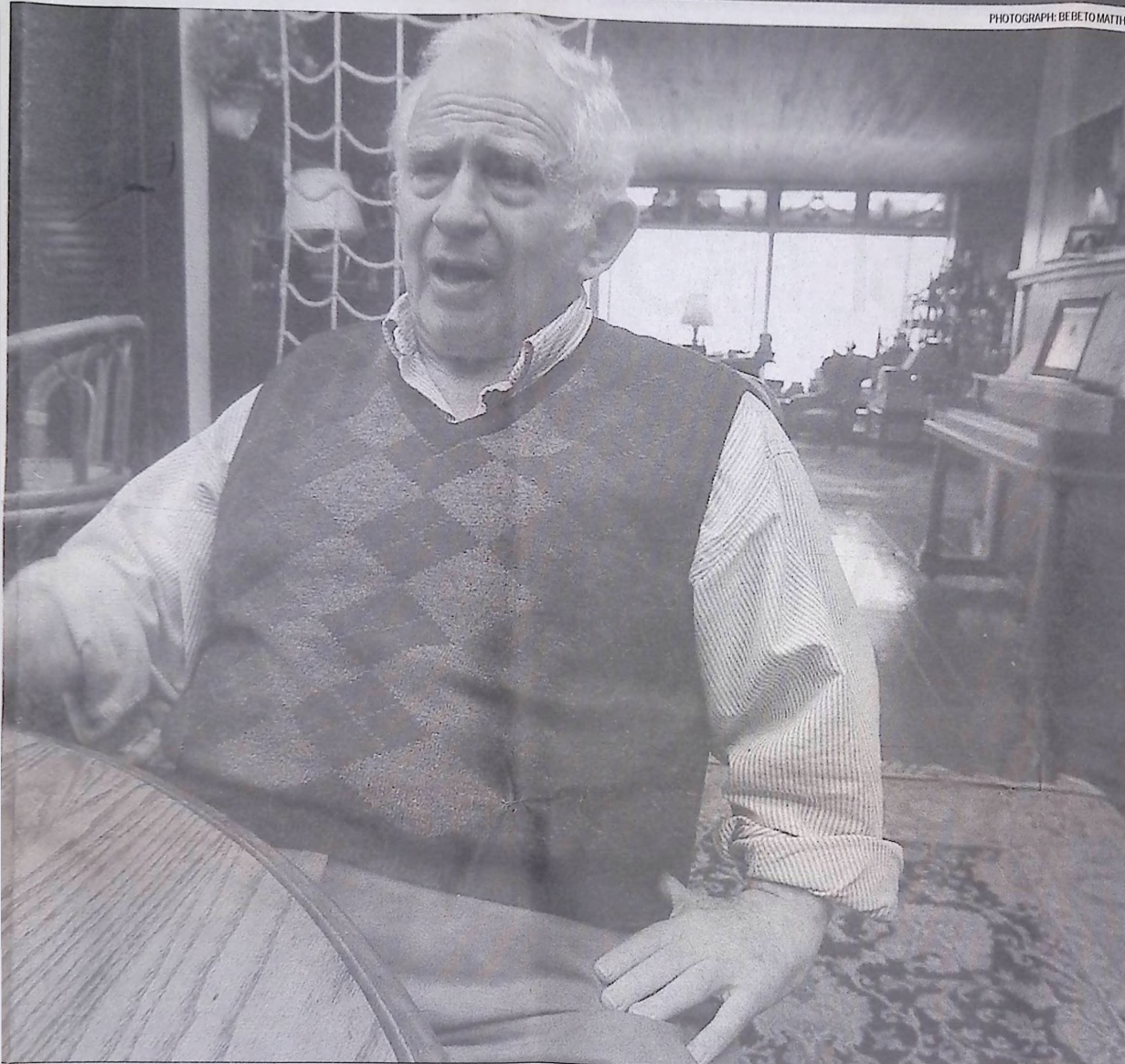
Why can't the Spanish change the name of their bit of briny instead? Because the disputed seascape is closer to Spain.

Cape Finisterre is drawing near/ Cape Finisterre is past/ Into the open ocean stream/ She floats, the vision of a dream/ Too beautiful to last. Longfellow, right?

Correct. You won't get a poem like that about a place called Fitzroy. Who was he anyway? An aristocratic Victorian mariner, Captain Robert Fitzroy was a direct descendant of Charles II. He commanded HMS Beagle for Darwin's famous expedition, and was also a major player in the founding of the met office.

Do say: Fitzroy.

Don't say: Finisterre.



machismo is not the easiest cloak to wear, the easiest role to assume in life. Machismo is a ladder, and there's always a guy who's more macho than you coming up that ladder. I've never had any illusion that I was high up that slope, and it's a desperate slope, because if you get to the top, you're dead. Macho means taking the dares that come your way, and if you take every dare that comes your way, sooner or later you're gonna be dead. So I'm quite happy to have machismo behind me now. There are pleasures in being macho, but there are great anxieties. It was a great load to carry. I was never macho enough to enjoy being macho. I don't know. I'd fight if it came to it, but people don't go looking for fights with men my age."

