

Hemingway in Our Times

by Michael Reynolds,
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ON OCTOBER 18, 1925, an American writer, not yet turned twenty-six, was first reviewed in *The New York Times*, whose anonymous critic called his short stories 'lean, pleasing, with tough resilience', 'fibrous', 'athletic', 'fresh', 'hard', and 'clean', almost as if an athlete, not a book, was being reviewed. Hemingway had that effect on reviewers and readers alike. His prose style was dramatically different, demanding equally new ways of describing it. Not more than a handful of the newspaper's readers likely knew the Hemingway name, but the review of 'In Our Time' could not have been more propitious.

Thirty-six years later, July 2, 1961, when Ernest Hemingway committed suicide, the story was front-page news in major newspapers around the world. By that time he had published a shelf of books, 14 in all, and had been awarded every honor available to a writer. In the second paragraph of its obituary essay, *The Times* perhaps consciously echoed the promise of its book review a lifetime earlier, describing his 'lean and sinewy prose', and his 'laconic, understated dialogue.'

Between 1925 and 1961, Hemingway changed the face of American fiction and became a widely recognized public figure. One hundred years after his birth, he has become an American icon whose picture needs no identifying caption, for his face and his name, both ubiquitous, are the very definition of 'the writer' to many people. His rise from promising unknown writer to world-renowned figure was charted with clarion accuracy by *The New York Times*, in whose pages Hemingway's life and art were regular features. Here on the web, *The Times* has assembled the most important of those stories, making immediate what once took days toiling in libraries to locate, find on microfilm and print. Reading through these reviews and news stories, one not only learns a good deal about Ernest Hemingway, but also will take in a short cultural history of America in this century.

Though Hemingway lived in Paris from late 1921 to January 1930, rarely returning to the United States, he rose from Left Bank cult writer to best-selling American author in the space of only six years. His breakthrough novel, 'The Sun Also Rises' (1926), found him his New York publisher, Charles Scribner, and his editor, Maxwell Perkins, and made use of characters and narrative elements to which book reviewers were unaccustomed; in fact, the central dilemma facing the novel's protagonist, Jake Barnes — a war wound that left him without a phallus — was something the *Times*'s anonymous reviewer could not bring himself to mention, though the review itself was titled 'Marital Tragedy.' Instead, the reviewer said: 'Jake was wounded in the war in a manner that won for him a grandiose speech from the Italian General.'

Without ever giving anatomical details, Hemingway was able to convey Jake's condition using no unprintable words. As a writer, he was quickly learning how to make

the reader supply from his own dark heart the details which could not yet be published in America; making a virtue of necessity — he could not describe Jake's mutilation itself — he forced the reader to supply the word. In this way, the reader cannot keep the story at a distance.

At the end of October 1926, when the Times review appeared, Maxwell Perkins wrote to Hemingway that the reviews 'in the Times and Herald Tribune are perhaps the most important, and both are admirable — particularly the Herald Tribune. It is not that it speaks more highly of the book than the Times, but it shows better understanding, and it is a signed review, which gives it more authority. The author of it is Conrad Aiken.' Hemingway, in a return letter to Perkins wrote, 'The Times review I had to read to the end before I found whether they really liked it or not. Aiken seemed to like it. . . . It's funny to write a book that seems as tragic as that and have them take it for a jazz superficial story. If you went any deeper inside they couldn't read it because they would be crying all the time.'

When 'A Farewell to Arms' (1929) was published serially, and secured the reputation made by 'The Sun Also Rises' (which has been successful after what Hemingway described in a 1933 letter as a 'terrificly [sic] slow start'), authorities in Boston banned the Scribner magazine in which it appeared, which merited a news story on page two of The New York Times. When 'A Farewell to Arms' was published in book form, The Times reviewer made it clear that although he did not approve of this new form of fiction, it was effective, even if he found it difficult to praise a book in which the protagonist was a war deserter rather than a hero.

