

NORMAN MAILER and Describing Physical Action

With titles by William Golding, John Steinbeck, and S.E. Hinton in your school library, why should you read books that confuse some people, bore others, and offend practically everybody?

Why should you read Norman Mailer?

Answer: To learn more about the craft of writing.

Are you interested in the form of a traditional novel? Read *The Naked and the Dead*.

Do you want to learn more about the "new journalism"? Read *Armies of the Night*.

Do you have a special fascination for sportswriting? Read *The Fight*.

Diaries and journals? Take a look at *Pieces*.

Research? Read *The Executioner's Song*.

And if you want to study strategies for describing action, read practically anything Mailer has ever written. As a *New Yorker* critic once said of Mailer's writing, it "demonstrates the power of literature to recreate an event in vastly more magnified detail than it can be experienced at first-hand." Quite a statement!

The heart plunges lower than night.

Armies of the Night, Mailer's eyewitness account of a peace demonstration in Washington, D.C., exudes this power. Using a variety of techniques, Mailer

recreates hundreds of events that comprised this huge anti-war demonstration. One of these events, his own arrest, is described with particular skill.

As this scene begins, Mailer, along with hundreds of protestors, stands behind a barricade facing the Pentagon. Suddenly he bolts out onto the lawn, past a club-clutching MP, and up toward the Pentagon where, a few moments later, he is arrested. Another writer might have reported this symbolic action, which lasted but a few moments, in one sentence: "Well-known author Norman Mailer was among the group arrested today." But Mailer, who has made himself a central figure in the story, shapes his account carefully.

He begins by setting the scene:

It was not much of a situation to study. The MPs stood in two widely spaced ranks. The first rank was ten yards behind the rope, and each MP in that row was close to twenty feet from the next man. The second rank, similarly spaced, was ten yards behind the first rank and perhaps thirty yards behind them a cluster appeared, every fifty yards or so, of two or three U.S. Marshals in white helmets and dark blue suits. They were out there waiting. Two moods confronted one another, two separate senses of a private silence.

We are now familiar with the setting; he will not have to pause to point directions. Good description almost always requires careful scene-setting.

Once he establishes this sense

of location, he relates the event, using as his building blocks the concrete details. In the establishing paragraph, for example, he tells us exactly where the first rank of MPs stands—"ten yards behind the rope, and each MP in that row was close to twenty feet from the next man." He informs us that the U.S. Marshals wore "white helmets and dark blue suits." From the outset, we can easily picture the event because he focuses upon the particulars.

He simply doesn't "get ready" to make his dash. Instead, he "steps neatly and decisively over the low rope." The first MP he comes to holds a raised club that "quivered." As Mailer resumes his run, he pictures himself as he is seen through the eyes of others:

It was his dark pinstripe suit, his vest, the maroon and blue regimental tie, the part in his hair, the barrel chest, the early paunch,—he must have looked like a banker himself, a banker gone ape.

To describe confrontation with the U.S. Marshals, Mailer reports his actual words: "I won't go back. If you don't arrest me, I'm going to the Pentagon . . . Take your hands off me, can't you see? I'm not resisting arrest." Soon they walk him away.

To these and many other external details, Mailer mixes in the internal details—his own feelings and reactions. When he first moves out toward the MPs, he feels like "a boy about to jump from one garage roof to an adjoin-

ing garage roof." As he runs on he becomes "much more alive—yes, bathed in air—and yet disembodied from himself. . . ." Once in front of the MP, he experiences "surprise," but by the time he reaches the marshals, "an absolute certainty had come over him." This new-found confidence stays with him all the way to jail.

Finally, Mailer brings this key moment alive through careful word choice. Although he subscribes to the "short is good" school, he is not afraid to use a long word when one is needed. Standing behind the barricade, he does not want to "dissipate resolve." Running, he feels "disembodied." Circling one another, he and the MP resemble a "gyroscope." The marshals wait for the "existential moment" to arrest him.

And fire and ice within me fight.

A few years after he brought us *Armies of the Night*, Mailer wrote *The Fight*, an account of a heavy-weight championship boxing match between champion George Foreman and ex-champ Muhammad Ali. Here was a subject with a unique set of problems: on one hand, Mailer's job would be easier than it was with *Armies of the Night* because he would know where and when the action would take place. He also could assume that his readers would understand the specialized language (hook, uppercut, neutral corner, leading with the right) of the subject.

But if his task was less taxing for these reasons, it was also much tougher because he would have to describe furiously fast and complex action. Of the literally thousands (perhaps millions) of movements that make up a prize fight, which ones should the writer select?

He partially solves the problem by sticking to the same rules he followed in *Armies of the Night*. He sets the stage by filling in the background and also by raising key questions such as: "Can Ali come back and recapture his title?" Once more, he builds upon vivid details; again, he demonstrates a rich and varied vocabulary (consternation, embossed, nimble, concussive, bludgeoning, cuadrilla, elucidate).

by Robert Boone



But he also does something different in this thirty-page description—he uses an astonishing number of similes, metaphors, and other figures of speech. A figure of speech is, in the words of Laurence Perrine, “a way of saying one thing and meaning another.” Thus Mailer, instead of talking directly about the furious action in the ring, describes it in terms of phenomena the reader can imagine.

