

Mailer's Latest Love Story

By Judy Klemesrud

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NEW YORK

Norris Church is the kind of woman you always notice at a party. First, she is usually the most beautiful woman there, which is not easy in a city where it seems every other woman looks like, or is, a fashion model. She is tall and slender, with almost eerie reddish brown eyes that match her auburn hair, and chalky white skin that seems to have no pores. Another reason you notice her is that the shorter man constantly at her side is Norman Mailer.

Miss Church, 30 years old, is Mailer's live-in companion, cook and the mother of his eighth child, John Buffalo, who is 1 year old Monday. But if that sounds as though she is little more than a Mailer handmaiden, consider this:

Miss Church recently gave her agent 100 pages of her first novel, "Little Miss Little Rock," about a child beauty contest winner in Arkansas who grows up and moves to New York City. It is "kind of" based on her life, she said, seeing as how she won the title of Little Miss Little Rock when she was 3 and now lives in New York City.

She is also trying to get enough oil paintings finished so she can have a one-woman show, and she will soon co-star in an experimental stage production of a Lanford Wilson comedy, "Icky Icky, Nye, Nye, Nye," directed by Mailer.

And what may come as a surprise to some people who view the 56-year-old Mailer as the male chauvinist of the Western world, Miss Church says that he "encourages" her to have a career.

"He's very pro-woman," she insisted the other day, as she lounged on a couch in the triplex co-op apartment she and Mailer and four children (two his, one hers, one theirs) share in a Brooklyn Heights brownstone that has a spectacular view of lower Manhattan.

"He got that bad reputation years ago, and it is hard to shake," she went on, in her soft Southern accent. "But he has been very nice to me, and encouraged me to do anything I wanted to do, and be anything I wanted to be. Of course, we fight once in a while. But it never lasts more than five minutes, and we wind up laughing about it."

Miss Church was dressed casually in a loose-fitting pink blouse and Western blue jeans, which seemed to blend right in with the recorded country-and-Western music that played in the background. Her long hair was pulled

back and fastened on the sides with two small red plastic hearts.

Sipping from a glass of Coca-Cola, she smiled when she recalled the day Mailer agreed to read the first 100 pages of her novel. "He took it down to his office, one floor below the apartment," she said. "I waited upstairs, and I was so nervous. I was afraid that I'd be devastated if he didn't like it. Then he came upstairs and told me, 'I'm so relieved. I liked it better than I thought I would.'"

Miss Church met Mailer in March 1975, in Russellville, Ark., where she was teaching high school art — she had graduated three years earlier from Arkansas Polytechnic College there — and he had come to visit a friend from his World War II days. As she recalls it, their first meeting went something like this:

"I walked in and had on blue jeans and a shirt tied at the waist and tall wedgie shoes, and I was about 6 feet 2," she said. "Well, Norman is 5 feet 8. I walked up and said, 'How are you, Mr. Mailer?' and he turned around and walked out of the room."

Despite his seeming lack of interest, the two wound up having dinner that evening, discovered they were born within a minute of each other on Jan. 31 ("He was born at 7:04 and I was born at 7:05"), and got along "very well."

He seemed fascinated, she said, to learn about her rather humble upbringing in Atkins, Ark., population 2,000, where she used to work summers in a pickle factory, and where her father was a heavy equipment instructor for a Job Corps center and her mother ran a beauty salon.

She, in turn, found him "charming, funny and witty — and very sexy. He has this way of talking to you that makes you feel like no one else is in the room."

Two weeks later, Mailer returned to Arkansas to visit Miss Church, who then went by the name of Barbara Norris, and her son, Matthew, now 7, whom she had during a three-year marriage to a wildlife biologist.

That summer, after she had visited Mailer in New York, Miss Church quit her teaching job, sold her house in Russellville, and, over the objections of her parents, moved with her son to Brooklyn Heights. "Isn't that crazy?" she said. "I'd never been out of Arkansas before."

She really wasn't worried, she said, about Mailer's past track record with women: He has been married four

times, and is currently involved in a messy divorce suit with wife No. 4, the actress Beverly Bentley, who has accused him of philandering during the six years they were together. An earlier wife, Adele Morales, once accused him of stabbing her during a domestic spat.

"From the very beginning, I thought Norman was the nicest man I'd ever met," Miss Church said, "and my opinion hasn't changed. Oh, I knew about his past when I came up here, but it didn't worry me. I can take care of myself. When I was divorced before, I didn't ask for alimony. I think it's ridiculous. I was teaching and making \$7,200 a year, and I was able to support myself and my son."

Adding to her confidence was the fact that she and Mailer had had their astrological charts cast, and found that they were very compatible. "Most of the things I had, he didn't," she said, "and most of the things he had, I didn't. It was like a key and a lock. I wasn't poetic and he was, and I was more down to earth than he was."

Once in New York, she changed her name from Barbara Norris to the more dramatic Norris Church, and went to work as a model for the Wilhelmina agency at \$75 an hour. She appeared in Vogue magazine, and in advertisements for Clairrol products, Ben Kahn furs and Gloria Vanderbilt sunglasses. She quit when she was pregnant with John Buffalo, and gained 60 pounds. "I've lost it all but 10 pounds," she said, adding that her normal weight is 115.

