

Mailer's way

Book tour's abrupt halt triggers few answers

By John Blades
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

In Norman Mailer's raging-bull days, public misconduct was more or less expected of him. Even though he's older, wiser and allegedly a lot tamer, Mailer still had a rude surprise last week for a Chicago radio host and a bookstore proprietor, not to mention all the admirers who'd hoped to catch the ex-devil in the flesh.

Shortly before he was due in Chicago to boost his latest book, "Oswald's Tale," the 72-year-old Mailer bailed out. "I understand he had a tiff with his publisher [Random House]," said one source, "and wanted to put his foot down. He was showing his petulance or anger or whatever by canceling the tour."

That wasn't the corporate line at Random House, however, where Carol Schneider, vice president of publicity, said: "This wasn't any arm-wrestling contest between a writer and his publisher. It was just too much for him. There's a chance he may come back in June, but I can't promise he will. He doesn't like to be away from his writing for long."

Mailer had agreed to media interviews in Chicago for his new book, a non-fiction exploration of the mind and motives of JFK assassin Lee Harvey Oswald. But after aborting his promotional mission, he wasn't available for comment on Oswald or anything else, even by long distance. "He's not comfortable with phone interviews," said a Random House publicist.

Whatever the reasons, Mailer's no-show was a jolt to Milton Rosenberg, who was left with two hours to fill on his WGN "Extension 720" program on May 11, and Pat Peterson, co-owner of Barbara's Bookstore, who had been promoting Mailer's Friday reading for two months.

Rosenberg, who'd always found Mailer "gracious and pleasant" in previous appearances on his program, said: "Of course, it was a disappointment. I was upset or annoyed for about 15 minutes, but

Literary notes

you can't live or die by things like that."

Rosenberg was able to quickly assemble a panel of journalists for a general news review. Pat Peterson, however, had nobody to sub for Mailer at her bookstore, 1350 N. Wells St.

"But we must've gotten the word out, because there was no mob scene," said Peterson, who said she wasn't told why Mailer dropped out of his tour. "Only 20 people wandered in, and they were disappointed but not angry."

Of all the Mailer fans, perhaps the most stricken was Peterson herself: "This was a once-in-a-career event for me. ... When Random House called last winter to set this event up, we were astonished and really proud. So, yeah, you could say it was a let-down."

Nobody expects poets to live on poverty wages anymore, and with the superabundance of prizes, grants, fellowships and academic sinecures their living standard has improved dramatically. For the latest evidence, there are A.R. Ammons and Thomas Lux, recently gifted with two of poetry's biggest jackpots.

Ammons, winner of the 1994 National Book Award for "Garbage," just added the \$75,000 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize to his list of honors. A poetry professor at Cornell University, Ammons has written more than two dozen collections.

Joseph Parisi, editor of Poetry magazine and chairman of the selection committee, said Ammons' "knowledge of the natural sciences ... infuses his moving lines with a sense of wonder at the complexity of the world and humankind's place in the universe."

Ammons will formally accept the prize, sponsored by the Modern Poetry Association, publisher of Poetry magazine, in a ceremony June 2 at the Newberry Library.

Somewhat lower on the prestige



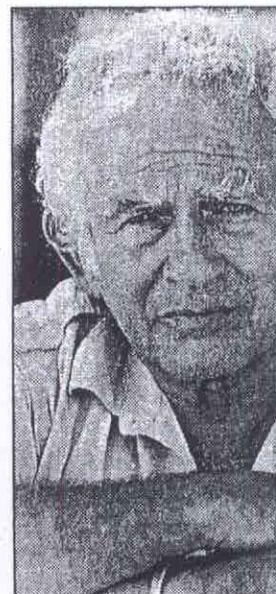
A.R. Ammons won the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize sponsored by the Modern Poetry Association.

and monetary scale, there's the \$50,000 Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award, which this year went to Thomas Lux, for his sixth and most recent collection, "Split Horizon." Lux, who teaches writing at Sarah Lawrence College, was cited for "poetry of unshed tears, hard-edged and adult."

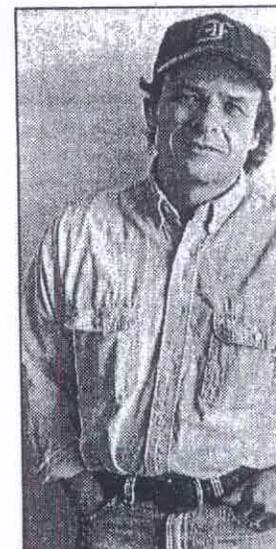
In the realm of fiction, Richard Ford came up winner of this year's \$25,000 Rea Award for the Short Story. The author of one volume of short fiction, "Rock Springs," and four novels, Ford was commended for exemplary stories of "unfailing grace [and] intellectual beauty."

Also rewarded for his work in short stories was Larry Woidwode, a former Chicago area resident, who won \$5,000 and the Award of Merit Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Singled out for the Society of Midland Authors' 1994 awards were seven writers, each of whom received \$300 at the Chicago area group's Tuesday dinner: Robert Hellenga in fiction for "The Sixteen Pleasures"; Carl Smith, non-fiction, "Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief"; Scott Sandoe, drama, "Points of Deviation"; Nelson Peery, biography, "Black



The cancellation of Norman Mailer's book tour left a void at several of Chicago venues in the city.



Novelist Tim O'Brien won the James Fenimore Cooper Award for "In the Lake of the Woods."

"Fire"; George Bilgere, poetry, "Going"; Janet Hickman, fiction, "Jerico"; and Milton O'Brien, juvenile non-fiction, "Us Out."

The society's lifetime awards went to Slam and Phyllis Whitney. In a prize for literary criticism given to Mark Krupnik, Friends of Literature Chicago area literary tion.

Tim O'Brien was the James Fenimore Cooper Award for "In the Lake of the Woods" honor given biannually for a novel on American history.