

Monologue To The Maestro: A High Seas Letter

by Ernest Hemingway, Esquire, October, 1935.

'Mice' was Arnold Samuelson who was born in 1912 and grew up on his father's wheat farm outside White Earth, North Dakota. Reputedly a very intelligent boy, he found it difficult to relate to others his own age and spent a great deal of time alone playing his violin and riding his horse. He had ambitions to become a writer and studied journalism at the University of Minnesota, but never graduated in 1932 because he refused (or simply didn't) pay the required \$5 for his diploma. He was said to have been greatly upset by the murder a year earlier of his older sister. Pessimistic about finding a job in journalism in the Great Depression, he roamed the country, read a great deal, including Hemingway's work, and finally, then back in Minnesota, decided to visit the writer in Key West. He arrived in the early spring of 1934 and Hemingway took a shine to him. Hemingway had just bought his 38ft cabin cruiser Pilar, and he hired Samuelson as a night watchman and occasional deckhand at \$1 a day. Samuelson stayed in the job for ten months, but when he finally had an article printed, he decided it was time to try his luck as freelance writer.

*He did have several pieces published in various magazines, including Esquire, in the late 1930s, but never tried to get any of his novels published. Newly married, he realised he could not make a living from his, comparatively small, freelance earnings and worked in construction, first in Texas, then in Minnesota where his brother, a doctor, was building a hospital. When the war started, he worked, still in construction, for the government in Alaska, and when it finished, he moved with his family to Texas where he first tried to retrain polo ponies to do ranch work, then bought a plot of land and started a business producing ready-built wooden houses. His putative writing career had long stalled and he became ever more eccentric and anti-social, and is said to have dressed shabbily, using car tyres for shoes and wondering through town playing his violin. His wife divorced him in 1978, and he died three years later. By the time of his death, he had started but not completed *With Hemingway: A Year in Key West and Cuba*, his account of the time spent with the writer. It was completed by his daughter and she managed to get it published. It appeared in 1984.*

NB In the piece below, I have added punctuation (never Hemingway's strong suit) to make it more comprehensible.

ABOUT a year and a half ago a young man came to the front door of the house in Key West and said that he had hitch-hiked down from upper Minnesota to ask your correspondent a few questions about writing. Arrived that day from Cuba, having to see some good friends off on the train in an hour, and to write some letters in the meantime, your correspondent, both flattered and appalled at the prospect of the questioning, told the young man to come around the next afternoon. He was a tall, very serious young man with very big feet and hands and a porcupine hair-cut.

It seemed that all his life he had wanted to be a writer. Brought up on a farm, he had gone through high school and the University of Minnesota, had worked as a newspaper man, a rough carpenter, a harvest hand, a day laborer, and had bummed his way across America twice. He wanted to be a writer, and he had good stories to write. He told them very badly, but you could see that there was something there if he could get it out. He was so entirely serious about writing that it seemed that seriousness would overcome all obstacles. He had lived by himself for a year in a cabin he had built in North Dakota and written all that year. He did not show me anything that he had written then. It was all bad, he said.

I thought, perhaps, that this was modesty until he showed me a piece he had published in one of the Minneapolis papers. It was abominably written. Still, I thought, many other people write badly at the start and this boy is so extremely serious that he must have something; real seriousness in regard to writing being one of the two absolute necessities. The other, unfortunately, is talent.

Besides writing, this young man had one other obsession. He had always wanted to go to sea. So, to shorten this account, we gave him a job as a night watchman on the boat which furnished him a place to sleep and work and gave him two or three hours' work each day at cleaning up and a half of each day free to do his writing. To fulfill his desire to go to sea, we promised to take him to Cuba when we went across.

He was an excellent night watchman and worked hard on the boat and at his writing, but at sea he was a calamity; slow where he should be agile, seeming sometimes to have four feet instead of two feet and two hands, nervous under excitement, and with an incurable tendency toward sea-sickness and a peasant reluctance to take orders. Yet he was always willing and hard-working if given plenty of time to work in.

We called him the Maestro because he played the violin, this name was eventually shortened to the Mice, and a big breeze would so effectually slow up his coordination that your correspondent once remarked to him, 'Mice, you certainly must be going to be a hell of a good writer because you certainly aren't worth a damn at anything else.' On the other hand his writing improved steadily. He may yet be a writer. But your correspondent, who sometimes has an evil temper, is never going to ship another hand who is an aspirant writer, nor go through another summer off the Cuban or any other coast accompanied by questions and answers on the practice of

letters. If any more aspirant writers come on board the *Pilar* let them be females, let them be very beautiful and let them bring champagne.

