

Monday, November 12, 2007

Thanks, Norman Mailer, for sharing your literary gifts.

Â Image from Library of Congress's website.Â One of my favorite novels is Saul Bellow's Henderson the Rain King. I read it on the plane back from a business tripÂ overseas -- winding down myÂ year between graduating college and entering law school, when I was a bank auditor/financial examiner with New York's Irving TrustÂ CompanyÂ -- where the assignment was dry, but the visit abroad was fascinating, and living in Manhattan was a daily adventure. What better time to read about a bored man from my natal state who had gained riches in business but wanted to break free of his daily grinding routine, and escaped to Africa in the process -- a man who resorted to working the grounds of his own estate, and, when hit in the eye with a wood splinter while wielding his axe, at the very least was reminded of his being very much alive? Unlike Henderson, I was earning an entry-level salary at the time, and was about to enter law school, thus delaying finally finding my path to self-fulfillment. Â Four years earlier, I finally started picking up novels by Norman Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*Â and *Armies of the Night*. Mailer injected his own character into *Armies of the Night*, but I forget if he did the same in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*. In any event, he wrote both novels so vividly that I felt I was at the events right with him as the stories unfolded. As I pondered the meaning of Mailer and his life -- after he left the planet this past Saturday -- I was reminded of Eugene Henderson's desperate need to break free from living within conventions created by others, with Mailer being a better example of that for me, because he was very much alive. Â Seven years after reading those two Mailer novels -- I wish to read more of them -- I had the television running in a Massachusetts motel the night before my brother's boarding high school graduation, and figured I was delusionally drowsy upon hearing a news report of soldiers moving in on the Tiananmen Square demonstrators, shooting them. I blogged last AprilÂ about my reactions toÂ the Tiananmen massacre. Â The next day, that surreal news turned out to be the reality, as a surreal day proceeded with a hotel breakfast served and tasting like they all do, a graduation ceremony that said not a peep about the massacre, and a brunch at a graduate's nearby home where the only political talk was about Congressman Gerry Studds's continued popularity after the Congressional page scandal. Â As people milled about before the graduation started, I saw Norman Mailer, whose child apparently was graduating that day. I walked up to him, and thanked him for sharing his writing with the world. He seemed to appreciate the thanks, and asked my name. I could have talked to him about the massacre, but felt relief enough that he was there, figuring that he shared my horror over the massacre rather than putting it to the back of his mind. Â Mailer had a particularly checkered past. He co-founded the *Village Voice*, which I tore open each week when living in Manhattan to learn where Ron Carter and other greats would be performing. He stabbed his second of six wives -- she survived and declined to press criminal charges -- under circumstances that I wish to know more about. He said demeaning things about women, and I want to know more about his reasons for doing so. He kept writing. I read Mailer when I was struggling to make sense of life, trying to figure out how I could feel grounded while so much inhumanity surrounded me, trying to find my own writing voice as a new college student, and often finding refuge in reading such writers as Mailer, Joan Didion, John Kennedy Toole, and Tim O'Brien. Mailer had his many struggles, and he kept writing. Jon Katz.

Posted by Jon Katz in Jon's news & views at 00:00