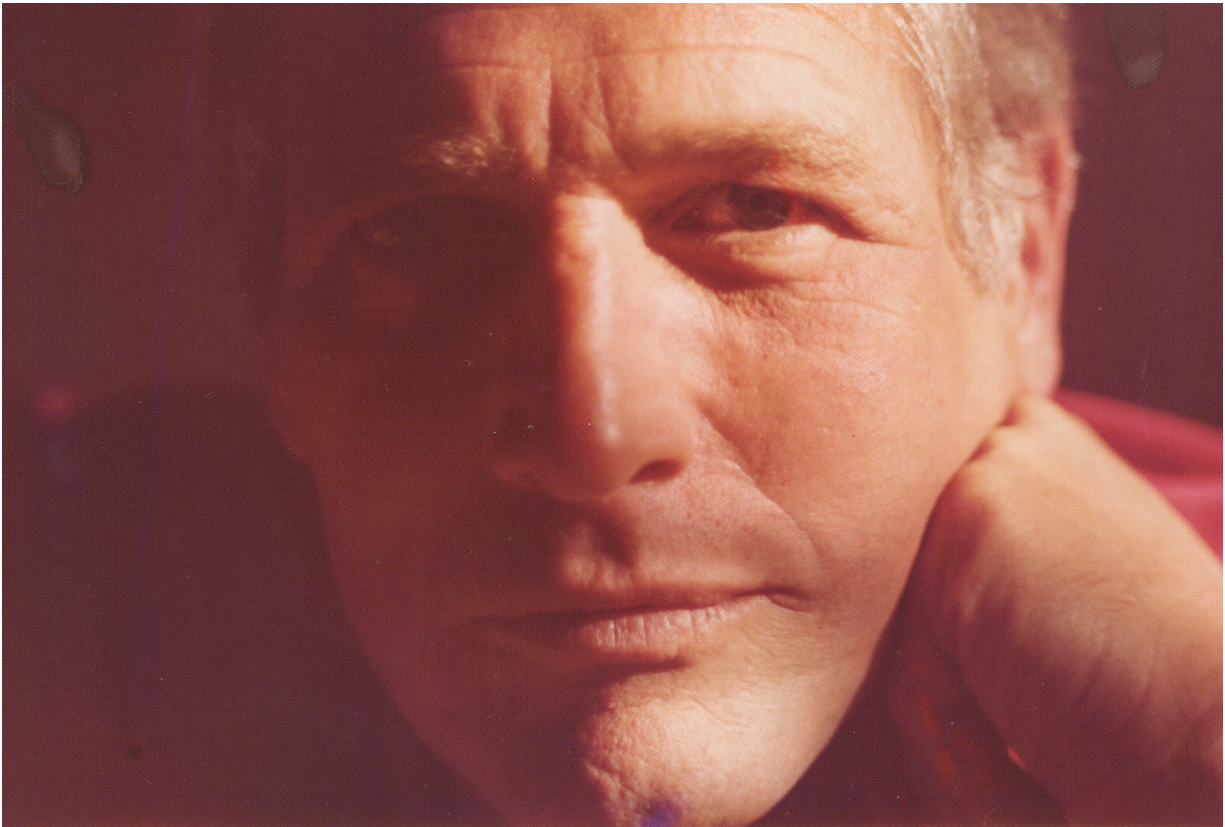
A black and white close-up portrait of Paul Newman. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. His right hand is raised to his face, with his fingers spread across his forehead and cheek, partially obscuring his features. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of his skin and the lines on his face. The background is dark and indistinct.

PAUL NEWMAN
THE EXTRAORDINARY LIFE OF
AN ORDINARY MAN

A MEMOIR



THE
EXTRAORDINARY LIFE
OF AN
ORDINARY MAN

· A MEMOIR ·

PAUL NEWMAN

BASED ON INTERVIEWS AND ORAL HISTORIES CONDUCTED BY

Stewart Stern

COMPILED AND EDITED BY

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Melissa Newman

AFTERWORD BY

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A select few names have been changed either due to inability to confirm a memory or to protect them from a subjective observation.

