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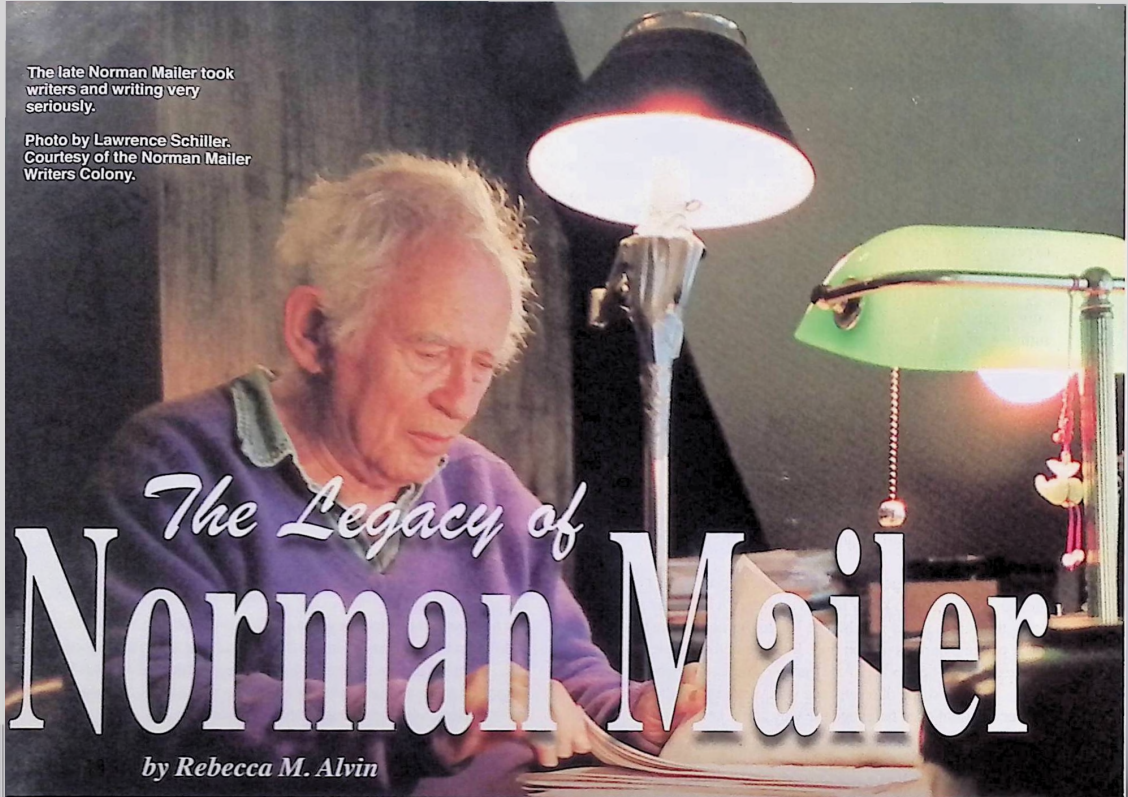
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The late Norman Mailer took writers and writing very seriously.

Photo by Lawrence Schiller.
Courtesy of the Norman Mailer
Writers Colony.



The Legacy of Norman Mailer

by Rebecca M. Alvin

Few were surprised when it was announced last year that Norman Mailer's red brick waterfront home on the East End of town would be preserved and used by the Norman Mailer Writers Colony, a project spearheaded by Mailer's longtime friend and collaborator, Lawrence Schiller. The Pulitzer Prize-winning author and icon of American masculinity lived in town for decades, and both he and his wife Norris Church Mailer gave their time and support to many community endeavors.

The Colony reflects not only Mailer's love for Provincetown, but also his willingness and desire to advise future generations of writers. The Colony will offer fellowships, national writing awards and awards for young writers still in school, workshops led by leading authors, editors, and scholars, as well as a number of programs in other areas of the arts, such as filmmaking and fine art.

"He carried on correspondence with many, many writers," says J. Michael Lennon, who is president of the Norman Mailer Society, a Colony board member, as well as Mailer's official biographer. "If you were a writer and you were serious, and you wrote to him, he would respond. He took it very, very seriously."

The mission of the Colony reflects this concern for the future of writing, working to "keep alive the endangered, serious writer." Executive Director Schiller explains, "With the Internet—and quite honestly with text messaging—new and different type

of writers are emerging and students are very confused about what type of writing they should really hone their skills on... I think the Colony, at least in its first year, will try to keep alive the endangered species of the writers who really understood the language."

As you might expect from a filmmaker, Schiller, a filmmaker, writer, and photojournalist himself, explains the anticipated atmosphere by asking me to imagine the scene: "All the fellows are sitting around and talking about their work. All of a sudden sits down a Nobel Laureate who says 'so, what are you guys doing?'"

He enthusiastically gives me another scene to ponder: "An esteemed writer submits something [he or she has] written but not yet published. All the fellows read it and then in a seminar criticize that writer's work. We've devised a lot of things like that."

The idea is to provide a space where students, fellows, and the exceptional writers of our time can intermingle and benefit from each other's experience and perspective. It's a beautiful idea and certainly one that calls to mind what already occurs at the Fine Arts Work Center (FAWC), a venerable institution in its own right. Schiller is keenly aware of FAWC's work, but he sees the Colony as distinct.

