

The effort to “delete” American novelist Norman Mailer

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There is no let-up in the campaign to discredit and, if possible, eliminate artistic figures, past or present, whose work does not conform to the outlook and interests of the gender- and race-obsessed upper middle class.

The pandemic, which continues to devour its human victims, and the policies of the Biden administration, as indifferent and homicidal as its predecessor's, arouse no great concern in these circles. But sexual misconduct, racial insensitivity, even located decades in the past—these are issues that one can sink one's teeth into.

American novelist Norman Mailer (1923-2007) has now fallen afoul of the campaign of McCarthy-style censorship in the book trade that previously overtook Woody Allen and Blake Bailey, biographer of novelist Philip Roth.

Giant publisher Hachette announced in March 2020 that it would not publish Allen's memoir, *Apropos of Nothing*, after pressure was exerted by journalist Ronan Farrow, Allen's son, and in the face of protests by a portion of Hachette employees. This stemmed from the long-discredited claims that Allen molested his adopted daughter Dylan.

Last year W.W. Norton announced its decision to “permanently” remove Bailey's biography of Roth from print, on the basis of several unsubstantiated charges of sexual wrongdoing. In an unprecedented action, Norton boasted that copies of Bailey's work would be “pulped.”

Michael Mailer, one of Norman Mailer's sons, told the Associated Press in early January that Random House, owned by German media conglomerate Bertelsmann, had suggested a project to mark 100 years since the novelist's birth in 1923. “The family, along with Mailer biographer J. Michael Lennon, ‘put together a proposal for a collection of political essays on democracy which they liked and then decided later not to proceed due to objections, putatively, from certain junior executives,’” according to the AP.

Random House representatives attempted to deflect criticism in weasel-like fashion by explaining that a contract had not actually been signed with the Mailer estate. “The book was not technically canceled,” noted journalist Michael Wolff, “it was instead, not acquired. The publisher's fig-leaf of virtue.”

As Wolff further observed, “With Random House having previously gobbled up most of the publishing industry (including with it many of Mailer's former publishers), and having most recently agreed to acquire Simon & Schuster, one of its few remaining rivals, there aren't many options left for a major new publication of the Mailer essays, many of which have helped reshape modern journalism.” Skyhorse Publishing, which previously came out with the Allen and Bailey books, will release the Mailer collection.

According to Wolff, Random House sources referred to “a junior staffer's objection to the title of Mailer's 1957 essay, ‘The White Negro,’” among other issues. Complaints about Mailer's criticisms of feminism, as well as his some of his more inflammatory comments about women in general, have also been pointed to as grounds for his books being forgotten, or suppressed.

Veteran novelist Joyce Carol Oates, a friend of Mailer's, tweeted a number of relevant comments in early January. She noted that it was “ironic that Norman Mailer, who'd deliberately hoped to provoke controversy, is being repudiated/censored in an age in which ‘controversy’ is unfashionable because it hurts some individuals' feelings. Today, issues are not debated, just deleted.”

Oates also commented on Twitter that it was evident “the publisher didn't really want to publish the book; a single ‘junior staffer’ wouldn't have absolute veto power over any title. Not unlike those red states in which a single outraged parent can have a book removed from a school library.”

She also observed that “if you don't like a book, don't buy it/read it. But why agitate to make it unavailable to others, who don't share your predilections? That seems to be the primary issue. In red states, books are banned; in blue states, books are endangered from within publishing houses.”

Oates indicated that she found it “touching, or ironic, that, when we were all publishing books, Mailer, [Philip] Roth, [John] Updike, [William] Styron drew virtually 100% of literary attention; the rest of us were small satellites. Now, I find myself defending them. How surprised/appalled they would be!”

As part of the attack on Mailer's writing, commentators have pointed to the episode in 1960 when he stabbed his second wife (of six) Adele Morales with a penknife during a drunken altercation, seriously injuring her. (Morales failed to press charges.) Oates stuck her neck out when she tweeted that “like many oft-married men Norman Mailer wound up finally with a much younger, adoring, & altogether quite wonderful wife (Norris Church) whom everyone liked. Womanizers all eventually wear out, it just takes time & if you're lucky, you are the last wife.”

The American media is attempting to cover up the censorship effort directed at Mailer by pointing to the fact, as this AP headline does, that “Collection of Norman Mailer's writing finds new publisher.” The AP story, in line with this, asserts that while “news of Random House not publishing the new collection led to allegations on social media that Mailer was being ‘cancelled,’ his books remain widely available through Random House and the Library of America, which has been releasing permanent bound editions of his work. ‘The White Negro’ can easily be found online, including *Dissent* magazine, where

the essay first appeared.”

What if another publisher had not stepped in? Mailer’s books may not vanish immediately, or ever for that matter, but that will not be the result of any democratic commitment on the part of the publishers, much less the race and gender zealots.

