

Provincetown Profiles

for/of/about/in honor of/because of/with gratitude toward
Chris Busa & Stephen Borkowski

by Steve Adams, Sandra Hunter, Valerie Loken, Theresa MacPhail, John Schimmel & Maureen Seaberg



In searching for an assignment for six student writers at The Norman Mailer Writers Colony that would enable them to exercise their considerable talents, it struck me that a profile of two long-time residents might be appropriate. The rest was easy. Stephen Borkowski and Christopher Busa have had Provincetown sand in their shoes for a long time and between them have informed knowledge of and contact with almost every writer and artist in Provincetown, as well as the rest of Lower Cape Cod. Chris and Steve are P-Town partisans and generous men who believe in and promote the artistic culture of the oldest art colony in the United States. The six profiles of them given here, varied as they are, capture these two gents and their town with grace and aplomb. Salud!

—J. Michael Lennon

When you ask two very nice people to give up an hour of their lives so they can be interviewed by a pack of anxiously observing students in a "Writing Techniques of the New Journalism" workshop, it seems they ought to get something in return. At the very least they ought to see what came of the experiment. So we offer up these short essays, with humility and gratitude, to celebrate Provincetown landmarks Stephen Borkowski and Chris Busa and the time we all spent together. The day we did these interviews was the day I stopped squinting indifferently at hyped-up Provincetown and finally began to understand why everyone loved the place so.

These profiles were written in haste/frenzy. They were due 23 hours after we began our interviews, and Mike and Donna Lennon (perhaps to replicate the New Journalism lifestyle) kindly plied us with liquor and pizza for at least a few hours of that evening. Sleep and the random pleasures of Provincetown surely ate up a few hours as well. Still, when we reconvened in the morning to read our work to one another, we were struck by the vitality of these profiles. Given the same raw material, each of us produced something different, something that of course reflected our individual fascinations and illustrated the main tenet of New Journalism: that writers are not machines that process fact into objective account. Some kind of alchemy occurs, and maybe it's truer just to acknowledge that fact and let it flourish.

Mike's generous, supportive classroom atmosphere freed us up to have some fun with the assignment, and Larry Schiller's direction of the Norman Mailer Writers Colony gave us the time and support to concentrate, and the brave and adventurous spirit of Norman Mailer brought us all together. Steve and Chris, you inspired our best efforts. We hope you like the results.

In true gonzo style I appropriated a few (probably copyrighted) images to produce certain pages (3, 7, 8, 11, 16). I take full blame for this offense and hope that, as this is a private document to be circulated only among friends, I will manage to escape prosecution.

—Valerie Laken

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Mr. Mailer's Neighborhood

by Valerie Laken



They call it a town, Provincetown, but it feels more like a neighborhood. At most, three or four neighborhoods strung together like fish on a line. But we're only going to talk about one of them: Norman's neighborhood, the East End. It's one thing to say you live in the same town as Norman Mailer, Mary Oliver, Michael Cunningham, Stanley Kunitz et al. It's another thing to say they are your neighbors, that they live on your street or your block.

On my block at home in Milwaukee, for example, live a cop, four public school teachers, a few professors, a rabbi, a carpenter, some students, and a DA and her husband, the fire and police commissioner. In the constellation of our neighborhood, the fire commissioner-DA couple are our bright stars. But neither of them has won a Pulitzer Prize or been a poet laureate. Not that they want to.

Sometimes, in conversation with them, I feel politically, civically inspired – though civics is not my profession. Writing is. So here in the East End I try to imagine how especially capable of greatness I might feel if I were surrounded, day after day, by the literary and artistic talents of this neighborhood. As Norman's former neighbor, the arts writer Chris Busa, once put it, "I took comfort in walking by his house and seeing his light burning in the window of the attic, knowing he was working. He was some kind of power in the neighborhood, an engine that seemed to move the leaves as I walked down the street..."

Imagine: an art-engine in your midst, bending

nature to his whim.

One of the hardest things to do, in my neighborhood, is to put aside my perceived responsibilities to civics and work, family and nature; to stop returning phone calls and watering the flowers and go up to my office and just write.

If I could see, from my office, the light in Norman's attic workroom, maybe I'd find it just a little bit easier to justify putting the ordinary world at bay, ignoring their priorities and focusing on my little black words on my slender white pages.