He races through the thoughts as they strike him, compelled to externalise, to confess. It is a compulsion that has been the motivating force behind his writing, generating works of genius and patchy disappointments alike. He has "this habit of exposing himself in all his weakness and all his anxiety", his old foe, the essayist Vivian Gornick, has written. He freely, happily, repeatedly, confessed to envy, greed, insecurity, raging competitiveness. What is curious is how little affect this confessionalism achieves . . . the way those sentences are accumulating: that is Mailer's self on the page, and the aggression in them never lets up."

Off the page, his aggression has been just as inexhaustible. So: when did he last headbutt somebody? "It's been a while. A long time. I did - oh, my lord - maybe it was when [the New York/Newsday columnist] Jimmy Breslin wrote about it. That was the best headbutting. Breslin and I butted heads, and a couple of days later he wrote in his column that Norman immediately lost the next two chapters of his novel and he was no longer in possession of his name and address . . . But there were probably a couple of episodes after that."

The literary feuds are over, too, he says - "they're so very expensive. Novelists are an endangered species now, and when there's only 18 elk left in the world, they mustn't start trying to knock off each other's horns." When Tom

'I'm much more interested in being able to do my own work than bringing a wonderful new writer into existence'

Wolfe made a clumsy attempt to initiate a new battle a year ago by dismissing Mailer, John Updike and John Irving as "the three stooges" ("it must gall them a bit that everyone - even them - is talking about me") Wolfe told a TV interviewer - Mailer says he couldn't be bothered to respond. "I was laughing. I was thinking, God, he's vulnerable. And the mean side of me thought, if I'd realised how vulnerable he was, maybe I wouldn't have been so nice to him." Nor does he take an interest in the jostlings of younger generations of writers. He doesn't have any literary heirs, he says, and he doesn't care. "You get very selfish about writing as you get older," he says. "You've got only so much energy and you want to save it for your own work. I'm much more interested in being able to do my own work than bringing a wonderful new writer into existence. Because my feeling is that if he or she is truly a wonderful new writer, they're going to come into existence on their own."

For many, though, the writerly feuds - and even the writing - were a distraction from the matter for which Mailer has incurred more opprobrium than any other in his career as a literary celebrity: his battles with feminism. "In the 1970s," Gornick recalls, "women in their 20s and 30s knew what he meant, at whose permanent expense 'feeling alive' was to be had. And when we said so, out loud page 4 ▶

4 page 3 and in print, Mailer turned vicious. The anti-feminism was pathological, a thing we turned away from in fear as well as rage."

It was never entirely clear from Mailer's goading public pronouncements – most famously, that "all women should be locked in cages" – just how much he was in earnest, and whether they mattered less if he wasn't. Today, he pleads misquotation, misunderstanding, and the bandwagon-jumping of publicity-seeking feminists.

I was on a television show once with Orson Welles, and at a certain point he got very pious about women – Orson Welles, who was married to Rita Hayworth, of all people! And so I made a totally stupid remark. I said, 'Oh, come on, Orson, women are low sloppy beasts'. Now I was going to add, with a great twinkle, *and they are also goddesses*. But you make a remark like that and you don't get any further. Well, the feminists took over. They used that remark and ran with it. They enjoyed that remark... of course, part of your character is dictated by the nature of your foe, and a lot of those early feminists were just godawful people."

Altogether unexpectedly, he turns out to be a new convert to the works of John Gray: "People have been known to say that men and women come from different planets, and were landed here, and that to me is as reasonable a hypothesis as any other."

Mailer's rhetorical jousting made telegenic entertainment – but there was something else. In 1960, at 4am, drunk and stoned after an argumentative party, Mailer stabbed his second wife Adele twice, in the back and chest with a pair of scissors. He only narrowly missed her heart. Adele did not press charges and Norman's literary friends rallied round; he spent 17 days in a psychiatric ward and got a probationary sentence. The couple did not separate for the best part of a year. Nobody in his circle seems quite to have addressed the incident at all, and the same seems to have happened when his fourth wife, Beverley Bentley Mailer, said he had physically attacked her, too. Uncomfortably, the episode seems to have been swiftly filed away under Norman Being Norman, as if they were another spat with Gore or a barroom fistfight.

Forty-two years after the first incident, Mailer is certainly not going to let introspection disrupt the patrician calm which has settled over the Provincetown house. "It's a long time ago, and you really might say the worst elements of it have been digested over the years – by me, I mean. I can't speak for Adele. It's our children who suffered with it more than we did, when people whisper about it. All right, I deserved [condemnation], but it's them carrying the weight. Everyone alive carries the weight. It's a dull bruise. You don't go around fingering it."

