

Hemingway's Latest: A Blend of Life, Fiction and an African Bride

**Review of True At First Light by Ralph Blumenthal,
New York Times, Aug 24, 1998.**

IN 1954, after surviving two African plane crashes, Mau Mau marauders and domestic life on safari with his fourth wife, Mary (and just maybe a mysterious tribal bride or two), Ernest Hemingway returned home to Cuba and began work on a long autobiographical novel.

Two years later, interrupted by the filming of 'The Old Man and the Sea', he put aside the unfinished 200,000-word manuscript. With Fidel Castro's revolution, he abandoned Cuba and the book; in July 1961, just short of his 62nd birthday, he took his life with a shotgun in Idaho.

Now, after a long repose in the limbo of restricted files in the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, placed there by Mary Hemingway after both men's deaths, the book — edited down by half and described as the last unpublished full-length Hemingway work — is being prepared for publication in time for the centennial of the author's birth in Oak Park, Ill., next July 21.

'This is it; there are no more books,' said Charles Scribner III, whose family imprint, now part of Simon & Schuster, is bringing out what it calls the fictional memoir, 'True at First Light', as edited by Hemingway's middle son, Patrick, 70.

A.E. Hotchner, who related anecdotes from the safari in his 1966 biography, 'Papa Hemingway', called the release of the latest work 'a big publishing event' but voiced surprise that Hemingway had never mentioned the book to him during many discussions of other projects. 'It's a mystery to me', he said.

The publishing plans were disclosed by Daily Variety this month, but the work was not unknown. Scholars inventoried the manuscript in 1969, and in 1971 and 1972 Sports Illustrated serialized a 50,000-word excerpt as Hemingway's 'African Journal', part of which was included in a 1974 anthology, 'The Enduring Hemingway.'

Four other works that Hemingway left in varying stages of completion were previously published, to mixed reviews: 'A Moveable Feast', 'Islands in the Stream', 'The Dangerous Summer' and 'The Garden of Eden.'

Few would rank these with quasi-autobiographical masterpieces like 'A Farewell to Arms' and 'The Sun Also Rises', and given the fanatical care Hemingway took with his writing there is some question of how happy he would be to have his reputation and last printed words entrusted solely to any editor, even a son.

Patrick Hemingway said that he was aware of the responsibility and that aside from a few place names he had not changed any of his father's words, although he acknowledged that condensing the book inevitably reshaped it.

For the few who have read it, a mystique has long clung to the sprawling 850-page blend of autobiography and fiction, in part over the ambiguous character named Debba, an 18-year-old woman from the Wakamba tribe whom the narrator casually takes as a second wife. The Hemingways both fed the intrigue by offering even richer versions of the story to biographers, although Patrick Hemingway, who took part in the safari, says the marriage to Debba is fictional.

'Did Ernest Hemingway have such an experience?' he said from his home in Bozeman, Mont. 'I can tell you from all I know — and I don't know everything — he did not.'

But because Hemingway's adventurous life and his fiction have been so intertwined, the new book is sure to raise questions about how much of the story is literally true. Hemingway was elliptical on the issue. All good books have something in common, he liked to say: 'They are truer than if they had really happened.'

'True at First Light', a title Patrick Hemingway selected from the text to suggest the deceptiveness of the senses, is based on Hemingway's second safari to East Africa, in 1953, just as 'Green Hills of Africa' was based on his first safari, 20 years earlier. Some characters, notably the revered white hunter — in real life, Hemingway's friend Philip Percival, 'the finest man that I know' — are the same.

But on that first safari, Hemingway was accompanied by his second wife, Pauline Pfeiffer, Vogue's Paris correspondent, with whom he had two sons, Patrick and Gregory, and for whom he had divorced Hadley Richardson, who was the mother of his first son, John, called Bumby. By the second safari Hemingway had divorced Pauline, as well as his third wife, Martha Gellhorn, also a writer, and had married Mary Welsh, a Time-Life correspondent whom he had met in wartime London.

The interplay of these relationships is a theme in the book, along with age and enlightenment, spirituality and the hypnotic spell of Africa.

'You cannot describe a wild lion's roar,' Hemingway writes. 'You can only say that you listened and the lion roared. It is not at all like the noise the lion makes at the start of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer pictures. When you hear it you first feel it in your scrotum and it runs all the way up through your body.'

The book also tracks Mary Hemingway's obsessive quest to kill a cattle-thieving black lion as mythic and elusive as Melville's white whale. She gets her lion, but in a way that exposes painful fault lines in the marriage.

Paris is in the book, too, and Ezra Pound and baseball and prodigious drinking and meditations on the soul — 'probably a spring of clear fresh water that never diminished in the drought and never froze in the winter.'

Hemingway and Miss Mary, as she is called in the book, arrived in the Kenyan port of Mombasa in the summer of 1953 and set up camp at Percival's Kitanga Farm. The party included Denis Zaphiro, a game ranger nicknamed G.C., for 'gin-crazed,' and Earl Theisen, a Look photographer. Hemingway had contracted to write a piece for the magazine to defray costs. Patrick, an art history major who had graduated magna cum laude from Harvard and become a licensed white hunter in Tanganyika, also joined them for a time, along with a safari staff of 22.