In the East End, such behavior might seem perfectly ordinary, perfectly civil. As Stephen Borkowski, the Chair of Provincetown's Art Commission, explains, "everyone has written a book, everyone's done a movie."

Forsaking the values and demands of The Real World for the sake of producing your own art is just ordinary here. It doesn't matter if you bump into John Waters on the sidewalk or skip out on a Michael Cunningham reading. "There's no star system," Borkowski says. "The attitude is just, so what?"

When I first landed here a few days ago, I'd have disagreed. Everyone I met seemed starstruck, dropping names constantly. They said, "Annie Dillard" this and "Jackson Pollack" that, and when speaking of Mailer, their local demigod, they said only Norman – as if all of us, just by being here, were now on a first-name basis with literary history. To my midwestern sensibility, this seemed preposterous.

Towns are made of industries, landmarks, histories; but neighborhoods are carved out of personalities – out of homes. They are stitched together haphazardly, by families and friendships, parties and gossip, across-the-fence disputes and... oh yes, gardens. Houses. Towns are public forums, subject to law. But anyone who has contemplated asking their neighbors to quiet down their sex life or stop throttling their kids knows: neighborhoods are private, sometimes uncomfortably so. They are drifting constellations of families and friends tucked into their homes, glancing around at one another, deciding whether and how and to whom to grant private access.

So it's strange to fly 900 miles and be plunged into Norman's house, Norman's neighborhood, and be surrounded by Norman's friends. A normal, living house does not have a white board and long plastic seminar tables in the living room. A normal, living house does not have a director and an assistant, with a movie camera tracing the moves of every guest. A normal house, in which the owner still lives, does not chime like a new car whenever you open the door, saying, "Bing Bing Bing. The front door is open." This is a fabrication. This is no longer Norman's home. Norman is gone.

And yet, his friends and neighbors remain. They fill this space and try to warm it by inviting us in to talk about him. They are oddly, almost suspiciously welcoming – like a cult. We are nearly indoctrinated. Norman did this, and Norris did that, and John Buffalo did the other. It takes me a while to realize that their habit of guiding each conversation back to Norman is maybe not so much propaganda as the wishful and disbelieving incantations of the bereft.

(We had to come this far to really feel his absence. We had to come all the way to his neighborhood, to the place where he should be.)

And so after we meet J. Michael Lennon, Norman's friend and biographer, and Lawrence Schiller, another friend and co-founder of the Norman Mailer Writers Colony, we are introduced to other friends of Norman, two denizens of the East End: Stephen Borkowski and Chris Busa. We are asked to write profiles of them.

At first this seems a fake, writing-class exercise, one I approach with reluctance, so uncertain am I of my abilities – of anyone's ability, really – to divine and sum up a stranger's character after little more than an hour-long interview.

But this too turns into another astonishingly generous invitation into Norman's neighborhood.



Slave Adams, 2000

From the waist down, Stephen

Borkowski, Chair of the Provincetown Arts Commission, looks almost like a worker. Tan suede work boots, white sweat socks, faded Levis sagging, workman-style, over the muscular legs and slightly deflated rear end that are the hallmarks of carpenters. He is lean, wears no jewelry. But on closer inspection his jeans are very clean, unsnagged by truck doors or machinery. And from the waist up he is something else entirely: his skin is smooth, well cared-for; his silver hair is cropped short and combed back, it is styled. His hands aren't calloused or scarred, not thick. And his shirt is a bright blue checkered button-down – like Jed Clampett's, but with a much higher thread count. His moustache is a faint white animal cropped short, clinging to his upper lip. He's gay. In the arts. Not exactly an artist. As he puts it with characteristic modesty, "I'm not a good draftsman. I enjoy what I do myself but I would never put it out there."

There are those who make art and those who make art possible. He is, then, one of the generous latter half. When he gets excited, his left eye moves slightly faster than his right – like a machine quietly calibrating subtle distinctions. And yet his gaze is free of judgment, condescension. He seems the kind of person who lingers at the edge of the party, listening, occasionally offering or grinning at sly observations, but never raising his voice above the din. Affable, tender, he is the kind of person, in a noisy, bloated crowd, I am always relieved to find.

He did not want to come here. To Provincetown, that is. He considered it "Too scene, too structured," this "town of contrarians." Steve seems anything but contrarian. It was his partner's idea to come here – first for a week's vacation, then more, until the vortex of Provincetown pulled them in and they bought a place here in '92. When his partner of 17 years died of cancer in 2002, Steve followed the "life plan" they'd mapped out together and moved to Provincetown full-time.