Modeling was "a lot of fun," Miss Church said, and so were all the glittery parties she and Mailer attended. At one, she caused tongues to wag when she asked Gordon Davis, the New York City parks commissioner, if he were Welsh. Davis is a light-skinned black.

"But he has blue eyes and straight hair," said Miss Church, whose maiden name was Davis and who is of Welsh descent. "I told him, 'If you can't tell by looking, it doesn't count.' But he didn't even laugh."

At high-powered literary gatherings, Miss Church said the first thing she learned was to "keep my mouth shut."

"I'm not an intellectual," she explained. "I often don't understand what they're talking about, especially if it involves world affairs. So I just don't say anything."

A baby began to cry in one of the bedrooms. Miss Church went in to check, and returned with John Buffalo, who has Mailer's pale blue eyes and



Norman Mailer (inset) and his live-in companion, Norris Church, with their year-old son, John Buffalo.

protruding ears. "Norman's mother, Fanny, says he looks just like Norman did when he was a baby," she said proudly.

Miss Church said she was able to do her writing and painting because a woman named Myrtle Bennett comes in five days a week to care for John Buffalo. But Miss Church said she did most of the cooking for her household — "Very simple, good old Southern cooking" — as well as paying Mailer's bills.

"We're \$500,000 in debt," she complained. "Our house in Provincetown was just seized by the IRS for back taxes, and we have to sell it within 20 days. Norman makes a lot of money, but he's supporting 14 people, including two children in college and

four in private schools. After all the alimony checks are mailed and kids' tuitions paid, we wind up with only \$30,000 a year to live on."

(The Provincetown house was sold at auction Friday for \$65,000).

The children are Susan, 30, Mailer's daughter by his first wife, Dr. Beatrice Silverman; Danielle, 22, and Betsy, 19, by his second wife, Adele Morales, an artist; Kate, 16, by Lady Jeanne Campbell, a journalist; Michael, 15, and Stephen, 13, by Beverly Bentley; Maggie, 8, by a singer Mailer never married, Carol Stevens; Matthew, 7, who is Miss Church's son; and John Buffalo.

Miss Church indicated that the couple's financial situation might soon improve, as Mailer has just finished a book on Gary Gilmore, "The

Executioner's Song," which will be published this fall by Little, Brown. Next, he plans to work with Milton Greene on a book about Greene's photographs, she said.

"And I'm teaching part time at St. Ann's school to offset some of Matthew's tuition," she said, adding that she and Mailer are also trying to economize by eating at home, not taking a lot of trips, or going to parties that cost money.

Is marriage in the future? "We plan on it, but it doesn't really bother me that we're not married," Miss Church replied. "Of course in Arkansas, where I was raised very strictly in the Baptist Church, you don't run off and live with someone you're not married to. As a result, I think the people in Arkansas are half-horrified and half-pleased about what's happened to me."

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Life with Norman Mailer: So far 6 it has been good to Norris Church

By Judy Klemesrud

NORRIS CHURCH is the kind of woman you always notice at a party. First, she is usually the most beautiful woman there, which is not easy in a city like New York, where it seems every other woman looks like, or is, a fashion model. She is tall and slender, with almost eerie reddish brown eyes that match her auburn hair, and chalky white skin that seems to have no pores. Another reason you notice her is that the shorter man constantly at her side is Norman Mailer.

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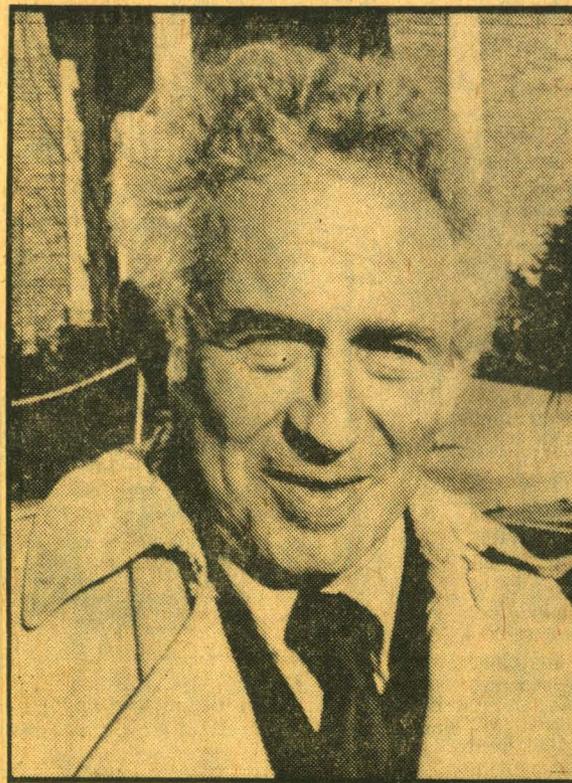
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A-WAITING, at the Church: The very pregnant Norris Church, Stormin' Norman Mailer's roommate for the past three years, stopped in Boston to check the new spring line at Fiandaca designers on Newbury street.

Before checking what to wear — after the baby arrives in April — Norris and Norman made a quick trip to Provincetown. Probably to check out their summer digs.

Eye say! What will they name the baby?

Jackie: 'Norman, there's so much criticism, I don't know where you should take Norris to even look!'