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A Note About the Authors

This book is dedicated to Stewart Henry Stern

March 22, 1922–February 2, 2015

*Success is what determines the difference between vision and
irresponsibility.*

*If I had to define “Newman” in the dictionary, I’d say: “One
who tries too hard.”*

—PAUL NEWMAN, UNPUBLISHED INTERVIEWS, 1991



PAUL NEWMAN, CIRCA
1929

FOREWORD

In September of 1986, the year he embarked on this project, an article in *The New York Times* described Paul Newman as “a lean 5-foot-11.”

A gossip columnist in the *New York Post* countered that “Anyone who has met Paul face to face says he has never hit 5-foot-11 except in heels” and offered a challenge: “\$1,000 to Newman’s favorite charity or political candidate for every inch he measures over 5-foot-8...barefoot.” Relishing the opportunity to stick it to Page Six, our dad matched it, upped the ante times a hundred and purchased some inversion boots so he could hang upside down for good measure. To our knowledge, the challenge was dropped.

In 1986 we can say with reasonable certainty he measured a solid 5-foot-10. Both papers were wrong.

He had integrity. He also had an abiding preference for privacy, and always felt awkward in interviews. The fact that our father ever considered the book you now hold in your hands seems completely weird to us, but he did keep at it for five years. An offering to the offspring is how he originally thought of it. That and maybe a way to “set the public record straight” after being dogged most of his life by the tabloids. Part confessional, part self-analysis, it’s full of the kinds of revelations that, had they been shared with us sooner, might have made for some deeply meaningful conversations about relationships, identity, luck, and art, and, most likely, some pretty uncomfortable family dinners.

He decided the only possible choice of collaborator would be Stewart Stern, a dear friend, faithful keeper of family secrets, and a breathtaking writer. Probably best known for his screenplay of *Rebel Without a Cause*, he had also penned multiple screenplays for projects that involved both Paul and his second wife, Joanne.

Stewart's adoration of both of them, their collective children, and their children's children made him the kind of adopted relative who intertwined blissfully with the family DNA. Starting in 1986 he threw himself into this new project, passing along the subject's insistence that all the interviewees be as bluntly truthful as they could manage. Close friends and relatives were hired to transcribe. By 1991, however, he and our father seemed to have completely overwhelmed themselves out of it. They were up to their eyeballs in material.

Not much was said after that. After a year's illness (and almost one year exactly from his final win at Lime Rock race track), our father passed away in 2008. He was eighty-three. For us, for what seemed an eternity, the world stopped. There was the inevitable confusion and chaos to be dealt with, and the fog of grief.

Nearly a decade crawled by. Once in a while, the topic of the transcripts would come up. Details were hazy. There had been rumors of a bonfire. Stewart, who at ninety-two was now coming to the end of his own life journey, was desperate to know what happened to them. He wanted them archived at least for posterity. Before the mystery could be solved, he was gone.

We assumed the transcripts were floating around somewhere. Or perhaps not. We wanted to see them...or did we, really? In 2019 we stumbled upon some ancillary interviews in locked file cabinets that had migrated to the damp basement of the family house in Connecticut. Sometime later our friend, producer Emily Wachtel, found the entirety of our father's transcripts as she was archiving a family storage unit. A cursory peek turned into a year-long reading project, and what was revealed felt raw and personal. Fourteen thousand pages in, she suggested it might be interesting to try to finish what was started.

You can read about private jets and red carpets elsewhere. This is definitely not that. Instead, it's sort of a self-dissection, a picking apart of feelings, motives, and motivations, augmented by a Greek chorus of other voices and opinions, relatives, Navy buddies, and fellow artists. One overriding theme is the chronic insecurity which will be familiar to so many artists. Objectivity is fickle. It's difficult for some people to understand, given all that success, how that sense of doubt could be so relentless. Here was someone who suspected himself an impostor, an ordinary man with an extraordinary face and luck on his side, achieving far beyond what he'd set out to do. He always felt it was tenacity, not talent, that saw him through. There were some who dismissed him, but luckily there were also plenty who recognized something remarkable in him long before he did.

