

MAILER REMEMBERED

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I HAD BEEN NORMAN'S EDITOR for only two weeks when he called me up one day in February 2003 and said he wanted to write a book explaining why the U.S. was going to invade Iraq.

I said that made a lot of sense but by the time we published the book we would be well past the invasion. That's when he stopped me. "David, I don't think you understand. I want to write a book about why we're going to war *before* we go to war."

Suddenly I realized I had not asked a critical question. "Norman, have you written this book?"

"I tell you what," he said, "Give me one week."

As it turned out, Norman would end up delivering the manuscript of his thirty-third book, *Why Are We at War?*, a day early.

This encounter would be my first personal experience with Norman's almost supernatural energy and courage. Shortly after, I visited Norman and Norris in Provincetown. Norman and I were beginning to edit what would be his final novel, *The Castle in the Forest*—a complex reimagining of the childhood of Adolf Hitler. As we were sitting down to the dining-room table to start working, something behind Norman drew my eye. On the buffet were a dozen or more antique dolls dressed in satin, taffeta, and ribbons. Norman caught me staring at them and laughed. "I imagine this is not what you expected," he said. "Tough-guy Norman Mailer working on his book about Hitler in a room full of fucking dolls. But what can I say: I love my wife."

As we edited, Norman let me in on a secret: he was writing a trilogy about Hitler's entire life. *The Castle in the Forest* would be the first volume in the saga. Norman estimated the trilogy would take him eleven years. Although now in his early 80s, he was convinced he was up for the task. Early in Nor-

man's career many dismissed this kind of self-belief as egomania, while later critics wrote it off as self-delusion. In truth, it was something far more special: an overflow of optimism, industry, and faith in the word. I remember once telling Norman about the German movie *Downfall*, which is about Hitler's final weeks in 1945. I suggested he might want to see it for his research. "Since I'm going to write that scene myself one day," he said, "I don't want to see how someone else has done it." Then he added, "Endings are far more difficult than they might seem."

When he went into the hospital last fall, he took a small bag packed with books about Hitler to continue his work on Volume Two. Yet now, in hindsight, we can see that Norman understood, at some level, that *The Castle in the Forest* would be a farewell. In the final paragraph, he writes, "So I must admit to a surprising degree of affection for those of my readers who have traveled all this way with me."

And yet any memory of Norman must put the ironic beside the serious. In fact, only a few pages before this Norman writes, "Irony is, of course, vital to one's pride." Which is why it seems apt to say good-bye to our friend by quoting his prediction of the critical reaction to *The Castle in the Forest*: "It will be declared either a work of genius or repugnant," he said. "Each claim is not without its merits." But as Norman's editor, I must disagree.