Though he mentions his partner many times, making his loss seem recent, ever-present, his is a name Steve refuses to drop.

The other neighborhood character

we meet is Chris Busa, publisher of *Provincetown Arts* magazine, a man in his mid-fifties whom Norman once called "too handsome to become a writer." Norman also told him, at the poker table, rapping his hand once for each syllable: "You talk too much."

We are warned of this. He is a character. An East End star, he is clearly much loved, the son of the artist Peter Busa, who was – we are told more than

once before meeting him – Jackson Pollack's best man. Chris invites us to his home, which is an old gray shake-shingle place just a few doors down and across the street from Norman's. Larry Schiller, our trusty cinematographer, films us walking from one house to the other. Above the front porch a room droops down as if made of wet cardboard.

Inside, the place is magical. Paintings by his father and Will Barnett and Ray Parker and Robert Motherwell crowd the walls – some of which he received in trade for tennis lessons. Many are wrapped in packaging and piled up against the fireplace: a surplus. It looks like the sort of house Joseph Cornell could've lived in: a simple wooden box gorged with objects that might be art or might be garbage; only a keen eye could tell. The uncertainty between the two recollects the precariousness and whimsy of art collection. (A Miro hangs dusty in the staircase, not far from a child's pencil drawing of Winnie the Pooh.) The smell is the pleasant nostalgia of a college rental house: the crude residue of decades of sex, liquor, books, tobacco and pot that makes you feel incapable of wrongdoing, or maybe encouraged toward it. The kitchen is clean, no dishes in the sink at all.

(I was raised in one of those oppressively sterile Catholic homes, and always feel some contrary part of myself unbuckle and swell inside such homes as this.)

He does not talk too much. True, at first he fires off a flurry of details about his life in the 'hood, but soon he simmers down to a respectable quiet, and begins asking about us.

Us? We blanch. Who cares about us interlopers, us visitors from the bleak outside ordinary? What relevance can we possibly have to Norman's neighborhood?

Nevertheless, he listens politely; he hands out copies of his publications that he's set aside for us. He shows us his back yard, his kitchen, his office and library – where the books are stacked head-high on the floor. They block passage, consume the space, defy the possibility of an outside world that's stopped reading. They seem to be the reason why that front room sags down a foot.

Chris doesn't mind the sagging, the apparent disorder. He is not self-conscious about it. He welcomes us into this "never never land" where he was raised, into this neighborhood where artists reign supreme, where the leaves turn up for "mass inspection" when a writer comes walking down the lane. And where names are dropped not in deference to stardom but as a means of navigating in the dark night, of orienting one's own dreams against the realized dreams of those who, though they died years ago, still shine down, impossibly. ☼

Heaven in Helltown

by John Schimmel



Theresa MacPhail, Sandra Hunter, John Schimmel and Steve Adams. Photo by Valerie Laken, 2009

Norman Mailer called Provincetown "The Wild West of the East." He appears to have been very proud of that moniker, like it was a major draw of the place.

The sign affixed to the porch railing at my condo reads, "Do not gather or socialize!" Not only that: Every day that I have been here, a street sweeper has rumbled up Commercial Street. It reminds me of the twice-a-week vacuum cleaner in my widowed mother's spotless apartment where the traffic mostly consists of other old ladies and the woman who pushes the vacuum. I can't imagine she needs to change the bag more than annually.

Provincetown has got to be the cleanest Wild West town ever.

I know we live in tamer times than when Norman nicknamed Provincetown. Of course we do. Once upon a time, the "Moon cussers," outlaws from Helltown who used lanterns to lure ships to founder on the rocks so they could pillage

their cargo, plied their trade on these shores. Not anymore.

In the sixties, it was not unusual for me to return from an evening out to discover that my entire fraternity was supine on the living room floor, tripping their brains out. I don't see that happening anymore, either.

In the seventies I spent a night on the dressing room floor of Trudy Heller's, a formerly famous disco turned gay club, because of whatever was in the nasal spray someone gave me right before I was to accompany a schizophrenic drag act, Craig Russell pretending to be a woman pretending to be other women. Blessedly, that doesn't happen anymore either. I mean the nasal spray; Craig was brilliant.

