

Word for Word/Hemingway Memorabilia; Marketing a Myth: Papa's Got a Brand New Bed

by Joe Sharkey,
New York Times, July 1999.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY brilliantly cultivated his elephantine public image during a 30-year reign as America's most famous writer. But the rough and cantankerous Hemingway, who committed suicide in 1961, might have a difficult time recognizing himself today in the hype over the centennial of his birth on July 21. There's 'True at First Light' (Scribner), the new novel cobbled together from unfinished manuscripts by his son Patrick. Then there's 'Hemingway: The Final Years', the fifth installment of Michael Reynolds's epic biography from W. W. Norton. (Reviews of both books appear today in The Times Book Review.)

Now get ready for Designer Hemingway. Leading the pack of licensed products is Thomasville Furniture's 'Ernest Hemingway: The Collection of a Lifetime', which includes a 96-piece furniture line (Kilimanjaro king bed: \$3,499), plus rugs, clocks, lamps, desk accessories, art and duck decoys. Hemingway products from other merchandisers include a Mont Blanc pen (\$600), cigars, a cookbook and eyewear.

Hemingway — the person, not the brand — worked as hard as he drank or played. He put his muddy feet up on whatever served as the furniture, dressed indifferently and probably never uttered the word 'décor' in his life, as these excerpts from various biographical accounts suggest.

JOE SHARKEY

'Papa Hemingway' eyewear, starting at \$300, evokes a fashion mystique. Hemingway himself had a dimmer view of spectacles. A. E. Hotchner, a friend and biographer, recalled Hemingway's description of how he bought his first eyeglasses in the early 1930s.

'When I hit New York I went to see an eye doctor. That's when I got my first glasses. I went out of the office with them on and I saw things so clearly for the first time in my life, I began to get nauseated. I was only a block from Bob Benchley's, so I went up to his place and we both got cockeyed drunk and that got me over the nausea.'

— **'Papa Hemingway: A Personal Memoir' (Random House, 1966)**

In 1950 Lillian Ross portrayed a garrulous, rambunctious Hemingway on a trip to New York City. 'He had on steel-rimmed spectacles, with a piece of paper under the nose-piece', she wrote. Hemingway's fourth wife, Mary, insisted that he buy a coat and fix his eyeglasses:

‘We’ve got to buy Papa a coat.’ Hemingway grunted and leaned against the car. ‘A nice, rainproof coat’, Mrs. Hemingway said. ‘And he’s got to get his glasses fixed. He needs some good, soft padding for the nose-piece. It cuts him up brutally. He’s had that same piece of paper under the nose-piece for weeks. When he really wants to get cleaned up, he changes the paper.’ Hemingway grunted again.

— **‘Reporting’ (Simon & Schuster, 1964) The Old Man and the Rope**

‘Our products are based on the life-style of Ernest Hemingway’, says Alex Malouf Jr., president of the John Richard Collection, which sells Hemingway home-decor accessories, including mirrors and wall art. Hemingway safari jackets, fishing caps and vests have also been licensed. These tributes would have created considerable merriment at Sloppy Joe’s, the Key West, Fla., saloon that was a Hemingway haunt and where the bartender referred to the writer and his third wife, Martha Gellhorn, as ‘beauty and the beast.’

The comparison more aptly applied to Hemingway, in his odoriferous Basque shorts tied in the middle with a piece of rope . . . ‘I am really not abnormally clean’, Martha would protest many years later. ‘But Ernest was extremely dirty, one of the most unfastidious men I’ve ever known.’

— **‘Hemingway’, by Kenneth S. Lynn, (Simon & Schuster, 1987)**

Once, when going away on a trip, Martha asked a friend to look after her husband:

‘Keep your eye on this big clown, see that he’s shaved and cleaned up when you go out on the town.’ While this injunction was superficially affectionate, it was actually a sign of tension, for Hemingway’s lack of cleanliness was rapidly becoming a serious problem for Martha. ‘The Pig’ was the rather edgy term of endearment she had fastened on him.

