

Ernest Hemingway's A Moveable Feast Still Satisfies

**by Jonathan Yardley, Washington
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SOMETIME in 1960 Ernest Hemingway completed a memoir of his years in Paris from 1921 to 1926. 'If the reader prefers,' he wrote in a three-paragraph preface, 'this book may be regarded as fiction. But there is always the chance that such a book of fiction may throw some light on what has been written as fact.' He did not submit the manuscript for publication, and the next year he was dead, a suicide at the age of 61 at his ranch [it wasn't actually a ranch] in Idaho.

Three years later the manuscript was published as *A Moveable Feast*. The title apparently was chosen by Hemingway's widow, Mary, who recalled words he had written to a friend in 1950: 'If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast.' Hemingway himself may have wanted to delay its publication so long as people mentioned in it were still alive (though such a kindness would have been uncharacteristic of him), but the essentially finished condition of the manuscript and the tone of the preface suggest that he wanted it brought out sooner or later.

It was the first of many posthumous publications that Mary Hemingway permitted – or, more accurately, actively encouraged – almost none of which did anything to enhance her husband's reputation, though presumably they enhanced the Hemingway estate's exchequer. *A Moveable Feast* is the one notable exception. Reviewers recognized it immediately as a valuable addition to its author's literary legacy, and readers gobbled it up. They still do; it enjoys steady sales and is often taught in high school and college.

I remember very well its publication in 1964, first in *Life* magazine – which still did things like that in those lost days – and then as a book. I was in my mid-20s. I had begun to have second thoughts about most of Hemingway's novels and deep reservations about his strutting literary persona, but the best of his short stories still seemed to me small masterpieces, and like virtually every young American at that time I was in thrall to Hemingway's famous prose style. Even though I made no effort to emulate it, I knew it was unique in American literature and believed that it was uniquely important.

To say that my judgments changed in the ensuing four decades is understatement. I came to regard Hemingway's style as more self-conscious and mannered than pure, declarative and spare; I realized that in almost all of his writing, he had little of interest to say; and I came to loathe his worst traits of personality and character – meanness that often turned into cruelty; self-centeredness; bluster and braggadocio; exaggerated,

showy machismo. Rereading *A Moveable Feast* in the late 1960s and again in the 1970s, I understood that in certain passages – those dealing with Gertrude Stein, Ford Madox Ford and, most particularly, F. Scott Fitzgerald – it is unforgivably vicious. I also came to understand that Morley Callaghan's *That Summer in Paris* (1963) is a better book about the same time and place, not least because Callaghan was a better man than Hemingway, more tolerant of and amused by other people's shortcomings.

Yet *A Moveable Feast* retained a certain irresistible charm. It was a privilege to be able to read about that time in Paris in the words of one of the most important literary expatriates, and it remains so to this day. Reading *A Moveable Feast* for the fourth (and probably not the last) time, I was struck by how much of it is still agreeable to me. It is actually possible to like Hemingway as he plays with his little son and his cat, fondly nicknamed Bumby and F. Puss, as he talks and travels with Hadley, the first of his four wives and the only one whom he may have loved, as he swaps gossip and stories with friends and rivals while knocking back impressive amounts of alcohol in the cafes and (when he could afford them) restaurants of Paris.

It was a famous time, by now deeply embedded in American legend, and much of the legend probably is fiction embroidered by nostalgia: the nostalgia of those few who were there, the nostalgia of those of us who wish we had been. In Hemingway's specific case, it was the nostalgia he felt for the days when he was writing at his peak. In the last years of his life, his creative gifts entirely deserted him – those posthumous novels are uniformly dreadful, embarrassments that he almost certainly would have refused to publish and should have burned – and he missed those gifts badly. Thus we find him writing here with pride and fondness for years in which he had very little money but a great deal of energy and determination:

'It was wonderful to walk down the long flights of stairs knowing that I'd had good luck working. I always worked until I had something done and I always stopped when I knew what was going to happen next. That way I could be sure of going on the next day. But sometimes when I was starting a new story and I could not get it going, I would sit in front of the fire and squeeze the peel of the little oranges into the edge of the flame and watch the sputter of blue that they made. I would stand and look out over the roofs of Paris and think, 'Do not worry. You have always written before and you will write now. All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know.' So finally I would write one true sentence, and then go on from there. . . . If I started to write elaborately . . . I found that I could cut that scrollwork or ornament out and throw it away and start with the first true simple declarative sentence I had written. Up in that room I decided that I would write one story about each thing that I knew about. I was trying to do this all the time I was writing, and it was good and severe discipline.'

Obviously Hemingway is sentimentalizing himself in this well-known passage, and the 'one true sentence' shtick [sic] has become tiresome over the years, but what

Hemingway describes is essentially true. However one may feel about the literary style that emerged from this protracted period of self-discipline and self-denial, there can be no disputing the seriousness of Hemingway's purpose or the dedication he brought to the task. This apprenticeship was undoubtedly hard. 'I knew the stories were good and someone would publish them finally at home,' he writes. 'When I stopped doing newspaper work I was sure the stories were going to be published. But every one I sent out came back.'

Too often the little family went hungry. In his 50s Hemingway tended to romanticize this – 'When you are twenty-five and are a natural heavyweight, missing a meal makes you very hungry. But it also sharpens all of your perceptions' – but it was entirely real and it must have been exceedingly difficult for Hadley, who seems to have had bottomless patience and good cheer. Whether Hemingway could have done what he did without her is at the very least open to question, and one senses from this book that he knew this better than anyone.

The gratitude that he expresses toward her is not often echoed elsewhere. One of Hemingway's least attractive traits was that he turned against just about everyone who helped him, the exceptions in *A Moveable Feast* being Hadley and Sylvia Beach, the generous proprietor of the famous Left Bank bookshop Shakespeare and Company. Ford, who helped him achieve early publication, is dismissed as a 'heavy, wheezing, ignoble presence'. He writes favorably about Stein at first – she, too, had encouraged him in his apprenticeship – but turns on her sharply when an overheard conversation underscores her lesbianism: 'She got to look like a Roman emperor and that was fine if you liked your women to look like Roman emperors.'

Homosexuality scared Hemingway, probably because he feared it in himself, and he used it as a real or imagined weapon against others, none to crueller effect than Scott Fitzgerald, who had been extraordinarily munificent to him, shouting his praises to his own editor, the celebrated Maxwell Perkins, who soon took Hemingway on. But when the two writers met in Paris, Hemingway saw Fitzgerald as 'a man then who looked like a boy with a face between handsome and pretty . . . and a delicate long-lipped Irish mouth that, on a girl, would have been the mouth of a beauty.' Then he slips in the dagger: 'The mouth worried you until you knew him and then it worried you more.' And 'he was cynical and funny and very jolly and charming and endearing, even if you were careful about anyone becoming endearing.'

It gets worse, in two famous scenes: one in which a drunken Fitzgerald persuades Hemingway to help him recover an abandoned automobile, a second in which a nervous Fitzgerald asks Hemingway to confirm that his apparatus is large enough to satisfy a woman. In both scenes Hemingway's disdain for and condescension toward Fitzgerald are palpable, and deeply unattractive. Yes, over the years he did some very good writing – the Nick Adams stories, *The Short Happy Life of Francis McComber*, *The Snows of*

Kilimanjaro, A Clean, Well-Lighted Place – and there is much of it in A Moveable Feast. It reminds us, though, of how spiteful he could be, and disloyal, and just plain heartless.