"[FAWC] is one of the finest institutions I know about. You don't try to do what they do. You try to offer something else. You try to work with [them] by having joint events, the fellows

interacting – You make it a hand in glove type situation.”

One unique aspect of the Colony is its plan for a film component to start up next year. This will include documentary film workshops, as well as a fellowship program similar to the one for writers. Also, obviously the specific connection with Mailer’s approach to writing and his works is a unique one.

“I think the biggest challenge is how do you create something in a very, very unique way. How do you offer people an experience that they don’t expect to have; anybody that comes has researched other colonies,” he says.

“Without giving away the secret. I think I’ve devised some very interesting ways of doing that,” he offers cautiously, without further elaboration.

The first round of summer fellowships was announced earlier this month. It includes seven talented writers selected from over 400 applications by the Colony’s Executive and Writers boards, which include former *New Yorker* editor Tina Brown, legendary writer Joan Didion, Pulitzer Prize winners William Kennedy and Doris Kearns Goodwin, Nobel Laureate Gunter Grass, Schiller, Lennon, and others – all of whom had personal and professional connections to Mailer. This program is administered jointly by the Michener Center for Writers and the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

It’s easy to get caught up in the celebrity aspect of Mailer’s life, but for those who knew him as a townie, it is Mailer as a human being that sticks in our minds. The Mailer home is more than just a place where a famous person once lived, it’s where a great writer was inspired, where he worked. And that goes beyond celebrity-worship.

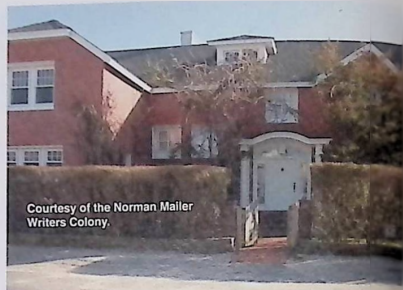
“The shape of a sentence was very important to Norman Mailer. He didn’t see language the way some journalists do, as freight

for content... He believed the style and substance had to be married, says Lennon, who edited several of Mailer’s manuscripts, including *The Spooky Art*.

“Some people have the notion that Mailer spent all of his

time either in a barn or on a TV show. It’s just not true. He certainly did both... but that wasn’t really the full extent of how he spent his life,” says Lennon. “He was really kind of a monkish guy as far as his writing. He wrote millions and millions of words. His letters alone contain 25 million words.”

And yet, Lennon says the writing was not for everyone. “He wanted to challenge people with his writing. He didn’t want it to be easy. He felt there should be a mysterious edge to it... There’s a certain difficulty level in his writing style that is both beguiling to the reader, and to some, they don’t like it, it’s painful. You have to think when you read Norman Mailer.”



(Above) Norman Mailer’s Commercial Street home now houses the Norman Mailer Writers Colony.

(Right) Friend and collaborator Lawrence Schiller spearheaded the effort to create the Norman Mailer Writers Colony.



Photo by Kathy Amerman

In all, Norman Mailer wrote 47 books, beginning with *The Naked and the Dead*, which he wrote the first 200 pages of while staying in North Truro, according to Lennon. His *On God: An Uncommon Conversation* and *The Castle in the Forest* were both released in 2007. Lennon worked directly with Mailer on the former and is named as contributor to that book.

Back in 2001 (on 9/11, actually), I interviewed Mailer for an article I was writing about one of the many benefits he and Norris were involved with – this one for what was then the Provincetown Repertory Theatre. We spoke about his connection to Provincetown.

“I first came here back in 1942, and I dreamed about this place all through the War,” he told me. “I came back in ‘46 when I started *The Naked and the Dead*. So, I’ve been coming here just about every summer since... I doubt if I’ve missed even ten summers [since then]. Now we

live here all year-round,” he recalled.

Asked if he missed New York City, he said “No. The older I get, the more important work gets to me... New York’s exciting and I love going back there from time to time, but to be there and work

and then go out at night and have a good time, and then try to work the next day has gotten too tough. I used to be able to do it when I was younger, but no longer. So, I like being here very much, particularly in the winter. I love the winters here.”

Schiller, who directed the film version of Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song* and knew him quite well, says, “Provincetown became for him, as he said many times, like Key West was to Hemingway. It became a safe haven for him... a place where he could not only relax and hide and walk around with his pants down, but where he was just another guy... He was able to submerge himself into the community so that he was not ‘Norman Mailer’ when he was there... Nobody walked up to him and asked him for an autograph.”

Tom Staley, who is the director of the Harry Ransom Center and a member of the Colony’s Executive Board, recalls being impressed with the uniqueness of the town himself when he attended a reception at the Mailer home last year.

“Half the town turned out – fascinating people,” he says. “It was just a great group, whether they were in the restaurant business or artists or poets, really interesting people... It’ll be a great opportunity for the fellows to get a feel for [the town].”

He adds, “It’s a great legacy for Mailer... he was deeply committed to Provincetown for years and years and years... This is kind of an extension of all of that.”

The Norman Mailer Writers Colony, 627 Commercial Street, Provincetown, will be unveiling new programs and announcing a variety of events on their Web site: <http://www.nmwcolony.org>. Also on the Web site is a listing of course offerings and faculty biographies. For additional information, contact the Colony’s administrator, Guy Wolf at 508.413.3288 or GWolf@nmwcolony.org.

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