Your correspondent takes the practice of letters, as distinct from the writing of these monthly letters, very seriously; but dislikes intensely talking about it with almost anyone alive. Having had to mouth about many aspects of it during a period of one hundred and ten days with the good old Maestro, during much of which time your correspondent had to conquer an urge to throw a bottle at the Mice whenever he would open his mouth and pronounce the word writing, he hereby presents some of these mouthings written down. If they can deter anyone from writing, he should be deterred. If they can be of use to anyone, your correspondent is pleased. If they bore you, there are plenty of pictures in the magazine that you may turn to. Your correspondent's excuse for presenting them is that some of the information contained would have been worth fifty cents to him when he was twenty-one.

Mice: What do you mean by good writing as opposed to bad writing?

Your correspondent: Good writing is true writing. If a man is making a story up it will be true in proportion to the amount of knowledge of life that he has and how conscientious he is; so that when he makes something up, it is as it would truly be. If he doesn't know how many people work in their minds and actions, his luck may save him for a while, or he may write fantasy. But if he continues to write about what he does not know about he will find himself faking. After he fakes a few times he cannot write honestly any more.

Mice: Then what about imagination?

Y.C.: Nobody knows a damned thing about it except that it is what we get for nothing. It may be a racial experience*. I think that is quite possible. It is the one thing beside honesty that a good writer must have. The more he learns from experience, the more truly he can imagine. If he gets so he can imagine truly enough, people will think that the things he relates all really happened and that he is just reporting.

Mice: Where will it differ from reporting?

Y.C.: If it was reporting they would not remember it. When you describe something that has happened that day, the timeliness makes people see it in their own imaginations. A month later that element of time is gone and your account would be flat and they would not see it in their minds, nor remember it. But if you make it up instead of describing it, you can make it round and whole and solid and give it life. You create it, for good or bad. It is made; not described. It is just as true as the extent of your ability to make it and the knowledge you put into it. Do you follow me?

Mice: Not always.

Y.C. (crabbily): Well for chrissake let's talk about something else then.

Mice (undeterred): Tell me some more about the mechanics of writing.

Y.C.: What do you mean? Like pencil or typewriter? For chrissake.

Mice: Yes.

Y.C.: Listen. When you start to write, you get all the kick and the reader gets none. So you might as well use a typewriter because it is that much easier and you enjoy it that much more. After you learn to write, your whole object is to convey everything, every sensation, sight, feeling, place and emotion to the reader. To do this you have to work over what you write. If you write with a pencil you get three different sights at it to see if the reader is getting what you wanted him to. First when you read it over; then when it is typed you get another chance to improve it, and again in the proof. Writing it first in pencil gives you one-third more chance to improve it. That is .333 which is a damned good average for a hitter. It also keeps it fluid longer so that you can better it easier.

Mice: How much should you write in a day?

Y.C.: The best way is always to stop when you are going good and when you know what will happen next. If you do that every day when you are writing a novel, you will never be stuck. That is the most valuable thing I can tell you so try to remember it.

Mice: All right.

Y.C.: Always stop when you are going good, and don't think about it or worry about it until you start to write the next day. That way your subconscious will work on it all the time. But if you think about it consciously or worry about it, you will kill it and your brain will be tired before you start. Once you are into the novel, it is as cowardly to worry about whether you can go on to the next day as to worry about having to go into inevitable action. You have to go on. So there is no sense to worry. You have to learn that to write a novel. The hard part about a novel is to finish it.

Mice: How can you learn not to worry?

Y.C.: By not thinking about it. As soon as you start to think about it, stop it. Think about something else. You have to learn that.

Mice: How much do you read over every day before you start to write?

Y.C.: The best way is to read it all every day from the start, correcting as you go along, then go on from where you stopped the day before. When it gets so long that you can't do this every day, read back two or three chapters each day; then each week read it all from the start. That's how you make it all of one piece. And remember to stop while you are still going good. That keeps it moving instead of having it die whenever you go on and write yourself out. When you do that, you find that the next day you are pooped and can't go on.

Mice: Do you do the same on a story?

Y.C.: Yes, only sometimes you can write a story in a day.

Mice: Do you know what is going to happen when you write a story?

Y.C.: Almost never. I start to make it up and have happen what would have to happen as it goes along.

Mice: That isn't the way they teach you to write in college.

Y.C.: I don't know about that. I never went to college. If any sonofabitch could write, he wouldn't have to teach writing in college.

Mice: You're teaching me.

Y.C.: I'm crazy. Besides this is a boat, not a college.

Mice: What books should a writer have to read?

Y.C.: He should have read everything so that he knows what he has to beat.

Mice: He can't read everything.

Y.C.: I don't say that he can. I say what he should. Of course he can't.

