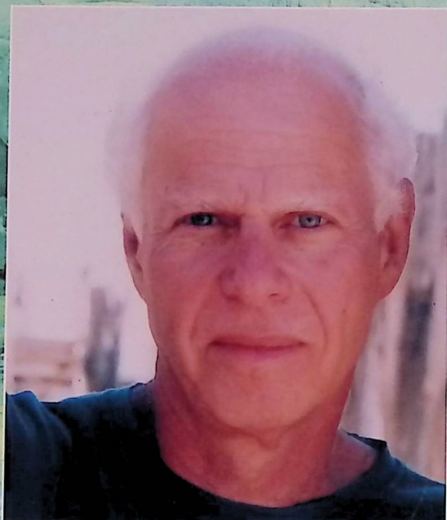


# PROVINCETOWN ARTS

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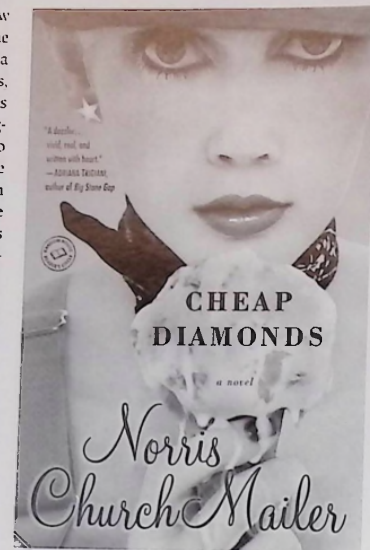
**HISTORIC STUDIOS OF PROVINCETOWN ARTISTS**

absolutely distinct from myself." Begun in New Mexico and finally finished in Provincetown, the novel, initially, was composed longhand. Scibona is unapologetically scornful of word processors, revealing that the physical process of writing was crucial to the way the novel took shape: "Longhand lends itself to recklessness, openness to mess and surprise. Once on the typewriter, the writing is more deliberate and settled. Once on the computer, the final stage, the language begins to die." He admits the computer saves needless retyping in the last drafts, but he distrusts its "phony perfectionism."

Conventional readers might wish Scibona had been more in charge of his characters, and a bit less reckless in his writing, for it takes a while to get into the rhythm of his onrushing words. It is not always easy to decipher and wade through rambling interior monologues, yet the effort proves very gratifying. If you allow yourself to go with his flow, you will see, as he says, that "[the characters] exist and have motives as deep seated and mysterious as my own. Whenever a pre-arranged notion of plot demanded a certain act from one of the characters, the character dependably refused." His are not characters you might necessarily wish to befriend or bring home to tea, but they merit close attention and sympathy. They are not archetypes or clichés, but flesh-and-blood people fighting to survive and make sense of their confounding worlds.

It could be said that any artistic endeavor demanding a decade of its creator deserves great celebration upon completion, but Scibona's accomplishment is laudable far beyond the sheer stamina that was required to bring the novel together. By utilizing his obvious scholarship and reverence for the written word to create *The End*, he makes great demands on his readers, but he brings new light into the prism of the American novel. He takes risks, expects his readers to accept his linguistic and philosophical challenges, and metaphorically takes no prisoners. There is a certain satisfaction to be found in seeing his characters through. As he says: "All of the main characters . . . are drawn to their own disappearance, their own peculiar end. Death is only one of the forms this takes. . . . The end is the end of the ego, and, we hope, the beginning of a kind of existence undifferentiated from the existence of other people." This is a novel to reread, to return to many times over. Be prepared to be stunned.

DEBORAH MINSKY is a freelance writer with lifelong connections to Provincetown. She taught English and creative writing for over twenty years; currently, she is executive director and curator of the Highland House Museum in North Truro.



### Cheap Diamonds

By Norris Church Mailer  
Random House, 2007

JOHN GARDNER ONCE famously claimed there are really only two plots in literature: The hero goes on a journey, or a stranger comes to town. Novelist Norris Church Mailer tackled the second scenario in her first novel. In *Windchill Summer*, small-town Arkansas art student Cherry Marshall takes up with an attractive hippie newcomer, falls for him hard, and learns a great deal about life and death, all in the course of one summer. In Mailer's second novel, *Cheap Diamonds*, Cherry embarks on Gardner's second option, the journey. She leaves parents, painting, and friends in Arkansas, and moves to New York to become a model.

In literature, at least until recently, women rarely took off on dangerous or uncertain journeys, especially not alone. The picaresque tradition among female novelists is not a long or familiar one. Most fictional heroines had to wait around for that stranger to arrive—for the plot to find them. But Cherry Marshall is having none of that in 1970. She leaves behind her best friend, Baby, her religion (or at least her priest, Father Leo), her friend Cassie, and gradually begins to shed her sheltered upbringing and her old views.