Hoping to counter the bad publicity from the terrorist uprising of the Kikuyu tribe against white landholders that became known as the Mau Mau emergency, and grateful for the tourists drawn by his books and movies, the Kenya authorities designated Hemingway honorary game warden for the region. For five months they hunted rogue lions that were poaching cattle, leopards, a wounded rhino, birds and other game.

Although Mary Hemingway kept a diary, Hemingway wrote no notes, as usual. 'I just push the recall button and there it is,' he told Hotchner.

In January 1954, the Hemingways were in a small plane over Murchison Falls when the bush pilot nicked a telephone line and crashed. The couple escaped with relatively minor injuries. Evacuated by a passing boat on the White Nile, they found a commercial pilot who offered to fly them to Entebbe in Uganda. On take-off the plane burst into flames. This time they were more seriously hurt but recovered.

Back home safely that fall in his beloved Cuban refuge, Finca Vigia, or Lookout Farm, outside Havana, Hemingway grumbled his pleasure at having won the Nobel Prize for Literature and began work on the African book.

While the early '70s Sports Illustrated excerpts focus heavily on hunting, they also offer broader glimpses of a work that is now to be Hemingway's final testament, and perhaps a last introspective look into a famously complex and colorful literary colossus.

The narrator of 'True at First Light' talks about a changed Africa and his boredom at reading so much about himself by fatuous people who pretend to know all about his inner life, and he quickly and playfully brings up the 'the matter of my fiancée' — Debba, 'very beautiful and quite young and more than perfectly developed.'

In the book, Miss Mary calls herself the jealous type, vowing to kill any woman who steals her husband's affections, but she says this doesn't apply to his African fiancée. Miss Mary says further, 'Since when does a good loving husband not have a right to a fiancée if she only wishes to be a supplementary wife?'

Two biographies suggested that the account was not entirely fictional.

In his authoritative 1969 biography, 'Ernest Hemingway, A Life Story', Carlos Baker, drawing on Mary Hemingway's diaries, says that toward the end of the 1953 safari Hemingway showed signs of 'wanting to go native', telling Mrs. Hemingway she was 'depriving him of his new wife', the Wakamba girl Debba.

Mrs. Hemingway, the account goes on, did not take offense, suggesting only that Debba 'ought first to have a much needed bath.'

Mary Hemingway left the camp for some pre-Christmas shopping in Nairobi, and she returned to find that Hemingway had dyed his jacket and shirts in Masai colors, taken up the spear and invited Debba and some of her friends into the camp, celebrating so energetically that they broke Mrs. Hemingway's bed. Warned of possible trouble from Debba's family, Hemingway returned her to her village, but she was among the people of the tribe invited back for Christmas celebrations, the Baker account concludes.

In 'Papa Hemingway', Hotchner says that in Venice in 1954, Hemingway 'told us of his startling nuptials', relating that when his wife was away in Nairobi, he had taken an 18-year-old Wakamba bride and 'as local custom dictated, inherited her sister,' a widow of 17.

'The three of them slept on a goatskin bed 14 feet wide, Ernest said, and when Mary returned she was very solicitous about the event and impressed with the lofty position Ernest had attained in the tribe by virtue of his matrimony,' the Hotchner book recounts.

It goes on to report that shortly afterward, Hemingway counted on his fingers and said, 'September I will have an African son.'

Furthermore, Hotchner said that in a letter written to him on March 14, 1954, from aboard the ship Africa, Hemingway first recounted the native marriage, adding: 'I'm very happy with my lovely wives with their impudence and solicitude and stacked better than M. Monroe but with good hard palms to their hands and smell wonderful.'

In the same long letter Hemingway said he had dictated 16,000 words 'and I hope I have kept it funny'. It appears to be a reference to the Look article, which had already appeared as a photo-essay of hardly 2,000 words, so the rest probably become the kernel of 'True at First Light'. The letter is part of an exchange of correspondence with Hemingway that the Oxford University Press plans to bring out for the centennial, Hotchner said.

Still, he said, he was more than dubious of any actual marriage, given Hemingway's mischievous streak and love of practical jokes, as when he graphically described making love to the spy Mata Hari, although, it turned out, she was executed by the French the year before he arrived in Italy in 1918.

Moreover, the Look photographer, Theisen, in his letters home between August and October 1953 never mentioned Debba, according to a re-check of his correspondence by his daughter, Roxie Livingston, in Los Angeles. Patrick Hemingway said furthermore that the manuscript made no mention of the sister-bride, a further sign the story was made up. And no African son of Hemingway has ever emerged.

After Hemingway's suicide and despite the virtual state of war between Cuba and the United States after the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, President Kennedy helped arrange for Mrs. Hemingway to return to Finca Vigia, which Castro planned to turn into a

museum, to retrieve her husband's belongings, including the manuscript, left in a bank vault. After Kennedy's assassination in 1963, she placed the bulk of Hemingway's papers at the Kennedy Library. She died in 1986.

With the exception of 'True at First Light' and the other uncompleted works, the papers were opened to the public at the library's temporary quarters in 1975.

The permanent Kennedy Library opened in 1980, and the collection is now centered in the Hemingway Room, where spread on the floor is the very real skin of the black lion Mary Hemingway shot in 1953.