



NORMAN MAILER INTERVIEW  
*LIFE TURNS 50*  
LIFE STORIES

**Norman Mailer, Novelist & Journalist, On The Heroes of Life Magazine**  
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**Total Running Time: 17 minutes and 58 seconds**

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

Norman Mailer

Novelist & Journalist, On The Heroes of Life Magazine

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NORMAN MAILER:

I always enjoyed this one. One of them. One of the things I enjoyed very much about this issue in this article was that it had, Norman Mailer on the fight and down here, little print. It had Frank Sinatra cover photography by Frank Sinatra. And I thought, this is the only time in my life that I will ever have billing over Frank Sinatra. So I treasured it, and I was absolutely right. This is the only time in my life that I've. I must say, I enjoyed this issue, and writing this piece was, wasn't fun at the time. It was the hardest work I ever did. But the fighters Ali and Frazier fought with such incredible determination for 15 rounds, I. No one's ever seen a fight quite like that. I don't I mean, people go to price fights all their lives. They'll never see a fight where two men work that hard for 15 rounds. And, it was all over. I had 36 hours to write the piece. I thought they can work that hard. Well, I certainly can. And, so I worked



harder than I ever worked before, and I wrote, both piece and in that time wrote 9500 words.

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INTERVIEWER:

Weird. Picking Muhammad Ali as one of life's heroes. Do you think it's an accurate description to call Ali a hero? Was he a hero to you or a hero in your eyes?

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NORMAN MAILER:

Oh, you know, not only was a hit, was he a hero, but I think obviously there've been greater men in the 20th century. Although I will probably never forgive me for that remark. I think there will, you know, many greater men, obviously. But no one was a greater hero of theirs. I think Ali had more courage than anyone I've ever known. And I say that because I don't think Ali was essentially a brave man. So I think bravery was something animal, just the way certain animals are brave, certain bulls are brave. They speak of brave bulls. So certain men are born braver than other men. I don't think Ali was born all that brave. I think he had enormous courage. In other words, he would apply his will to the bravery he had and get the maximum out of whatever bravery he had. I only took more chances than anyone I've ever known. And, I always up the ante, which was it took incredible courage, you know, if he was fighting a dangerous man, he made him more dangerous by insulting him. Oh, Ali had an extraordinary sense of, of the psychology of violence. You know, absolutely brilliant man, in terms of, his warlike capacity to enter the psychology of an opponent and find the weak spot. So in that



sense, yes, he's the hero of the 20th century. Not the greatest man by far, but. But the hero.

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INTERVIEWER:

Life magazine chose the astronauts as heroes. What is your opinion of the astronauts as heroes?

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NORMAN MAILER:

I think they're. I think the astronauts are heroes for an altogether different reason than Ali. Because after all, the astronauts sought to have as much knowledge as they could possibly, acquire, brought to bear, and every single problem they would face. And their attitude was that the more knowledge they had, the less fear they would feel. I think their heroes, because they were, young, powerful, well-coordinated, intelligent, well-educated men who were, for the most part, reasonably happily married, who were daring. They are now, you know, they were taking the most tremendous chances anyone could take. They were going to the moon, which meant that they were, taking on, terrible dreams for 5 or 10 years, getting ready for that adventure, living with a sense of inner excitement and danger as a part of their daily lives. And that sense, I think it was heroic to dare to do this. They also were men who could who were Stoics that could take enormous punishment. When I think of them as heroes, I think of them as, heroes who bring out the, underpinning of stoicism, because I can't imagine a more uncomfortable life. And to be an astronaut, I mean, it's bad enough to be in a plane for 12 hours, sitting in the middle seat in tourist with two people on either side of you. Those those



astronauts sat in seats narrower than that, with incredibly uncomfortable, bulky, spacesuits on. They practiced in them. They'd spend days training and wearing stuff like that. They'd be pulled from centrifuges. They, they had to learn enormous amounts of material, enough to to detonate the brain. Feats of memory. They really, were tortured, and, went through it all because finally they had they had a vision of what they wanted to do. I think when people have a vision of what they want to do, and they're willing to accept torture and danger and difficulty and anxiety and instability and insecurity and all of that, then they're heroes. And if they're successful, that certifies it.

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INTERVIEWER:

Do you feel that life had a role in creating them? You know, life had an exclusive to all of their personal stories. Do you feel that life had any role in making these astronauts into heroes, or do you have any opinion on that?

