

The Norman Conquest, or The Last Wife of Norman Mailer Speaks

Review of
Norris Church Mailer, *A Ticket to the Circus: A Memoir*
(Random House, 2010)
416 pages with index and photos

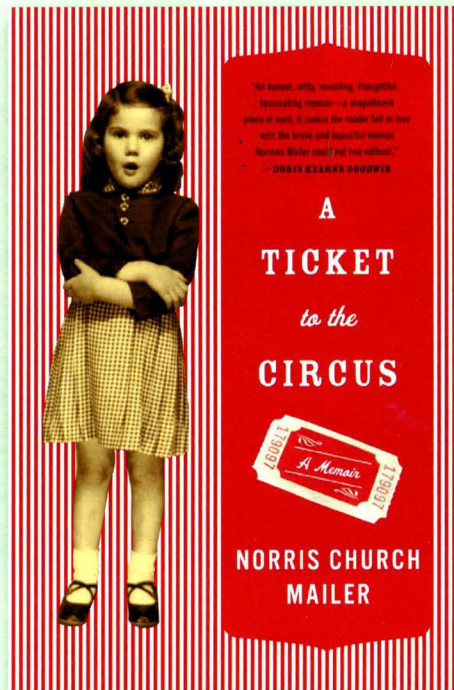
Most memoirs are like political speeches: they spin their subject or seek to settle scores. Not Norris Church Mailer's *A Ticket to the Circus*. Her book is like a lively, long letter for an engaging friend. Would we be reading it if she hadn't been married to Norman Mailer? Probably. Ms. Mailer is a natural storyteller with a fresh voice, one filled with candor and humor.

Her life reads like a movie script: a plucky, big-hearted redhead from Arkansas, months after meeting the love of her life, the flamboyant, sometimes brilliant novelist Norman Mailer, packs up her son and moves to New York to live with him and, during the summers, his seven children from previous marriages. Drop-dead gorgeous, Ms. Mailer modeled for Wilhelmina and acted on stage and in movies. She published two well-received novels and held one-woman art shows of her paintings. She is confident enough to tell of her early embarrassments, such as wearing a satin nightgown to a dinner party at the home of fashion designer Oscar de la Renta. She jokes about how Gore Vidal proposed to marry her once Mailer was out of the picture. Yet the heart of her story is deeper than the bold-faced names in her social circles.

She was the ballast of the Mailer household. She banished the chaos and handled his far-flung progeny. She spent her middle years as a caregiver for a dying father, a difficult mother and an ailing husband while undergoing horrific treatments for cancer (gastrointestinal stromal tumor) herself. Her sorrows have been extreme, starting with the date rape by a friend's older brother. There are her six surgeries and Norman's numerous infidelities, yet our heroine copes. Like many women of her time and place, she was reared to put other people first.

Born Barbara Jean Davis in 1949, she was the product of a family that was small town Americana. After the earthquake hit New Madrid, Missouri, in 1811, one ancestor built a houseboat and floated his family down river to Arkansas. Her father's father was a mule skinner, a fact that Mailer used to delight in announcing at chic Manhattan dinners. Although she was a cherished only child, her early years were clouded by her mother's rages and depressions so severe that she was hospitalized and given electroshock therapy. As a toddler, Barbara blamed herself for her mother's absences. When the family moved from the country to Atkins, Arkansas, she writes

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how exciting it was to have an indoor bathroom with hot water and a toilet.

The center of the Davises' life was the Freewill Baptist Church where they went to pray three times a week and socialized at church suppers and summer vacation Bible school. The hellfire preachers with their sermons that the world would end at midnight so scared the little girl that

she could not close her eyes until after the stroke of twelve. Despite prenuptial nightmares, Barbara married Larry Norris, the first boy she slept with, to expiate the sin of premarital sex. She knew it was a mistake because she wanted a bigger life. After a fling with another man, she vowed to be a better Christian, writing, "The great thing about Freewill Baptists is that you can sin and then rededicate yourself and you are shiny clean and new, like a slightly used car that has been detailed." The marriage died after her husband returned from Vietnam.

With her toddler in tow, Barbara set out for the bigger town of Russellville. She loved the life she built there, teaching art in the high school and planning to go for her MFA, and dating. In the post-Pill and pre-AIDS era, she writes, "Sleeping with someone was almost like shaking hands." She "couldn't resist" a law professor running for Congress, Bill Clinton, whom she says remains a friend.

She wrangled an invitation to a cocktail party with Norman Mailer, then fifty-two, in 1975. She was half his age, with longer legs than the law allows, and for him, at least, it was mad lust at first sight. They had nothing in common except being born on January 31, one minute and twenty-six years apart, and combustible sex. He was separated from his fourth wife, living with his lover and their daughter and seeing a serious girlfriend. Got all that? The other women evaporated.

Barbara Jean Norris became Norris Church after her modeling agency told her to change her name. She proposed “Norris” because that was the name she used on her paintings, and Norman proposed “Church” because she had attended so often. By the time wife number four granted a divorce, Norris had borne Norman a son. She encouraged him to marry his former live-in to make their daughter legitimate. That wedding caused her angst, but she put on a brave face. “He would always have feelings for her,” she writes. “It was something I learned to live with, like arthritis.” He divorced wife number five one day and made Norris number six the next.

While many New Yorkers often wear their power on their sleeves like Boy Scout badges, Ms. Mailer, a good Southerner, hid hers. Nimble-witted, she could hold her own with her literary lion and anyone else. One woman called at three a.m., asking to speak to Norman. His wife said he was sleeping.

“Well, wake him up,” said the caller. “He will be very glad to hear from me.”

“Honey, if he was *that* glad to hear from you, you would be here instead of me,” she said.

Despite his marital history, Mailer always made Norris feel special, secure and very much loved. For sixteen years she did not worry, but then she began having nightmares that he was leaving her for a woman as old as he and plain. She was devastated when he set her up to discover how he had been cheating for nearly a decade, often with plain, overweight women his age. His explanation: “Sometimes he needed to be the good-looking one.”

Sex between them continued to sizzle. It was only one part of their marriage that was tumultuous. They played one-upmanship in public and fought in private. Once she punched him in



Modeling for the *Femme Sestina*.

the face. While they supported and encouraged each other, Norris wisely refused to let Norman read the final draft of her novel, insisting that she wanted to be able to say she did it herself.

Mailer told her the night they met and repeated it over the years that she was “the nicest woman he had ever met.” Indeed. She is a real mensch. During a trip to Cuba, she gave away all her hats and scarves, cosmetics and toiletries to the maids unable to buy such things in a Communist country. She wished she had brought more to give them. Mailer’s family appreciated all she had done to keep them together. When she was to undergo her first cancer surgery, all nine children, their spouses and their children, along with Norman, his sister and her clan, arrived at her hospital bedside at five a.m. to escort her to the elevator and then to the operating room.

Post-surgical chemotherapy forced Norris to wear a wig on her first book tour. The wig looked so authentic that one woman remarked at a book signing that she must never have had bad hair days. The author tells readers in similar circumstances how to find the same wig maker.

As he lay dying of acute renal failure in 2007, Norman joked about their famous Taxicab Kiss when she first landed in New York. They were together nearly thirty-three years. Lasting that many rounds with the pugnacious Norman Mailer may be Norris’s second accomplishment. The first is being herself.

Ellen F. Harris, a local writer, is a frequent contributor to Belles Lettres.



Norman Mailer, Don King and Norris Church Mailer in the Philippines