

95 and Not Dead Yet: Arm and Hammer

by [Reg Green](#) (September 2024)



Literary reputations are elusive things, they come and go, sometimes from adulation to ridicule, but the person behind the reputation is more elusive still.

This mundane observation came to me when I read George Plimpton's account of an evening spent with Norman Mailer, who had a reputation for manly courage born with the sensational debut of the rugged *The Naked and the Dead*.

Years later, when Mailer and Plimpton were together at a garden party where one of the diversions was a bell-ringing contest, one academic-looking as if he'd come straight from a classroom—casually swung the hammer, rang the bell on his first attempt, wandered off and was lost to history.

In full view of history, however, Mailer, stung into action, took a mighty swipe and achieved a Mr. Average which, stinging even more, led to repeated attempts which got no higher and declined toward Mr. Henpecked as tiredness overtook irritation.

What made this incident personal for me was that a friend in London, Bob Hugill, traveled drunkenly with Mailer in a taxi which ended with Mailer offering to fight the driver in a difference of opinion over the fare. By then Mailer had acquired a reputation in London as a quite dangerous man when roused yet Bob's wisp of a wife, Beryl, all of 5' 4" and 110 lbs was astonished to find how easy it was to hold him in check as he struggled to take off his coat so he could flatten the cab driver. He didn't get the coat off before the fare was settled—amicably and with a higher tip than the one originally proposed. To the world at large, however, he remained a man to be wary of.

But, after reading Plimpton, I wonder if that hammer scale should have been expanded to include Mr. Bag of Wind.

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