

The Garden Of Eden

**by Michiko Kakutani, New York Times,
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'I KISSED her before we came in and we were happy and I liked it and I still like it.'

Those distinctive rhythms belong, unmistakably, to Ernest Hemingway, and one can well imagine Lieut. Frederic Henry or Robert Jordan using just such words to talk about a pretty girl. In 'The Garden of Eden,' however, they're spoken by a woman – in reference to another woman; and the bisexual theme isn't the only aspect of this novel that makes it feel like a departure from the author's usual work. Instead of describing bullfighting or big game hunting or fishing, Hemingway spends most of his time in this book writing about eating, love-making and sunbathing. And instead of writing about a man of action or even a wounded man of emotion like Jake Barnes, he's chosen, as his protagonist, a wimp – a frustrated writer, who's so passive in his dealings with women that he makes even the tongue-lashed Robert Cohn look like a self-assured, stand-up sort of guy.

For these reasons – as well as the simple fact that it is a 'new' work by Ernest Hemingway – 'The Garden of Eden' will no doubt be widely read. As a novel, however, its merits are dubious: the writing – which dates from roughly the same period as such lesser works as 'Islands in the Stream,' 'The Old Man and the Sea' and 'The Dangerous Summer' – is frequently synthetic and contrived; the characters, sketchily defined; the story-line, by turns static and abruptly melodramatic.

Given its history, however, it is impossible to say just how much responsibility Hemingway, himself, bears for the novel as it currently appears. Having started it in 1946, he apparently worked on it intermittently over the next 15 years, leaving behind several uncompleted versions. A Scribner's editor subsequently whittled down one of those manuscripts to a third of its length in order to produce the book at hand.

According to Carlos Baker's biography, Hemingway once referred to the theme of the novel as 'the happiness of the Garden that a man must lose' – a theme previously addressed, of course, by 'The Sun Also Rises,' 'A Farewell to Arms' and 'For Whom the Bell Tolls' – and in its present incarnation, the book does recount the story of one man's loss of innocence.

Simply told, it is the story of David Bourne, a novelist who is spending his honeymoon driving about Spain and the South of France with his beautiful young wife, Catherine. At first, everything seems idyllic – the sun is warm, the food is fine, the wine is good, and David and Catherine are happy. Then, quite abruptly, everything begins to change – one day, Catherine chops her hair off and announces that from time to time, now, she is going to be a boy. David, needless to say, is not too happy about this development, but as usual, he goes along with her game: he allows her to call him Catherine in bed, refers to her as his 'brother' and has his hair cut to match hers.

There are a lot of portentous references to the ‘danger’ of the situation – even Catherine’s obsession with getting a dark suntan becomes vaguely ominous – and sure enough, things quickly deteriorate further. Catherine grows increasingly jealous and resentful of David’s work; and she soon takes up with a young girl named Marita. Although David is initially enraged, he soon acquiesces – especially after Catherine encourages him to sleep with Marita, as well, and she proves only too willing to comply.

The remaining portion of ‘Garden’ is devoted to defining the shifting shape of this unorthodox triangle, with occasional asides about David’s attempts to write a story about his childhood memories of elephant hunting with his father in Africa. The story is a sort of ritual adolescent tale of initiation into the ferocities of the grown-up world, and echoes the overall novel’s theme of disillusion and betrayal.

Though the excerpts of David’s story that appear in the text are fairly weak imitations of Hemingway’s finest African tales, they nonetheless stand out as high points in ‘Garden.’ At least here, Hemingway’s famous style – whose austerity and precision once implied a moral outlook, a way of looking at the post-war world – is employed in the service of some sort of vision. In the bulk of ‘Garden,’ where it is used to describe the characters’ eating habits or suntans, it simply dwindles into empty mannerism. ‘They were big eggs and fresh and the girl’s were not cooked quite as long as the young man’s,’ reads one lengthy account of breakfast. Or: ‘The salad came and then there was its greenness on the dark table and the sun on the plaza beyond the arcade.’

Sometimes Hemingway sounds as though he were parodying an earlier self (‘All your father found he found for you too, he thought, the good, the wonderful, the bad, the very bad, the really very bad, the truly bad and then the much worse’). And sometimes, he sounds as though he were parodying Norman Mailer (‘He treated evil like an old entrusted friend, David thought, and evil, when she poked him, never knew she’d scored’).

In the end, though, the flaccid writing alone is not what makes ‘The Garden of Eden’ such a flimsy, disposable book. What makes us most impatient is Hemingway’s simple failure to turn his characters into sympathetic or recognizably complex human beings. While there are a few vague hints of some darker torment at work in her heart, Catherine comes across as an impetuous, castrating man-hater, who’s on the verge of cracking up. David emerges as a pathetically weak man, whose noisy aphorisms about work and art serve as a defense against his other failures. And Marita remains such a negligible presence – even as a sex object – that she always seems on the verge of disappearing.

Perhaps the missing clues to their personalities lie somewhere on the cutting-room floor, but as the book stands, they are nothing but careless narcissists, about whom it’s impossible to care.