Mice: Well what books are necessary?

Y.C.: He should have read War and Peace and Anna Karenina, by Tolstoi, Midshipman Easy, Frank Mildmay and Peter Simple by Captain Marryat, Madame Bovary and L'Education Sentimentale by Flaubert, Buddenbrooks by Thomas Mann, Joyce's Dubliners, Portrait Of The Artist and Ulysses, Tom Jones and Joseph Andrews by Fielding, Le Rouge Et Le Noir and La Chatreuse de Parme by Stendhal, the Brothers Karamozov and any two other Dostoevskis, Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain, The Open Boat and The Blue Hotel by Stephen Crane, Hail And Farewell by George Moore, Yeat's autobiographies, All The Good de Maupassant, all the good Kipling, all of Turgenev, Far Away and long ago by W.H. Hudson, Henry James' short stories, especially Madame De Mves and The Turn Of The Screw, Portrait Of A Lady, The Americans.

Mice: I can't write them down that fast. How many more are there?

Y.C.: I'll give you the rest another day. There are about three times that many.

Mice: Should a writer have read all of those?

Y.C.: All of those and plenty more. Otherwise he doesn't know what he has to beat.

Mice: What do you mean "has to beat"?

Y.C.: Listen. There is no use writing anything that has been written before unless you can beat it. What a writer in our time has to do is write what hasn't been written before or beat dead men at what they have done. The only way he can tell how he is going is to compete with dead men. Most live writers do not exist. Their fame is created by critics who always need a genius of the season, someone they understand completely and feel safe in praising, but when these fabricated geniuses are dead they will not exist. The only people for a serious writer to compete with are the dead that he knows are good. It is like a miler running against the clock rather than simply

trying to beat whoever is in the race with him. Unless he runs against time he will never know what he is capable of attaining.

Mice: But reading all the good writers might discourage you.

Y.C.: Then you ought to be discouraged.

Mice: What is the best early training for a writer?

Y.C.: An unhappy childhood.

Mice: Do you think Thomas Mann was a great writer?

Y.C.: He would be a great writer if he had never written another thing than Buddenbrooks.

Mice: How can a writer train himself?

Y.C.: Watch what happens today. If we get into a fish, see [exactly] it is that everyone does. If you get a kick out of it while he is jumping, remember back until you see exactly what the action was that gave you that emotion. Whether it was the rising of the line from the water and the way it tightened like a fiddle string until drops started from it, or the way he smashed and threw water when he jumped. Remember what the noises were and what was said. Find what gave you the emotion, what the action was that gave you the excitement. Then write it down making it clear so the reader will see it too and have the same feeling you had. That's a five-finger exercise.

Mice: All right.

Y.C.: Then get in somebody else's head for a change. If I bawl you out, try to figure out what I'm thinking about as well as how you feel about it. If Carlos curses Juan, think what both their sides of it are. Don't just think who is right. As a man, things are as they should or shouldn't be. As a man, you know who is right and who is wrong. You have to make decisions and enforce them. As a writer you should not judge. You should understand.

Mice: All right.

Y.C.: Listen now. When people talk, listen completely. Don't be thinking [about] what you're going to say. Most people never listen. Nor do they observe. You should be able to go into a room and when you come out know everything that you saw there and not only that. If that room gave you any feeling, you should know exactly what it was that gave you that feeling. Try that for practice. When you're in town, stand outside the theatre and see how people differ in the way they get out of taxis or motor cars. There are a thousand ways to practice. And always think of other people.

Mice: Do you think I will be a writer?

Y.C.: How the hell should I know? Maybe you've got no talent. Maybe you can't feel for other people. You've got some good stories if you can write them.

Mice: How can I tell?

Y.C.: Write. If you work at it five years and you find you're no good, you can just as well shoot yourself then as now.

Mice: I wouldn't shoot myself.

Y.C.: Come around then and I'll shoot you.

Mice: Thanks.

Y.C.: Perfectly welcome, Mice. Now should we talk about something else?

Mice: What else?

Y.C.: Anything else, Mice, old timer, anything else at all.

Mice: All right. But —

Y.C.: No but. Finish. Talk about writing finish. No more. All gone for today. Boss he go home.

Mice: All right then. But tomorrow I've got some things to ask you.

Y.C.: I'll be you'll have fun writing after you know just how it's done.

Mice: What do you mean?

Y.C.: You know. Fun. Good times. Jolly. Dashing off an old masterpiece.

Mice: Tell me —

Y.C.: Stop it.

Mice: All right. But tomorrow —

Y.C.: Yes. All right. Sure. But tomorrow.

*(*meaning, I believe, 'the human race', as in Jung's collective unconscious.)*