

Review of The Garden Of Eden

by **Matthew Bruccoli,**
Los Angeles Times, May 22, 1986.

FIERCELY protective of his contemporary reputation and his immortality, Ernest Hemingway blocked republication of his minor work and held back large quantities of unpublished work. The problem raised by the posthumous publication of 'The Garden of Eden' is not whether it should have been disinterred – everything Hemingway wrote possesses literary interest – but how it should be presented. Although nothing can alter the stature of his best work, the publication of his unfinished work without proper explanation can only damage unwary readers.

Because of Hemingway's drawing power, 'The Garden of Eden' was a success before publication: A Book-of-the-Month selection and excerpted in *Sports Illustrated* and *Life*. (As far as is known, proceeds from the book go to the Hemingway estate.) Despite the immediate success, this book is not usable by the wide audience it aims at. Non-specialists need and deserve an introduction telling what they are reading and how to read it. The only account of 'The Garden of Eden', in the Carlos Baker biography, reports that Hemingway started work in 1946 and wrote about 1,000 manuscript pages over a period of about two years.

This holograph draft treats two American couples in France, presumably during the '20s: the newlyweds Catherine and David Bourne at Le Grau-du-Roi (where Hemingway and Pauline spent their honeymoon in 1927) and Barbara and Nick Sheldon in Paris. Both couples engage in sex-role experiments involving their coiffures. According to Baker's reconstruction, Hemingway returned to the material in 1958, revising the manuscript into 48 typescript chapters of more than 200,000 words.

As published, 'The Garden of Eden' includes no explanation beyond an imprecise 74-word 'Publisher's Note' stipulating that 'In preparing the book for publication we have made some cuts in the manuscript and some routine copy-editing corrections. Beyond a very small number of minor interpolations for clarity and consistency, nothing has been added. In every significant respect the work is all the author's.' This explanation is worse than unhelpful: It is intentionally misleading. 'Papa's New Baby,' Eric Pooley's article in the April 28 issue of *New York* magazine, interviews Tom Jenks, the Scribner's editor responsible for the published text. (Charles Scribner Jr., chairman of Scribner's, had tried his hand at the editing. So did another in-house editor. Jenks was the third, finally successful editor. A Scribner's staff editor, he had not previously worked on Hemingway.) Jenks acknowledges that he cut the 247 printed pages from a 1,500-page typescript and that he entirely eliminated the Sheldon subplot, 'filling in the holes with lines lifted from other sections.' On the basis of this testimony, the assertion that 'In every significant respect the work is all the author's' is untrue. 'The Garden of Eden' is the product of an elaborate word game. The words are Hemingway's, but the book is not. Accordingly, the judgments on Hemingway in this review are provisional because the evidence has been tampered with.

The text now published has 30 chapters and about 72,000 words. The book opens with the Bournes on their honeymoon at Le Grau-du-Roi. David is a writer and has just published a well-received novel on his flying experience in World War I. Catherine, who is

wealthy, is eager to bankroll his writing; nevertheless, she resents the favorable reviews of his book. The Bournes do a good deal of drinking and talking about drinks; and Catherine discourses bafflingly about her sexual role preferences after her hair has been cropped and dyed near-white:

‘You are changing,’ she said. ‘Oh you are. You are. Yes you are and you’re my girl Catherine. Will you change and be my girl and let me take you?’

‘You’re Catherine.’

‘No. I’m Peter. You’re my wonderful Catherine. You’re my beautiful lovely Catherine. You were so good to change. Oh thank you, Catherine, so much. Please understand. Please know and understand. I’m going to make love to you forever.’

David and Catherine go to Spain and then to the Riviera where they are the only guests at a hotel near Cannes. She becomes increasingly unstable and recruits a beautiful young woman named Marita to join them. Both Bournes sleep with Marita, and she and David are drawn together by their concern for Catherine. David writes short stories about his boyhood in Africa, and the best writing in ‘The Garden of Eden’ is the account of his satisfaction and excitement in writing well. Catherine wants David to work on a journal of their sexual activities, which she plans to have published with illustrations by prominent artists. When he fails to show enthusiasm for her project, she burns his African stories and the reviews of his novel. Although David bitterly insists that he will never be able to recover the burned stories, he proceeds to rewrite and improve them. There ‘The Garden of Eden’ breaks off rather than ends.

Hemingway identified his theme as ‘the happiness of the Garden that a man must lose,’ but the characters and their actions are inconsequential. The best way – certainly the most generous way – to regard this work is as Hemingway’s warm-up exercise to get back into his old writing habits after the five-year lay-off following ‘For Whom the Bell Tolls.’ Apart from the amusement ‘The Garden of Eden’ may provide sex therapists, it raises a serious question about Hemingway’s later career.

Now that it is possible to assess the banked fiction, it is clear that Hemingway held it back because he knew that it wasn’t good enough for him. Those of us who grew up in the conviction that Ernest Hemingway represented American literature in his time can only grieve at the evidence of his artistic decline. Hemingway’s nonfiction remained excellent; and even in his late fiction, there is no marked deterioration of style. But the old reciprocity between style and material is depleted in ‘The Garden of Eden.’ What rotten luck for a writer who believed in the power of luck.