A *New York Times* review refers to *Cheap Diamonds* as "cinematic," but in reality it evokes a much older classic form: the picaresque novel, in the tradition of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and Defoe's *Moll Flanders*. The disreputable Moll, for example, longed more than anything to be secure and respectable. Cherry seems to be on a sort of Moll Flanders quest in reverse, traveling from a pleasant, comfortable, but narrow existence in respectable Bible-Belt Arkansas to the

mildly debauched, wildly exciting world of New York City in the seventies. She becomes a fashion model, learns her way around, dates a black jazz musician, eats hash brownies, and lives in a walk-up with an eccentric landlady who's a former Ziegfeld hooper and—as Cherry will find out later, in the darkest part of the novel—an occasional backdoor abortionist.

Like Moll, Cherry longs for a quite different life, and determines to get it. Fortunately, she has an education, more resources, and a much-less-structured society than eighteenth-century England to do it in. Like Moll, though, she journeys far, both geographically and internally. She meets strange people, learns how to deal with and even use them to her advantage, and once in a while—without truly meaning to—she lets down people she cares about along the way. To her credit, she worries about this, and, also to her credit, she does not let the traditional female character guilt-trip derail her plans.

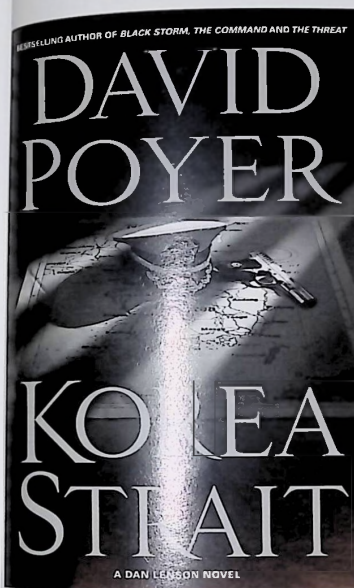
Since Norris Mailer is a former New York model herself, it's hard not to wonder how autobiographical *Cheap Diamonds* might be. Mailer says, however, that like any novelist she relies not just on her own direct experience, but on that of others, and research and imagination as well. She is a Southerner by birth, like Cherry, and "will always be one, and love the voices, the cadence, the dialogue, the metaphors of the South." But she's lived in New York for thirty-three years now, with the result that she's equally at home there.

The writer's beginnings were in Arkansas, like her main character's. Her parents spent what might have been their college years during the Great Depression, working to support their families. They wanted Norris to have an education. She was an avid reader. "I had always loved books. I lusted after them, wanted to own them, to read them over and over and over and have to give them back to the library when I was done with them." Though their means were limited, her parents made sure she had her own books, especially the books of Laura Ingalls Wilder and the Nancy Drew mysteries, purchased from a local bookstore whose owner bore the propitious name of Faulkner.

Mailer started writing in seventh grade. Her English teacher was her first mentor and fan, giving her As on her papers and telling her she should be a writer. "From then on," says Mailer, "I felt in some part of me that I would be." When she was at Arkansas Tech, B.C. Hall, her creative writing professor once wrote on her paper, "What's an intelligent girl like you doing in a place like this?"

Her path to novel writing was not so direct, though. First came art, and modeling, and an encounter with Norman Mailer at a book signing in Arkansas. Meaning only to get her copy of his novel signed, she ended up following him to New York, and they were married. But back to the subject of mentors—their marriage of thirty-two years can hardly be ignored. The subject is of interest to this writer, especially, as I too married an already established novelist. So I wonder, of course, if Norman Mailer will turn out to be her third unforgettable mentor.

Though our styles are nothing alike," she set in Paris. Mailer is at work on it now. When asked about advice to beginning writers, Mailer is adamant about certain things: Avoid trying to second-guess, anticipate, or otherwise try to write just to please the imagined audience. "A writer is lost if he censors himself before the words are on the page." Avoid plagiarism like the plague; it is, in her opinion, the worst crime a writer can commit. And aspiring writers should remember that "nobody has to see what you have written unless you want them to. Write what you want, you can always go back later and take it out."



### Korea Strait

By David Poyer  
St. Martin's Press, 2007

ONCE, SAILING OFF the Virginia coast, I puzzled over the greenish color of the water. How would I describe it? Finally I gave up and asked the other occupant (and owner) of the boat. A moment of reflection, then "cooked broccoli," said David Poyer, getting it exactly right. Such images are one of the many pleasures of reading his naval fiction. I do not know of any writer better at describing the sea—the water itself—in its infinite variety. Take for example a passage from his latest novel, *Korea Strait*, as U.S. Navy Commander Dan Lenson looks out from the deck of a Korean Navy ship:

The smooth-surfaced sea heaved under a cloudless amaranthine sky. It was just before dawn. There was no wind. Not a ripple marred the ever-changing, everlasting inter-

face between water and air. But it rose slowly, then fell away along the worn steel of the hull, all but imperceptibly, as if the sea were breaching. . . . Every hundred feet or so a wave broke with a quiet splatter. It left a patch of ivory lace rocking, slowly melting, till the clear blue welled up again. Small silvery fish hovered in the hull-shadow, fluid rippling commas poised tensely between quiescence and alarm.

