

Norris Mailer; her memoir tells of life as author's 6th wife

By Hillel Italie
ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Norris Church Mailer, an actress, model, author, and painter who enjoyed and endured the ride of her life as the sixth and final wife of Norman Mailer, died at her home in Brooklyn yesterday. She was 61.

Her death was announced on the website of the Norman Mailer Society, which in a statement said she passed away "after a long and valiant struggle with cancer."

As Mrs. Mailer wrote in her 2010 memoir, "A Ticket to the Circus," she was a single mother in her mid-20s when she met Norman Mailer, who was then 52, at a 1975 party in Russellville, Ark. Their attraction was immediate, even if he was breaking up with his fourth wife and seeing the woman who would become his fifth. Norris Church became number six in 1980. A son, John Buffalo, had been born two years earlier.

The new Mrs. Mailer discovered the consequences of coupling with a god. Norman Mailer was charming, callous, wise, and infuriating. Through her husband, she met Jacqueline Kennedy and Imelda Marcos, Woody Allen and Fidel Castro. Norman Mailer could talk about anything; she likened their banter to the rapport between Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn. A sign of destiny: The Mailers both were born on Jan. 31.

But the author also discouraged his wife's own work, avoided her when he learned she had cancer, and had affairs with several women, some of whom were referenced in his work and even showed up at social functions, at his invitation.

The tension became public by the early 1990s through gossip columns and in an ABC television interview when she told newsman Sam Donaldson that "one day Norman is a lion, the next day he's a monkey. Occasionally he's a lamb, and a large part of the time he's a jackass."

They drifted. She threatened to leave. He resisted. She stayed.



The year after they wed, Norman and Norris Mailer had bit parts in the 1981 film "Ragtime."

"I knew I was going to be with him for the rest of my life, and I think he felt the same way," she wrote. When the author died, in 2007, she was at his side and remembered his final moments: "His mouth spread in a huge smile, and his eyes were alive with excitement, as if he were seeing something amazing. Then he was gone."

A native of Atkins, Ark., she was born Barbara Jean Davis (a name not unlike Norma Jean Baker, the real name of Marilyn Monroe, subject of a Norman Mailer book), and by age 3 had won a contest as Miss Little Rock. Popular in high school ("I was at the center of everything"), she attended Arkansas Polytechnic College and dated a childhood acquaintance, Larry Norris.

They married in 1969 and had a son, Matthew, two years later. But, as she recalled, they

were too different — he preferring solitude, she preferring company. They divorced in 1974. As she began a modeling career, she changed her name to Norris Church, the last name suggested by Mailer because she attended church often as a child.

Long-legged and auburn-haired, the newly single Church enjoyed "a string of boyfriends," including Bill Clinton, then a candidate for Congress. He had a well-stocked staff of female admirers, she wrote, but clearly favored a plainly dressed blonde named Hillary Rodham who "had an intelligence none of the prettier girls in the room had."

"I would have so liked to be able to talk to him about world affairs and politics, or art or literature, or anything, frankly," Mrs. Mailer wrote. "But we frankly never talked much."

Norris Mailer never considered herself in Norman Mailer's

class as an author, but she did have a broad interest in the arts. Her paintings were featured in several one-woman shows. She was a member of the Actors Studio, appeared in the television adaptation of Mailer's classic "The Executioner's Song" and had a brief part, with her husband, in the film version of "Ragtime." She also wrote two novels, "Windchill Summer" and "Cheap Diamonds," and worked as a model for the Wilhemina agency.

"I'd had a career. Family. I once had ambitions and dreams that had nothing to do with Norman Mailer," she wrote. "Norman changed my life and the ripples from that first meeting in Arkansas have spread through many others. I wouldn't trade with anybody in the world. And who knows what he's doing on the other side? I'm curious to catch up with him and find out."