Nothing sacred remained for what The Times's reviewer called 'the Hemingway school' with its 'cold reportorial aloofness.' In Hemingway's 'new art' there was no human experience that was untouchable, no subject matter that was forbidden. As the reviewer noted, 'Caesarian operations and the mention of obscure anatomical parts' were now commonplace. Only certain words remained unprintable, and Scribner's duly forced Hemingway to use blanks in the printed text. Today historians, politicians, social scientists, and cultural studies quote from 'A Farewell to Arms' as a primary document when discussing the effects of World War I on America.

Throughout Hemingway's career, as he moved from unknown to revered author on a pedestal, reviews of his books that appeared in The Times accurately registered the general commercial and critical success of each title, as well as Hemingway's growing influence in American letters. The Times reviews track, as well, the evolution of public mores, for the reviewer's discomfort with the elements of 'A Farewell to Arms', for example, was matched by some readers' indignation — over a hundred people cancelled their subscription to Scribner's Magazine when it serialized the novel.

In the 1930's, when Hemingway moved into non-fiction with 'Death in the Afternoon' (1932) and 'Green Hills of Africa' (1935), neither his established audience nor the New York Times knew quite what to make of his new direction. His style, once so 'lean', was in 'Death in the Afternoon' sometimes so complex that it was difficult to 'distinguish the subordinate verbs from the principal one', according to the Times

reviewer (who compared the style to Henry James) and who found it equally difficult ‘to pass judgment on certain passages which in former days would have been called vulgar or even obscene.’

Yet even discussing Hemingway’s nonfiction, the reviewer notes ‘an important literary movement as typified in Mr. Hemingway’, which he sums up, briefly, as ‘anything but a shrinking from calling a spade a spade’ and indicates just how popular Hemingway was by referring to his fans as Hemingway ‘addicts.’ (But, ‘One’s guess is that it will be less successful than the novels in making new Hemingway addicts. Action and conversation, as the author himself suggests, are his best weapons.’)

Reviewers for *The Times* saw from the beginning that his style was new, forceful, and effective. By the mid-1930’s, just as the *Times* reviews indicate, a literary movement with Hemingway at its head was sweeping American writing.

Critical opinion on ‘*The Green Hills of Africa*’ was divided: John Chamberlain, reviewing the book for the daily paper, was not amused, calling the safari story ‘all attitude, all Byronic posturing.’ Charles Poore, a Hemingway admirer, wrote in the *Sunday Book Review* that the writing in ‘*Green Hills*’ was ‘fuller, richer, deeper’, yet expressed the hope that Hemingway could find a novel to write in the same manner. (Hemingway, in a 1933 letter to Perkins was contemptuous even of Chamberlain’s praise of his short story, ‘*After the Storm*’, published in ‘*Winner Take Nothing*’: ‘If I write about anybody — automatically they label that character as me — when I write about somebody that can’t possibly be me — as in *After the Storm*...Mr. Chamberlain says it is unusually imaginative or more imaginative than anything I’ve attempted.’)

The American reading public, in the midst of the Depression, was unenthusiastic about Hemingway’s nonfiction — ‘*Death in the Afternoon*’ and ‘*Green Hill of Africa*’ did not sell well, barely making back the money Hemingway had received as an advance. Both books seemed a bit precious: who could afford to go to Spain for the bull fights or to Africa for a ‘spot’ of lion hunting?

The *Times* reviewed every book Hemingway published, naturally reporting in its book pages on the newest publication by one of America’s most esteemed writers. (Hemingway himself, in a 1936 letter to Perkins, referred to critics as ‘all that N.Y. outfit that foam at the mouthe [sic] at the mention of fishing or shooting or the idea that I ever have any fun or any right to have any fun. By being in N.Y. last fall and seeing how it worked I know that they don’t read books. . . . and I have no more illusions on that score, nor any of fairness, nor any idea but what they want to put me out of business. Nor will I ever again notice them, mention them, pay any attention to them, nor read them.’)