Like the fish, Poyer's Dan Lenson inhabits the border between "quiescence and alarm." With a long career of annoying people of higher rank, neither his Medal of Honor nor his wife's position as an undersecretary of defense have kept Dan from being given the most obscure seagoing job that could be found. As leader of a TAG (Tactical Assessment Group) team, he is to observe an antisubmarine exercise by a multinational force in the waters between Korea and Japan. In *Korea Strait*, Poyer offers a classic demonstration of how thoroughly politics and personalities can blur the clarity of command one normally expects in a military context. On meeting his small team of military and civilian observers, Lenson isn't even sure at first who is in charge. After the exercise begins, an arrogant American commodore issues orders to the task group he does not command, and Lenson's off-hand advice to a Korean officer infuriates the ship's captain. Aboard the Korean flagship he has to keep reminding himself that "He wasn't in command anymore. Just a foreign passenger, an alien body, a bacillus."

*Korea Strait* is Poyer's tenth novel in the Dan Lenson series. First in narrative order, though not in publication date, is *The Circle*. In *The Circle* Lenson, an ensign recently graduated from the Naval Academy, confronts the Cold War Soviets and his own surly crewmembers on a tired ship in the icy waters of the Arctic. Other volumes take him to the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, the Caribbean, the South China Sea, and Washington (both the Pentagon and the White House). As in *Korea Strait*, the Lenson in these books is smart, technically savvy, and physically and morally courageous. He also continually questions himself and the established order. He tends not to act as expected, for which some admire him and others want to see him court-martialed. Indeed,

But the time of the big stars, as in Norman Mailer's day, is over. The focus now, she laments (don't we all) is on "celebrities and vapid pretty boys and girls who are famous for being famous." So write to please yourself, she says: "Nobel Prizes aside, no matter what the critics say, if a writer has done the best job she can do, and has been honest, then that is the best feeling there is."

LENORE HART is the author of five novels, including most recently *Becky: The Life and Loves of Becky Thatcher* (St. Martin's Press, 2008). She lives in Virginia.

in *The Circle*, he even wants to court-martial himself! Though one may find the Lenson volumes on the "military thriller" shelf in bookstores, they offer more in substance, texture, and excellence of style than others in that category.

By the time we meet Lenson in *Korea Strait*, he has, in addition to being banged up by various terrorists and other bad guys, gone through the disintegration of a first marriage and nearly lost everything to alcoholism. He has confronted such difficult issues as homosexuality in the military and women in combat. However, his second wife, Blair, is beautiful and bright, considerably outranking him in the Pentagon hierarchy, and he has recovered from his alcoholism, matching the Koreans' *soju* (rice whiskey) toasts with a cup of tea. He has also become capable of describing his moral ground. In response to a claim that a right decision is "the one that turns out later was right," which of course is of little help at the time of decision, Lenson has a more useful response: "You just subtract yourself from the equation. No matter how scared or tired you are, or how bad it might be for your career. You just do what used to be called your duty. Just do that—and no matter how it turns out, you can live with it."

As its number suggests, SATYRE XVII is one in a long series of relatively routine exercises intended to make the antisubmarine capabilities of the forces involved a little better than before. The surface and air units will test themselves against an American nuclear attack boat and a Korean diesel sub. But Korea, which for most



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The Sixth Annual Conference of

## THE NORMAN MAILER SOCIETY

will be held in Provincetown on October 16-19, 2008

CONFERENCE THEME: MEMORY AND THE AFTERLIFE

The conference will include panel discussions, papers and dramatic presentations focusing on Mailer's final two works, *The Castle in the Forest* and *On God: An Uncommon Conversation*, as well as discussions of many of his other works. There will be a walking tour of literary Provincetown led by Christopher Busa and a Readers Theater presented by Wilkes University's MFA Program. October 16 will be devoted entirely to tributes to the late Mr. Mailer from Society and community members at the Provincetown Theater (open to the public). Other sessions will be at the Fine Arts Work Center and the Provincetown Inn. Registration is \$135 (for Society members only), and includes continental breakfasts, one catered lunch and admission to all panels. Annual society dues are \$30 (\$10 for students) and include a subscription to *The Mailer Review*. The memorial issue (400+ pages) will be published in September.

Keynote Speaker: **Christopher Ricks**, co-director of the Editorial Institute at Boston University, current Professor of Poetry at the University of Oxford (England), and author of critical studies of the works, among others, of Eliot, Housman, Arnold, Tennyson, Keats and Mailer.

To join The Society and register for the conference, send your check, made out to The Norman Mailer Society, to David Light, Treasurer, 75 Jennings Lane, Windham, CT 06280. Registrations will also be accepted at conference headquarters, the Provincetown Inn. For more information, contact David Light ([dlight@snet.net](mailto:dlight@snet.net)) or go to [www.normanmailersociety.com](http://www.normanmailersociety.com)

"There was  
that law of life  
so cruel and so  
just which  
demanded that  
one must grow  
or pay more for  
remaining the  
same."

The Deer Park  
(1955)



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