In the eighties, the managers of the Broadway theater where I was working cut gigantic piles of cocaine on their office Xerox machine every night, raising the cash from drugs to import the first Karaoke machines in America. In Hollywood, I'm

told executives cut much smaller piles on their conference room tables before meetings. Everyone was sniffling and speeding and convinced they were having the best sex in the history of the universe. Big bang? Man, you should'a been there last night! Whoeee!

Not anymore. At least, not on that scale.

One has to wonder: If back in the day this was all going on in the more visible urban centers of America, what in God's name might have been happening here at land's end where no one was looking? Whatever it was, you can be sure it is not happening anymore. Although the world has not gone completely edgeless – there was a tab of ecstasy on every dinner plate at my former company's 2002 Christmas party – in general people have calmed down – or maybe lost spirit – a lot since then. So it should be no surprise that one is not invited to a drug-fueled orgy upon stepping off the ferry.

Still. Provincetown is rumored to be a village of renegade artists living in the energy vortex of two intersecting lei lines, sucking down whatever primal

spiritual and creative juice can be squeezed from the spiral defined by the bent tip of the peninsula, supposedly hell bent on creating relationships as original and abstract as their art. "Do not gather or socialize" does not seem consistent with that. To the naked eye of a virgin visitor, Provincetown is one gigantic contradiction.

Or else, the whole wild west thing is a smoke-screen, intentional or not, covering the much deeper and gooier truth about the spiritual attractiveness of this place.

Seven year resident Stephen Borkowski's love for Provincetown was clear from the beginning of our conversation with him, even though he was, by his own account, dragged here kicking and screaming. When pressed about the supposed wild westness of his adopted home, he admitted that it could take years for the wild Yankee residents to allow one a glimpse of real life here. Cautious wildness, how New England: The casual visitor might never learn what lurks beneath the surface. But Steve also told us that the gay community was much more of a scene twenty years ago than it is now, a fact he attributed to



Steve Adams, 2009

the flood of information that drenches our lives and makes it nearly impossible to infuse them with the edgy energy of the clandestine.

Steve appeared to mourn that loss as a general cultural phenomenon, but not its loss from PTown. That was simply not what had attracted him to live here. He spoke instead about the compassion of the residents; about something he termed "ambient support" which helped him swim through his grief after the tragically early death of his partner. This was totally consistent with a phenomenon I have witnessed more than once here, best illustrated by a young and clearly non-conformist woman yelling across the street to an elderly lady all dolled up in straw hat and purple pants suit, "You look beautiful today!" Ms. Purple's face lit up. It was a simple act of kindness one would not normally expect to witness on a street called Commercial, and it felt pure Provincetown.

In our interview with Chris Busa, founder and editor of *Provincetown Arts* magazine, he spoke of the community here as self-selecting. His criteria for what draws people here was, "fun, intelligence and beauty." Beauty is certainly a factor; this place is spectacular. But that combination seems broadly attractive rather than specific. The artists who are drawn to this place must be self-selecting along different lines.

The more I think about Steve's phrase, "ambient support," the more convinced I am that this is a key. In my mind, the self-selection happens for much more profound reasons than Chris laid out. In a handout he gave us he writes, "Mailer had begun to spend winters in Provincetown, learning how the mood of summer frolic yields to a damp and chilly isolation and a disorienting awareness of inner dread." A need for the seclusion of land's end must be matched by an ability to tolerate it. In other words, the adventurous artistic spirit of Provincetown residents must be real. You couldn't fake it here; you'd go stir-mad.

People who are drawn to a place where reflection is enabled by silence are by definition hardy enough to withstand the assault of their own thoughts and emotions. But they almost certainly also understand that silence is required precisely because the cascade of their own stuff does not play well with others. Busa is a perfect example of this. Entering his home is probably a lot like entering his brain, with rooms crowded to bursting with the detritus of his obsessions. Outside stimulation would appear to be the last thing in the world he needs; he already seems barely able to push his words past the crowd of ideas pressing forward. He seems a fabulous force of nature, but

a fragile one.

I think people like that must have an intuitive understanding of the tenuousness of sanity. They move here in part to preserve their own, and must be grateful for the garden they have found to grow in. Having settled in a place gentle and generous enough to allow them to bask in their own eccentricities, these people seem to recognize fellow travelers in need, and to reach out to them, or at the very least, support them in their own quiet, hidden Yankee way.

