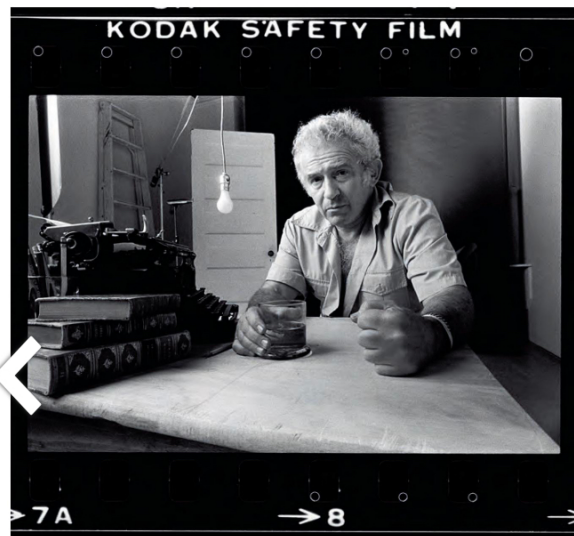


## NOTORIOUS NEW YORKERS



### The Angriest Man in New York

Norman Mailer was a literary lion who liked nothing more than a nasty fight—with other writers, hapless strangers on the street, and the many women he both slept with and married. **Janet Mercel** tallies up Mailer's most infamous and shocking scandals.

READY TO RUMBLE  
Author Norman Mailer  
fisting a cocktail.

**P**oor Norman. By friends and foes alike, Norman Mailer is referred to variously as “violent, full of hate” (his sister, Barbara), “a psychotic clown” (Henry Miller), and as having “no talent. None, none, none!” (Truman Capote, whom Mailer retaliated against by sitting on little “Tru Heart” at a party). Tom Wolfe called him one of “two old bags-of-bones” (the other “old bag” being John Updike).

This was a time in publishing when hurling insults at another author was almost as important to a literary profile as written works. To be left out of the fray was to be considered unworthy by a desirable cohort of media elite, and Mailer always made the most of his screen time. From his unhinged ramblings in *The Village Voice*, which he cofounded, to his role in the 1979 documentary *Town Bloody Hall*, there are so many scandals that played out on the world stage involving the author and fill-in-the-blank (feminism, racism, politics, sexual assault, murder, homophobia, other writers, birth control, Kate Millet), we’ll limit ourselves to three of his favorite subjects: fights, women, and fights with women.

While baiting people in print thrilled Mailer, so did the more colorful method of expressing himself with fists, or any other appendage. His pugilist era lasted a long time: he threw his last punch at the age of 74 (at *Esquire’s* publisher) after decades of histrionic public violence. In 1969, on the set of *The Maidstone*, Mailer’s bananas experimental film, actor Rip Torn hit him in the head with a hammer and Mailer bit off part of Torn’s ear (puns abound). No one knew if they were acting or not. The two men wrestled while Mailer’s wife, actress Beverly Bentley, broke up the fight and their real-life children looked on, screaming in horror. In 1971, after years of nasty squabbling, he headbutted the supremely urbane Gore Vidal backstage at *The Dick Cavett Show*. Less well-known: he threw his dog, Zsa Zsa, down the stairs after she defecated on the carpet. (“She did it on purpose, the little bitch,” he snapped.) In 1962, there was another throwing-down-the-stairs incident, although this time the victim was Max



LADIES MAN Maller with his sixth, and last, wife, Norris Church Maller.

ROBERT BELOTTI / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Hayward, the translator of *Doctor Zhivago*, at a literary conference in Edinburgh.

For a man who chased rage like a dog chases cars, nothing rankled Mailer more than homophobia. A relationship with Jack Kerouac was part of his long-standing feud with number-one frenemy Vidal, who Mailer blamed for “killing” Jack by sleeping with him and driving him to madness. This did not extend to group sex; he often pimped out his (sometimes willing, sometimes not) second wife, Adele Morales, to his friends and any of hers he found attractive. The looming embrace of Mailer’s own homosexuality was a topic he openly, if theoretically, explored. Polyamory, infidelity, and hundreds of sexual exploits and fistfights never seemed to fuel his darkness, probably because the whole time he just wanted to bone poor James Baldwin.

Mailer found marital bliss (albeit not faithfully) in later years with his final wife, actress Norris Church, although it took him a while to get there. Two decades earlier, the writer was married to Morales and riding high off the success of “Superman Comes to the Supermarket.” The *Esquire* essay extolled the era of JFK and Jackie, who Mailer believed would mark a new “pagan” United States, and it changed the face of American journalism. (The Kennedys loved it.)

A Harvard graduate and literary aristocrat who saw no conflict with hating “prep-school types” and the establishment, Mailer saw himself as a fit

candidate for the presidential cabinet and, failing that, mayor of New York City (for the “Existentialist Party”). At a campaign party at his apartment on November 19, 1960, Mailer was prepared to win over everyone, from the hoi polloi to the disenfranchised who didn’t normally take the time to vote—junkies, prostitutes, and the hard-bitten proletariat to whom he so badly wanted to be linked. Allen Ginsberg and Shel Silverstein were there, and Mailer’s buddy, *Paris Review* cofounder George Plimpton, along with dozens of street vagrants and men recently released from the local jail who were happy to be offered food and drink.

We know he was drunk that night; we know he was stoned. But since he also experimented with mescaline benders that left him deranged, loved Miltowns and Demerol, but not necessarily all at the same time, who knows what would have shown up in his personal pharmacopeia? Channeling the masculine power of his idol Hemingway, Mailer dressed in a matador’s shirt and attempted to physically separate the crowd into his political supporters and naysayers. Shockingly, this did not go well, and Mailer’s bad mood turned positively black. After disappearing to the streets, engaging in numerous fights, this red-faced, bellowing drunk in his bullfighting blouse returned to the apartment around 4:30 AM, wounded and bleeding. Roleplaying as both bull and matador, Mailer charged Morales, stabbed her twice with a knife, piercing her cardiac sac and nearly killing her. He was

**ROLEPLAYING AS BOTH BULL AND MATADOR, MAILER CHARGED MORALES, STABBED HER TWICE WITH A KNIFE, PIERCING HER CARDIAC SAC AND NEARLY KILLING HER. HE WAS ARRESTED WHILE VISITING HER IN THE ICU, AFTER STOPPING FOR A TV APPEARANCE WITH MIKE WALLACE ALONG THE WAY.**

arrested while visiting her in the ICU, after stopping for a TV appearance with Mike Wallace along the way.

Bullied by publishing buddies who advised her not to make more trouble for Mailer, Morales never pressed charges. One friend said it happened because she was “a lousy wife.” Another declared, “Norman finally did to Adele what should’ve been done years earlier.” Her mother-in-law, Fanny Mailer, told reporters, “My boy’s a genius. Whatever happened with the stabbing, she goaded him into it.” Morales, worried about how the publicity would affect her two baby daughters, and the concept of raising them alone with their father in prison, declined to separate from her husband because of the stabbing. Instead, she filed for divorce only after the night he met and slept with his third wife, Lady Jeanne Campbell, at a party, while Adele was still on bedrest from her wounds.

The newlyweds fought so badly, Lady Jeanne said, “we could empty a room quicker than any couple in New York. We could arrive at a party and even the hosts would put on their hats and coats and leave.” One account has Mailer dangling Campbell by the ankles from a second-story balcony. If true, it pissed her off enough to divorce him after a year. If not, something else did the trick, adding to the list of overlapping ex-wives Mailer made a parallel career of mortally offending, if not wounding, along the way. ♦