

Preludes To A Mood

New York Times review of *In Our Time*, July 11, 1999

ERNEST HEMINGWAY has a lean, pleasing, tough resilience. His language is fibrous and athletic, colloquial and fresh, hard and clean; his very prose seems to have an organic being of its own. Every syllable counts toward a stimulating, entrancing experience of magic. He looks out upon the world without prejudice or preconception and records with precision and economy, and an almost terrifying immediacy, exactly what he sees. His short stories, sketches, anecdotes and epigrams are triumphs of sheer objectivity.

The items which make up the collection of 'In Our Time' are not so much short stories, in the accepted meaning, as preludes to a mood, composed with accurate and acute finesse to converge in the mind of the reader. Mr. Hemingway is oblique, inferential, suggestive rather than overt, explicit, explanatory. His people and events emerge with miraculous suddenness and inevitability out of a timeless paradise of their own, to intimate their own especial and intrinsic incongruities and ironies and pathos out of an illimitable fabric of comedies and tragedies.

Mr. Hemingway packs a whole character into a phrase, an entire situation into a sentence or two. He makes each word count three or four ways. The covers of his book should strain and bulge with the healthful ferment that is between them. Here is an authentic energy and propulsive force which is contained in an almost primitive isolation of images as if the language itself were being made over in its early directness of metaphor. Each story, indeed, is a sort of expanded metaphor, conveying a far larger implication than its literal significations.

The first five stories are linked upon the personality of one Nick. In the seventy pages or so, Nick, his father a doctor, and his hypochondriacal Christian Science wife, his uncle, his friend, his first love affair, his fishing expeditions and his casual adventures serve to give a unique and unmistakable portrait of a growing boy in a Michigan backwoods settlement. The first story might almost be a stripped, matter-of-fact account of a delicate, tricky surgical operation told with the scientific finality and reticence of a medical report. Mr. Hemingway does not worry at the young boy's symptoms, his 'reactions' to this terrifying introduction to the mysteries of birth and death; he states: 'Nick did not watch. His curiosity had been gone for a long time.'

'Cat in the Rain' concerns itself with an American couple in an Italian hotel, the attentive, ingratiating proprietor, the maid and the cat. The husband lies on the bed and reads. The wife presses her nose against the chill windowpane, and sees a cat crouched under a table to keep out of the wet. 'Anyway, I want a cat,' she said, 'I want a cat. I want a cat now. If I can't have long hair or any fun, I can have a cat.' She goes down to get the cat and finds it gone. The proprietor learns of it and sends her a cat. That is absolutely all

there is, yet a lifetime of discontent, of looking outside for some unknown fulfillment is compressed into the offhand recital.

Mr. Hemingway can make the reader see a trout lying on the pebbles of a clear, swift, cold stream. He can show you the four-cornered mouth of a grasshopper and the sudden, disconcerting spurt of 'tobacco juice' over the restraining fingers. He can call up a whole bullfight, indeed an entire civilization, in a curt epigram. He can present the life and the preoccupations about a race course--the horses, the jockeys, the touts, the bettors.

Mr. Hemingway's most noteworthy gift, however, is for a delightful economy of dialogue. In 'The Three-Day Blow,' two boys sit over a wood fire and talk; the shanty, the gale outside, their convictions and habitual modes of being are fully revealed in irrelevant aimless snatches of conversation. It seems to be overheard, it is so compellingly actual, yet it gives evidence of Mr. Hemingway's severely schooled selectiveness. It is merely one afternoon when these two decided to get drunk, nothing more, yet it is a friendship of months and years, dense with common experiences and impressions. Their weighing of the relative values of baseball teams, of Hugh Walpole and G. K. Chesterton, of their respective fathers, and their philosophizings of life in general are priceless yet poignant with a hint of that fleeting, ephemeral quality, youth.