And finally, there is the public fairy tale of two Hollywood stars and their blissfully uncomplicated fifty-year marriage, which, besides being bogus, seems unfair to anyone, famous or not, who has ever committed to a romantic relationship. Acknowledge that there were two families, half siblings, and other collateral damage and suddenly the story becomes far more relatable. The mood in the house was unstable, stormy one minute, joyous the next. The truth ultimately gives more credit to the flesh-and-blood couple who weathered all of that drama and betrayal and came out on the other side, battle-scarred but still inexorably intertwined.

It's a cliché for fathers of a certain vintage to be distant or unknowable. Ours was the inevitable sequel to his own frustrated father and all the preceding generations that flailed away at parenting with little or no guidance. This book looks backward from a moment in time. To his lasting credit, our father continued to evolve after these interviews were conducted, contributing some of the best of himself, emotionally, artistically, and altruistically all the way to the end. To suddenly have at our fingertips this encyclopedia of his thoughts and motivations, his conflicts...his context, has been, shall we say, deep. That he speaks about wanting us to know everything is beyond moving.

Melissa Newman

INTRODUCTION

Let's see if we can write a first chapter, then try that with a second chapter, then a third, then a fourth and a fifth...Let's see now: we've got *that* covered, we've got *this* covered—we've got the attitude down, the creation, the drinking and all of the humor and whatever the morality is.

The most ironic thing of all is that one could say at the beginning, like writers do in some biographies, "This is the boy who accomplished this and then that and then grew up to be the prime minister. And now we'll go back and look at the details of how that happened."

But it turns out that this book is just the story of a little boy who became a decoration for his mother, a decoration for her house, admired for his decorative nature. If he had been an ugly child, his mother would not have given him the time of day. If he had had a limp, or an eyelid that drooped, and she stopped to comfort that small invalid beside her, it would have been to satisfy her own sense of needing to comfort something—but nothing actually to do with the boy.

And the boy became so offended by the artificiality of it, and the fact that it did not relate or connect to him in any way, that the core of this kid finally said, "Jesus Christ, take it, it's yours! I'm going to save what's left of me over here."

Then the boy with the decoration just ran away with the football. He was getting everything. He was eating and living well, and he was leaving the

the core—the orphan, if you will—in the dust.

But the orphan kept running to catch up with that decorative little shit he so despised, even as the decorative little shit was getting away with all the honors, doing all the plays, grabbing all the encomiums and the praise, and the orphan kept losing ground. He never did catch up until the last few years, and then he said, “Whoa. Wait a second. Let me at least look around and see if I can make any sense out of this.”

I was my mother’s Pinocchio, the one that went wrong.

And I’m still trying today to disentangle my own heart and wants from everyone else around me who are certain they know the answers.

This book came out of the struggle to try and explain it all to my kids. I was thought of as distant and reserved; well, that happened not because other people’s arms were too long but because mine were too short. And as their arms became longer and longer, my own became shorter and shorter: it was a sense of suffocation that happened to me.

I want to leave some kind of record that sets things straight, pokes holes in the mythology that’s sprung up around me, destroys some of the legends, and keeps the piranhas off. Something that documents the time I was on this planet with some kind of accuracy. Probably, in my dotage, I’ll go over it and create an autobiography with some semblance of truth. Because what exists on the record now has no bearing at all on the truth.

That’s all I really want to do.

I'm in my Connecticut house, in the library, sitting by the fire on a formal little couch. I just smoked a joint and remembered with absolute clarity the whole map of my boyhood hometown, Shaker Heights, Ohio. It's all there to be remembered, things I thought were dead and buried, things I never thought I'd recall...

I was born there in 1925. Shaker Heights then was the Cleveland suburb that every other American suburb aspired to become. It was the standard by which other affluent places measured themselves. We lived in a spacious, three-story home on Brighton Road, which was far from the wealthiest stretch in the neighborhood, but we were certainly well-to-do. My father, Arthur, and his brother, Joe (known as J.S., and in his spare time a prolific author of popular doggerel), ran the Newman-Stern sporting-goods company from an imposing corner building downtown; in its category, it was second only to New York's original Abercrombie & Fitch.