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NORMAN MAILER:

A lot of people would say that they that the astronauts were heroes first, and life did not have a role in making them heroes. But I don't know, I think if ever an event was made, a media event, life certainly, contributed to the importance of the astronauts in American life. Life was the first to see that, they were really, there was something story going on there that was worth an enormous amount of attention and from life's point of view, a great deal of expense covering it up. There's a story I love about two Jewish grandmothers meeting on the street, and one of them is, pushing a baby carriage and the other looks and says, oh, what a beautiful grandchild you've got. And the first



one says, that's nothing. Wait, let me show you her picture. So, in effect, I think life created the astronauts to a degree. They show the astronauts picture and, underline the importance of what they were doing. And I think also, the astronauts themselves became, self-conscious in a way that if you're made of heroic stature, sometimes the fact that the spotlight is on you, adds to, the possibility of becoming more and more of a hero.

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INTERVIEWER:

Another of life's heroes. And I know it. He it seems to me he is your hero is Ernest Hemingway.

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NORMAN MAILER:

Hemingway is is a hero to me because, I love what I learn from his work. I think half the American writers, a lot of them, I would include half the American writers alive who happened to be women, who read Hemingway have been enormously affected by his work. He taught us all how to write. In that sense, he was more our teacher and our father, our spiritual father, than our hero. I think, again, though, if I was, he exemplifies that quality of courage rather than bravery. If you study his life, there's an enormous emphasis on his life, on keeping that courage up. He was the last man in the world to see. His courage is automatic. And I think he finally he died trying to keep his courage up. I often suspect of that, maybe for years discovered that if he played Russian roulette with himself, he could recover for a period from his depressions and his terrors. So I think perhaps he used to go in each night, put a shotgun in his mouth, start to pull the trigger, go in further and further



to pull the trigger, and then stop. And then one night it went off because he seemed to be a lot of pressure. On the night he killed himself as possible, he'd wake up in the middle of the night, start playing these games with himself. I don't think it was much as a hero because finally he committed suicide and left us all there. He he left a great shock in American letters. None of us have been the same since he committed suicide.

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INTERVIEWER:

I guess above all others. Life magazine thought that Winston Churchill seemed to be life's greatest hero. I mean, they called him the greatest figure of history in 50 years. What is your assessment of Winston Churchill as a hero?

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NORMAN MAILER:

Winston Churchill was one of three heroes who had a most triangular relationship. One of those, Churchill, one was Roosevelt, a little Stalin. A Stalin was an awful man, a terrible man. He was also a great man. He, made some of the worst errors any human beings ever made. And millions of people died for those errors. But he also had the guts of the gods, and he was a hero. Roosevelt was a hero. Churchill was a hero. I rarely in history do you find three heroes on one side in a war. Churchill is the most agreeable to some of the three heroes. Roosevelt. We Revere those of us who do. And those of us who still hate them. Still hate them. I happen to Revere and but but Roosevelt is nearer to us. There was something about Churchill that was great Britain was marvelous. It was British panache was the fact that Churchill could, drink a bottle of brandy a day and smoke a box of cigars and somehow stay hale



and hearty. He, he had, cause he actually, I don't know enough about history itself to say where he was, a wise leader and where he was a bit of a fool. But I think Churchill made some enormous errors. And, probably if one took a hard, cynical view of his role in the war, he was the most conservative of these three heroes, the one least interested in winning the war, far more than winning the war. He wanted, Russia to, bloody bloody itself to bleed itself. Well, Russia be weakened by that war. They want to preserve the British Empire. Last on here is a shopping list was was winning that war. However he was he was a remarkably resourceful man. Brilliant on the one hand, a rogue on the other. He, he I think one reason he definitely was a hero, at least used to me when all is said, is he spoke the best language of any political leader in the last 200 years, at least of the English language. And those remarkable phrases, unify the nation in that role. If you live with language all your life and you work with it, that's what you want language to do.

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INTERVIEWER:

We talked about all of these heroes, but I would like to know from you is what is your definition of a hero? What are the ingredients of a hero?

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NORMAN MAILER:

It's hard to come up with a formula. You know what is a hero? I think one element that has to be there is that the man or the woman, if we're speaking of heroines, has to, be come more than anyone would ever expected they would become. They have to transcend themselves at least once in their lives, and usually many times. And heroes have to be able to take huge strain. There



are any number of people who are virtuous or brilliant or daring, but a hero has the ability to, take consecutive dares very often, daily, for a period of years, and live with it and somehow transcend the, anxiety of that. Heroes are people who, on a huge scale, rise above their own anxiety and so succeed in changing the world. I think a hero on whatever level. And you can have a black hero as well as a world hero. But I think a hero has to change the history of their environment. If they are a hero on a large political scale and they change the history of their nation, if they're a local hero, then they, they better something in the environment around them, or they alter something. But it isn't just a matter of doing it through slow, patient, decent work. Those those can be very decent people. Good people. A hero does it. Well, I always assumes that there's an element of the dramatic and what a hero does. They can be sly, they can be subtle. They can be patient. They can work for years at their purposes. But they also have to have something absolutely bold in their vision. The the what is not before their eyes has to be more real to them than what is.