Reflecting that Hemingway was perhaps America’s most famous writer, a writer made famous, in part, by the newness — and newsworthiness — of his writing style, *The Times*, off the book pages, traced Hemingway’s rise as a public figure. According to those who knew him well, Hemingway was a sensitive, often shy man whose enthusiasm for life was balanced by his ability to listen intently, quietly making mental notes. That was not the Hemingway of the news stories. The media wanted and encouraged a brawnier Hemingway, a two-fisted man whose life was fraught with dangers. The author, a

newspaperman by training, was complicit in this creation of a public persona, a Hemingway that was not without factual basis, but also not the whole man. Critics, especially, but the public as well, Hemingway hinted in his 1933 letter to Perkins, were eager ‘automatically’ to ‘label’ Hemingway’s characters as himself, which helped establish the Hemingway persona, a media-created Hemingway that would shadow — and overshadow — the man and writer.

His brawls, injuries, travels and adventures, often the simple delivery of a new manuscript, were all chronicled in *The Times*, sometimes in items as brief as one or two sentences. Hemingway had four wives, and each time he divorced or remarried, it was news in New York and the world. When he was hospitalized after a Montana auto accident, the *Times* reported it. Arriving in New York from his 1933-34 safari in East Africa, Hemingway was caught by a *Times* reporter. In 1937, in a contretemps noteworthy only because it involved Hemingway, his brief fisticuffs with Max Eastman was a four day story in the *Times*: three versions of the fight and a follow-up editorial. Nearly fatal accidents in the 1950’s would be front-page news.

In October of 1937, the publication of ‘To Have and Have Not’ put Hemingway on the cover of *Time* magazine, but not even that accolade was protection against the reviews that followed. Consensus said that this difficult book was the end of Hemingway the writer. Not only was Hemingway finally allowed to use a forbidden word that is still unprintable in this newspaper, but with its multiple stories and shifting point of view, it was also not the book the critics wanted to read — too proletarian for some, not enough for others. The *New York Times* review found the novel an empty book, and it was at the head of a long line of similar reviews.

Beginning in early March 1937, Hemingway had been in Madrid, reporting on the civil war the elected socialist government was waging against the invading fascist forces of General Franco, who was supported by both Hitler and Mussolini. (In a February 1, 1938 letter to Perkins from Key West he notes ‘I saw the *Times* [reviews] both daily and Sunday while I was away.’) Only his style of reportorial detachment kept his news stories from being blatantly pro-Loyalist propaganda (in May 1937 he erred in predicting Franco’s defeat, but his opinion made news). His involvement in filming Jorvis Iven’s ‘The Spanish Earth’, a propaganda film documentary, and his raising money for Loyalist ambulances were quite well known. Hemingway made it clear that fascism was an enemy to be fought with every means available, even Communist aid, if necessary.

Hemingway brought his readers as close to the front line action as possible, filling in visual details in the style of Goya’s etchings on the effects of war, and his dispatches, really personalized news stories from the battlefield, were meant to give American readers a picture of what they might expect in the next war: enemy planes bombing civilians, artillery shells crashing into public buildings, women dying in the streets, and armed men giving up parts of the bodies and not infrequently their lives for a political cause in which they believed.

That October, when Madrid was quiet, Hemingway wrote his first full-length play, which he called ‘The Fifth Column.’ The day he finished it, the *New York Times* reporter

in Madrid cabled in the event as a news story. Once again, Hemingway the writer was news.

By the time the German blitzkrieg rolled across Poland in the fall of 1939, Hemingway was writing 'For Whom the Bell Tolls', which was published the following October to universal praise. The Times review was the first to admit that 'there were those of us who felt, when 'To Have and Have Not' was published, that Hemingway was through as a creative writer. . . . We were badly mistaken.' The novel sold half a million copies when that was still a significant figure, and went on to become a successful Hollywood movie. By the time the title appeared on movie marquees, America was at war with the Axis powers, and Hemingway was running clandestine coastal patrols in his armed fishing boat. He would not publish another novel for ten years.