Having grown up in Shaker Heights, I can still remember the horse-drawn carriages that pulled the milk wagons or the blocks of ice. Our public schools were considered the best in the United States. There were hundreds of acres of woods, and five little lakes where we'd fish and explore. Safety was never an issue; in summertime, you could spend four days in those woods and nothing would happen to harm you. The most raucous it got was when we kids had a "war"; we'd snatch people's tomato-plant stakes and throw them as spears, defending ourselves with garbage-can lids. It was like a ritual from Papua New Guinea.

All the families were lily white; no foreigners, no Black people, either, amid the quiet streets and estates. The Newmans may have been the first

Jewish family to penetrate Brighton Road. But we were really just like anyone else; we'd hold makeshift circuses in our backyard, selling lemonade, doing fancy tricks on our swings. Young kids my age and that of my older brother, Art Jr., would come to my house and our father would entertain them by telling them made-up stories, starring his creations the ever-adventurous Terry Berry Boys. He'd recount them as a serial, a different chapter every night. And when he was finished, he'd make believe he was a scary animal, and all the neighborhood kids would jump on top of him and wrestle him. He'd cover up, like a boxer; then it would just be over. "That's the end, guys," he'd say, and the children would be ushered back to their own houses while Art and I headed to bed. Of course, Art would always find the time to kick the bejesus out of me, often in what we called "the club"—actually our home's third-floor "attic," where we shared a playroom.

He'd delight in sitting on my back, taking hold of my chin and seeing just how far he could bend back my neck. I think he felt I deserved it, because he thought I was getting all the attention from our mother, Tress, all of her devotion, and that he didn't get more than crumbs. The big difference between Arthur and me was that our different relationships with our mother didn't ultimately bother him. Arthur always thought that of the choices available to him, God had put him in a place where nothing could be better. My brother chose to remember the good things from our childhood, while I best recall the failures and the things that didn't go right.

We spent a lot of time up in our playroom; it's where we did our homework. Art practiced his drums there, too, while I played records on the Victrola and sat in a comfortable chair reading lots of comic books. Our "club" was more congenial than our family's fancy living room downstairs, where no one really did any living. You might say my sense of "decoration" began right there in that carefully furnished showplace. My mother took great pride in how that living room looked; to me, her taste was chilly, sort of what today might be called "Bloomingdale's Modern." Everything was manicured; everything was designed for appearance, not comfort. Early on, she decided to lay down all-black carpeting—and then bought herself a

white Spitz dog because it looked great on the carpet. Of course, whenever the dog moved, he left a trail of white fur.



PAUL AND ARTHUR JR., CIRCA
1929

Next to the living room was a proper dining room, where for years we ate virtually all our meals together; there was rarely any conversation, and the evenings at the table could be painful. Our dining table was inlaid, and always covered with a linen tablecloth. It would be set each night with wonderful china. We'd be sitting there, my father always the last to arrive. He often wore a jacket and tie, though if he'd had the time to change after work, sometimes a bathrobe. Although we had a maid, my mother would

pass the plates around herself, often serving some very simply cooked meat, vegetables, and mashed potatoes. Before beginning, there'd usually be some sort of toast offered by my father; my brother and I would clink our water glasses.

My mother eventually decided she didn't want to keep ironing that linen tablecloth, so she had us move to the much smaller breakfast room off the kitchen for our meals. My father disagreed with that shift, so he continued to eat in the dining room, alone. Dessert would be pudding or cake—my mother was a fine baker—and after that Father would say “Excuse me” and go upstairs to read (he never tired of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which he went through end to end more than once) or to take a nap. Art and I would help with the dishes, then go up to our playroom, cook a batch of popcorn, and drink iced tea or pop.

It was also in the dining room that Art and I would bang our heads against the wall. Literally. We did it in secret until the dent got big enough for my parents to notice. This was not some tippy-toe banging; this was a serious whacking that took down the plaster behind the wall covering. We must have knocked our fucking brains out. It was our own Wailing Wall. I couldn't take my rage out on anybody my size, so I took it out against the wall. Today, it makes me laugh to think of us—these two little guys tapping each other on the shoulder, saying: “My turn.”...“Oh, after you!” Art was bigger, so he probably got the first shot. Since his head was about six inches higher than mine, we never banged at exactly the same spot. (Years later, when I came home after World War II, I checked on the wall and was amazed to see the huge ruptures.)