The fight begins with Ali and Foreman rushing toward each other and then retreating: “Each veered backward like similar magnetic poles repelling one another forcibly.” Next, they circle “in an electric ring.” Ali’s first punch is a “lightning strong right straight as a pole. . . .” Then, “They started in on one another and drew back. It was as if each held a gun.” Seconds later, Ali hits Foreman again, “The sound of a bat thumping into a watermelon was heard around the ring.” They are “two big men fast as pumas, charged as tigers. . . .” When Ali hits Foreman a third time, the champ “responded like a bull. He roared forward. A dangerous bull. His gloves were out like horns.”

As the fight progresses, Mailer stays with his own strategy of using figures of speech wherever possible. A combination of punches is as “rare as plutonium.” Foreman’s confusion is “as if reverting to memories of fights when he was ten years old and scared. . . .” Once he had a look of “a pensive steer being dragged to the ground by a cowboy.”

The observed of all observers

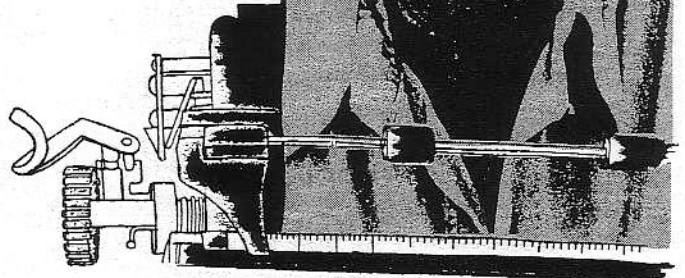
You might agree with some critics that Mailer’s writing is excessive. Or, you might agree more with the *New Yorker* critic who says this book illustrates one of

the fundamental powers of literature. But, whether you like him or not, you must wonder how anyone can derive so much information from a fight. George Plimpton, who watched the bout with Mailer, provides a clue:

I sat next to Norman. He was fine and valuable company because so often he caught a mood up there in the ring that he would share; he paid tremendous attention; it was disconcerting, too, because when the fight began and settled into its course, he would begin to sway, and the rhythm and motion of the fighter seemed to activate him like puppet strings, so that he bobbed and weaved and ducked, just as they did, occasionally snuffling like a fighter clearing his nostrils. . . . Only after each round was done would he reach up and adjust his school-marm spectacles; he would scrawl some notes in a foldback notebook, and chat until the bell sounded for the next round. . . .

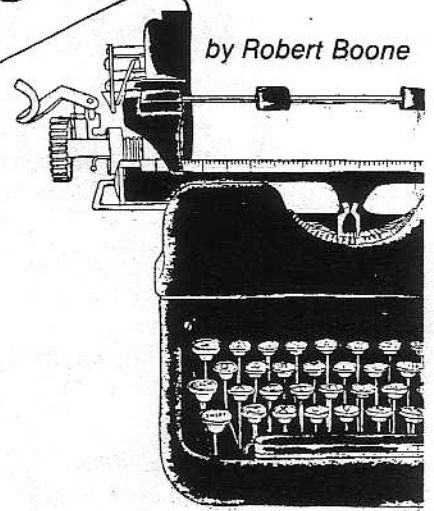
This image of the fiercely concentrating Mailer with the “foldback notebook” epitomizes something fundamental about the business of descriptive writing. Before you select a voice, before you make decisions about language, before you do any writing at all, gather as much material as possible. Observe. Observe again. Observe with energy. And then observe one last time. Practice and your intelligence will tell you which observations are important to your message, and which are best tossed out. But only after you have collected a wealth of detail can you make this rich choice. !

Photo of Mailer, Courtesy Little, Brown and Company



The Electronic Mailer

by Robert Boone



I

Norman Mailer's accounts are charged with first person observations. He frequently participates in the event he reports.

A Describe a nursery rhyme, first as an outside reporter and then from an insider's point of view. You might start with "The Three Little Pigs" or "Goldilocks and the Three Bears."

B Recall a significant (traumatic?) experience from your past. Describe it first from an outsider's point of view, then from your own vantage point.

C Consider this statement: "Only the insider knows what really happens." Using examples from your own experience, support or refute this statement.

II

Before he describes action, Mailer makes sure that his audience understands the who, what, when, where, and why of the situation.

A Rewrite one of the above exercises, paying particular attention to establishing clarity for your readers.

B Read other articles about the Ali-Foreman fight and about the Pentagon march. Compare the coverage to Mailer's.

C Find a short sports article. In one sentence, capture the essentials (who, what, when, where, why).

III

Mailer uses details, lots of them.

A Write an imaginary discussion between a highly observant individual and a barely observant individual. The subject? Your bedroom.

B Describe an action as it would be seen by the two people in A, above.

C Use the following details to reconstruct the last seventy-two hours in Eathan's life. In Eathan's pocket, police found the following items: one unused ticket to last year's hockey game, a silver ring with the stone missing, a half-written poem, a ball of string, a fishing lure, half a stick of gum, confetti, a picture of a dog.

IV

As *The Fight* amply illustrates, Mailer uses figures of speech extensively.

A Describe a process that requires several steps (tying a shoe, punting a football, building a model, or parking a car, for example). Make the process clear by comparing it to something else.

B Describe a place to someone who has never seen it. To make yourself clear, compare this spot to places with which your audience is familiar.

C Write a fable about a war that starts as a result of a misinterpreted figure of speech.

V

Mailer is often accused of glorifying controversial topics. Do you think boxing should be banned? Express your opinion in one of the following ways:

A Write an imaginary panel discussion involving several people, each with a different opinion.

B Write a "think piece"—an essay written "off the top of your head."

C Write a formal essay in which you document your conclusion.