What would the young Mailer, the 25-year-old bruiser, make of the 79-year-old patriarch, I ask. The explosive gritty laugh returns. "Ha-haha! It's rank speculation. You think that's a good question? It's not a good question! Rank speculation is useless! It's like asking what would I do if I'd been a bathing beauty or a whale! A dolphin! A mountain climber! It's not a question I'd care to answer." But, of course, he has had an idea and he has to get it out. "At 25 I was terribly critical of my literary betters because they weren't doing enough. So I probably would be angry at me: why isn't Mailer doing this, why isn't Mailer doing that? Dissatisfaction with the things I haven't done. Not with the things I have done."

Norman Mailer is talking to Andrew O'Hagan at The Orange Ward lecture tomorrow, 6–7pm, at The Apollo Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue. Tickets, £5: 020-7494 5070



Sex education

To many, the case of Amy Gehring, above, the teacher cleared yesterday of sexually assaulting two boys, was more amusing than troubling. But, asks **Maureen Freely**, would we have felt the same if the pupils were girls?

If it were a man, it would be different. We'd be outraged at his acquittal. But no one seems too bothered that Amy Gehring will not be doing time for indecent assault. This is as it should be, as she's been cleared of all charges. But why is no one worried about the prospect of boys having sex with female teachers?

The plot so far goes like this: Amy Gehring, a 26-year-old Canadian who was working as a supply teacher at a Surrey school, was having relationship problems. Her long-term boyfriend had dumped her. She was having a hard time finding friends her own age. So she struck up what she described in court as "inappropriate relationships" with a number of other students.

Not only did she socialise with them, she even stayed over at some of their houses after "late nights" with the knowledge and consent of their parents. "I can't believe it was me," she told the court this week. "I should never have become friends with them in that way. I don't agree with a lot of things I did."

She went on to insist that she had never formed sexual relationships with the two boys, brothers aged 14 and 15, who brought charges against her. The fact that they had talked to the tabloids cast some doubt on their stories. The fact that their stories were the stuff of adolescent fantasy did not help either.

And it wasn't as if the boys in that school weren't just constantly asking for it. Gehring told the court about the incessant sexual innuendo she had had to live with while working there. "There was grabbing, touching, gestures,"

she said. "I obviously didn't like it." She had less to say about a certain new-year's party, because she had so much to drink that the whole thing is a big blur. It was only when she was back in school that she heard rumours that she had had sex with a boy in a toilet. "I didn't know what to make of it," she told the court. "I was so shocked I didn't remember anything like that happening... I didn't know. I texted him and said 'what's happened?' He said, 'I think we had sex' and I said I didn't remember."

But she was sufficiently worried to rush off to ask the doctor for the morning-after pill. Now that she has been cleared of all charges, it has emerged that there were complaints about her in a previous school. I'm not surprised, and I'm not all that concerned, because it's pretty clear that Gehring herself is appalled by her behaviour and seems determined to observe decorum from here on in.

My problem, really, is with everyone else. It's not just the double standards, but let's start there. Let's start with the law. You may not know this, but there is one law for women and another for men. It is against the law for men to have sex with underage girls OR boys. For women, it is only against the law if it is "indecent assault".

As a nation we are more concerned about restraining men than we are about restraining women. But why are we so sure that a man who has sex with a girl is scarring her for life, and that a woman who is in the next bedroom with her brother is doing him a big favour?

Yes, it's every boy's fondest fantasy. No, it doesn't seem possible for a full-grown Eng-

lishman to listen to the Tale of Amy without sighing and waxing poetic about Miss Sexy who taught him in lower sixth, and who still comes back to him, all these years later, to perform unspeakable acts in his dreams.

But how many harmless fantasies are harmless when they come true? Teachers, no matter what sex they are, are powerful people. They can break children by refusing to take them seriously. They can transform them by telling them they "have what it takes".

To teach at all, they have to win their students' trust. Winning trust is, as any teacher knows, a difficult proposition. It's a fragile bond, and when it's broken, it's hard to fix. We're all well acquainted with this line of argument vis-à-vis male teachers and female students, and we've come to the view that it is not right even when the female students are technically adults.

It's not right because it's an abuse of power. It's an abuse of power, mind you, that comes with many perks. Thus, a female student who has an affair with her male teacher may not feel as traumatised as the stock plot would have us believe. She may feel special, and she may love all the extra attention, not to mention the special one-to-one tuition that so often comes with it.

But in every case I know about, it ends in trouble. It's not the sex per se, it's the adult relationship that comes with it. Boys are, if anything, less prepared for that rollercoaster than girls are. If anything, they're even more vulnerable than girls are. If something does go wrong, and they go for help, no one takes them seriously. Everyone laughs.