The episode, like the ones involving Allen and Bailey, has sinister implications. As we noted in the latter case, it is “intended to intimidate artists, biographers and scholars alike. The message being sent is clear: any influential figure who rubs establishment public opinion the wrong way can be denounced and dispatched in like manner.” We continued, “Why should this high-minded campaign stop here? Any writer or artist who has a personal life that in any fashion provokes the disapproval of the moral crusaders risks ‘permanent removal.’”

The issue of the artistic and social value of Mailer’s work is not the central one here. The WWSWS chronicled in detail his decline from the left-wing stance of his early works, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and *Barbary Shore* (1951), which, despite their problematic elements, remain eminently worth reading, to his later, often self-destructive clowning. Along the way, there are no doubt important, truthful and oppositional portions of his vast output of fiction and journalism. Objectively speaking, Mailer was, in any event, the product and victim of definite historical circumstances, the stagnant and reactionary postwar years in the US with their state religion of anti-communism.

Rather courageously, Mailer’s *Barbary Shore* was written under the influence of émigré Polish leftist writer Jean Malaquais [Wladimir Malacki, 1908-1998], a onetime member of the French Trotskyist movement. Malaquais’ remarkable book *Les Javanais* (1939), translated into English as *Men From Nowhere*, won praise from Leon Trotsky in an unpublished essay, “A Masterly First Novel: Jean Malaquais’ *Les Javanais*” (1939). Mailer later described Malaquais as his “mentor” and also indicated that he finished *Barbary Shore* “with a political position which was a far-flung mutation of Trotskyism.” In fact, it was a rather discouraged version of state capitalist, Third Camp politics. (Malaquais, in fact, did not care for Mailer’s novel, although the pair remained friends for many years.)

Nonetheless, Mailer came under venomous and general assault from the bourgeois media in the US, not so much for the artistic failings of the claustrophobic novel, set in a Brooklyn boarding house, which were real, as for his continued stated interest in socialism.

Time magazine’s review, for instance, positively oozed cynicism and hostility. “Mailer’s new novel,” complained its critic, “is hauled from the literary graveyard of the ‘30s, when ‘social consciousness’ was in vogue. Like other books of the school, it tries to pin the blame for human evil on the favorite villain of every park-bench anarchist, ‘the system.’” *Barbary Shore* was “perched on the stilts” of various “fallacies,” including the notion that “the Russian Revolution was ‘betrayed,’ i.e., Lenin was O.K., but Stalin spoiled everything.”

In *Commentary*, existentialist (and former leftist) William Barrett (*Irrational Man*, 1958) gave vent to his particular version of virulent anti-Marxism. Referring to one incident involving the novel’s protagonist, Barrett asserted that “Mailer seems to be remembering here Trotsky’s account, in his *History of the Russian Revolution*, of the mass demonstration that set off the February Revolution (notice, not the October Revolution). This is the kind of heroic political dream we used to nourish ourselves with when we were kids in the 30’s. The proletariat never crawled to glory except in the pages of Trotsky’s book, which must be judged from what we now know as nothing less

than a romance and a falsification of the Russian Revolution.”

These attacks and others provide some sense of the immense pressures to which those who attempted to pursue a path independent of American imperialist “democracy” and Stalinism were subject. As noted in our 2009 obituary, Mailer did not long stay the course.

Now, Mailer is threatened by a different sort of right-wing attack, in the guise of defending women and protecting the public against “criminals.” One tweet brilliantly observed, “Norman Mailer stabbed his wife twice with a rusty penknife and told onlookers ‘Don’t touch her. Let the bitch die.’ It was only thanks to emergency surgery that she survived and he only avoided being ‘cancelled’ by prison because she wouldn’t press charges*. F--- Norman Mailer.”

Mailer’s action was inexcusable, but it clearly occurred within the context of a generalized demoralization that afflicted wide layers of the once-leftist intelligentsia in the postwar period. A concrete consideration of the problems in the development of art and society are replaced in many cases today by “high-minded” puritanism and prudery.

Moreover, as we have argued before on several occasions, it is a serious mistake to identify the personal flaws of individual artists, even serious ones, with the significance of their work as a whole. “Some separation has to be made,” as we argued in the case of painter Paul Gauguin, “between the artist and his or her biography, a separation almost always made, for example, in the case of a scientist. The serious artistic personality is often better than him or herself. Arbitrary and ahistorical moralizing is worse than useless in such cases.”

“Deleting” all those accused or found guilty of crimes from the ranks of artists to be viewed and read would involve removing figures such as poet François Villon, accused of manslaughter and robbery; playwright Christopher Marlowe; painter Caravaggio, condemned to death for killing a man in a brawl; goldsmith and sculptor Benvenuto Cellini; poet Paul Verlaine; playwright Oscar Wilde; painter Egon Schiele; novelist Jean Genet, author of *The Thief’s Journal*; Beat writers William S. Burroughs and Gregory Corso, and many more.

Meanwhile, the truly “criminal” element, composed of former government officials and generals, bankers and CEOs, has its wretched books published all the time and no one bats an eye.

The censorship of Mailer’s work has a thoroughly reactionary, antidemocratic content.



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