Our house contained the sounds of constant warfare. It could be a quiet war, like the chunking of knives in human flesh, as surreptitious and stalking as commandos moving silently through the night. It could also be explosive and noisy, which was usually my mother erupting. Or threatening to erupt. We'd sit there waiting for something to go wrong, for somebody to fall off the eggshells and run, waiting for a mistake and the explosion to follow. We'd be in bed, and we'd hear our parents fighting, hollering at each other. I'd hear things breaking. There was one fight where my mother

took a picture down from the wall and broke it over the top of my father's head. It was a pastel of nymphs cavorting nude (which I had examined many times with a magnifying glass). It hung right over the sofa in the living room. My father must have been left walking around with the frame around his shoulders. I'm certain there'd been serious grief, but all I see in my head now are cartoon images of these things.



ARTHUR AND PAUL IN THE MID-
1930S

When I was five years old, America entered its Great Depression. A full 85 percent of the sporting-goods stores in the country went bust in those years, and my father seemed in the depths of despair. We were a luxury store at a time when no one was buying luxury items. Newman-Stern would hold a sale, and whether it was successful or not would determine whether we'd stay open.

At one point, the brothers Newman ran out of cash; I remember my father going to Chicago and getting the Spalding and Wilson companies to extend him \$250,000 worth of merchandise on consignment; my dad had such a fine reputation for integrity, the manufacturers knew they'd eventually get paid back for their goods. It was an extraordinary testament to my dad and my uncle Joe and their code of doing business that they survived the Depression financially intact.

All of us helped out. My father would never let my mother work, but she still let the maid go—and he was furious about this. My mother said, “I’ll clean, and I’ll take the money I was paying the maid and buy the kind of furniture I want.” And she did. She took on all the washing, the mangling, the ironing, purchased new furnishings or reupholstered the old furniture herself, even sewed the drapes and valances. (It was a great source of pride, and a triumph of keeping up appearances, that my father never let our membership lapse at the Jewish country club, the Oakwood.)

I began working in the Newman-Stern stockroom, and as I got a little older, I was moved to the sales floor. I sold all kinds of things: binoculars, balls, tennis gear. I was a good salesman, an honest salesman. If I was selling a guy a bowling ball and he said, “Golly, I really don’t know if I need a new bowling ball,” I’d say, “If you don’t need it, don’t buy it.” I enjoyed working there.

Following World War II, Newman-Stern also carried army surplus. A guy had dropped by peddling crates of leftover Norden bombsights, the futuristic, once-top-secret military device that allowed US planes to accurately drop their payloads on Germany and Japan. This guy couldn’t unload his cumbersome inventory, understandably. You’d see these elaborate contraptions and think, “What can anyone use this thing for?” But

Uncle Joe (who'd studied applied science while in college) and my father began taking the machines apart and figured out the puzzle. There was a segment of the bombsight where if you pushed a little button, a powerful electric motor turned on, and with a little improvisation you could have yourself a relatively inexpensive automatic garage-door opener. There were rheostats that could be repurposed for many critical household uses, and even an early analog computer was built in.

The brothers took a full-page ad in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* describing how each of the bombsight's thirty-six separate components might be repurposed. For three or four days, you couldn't fight your way into our store. Cleveland's renowned Case School called and bought two entire units for \$2,800 apiece—a tremendous amount of money then. It was bedlam—maybe \$200,000 in revenue for a few days.

Uncle Joe and my father were ebullient. It wasn't so much the money, but that they had taken something that had been offered around everywhere and only they had the vision to see its possibilities. They'd invented a huge success. This was the romance of retailing. And the brothers Newman were romantics.