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INTERVIEWER:

And what was life magazine's impact on race?

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NORMAN MAILER:

I have this little I can say there because I wasn't really following life that closely in those years. I have a general impression that I, gave a greater, coverage to, little Rock and to, Martin Luther King and, so I think they





probably had a positive aspect there. But I think, as so many people have to say more about.

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INTERVIEWER:

What about Martin Luther King as a hero?

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NORMAN MAILER:

Martin Luther King was a hero. And, I speak of living with, great anxiety day after day, year after year. That man had to live in terror of being killed, every day of his life and not show it. And in fact, if he had any paranoia in that direction, I'm sure he did. He was justified. It wasn't paranoia at all. It was acumen. He knew he was in danger of his life every day. I met him once in New York. He was in for an evening, and, some people passed the word, and we went to Harlem. I think it was somewhere around hundred and 35th Street. In those days, it was less extraordinary to go up to Harlem. And, I had the pleasure of meeting him. And he was just a mild, pleasant man. You thought you were meeting a cordial, decent black minister? He was. He always had that attractive side to him. Physically, it was obvious he was also a man who would be attractive to women. There was just something so agreeable and gentle and warm and strong about him that you felt. But he was, he was not a man. You say? Well, there's a hero. When you met him, I remember being surprised at how, not average. That's not the word, but at how, how agreeable and easy it was to talk to him. And, his charisma had a gentle glow about it. It wasn't full of, lightning and sharp shaft.

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INTERVIEWER:

What about you? What your very first book was written about World War two. Have do you have any did life's coverage of World War Two, did any of the pictures anything have any influence on your writing?

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NORMAN MAILER:

I remember that I used to be angry at life and time during the war, because I used to make it more glamorous than my end of the war. I used to be jealous. The coverage of the Pacific was pretty good, but the coverage of Europe was far better and far more extensive. And indeed, if I'd had any choice, I would have been in Europe myself. I used to think I'm in the wrong war, in the wrong place. The war I was in was such a grim, dull, essentially dirty war. What I mean about you, just physically, you were dirty all the time. You're covered with mud. Your uniforms were rank, you know, there were no places to bathe. It was just a dull, dirty, smelly, uninteresting war. And I used to hate life magazine because it made the war look so good.

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INTERVIEWER:

In the early issues of life, printed on the life logo were the words America's most important editorial force. When you were around in those days and reading life Wasn't. Do you agree with that assessment that life had this editorial impact on the world and its readership?

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NORMAN MAILER:

I think life had not so much editorial impact on its readership as a sensuous impact, or let me say. I think life changed values in American life to a certain degree, as much as a magazine can. And in that sense, if you want to say that there was editorial, yes, but they weren't changing people's minds because of their editorials. Territorial used to be at a high level, used to be a bit of a joke to me because there they were on one page and they pontificated. And in those days, the loose magazines weren't as close to the reality of things as they are today. And they used to pontificate outrageously and egregiously. It used to irritate the hell out of me. So I wasn't fond of life until I started working for it and discovered there were a lot of nice guys and there, and a lot of nice ladies, and they were all helping me a lot, and they were very decent people to work with. So I got to I became fond of life because the people I work with, but I never particularly liked life in the old days. I always felt a little bit smug, and it tended to, have much too much certainty as all the loose magazines did before the war, right after the war, about how Americans should live. Life had an influence on the way people lived. That was the beginning. I think, of a huge influence that you will now, we've now speak of as a visual. People take their mores today from television. They are dressed like the the so-called heroes and heroines that they identify with on TV, soap operas and what have you. They pick up that sense of chic from TV. Life was the first, major organ of the media to affect people visually, I think. And that sense, I think it had a huge impact on American life. But I would not call editorial so much as, whatever visual suggestion I have, words fail me now.

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INTERVIEWER:

I think that's very my last question is, what do you think is the lasting importance of life magazine?

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NORMAN MAILER:

I think life will. How about, dare I say it, a second life in libraries? Given video entertainment these days. It'll be packaged and put out and cassettes and kids of the future won't go to libraries and to look at it on their TV screen, which won't be the same thing. But I think if people will still pick up old copies of Life in Libraries and live through them, that there'll be a marvelous, reallocation, marvelous, but bring a marvelous book of a past, and, one will be able to steep oneself in certain periods when we'll get a false impression of it. But then any time when goes through any history book, one gets a false impression of the past, and therefore your past is not my past. And so, that doesn't really matter. But when we have some notion of somebody's conception of what the present was at a time in the past, and that's as near as we can ever come to the past.

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