In 1944, when there were no more U-boats off the coast of Cuba, Hemingway signed on as a front line journalist with Collier's magazine. None of his stories appeared in the New York Times, but his activities in war-time France were regularly reported: 'Hemingway is Injured', 'Hemingway Leaves Hospital', 'Hemingway Captures Six', 'Hemingway Still at Front.' What ever happened to him, wherever he went, whatever he did was now legitimate news. The private life of Ernest Hemingway almost disappeared.

When Hemingway published 'Across the River and Into the Trees' in 1950, the Times review, by John O'Hara, praising the novel (and in its first sentence hailing Hemingway as the greatest writer since Shakespeare), was a minority opinion. Most critics agreed that, once again, this book marked the end of Hemingway the writer. Two years later he proved them wrong once more, rising phoenix-like with 'The Old Man and the Sea', a hugely popular success which helped bring him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954, an honor that came almost too late for him to appreciate it.

In January 1954, he and his wife Mary were reported lost in an African plane crash. The next day they were found alive, only to be badly hurt in a second crash when the rescue plane went down on take-off and burst into flames. Hemingway emerged with a serious concussion and several internal injuries from which it took him a year to recover. Old friends would say he was never the same man. In fact, the African injuries were the last of a long list of concussions, serious injuries, and mounting physical problems which kept him largely out of the news for the last five years of his life. When, in November 1960, a deeply depressed Hemingway entered the Mayo Clinic for electro-shock therapy, The Times honored the cover story ('The spokesman would not reveal the nature of the author's ailment, but indicated it was not serious and did not require surgery'). But two sessions of such therapy were of no avail. In July 1961, when he pulled the trigger on his favorite shotgun, ending his life, it was, literally, a shot heard round the world.

His death and its attendant obituaries might have been the end of the story. But Hemingway, no ordinary writer, remained in the news for years afterwards as his posthumous life kept the New York Times and the world at large engaged; immediately after his death, the disposition of his unpublished manuscripts, and his widow's pronouncements on the subject, were often in the news. From the grave he published three novels, one memoir, and a follow up to 'Death in the Afternoon', accompanied by

collections of his essays, journalism, poetry, letters (which he had stipulated not be published) and collected interviews. A new edition of his short stories included previously unpublished work. Thirty-eight years after his death, the last book he left in the vault, 'True at First Light', has been brought to light by his estate, nearly simultaneously with the introduction of a line of Hemingway furniture.

Between 1961 and 1999, an entire shelf of Hemingway biographies have appeared along with several memoirs by family and friends who knew him. A rough count of the posthumous books, the collections, and the biographies adds up at least thirty-seven books. This count does not include the other two shelves of critical books, or the hundreds and hundreds of articles. Two Hemingway houses are preserved in Oak Park, another in Key West, another in Ketchum, and a fifth house in Cuba. His face has appeared on an American postage stamp.

Ernest Hemingway became and remains an American icon and one embodiment of America's promise: the young boy from Oak Park who set out to become the best writer of his time, and did just that. His ambition, intensity, creative drive, sense of duty, belief in hard work, and faith in the strenuous life carried him to the pinnacle of his profession and provided him with worldwide recognition and considerable wealth before destroying him when he could no longer meet the demands of his public life. It is an old story, older than written words, a story the ancient Greeks would have recognized.

Hemingway told us that pursuit was happiness, and that any story followed far enough would end badly. He lived constantly on the edge of the American experience and constantly in the public eye. He wrote books that influenced two or more generations, and was awarded not only with prizes, including the Pulitzer and the Nobel, but with fame such as few writers have known or have had to endure. He remodeled American short fiction, changed the way characters speak, confronted the moral strictures confining the writer, and left behind a shelf of books telling us how we were in this century's first half and leaving a record for those who come after. At the end of the next century, the basic human struggle with universal demons that Hemingway put down with such clarity will still be read, and men may still take heart, knowing that they are not the first nor the last to face their fate.