— **‘Hemingway’, by Kenneth S. Lynn, (Simon & Schuster, 1987)**

Thomasville Furniture says Key West and Havana, two places where the author had homes, are among the locales that ‘weave a beautiful tapestry’ of the Hemingway domestic life style. Others had a less romantic view of chez Papa. In 1922, the young Hemingway and his first wife, Hadley, lived in a cheap apartment in Paris with a hole-in-the-floor toilet.

From the flush-box hung a chain that, when pulled, deluged the floor of the compartment to a depth of two inches. Those adept at its use were able to get out of the door before their feet got wet. Those who did not were tourists.

— **‘Hemingway: The Paris Years’,
by Michael Reynolds (Basil Blackwell, 1989)**

[Martha Gellhorn] objected strongly to the pack of fierce tomcats he kept in Cuba, which smelled fearfully and were allowed to march all over the dining room table.

— **‘Intellectuals’, by Paul Johnson (Harper & Row, 1988)**

Hemingway acquired his original cat as a gift from a sea captain of a freighter. The cat was from a species having six toes. It wasn’t long before all of Hemingway’s cats were six-toed. The cats also had an unusual water trough. When Josie Russell decided to remodel the rest rooms in Sloppy Joe’s, he was going to throw out the men’s urinal. Hemingway took it home, inlaid it with Spanish tile. It can be seen today in the backyard of the Hemingway house in Key West, watering the descendants of Ernest’s cats.

— **‘Workbook’, by J. C. Simmons, an online biography (www.ee.mcgill.ca/nverever/hem/workbook/cover.html)**

In Ernest’s room [at the Hemingway villa near Havana] there was a large desk covered with stacks of letters, newspapers and magazine clippings, a small sack of carnivores’ teeth, two unwound clocks, shoehorns, an unfilled pen in an onyx holder, a wood-carved zebra, wart hog, rhino and lion in single file, and a wide assortment of souvenirs, mementos and good-luck charms. . . . We went into the living room, and Ernest looked up at the ceiling a moment [and said], ‘The Duke and Duchess of Windsor were here last week but they only seemed fascinated by the falling plaster.’

— **‘Papa Hemingway: A Personal Memoir’ (Random House, 1966)**

‘The Hemingway Cookbook’, by Craig Boreth (Chicago Review Press, 1998), includes a recipe for fillet of lion and delights in ‘the entire range of the Hemingway gustatory experience’, according to one reviewer. While the writer certainly enjoyed fine food, biographers recalled a less refined palate.

Hemingway had inherited from his father a fondness for onion sandwiches . . . munching them with periodic swigs from his silver hip-flask of whisky, a memorable combination.’

— **‘Intellectuals’**

In a Havana bar called the Floridita, Hemingway once insisted that Mr. Hotchner join him for a shrimp dinner:

‘I founded the Royal Order of Shrimp Eaters. Members of the order eat the heads and the tails.’ He bit off a shrimp’s head and crunched it happily. . . . ‘It grows on you’, he said, picking up another. Two more vases of daiquiris arrived.

— **‘Papa Hemingway: A Personal Memoir’ (Random House, 1966)**

Hemingway was well aware of his allure to marketers. He once offered an unpaid product endorsement, as he recounted in a 1954 article in Look magazine describing an African safari that ended when he and his wife, Mary, were seriously injured when

their small plane crashed. Hemingway reported that Gordon's gin had served as both topical antiseptic and balm for the spirit:

I do not work for the Gordon's people and this is a testimonial which I offer freely and in what I hope is my right mind. This beverage is one of the sovereign antiseptics of our time. . . . Gordon's product is of approved merit and can be counted on to fortify, mollify and cauterize practically all internal or external injuries.

— **'By-Line: Ernest Hemingway' (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967)**

But on another occasion, witnessed by Lillian Ross, he contemptuously declined to accept an offer to endorse Lord Calvert whisky by appearing in its 'Men of Distinction' advertising campaign.

The telephone rang and Hemingway picked it up, listened, said a few words, and then turned to us and said that an outfit called Endorsements Inc. had offered him \$4,000 to pose as a Man of Distinction. 'I told them I wouldn't drink the stuff for \$4,000', he said.

— **'Reporting'**