



Memoir: Norris Church Mailer Tells Her Side of the Story

by Kathryn Kleekamp

Norris Church Mailer, wife of the late Norman Mailer, visited Cape Cod earlier this month to promote her recently published memoir, *A Ticket to the Circus*.

The June 11th event, which was hosted by the Cape Cod Museum of Art, on Hope Lane in Dennis, was co-sponsored by the Cape Cod Branch of the National League of American Pen Women (<http://www.nlapw.org>) (NLAPW).

"After years of having my story told by people who've never met me, I decided it was time to tell it myself," said Norris at a book signing that followed her reading.

Blending colorful memories with gentle humor, Norris's natural acting abilities were most evident in her reading of several passages from her book. In one of the excerpts, she recalled the day she met the famed author, then 52.

She also noted how Fate seemed to bless them from the beginning with a series of synchronicities that included sharing the same birthday and her being exactly half his age. "This was a phenomenon that would only occur once in our lifetime," she noted.



Norris Church Mailer reads from *A Ticket to the Circus* Photograph by Stephanie Boosahda

When she met Mailer, then the father of seven children and married to his fifth wife, Barbara Norris was a 26-year-old divorced mother who thoroughly enjoyed life as a single woman. She was a small town high school art teacher; he the subject of national news and known to be brilliant, ego-eccentric and provocative.

Such was the beginning of a relationship, then marriage that would last for 33 years, until Mailer's death at age 84. From all accounts an excellent step-mother for his large brood, as well as the son they had together, Norris provided a safe harbor for the chaotic home life of her controversial husband.

While she is beautiful and talented in her own right; a painter, novelist and model, he went on to win a Pulitzer Prize and recognition for such classic literature as *The Naked and the Dead*, *The Executioner's Song* and *Marilyn*.

Early on in their relationship she imagined writing about her experiences, but thought, "no one would believe it."

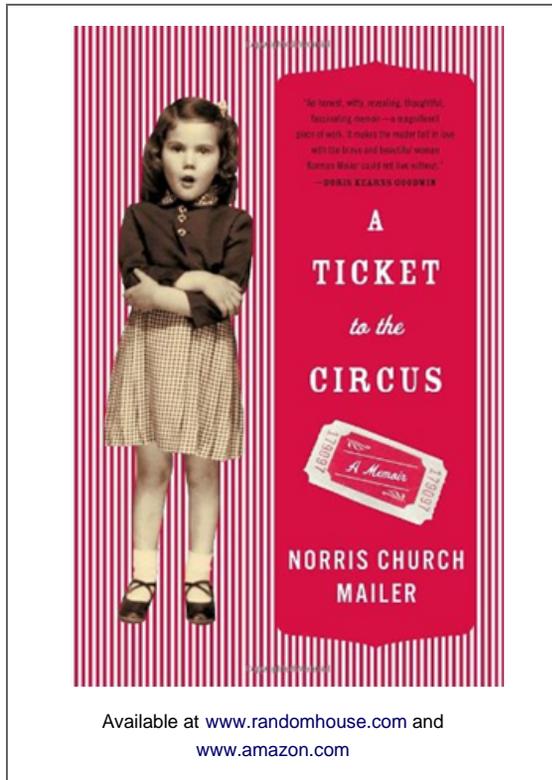
In *A Ticket to the Circus*, Norris weaves an intimate tale of love, excitement, chaos and celebrity as Norman's sixth wife and the mother of his ninth child, John Buffalo Mailer. She effectively transitions from sadness to humor in a single word. Despite her life of celebrity, the sweet charm of this southern girl is still firmly in place and had the audience of the CCMA wanting more.

Norris is now the mother of two sons, and five stepdaughters, as well as a grandmother to two and step-grandmother to nine. She is also the author of *Windchill Summer* and *Cheap Diamonds*.

For many years, the Mailers lived in Provincetown, where Norman loved to work. The Norman Mailer Writers Colony (<http://www.nmwcolony.org>) is now based in the Mailers' old Provincetown home.

After her husband's death, in 2007, Norris felt too isolated to remain in Provincetown so she moved back to their home in Brooklyn Heights, New York. A significant factor was her need to be close to her physicians – the survivor of a rare form of cancer, she has been left with other chronic ailments.

In a recent interview with Debbie Forman of the Cape Cod Times, Norris explains that "Norman loved Provincetown. He never wanted to leave. And he's still there," she said, referring to the town cemetery where he is buried. And, she added, "I'll be back there one day with him. My name's on the tombstone."



Members of the Cape Cod Branch of the National League of American Pen Women with Norris Church Mailer at the Cape Cod Museum of Art, Photograph courtesy of Stephanie Boosahda

The Cape Cod branch of NLAPW was very pleased to be able to co-sponsor this event at the CCMA. Norris Church Mailer's lecture was just one of the ways the Pen Women can share the arts with women across the Cape. They look forward to presenting more programs like this one in the future.

First organized by Marion Longfellow in 1897 (niece of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow) NLAPW is an organization whose juried members are published authors and professional artists in both visual and performing arts.

The league's national headquarters is the historic Pen Arts building in Washington, DC, the former home of Abraham Lincoln's oldest son Todd. One of the most famous Pen Women was Eleanor Roosevelt, a prolific writer.

The Cape Cod Chapter welcomes published authors and artists who may register to join and subsequently be awarded a letter in art or literature.

To learn more about the Pen Women, read Nicola Burnell's article *Who Are These Fabulous Pen Women?* In the Fall 2008 Issue of CapeWomenOnline.com

You can also visit the NLAPW website

If you are interested in becoming a Pen Woman contact the Cape Cod Membership Chair Christina Laurie at: PreacherPoet@comcast.net

Kathryn Kleekamp is the author of *Cape Cod and the Islands: Where Beauty and History Meet*.

She is an artist member of the Cape Cod Art Association and a member in Letters and Art of the National League of American Pen Women. Her work is in private collections all over the United States and Europe.

Kathryn lives with her husband, Charles, in Sandwich. She is the mother of three adult children. You can email Kathryn Kleekamp at kleekamp@verizon.net

