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**Norman Podhoretz.** *Ex-Friends: Falling Out with Allen Ginsberg, Lionel and Diana Trilling, Lillian Hellman, Hannah Arendt, and Norman Mailer.* New York: The Free Press, 1999. 244 pp.

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**Reviewed by** Nathan Abrams (Bangor University)

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## Stormin' Norman Strikes Back

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Like the *Return of the Jedi*, Norman Podhoretz, erstwhile editor of *Commentary* and doyen of neoconservatism, strikes back with the third installment of his autobiography. *Ex-Friends* completes the trilogy and follows on from where *Making It* and *Breaking Ranks* left off. The publicity blurb states its subtitle as the "Civil Wars of the New York Intellectuals" (although the book itself does not), and so the book may just as well be called 'Star Wars.'

Writing a biography of Norman Podhoretz is a difficult task. While his predecessor at *Commentary*, Elliot Cohen, left no memoir or autobiography, those of Podhoretz have proliferated, which greatly interfere with one's own attempts to map his life. Together the Podhoretz trilogy form a hagiography in which Podhoretz has pedestaled himself in what has been noted as a most self-congratulatory and pietistic tone. The same may be said for *Ex-Friends*. With no sense of irony he later includes himself as one of those who should be praised for "their refusal to worship the God of Success" (p. 141). In stark contrast, he describes poet Allen Ginsberg as a "relentless" "self-promoter" (p. 33). Obviously he is projecting here and certainly, he cannot be considered one of

those who refused to worship. John Ehrman put it rather tamely when he noted, "Podhoretz undoubtedly has a talent for self-promotion." [1]

If you have read Podhoretz's previous volumes and know about his life then *Ex Friends* will probably tell you nothing new, but it will confirm that Podhoretz's lifetime obsession has been with success. He has spent his lifetime constantly trying to prove himself. But why after forty years is he still trying to do so when I am sure that no one doubts his considerable achievements as editor of *Commentary*? He opens with a typically arrogant statement, "I have often said that if I wish to name-drop, I have only to list my ex-friends" (p. 1). Thereafter, this volume is littered throughout with references to his achievements. Podhoretz can't resist pointing to his success in a succession of superlatives: "Goodman's] *Growing Up Absurd*, [was] published in the early 1960s with more than a little help from me" (p. 20); "Lionel Trilling once said that I was the best student he ever had" (p. 57). Elsewhere he states, "I contributed mightily to the spread of a radical critique... of 'the ideals of the American Dream.'" (p. 78); "she [Arendt] consistently told me how 'excellent' the magazine had become since I had taken it over" (p. 145). Thus Podhoretz constantly blows his own trumpet,

as if he needs to do so when he has a considerable cohort of fellow neoconservatives who would happily do it for him.

His opening claim, however, leads one to a burning question: why did Podhoretz choose these six ex-friends when he has had many so many others? He claims to have chosen them because “all of them were once, and for a considerable period of time, very close to me” and incidentally they “were all Jewish in one way or another” (p. 1). Surely, though, he had one eye on the publishing market and his potential audience. Podhoretz has left behind him a string of broken friendships all of which would have made interesting subject matter for this book. But would his splits with Jason Epstein, Robert Brustein, or Elliot Abrams, say, have received so much attention from a general readership?

Podhoretz’s works have been typically one-sided and here we have more of the same; in which case, how are we to judge his version of events? Those, like me, too young to have directly experienced many of the events in question would have to do a vast amount of work to validate his claims. In one instance, Podhoretz’s memory obviously fails him (he later even admits, “Memories are short” (p. 174), but of course not in reference to his own). He dates Irving Howe’s now famous article “The New York Intellectuals” to the early 1970s when it was actually published in 1968 (p. 12). Although it is a minor detail in some respects how can we trust him further? Indeed, the publicity blurb states: “Enemies are more honest than friends.” But with the exception of Mailer, none of his subjects can answer him back, for they are all dead. So how can we check Podhoretz’s honesty? Perhaps this was one of the main reasons for guiding his choice of subjects.

Underlying Podhoretz’s accounts of ex-friendships one detects a rather puritanical streak. In his chapters on Ginsberg and Mailer he mentions that he had no use for drugs (with the exception of alcohol), which they both used frequently. Then there was sex. When discussing the work of Mailer, Podhoretz writes, “I thought Mailer made far too much of sex in his writing” (p. 195). It seems that anal sex in particular bothered him. He was embarrassed by Mailer’s attribution of “a veritably metaphysical significance to the act of heterosexual anal penetration in ‘The Time of Her Time’” (p. 196). Podhoretz’s animus against Ginsberg, therefore, may have been due more to Ginsberg’s homosexuality than to his politics. Podhoretz deems this subject worthy of several pages of consideration (pp. 35-38), rather than discussing his and

Ginsberg’s considerable political differences. Later both he and his wife would publish notorious and homophobic rants against homosexuality. [2]

Then there is his view of women. When writing about Hellman in particular, and to a lesser extent Arendt and Diana Trilling, there seems to be a compulsive need to mention their sex lives, affairs, and lovers. When describing Mary McCarthy, for example, he can’t resist mentioning that Philip Rahv was her lover or that she was “our leading bitch intellectual” (p. 146). Indeed, running throughout the volume is a rather salacious and bitchy tone. With regards to Diana he wrote: “Although I still consult Lionel’s writings often and although I think about him a lot, always with admiration, gratitude, and indeed love, the best I can do with Diana is occasionally to remember her fondly. But not, in all truth, all that often or all that much” (p. 102). This is his last word on the subject.

Although he would be loath to admit it, Podhoretz irritated many brilliant *Commentary* contributors, to the journal’s eternal detriment. Had he remained friendly with individuals like the ones he writes about here, *Commentary* might still be what it once was rather than a relic of the magazine it had been in the 1950s and 1960s. In truth, *Ex-Friends* only really becomes interesting when he describes in detail his various run-ins as an editor for *Commentary*, particularly the rejection of Arendt’s “Reflections on Little Rock” and her series of articles for *The New Yorker* that were later revised and compiled as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking, 1963). His chapter on Mailer, combining sexual, literary, and political criticism, is rather compelling.

Overall, however, one gets the feeling that Podhoretz has tended to use his subjects as a pretext for treading over old ground about his own beliefs, viz. his chapter on Arendt, which is more about the evolution of his feelings towards Israel than it is about his relationship with her. This possibly explains the reasons behind his selection, using individuals to defend aspects of his own philosophy: for Ginsberg read anti-New Left promiscuity and homophobia; the Trillings are there to justify his various political shifts; Hellman his anticommunism; and Mailer his views on sex and sexual promiscuity.

Together, *-Ex-Friends* and the two previous volumes have constructed a picture of Podhoretz’s life that any biographer will find hard to undo. As an example of this, *Ex-Friends* is useful, perhaps not as a direct source for detailing Podhoretz’s life and works, but as an insight into

his mentality and thought. And just like George Lucas, a fourth installment of Podhoretz's Star Wars has just been published, *My Love Affair with America*, possibly to tap into a new audience who have not yet heard of Mr. Podhoretz.

Notes:

- [1]. John Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism*, p. 42.
- [2]. Norman Podhoretz, "The Culture of Appeasement," *Harper's* (October 1977); Midge Decter, "The Boys on the Beach," *Commentary* 70:3 (September 1980).

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