It hadn't started that way, certainly not for my father. When he was a young man, my father wanted to be a writer; it was really all he wanted to do. Not long after returning from his service in World War I, he became the youngest reporter ever hired by the *Cleveland Press*. But brother Joe seduced him into joining his fledgling sporting-goods business, which originally had specialized in selling electrical-experiment kits for boys as well as more sophisticated microphones, transmitters, and telegraphs. (The big move to sporting goods came after the government banned private telegraphy equipment sales following America's declaration of war on the Kaiser in 1917.) Joe was the firm's president, my father the secretary-treasurer, and he fell under the shadow of my uncle. He couldn't find a way out—he was just starting a family, he had responsibilities, and he was an honorable man. He couldn't possibly place all the financial burden on his young wife, and Arthur Newman Sr. never believed in divorce.



ARTHUR NEWMAN SR. AT HIS OFFICE IN
1938

He became a prisoner: imprisoned by the store, imprisoned by his dick, with no time to really think through his decisions.

I don't think his work ultimately pleased him. I don't think his castle pleased him. And I don't think his family pleased him, either.

Teresa Fetzko, my mother, was a beautiful young woman who immigrated here with her family from Eastern Europe (what was then the disintegrating Austro-Hungarian Empire, the part we now call Slovakia). She arrived not

long after the turn of the twentieth century, practically a girl, practically in rags. Her family was very poor, and that contributed to my mother's everlasting fear of losing everything. She claimed her father was a professor, but in fact he was a bricklayer. Her own mother had died when she was still a child, and at sixteen she married a young guy, but divorced him shortly afterwards because, she claimed, he abused her.

When my father met her, she was working as a ticket taker at the Alhambra Theatre in Cleveland. Going out with my father, who was far more accomplished than she was, she decided to convert from Roman Catholicism to the relatively less fraught (and perhaps less familiar to her beau's Jewish family) Christian Science. She soon became pregnant by my father, and despite a great deal of pressure from his family, the baby (my brother, Art Jr.) was indeed born and Arthur Sr. and Tress married sometime later. My father did so under duress, and I suspect had he not been such an honorable man, he would have left her in a minute. I'm not sure if my mother simply loved him greatly, abhorred abortion, or had other reasons for wedlock, but the two of them managed to settle down together. I was born just about a year after Art Jr., a pending birth that apparently prompted considerable discussion about alternative options.

The Newman relatives, from the beginning, had an attitude about Tress for many reasons. Because she was a Gentile and they were Jews, even if mostly nonpracticing ones. Because she was gorgeous. Because they considered her a hussy ("Wasn't she a divorcée?"), a gold digger, and below their social and educational station (ironic, given that only one generation removed, the Newmans themselves were itinerant peddlers and tinkers). They viewed my mother's people as an embarrassment. How inferior that must have made her feel; how left out it must have made him feel!

My father was basically a shy man who never, in my memory, mingled with his wife's family. My mother took my brother and me every other week to visit our dour and silent grandfather (where we were fed his wife's wonderful chicken soup), but my father never came along; I think he met them only twice. I also think my father was angry at us for going, because we always visited our grandparents on a Sunday; my father worked six days

a week, and our trips left him home alone. Sunday, in fact, was less happy for him than any other day of the week. Still, my father didn't want anything to do with them; I don't even know if he ever allowed them to set foot in our house. They were the poor relations.

It's probably not surprising, then, that my mother became a very private woman with only a few close friends. And while she was devoted to her house and her husband, she ultimately despised them both, and mistrusted all of her family. She was the most suspicious woman who ever lived, hysterical with the thought she'd never be accepted or get her fair share of anything. And those suspicions followed us throughout our lives.

What my mother did embrace was her own consuming passions—although never the objects that created the passion. She came to love opera, for example, and would drag me to five-hour Wagner performances at Severance Hall; the music would provoke a soaring response in her. As a child, I might do something cute or come downstairs looking especially pretty, wearing little shorts and a sweater, and she reveled in the great flood of emotion that flowed through her, whether it was tears or joy. The child himself was not really seen, just as the opera was not really heard. What happened inside her head and heart had very little to do with the Wagner or with me, only with her own flood of ecstasy. You could only pray that she'd let go of you. And if the child managed to pull away or the music stopped, she wouldn't have missed either of them; her emotions would have continued, fed by their own size and scale, until they died of exhaustion. Only then might she have asked "Where is he?" or "Did someone turn off the music?"