I am certain the wildness was real once upon a time, just like it was real in the rest of the country. But I do not believe for a minute that that was what Norman found attractive enough about the place to move here. After all, at the end of the day how much crazier could it have been than the scene in New York? I knew and worked with some of the people from Warhol's Factory. If weirdness and stoned erotic adventure were what Mailer was after, he didn't have to travel far from Brooklyn.

Certainly, Norman understood the strange energy of this place. Busa quotes him as saying, "Provincetown is naturally so spooky in mid-winter and provides such a sense of omens waiting to be magnetized into lines of force that the novel in my mind seemed more a magical object than a fiction." That sense alone seems cause enough for the strong-of-heart to nest here. But my suspicion is that the wildness of which Norman wrote probably had a different quality here than anyplace else, because this place is and most likely was particularly tolerant and respectful, even of people dancing naked in the moonlight, acid-soaked sugar cubes melting in their mouths. Residents here would have understood what was behind all that was being acted out. "Hell, Helen," they might have said, "so long as they put their pants back on before they come back downtown, who cares what they do?" They'd say that and then go off to paint or write their rage and rebellion instead of dance it. They'd get it, and the getting it meant everything.

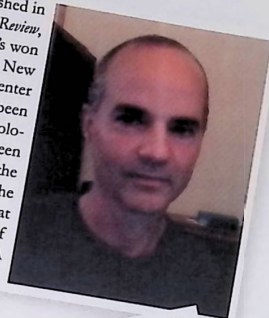
The way people express themselves is not the same now as it was then, but that isn't the point. Steve's "ambient support" seems alive and well – and exceptionally attractive. Heaven is alive and well in the shadow of Helltown. ☼





Many of **Sandra Hunter's** short stories have been published in literary magazines. Even more haven't. She is currently working on a novel-in-progress, titled "Leaving to exorcisingly-long-progress, titled "Leaving to Come Home." This is her daring to eat a peach.

Steve Adams' stories have been published in *Glimmer Train*, *The Missouri Review*, *Chicago Review*, *Quarterly West*, and *Georgetown Review*. He's won *Glimmer Train's* Short Story Award for New Writers and The Bronx Writer's Center "Chapter One" Contest. His fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and anthologized. His plays and musicals have been produced in New York City and across the country, and he's been a guest artist at the University of Texas and a guest lecturer at NYU. He is a native Texan and a graduate of The University of Texas. He received his MFA in Creative Writing from The New School.

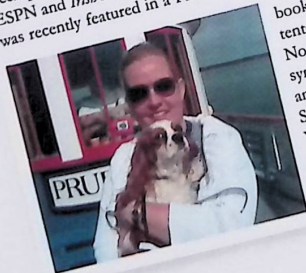


Theresa MacPhail is a medical anthropologist at the University of California, Berkeley. A writer and former reporter, her essay, "Courage Comes with Practice," was featured on NPR's *All Things Considered*. She is currently at work on a memoir about her childhood, called *Cover Your Mouth*.



Valerie Laken's first novel, *Dream House*, was published by Harper in 2009. Her work has received a Pushcart Prize, a *Missouri Review* Editors' Prize, and two Hopwood Awards. She holds an MA in Slavic Literature and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Michigan and currently teaches at the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee. Her story collection, *Separate Kingdoms*, is forthcoming from Harper Perennial.

Maureen Seaberg has been a journalist for 20 years and has been published in *The New York Times*, the *New York Daily News*, *ESPN* and *Irish America*. She is also an MSNBC contributor and was recently featured in a PBS documentary work on an agented book about synesthesia, tentatively titled "Grace Notes," and is herself a synesthete. She lives on an historic home on Staten Island in New York City with her husband and spends much of her spare time in Home Depot.



John Schimmel has had multiple careers. The first was as a bass player, working mostly in New York theaters, clubs, and studios. Among other credits, he was a co-creator and co-star of the Broadway musical "Pump Boys and Dinettes," which was nominated for both Tony and Laurence Olivier awards. His second life was in Hollywood, as an executive with Warner Bros., with Michael Douglas, and as a producer/partner in Ascendant Pictures which made "Lucky Number Slevin" and "Lord of War." Having informally written his way through both of those careers, he recently decided, "What the hell, let's try this for real." He is currently getting his MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College.

