

## **The Son Also Profits**

**Review of True At First Light  
by Frederick Zackel, January Magazine,  
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ERNEST HEMINGWAY once wrote, ‘The first draft of anything is shit’. And this new book of his — originally written 45 years ago — is a first draft he never intended to publish. So that whirling sound we hear during this 100th-anniversary month of his birth is Papa Hemingway rotating in his grave over the antics of his son Patrick and the corporate juggernaut that’s selling off what he never meant to have people read.

True At First Light appears to be the record of an African safari — a sort of How I Spent My Summer Vacation — during the winter of 1953-54. Hemingway called it ‘a fictional memoir’.

What is a fictional memoir? Hemingway meant that the writer takes his personal experience and dramatizes it. He makes it larger than life. He removes the bumps and splinters, and prettifies it so that it reads as smoothly as fiction does. As the Ernie Hemingway we meet in this story tells his wife Mary (who happens to have the same name as Hemingway’s fourth and final wife), ‘I make the truth as I invent it truer than it would be. That is what makes good writers or bad. If I write in the first person, stating it is fiction, critics now will still try to prove these things never happened to me. It is as silly as trying to prove [Daniel] Defoe was not Robinson Crusoe so therefore it is a bad book.’

So, the reader’s goal is to discover why Hemingway felt this particular story needed to be told.

The plot of True At First Light is simple. While on an extended safari in Kenya, Ernest Hemingway is asked to be the acting game ranger, when the real gamekeeper [sic], Philip Percival, is called away. Percival is, in Hemingway’s words, ‘the longest lived and most knowledgeable of all white hunters. . . I respected him as I had never respected my father and he trusted me, which was more than I deserved.’ Hemingway is told by Percival to ‘be as good as you can’.

In the course of this book, then, Hemingway should be learning how ‘to command’ by himself, without anyone ‘to correct my mistakes’. Naturally enough he is nervous. After all, Hemingway does not want to fail. But then who would want to be shown up as incompetent?

Meanwhile, Mary is obsessed with bagging a lion that has been marauding the locals, and the Hemingways have spent the past three months stalking ‘the great black-maned lion’. But the kill has to be made in a certain way. Hemingway writes, ‘Everybody understood why Mary must kill her lion. It was hard for some of the elders who had been on many hundreds of safaris to understand why she must kill it in the old straight way.’ Mary herself describes killing this particular beast as comparable to ‘the search for the Holy Grail and for the Golden Fleece’. Part of her difficulty is that she is so short. (Hemingway describes her as no taller than the grasses into which the wounded lion would flee.) Which makes Hemingway very protective. They both know a major goal for him is to have confidence in her shooting ability.

The story’s first half offers more expectations of action than action itself. About one-fourth of the way through, Ernie admits to himself and the reader that he wishes ‘something spectacular would come up’ so that he could be a hero in his wife’s eyes and not be seen solely as ‘her unpaid and annoying bodyguard,’ protecting her from Africa. Their wait for a confrontation with the lion is complicated by ‘marauding elephants’. But nothing ever becomes of those elephants; they just fade away like old soldiers. Later, Hemingway adds suspense when he and his wife learn that a band of Mau Mau (1950s-style African terrorists) might be coming their way. That threat, too, whets our appetite, but nothing comes of it.

Finally, at the mid-point of *True At First Light*, Mary kills her lion. It is a magnificent scene that rolls on for a dozen lovely pages filled with the best of Hemingway, the prose holding you breathless. But was this writing worth the wait? Could this section not have been excised from the manuscript and presented to us as a long magazine feature?

It’s interesting to see how Hemingway portrays his wife and his relationship with her. He casts Mary as dutiful, and acknowledges that his efforts to lord over her as husband/protector are largely ‘unnecessary’ or ‘stupid’. At the same time, he’s having a fling with a young African girl named Debba, who lives in a nearby Shamba (a small cultivated area, like a farm).

Debba is a character worth liking. The walls of her room in her family’s lodge are covered with *Look* magazine photographs of Papa Hemingway and advertisements for American kitchen appliances. She knows what she wants. She wants not to be ‘a play wife or a wife to leave’. When Hemingway asks, ‘Who would leave you?’ her instant answer is, ‘You.’

Debba likes to ride in Hemingway’s car. Her favorite thing seems to be stroking the holster of his pistol. (Easy to see how Papa Hemingway could like a girl who sees the gun as a penis. At the same time, I kept thinking of *Robinson Crusoe*, in which Man Friday

discovers the Master's rifle is the source of Power and strokes it.) When she can't stroke his holster, she squeezes the muscles of his thighs.

Mary knows about and tolerates her husband's philandering. But she's more concerned that he will fall in love with a white woman than she is about competition from the Kenyan natives. Referring to Debba as Hemingway's 'fiancée', Mary tells her husband, 'I like your fiancée very much because she is a lot like me and I think she'd be a valuable extra wife if you need one.' Later, just before Mary leaves Papa alone for a visit to Nairobi, she adds 'I don't mind about her being your fiancée as long as you love me more. You do love me more don't you?'

Hemingway answers, 'I love you more and I'll love you more still when you come back from town.'

And isn't it pretty to think so?

The Hemingway we see in *True At First Light* practices the same sort of adultery that one finds between *droit de seigneur* and Mel Brooks' 'It's good to be king'. Part of it is reprehensible, and much of it is goofy.

This is a curious take on the Old Man. Because for all of the talk about Hemingway's misogynistic attitudes, *True At First Light* seems to be about nothing so much as how he came to recognize his wife Mary's true worth.

At least I think that's this story's message. It's hard to know for sure. Too much is missing here. This is, after all, a first draft. Hemingway wrote 200,000 words, and now almost 50 years later (and nearly four decades after the author's suicide in Idaho) his first draft has been edited into a 100,000-word manuscript. And Patrick Hemingway and the editors at Scribner have done more than just tweak the manuscript here and there. They have done an admirable job of fleshing the text out to the best of their limited abilities, but they aren't Hemingway, and his deft touch is what every reader expects to find in this book.

One draft of a manuscript is nothing. After all, this author is the same Hemingway who told *The Paris Review* that he rewrote the ending of *A Farewell to Arms* 39 times before he felt he had captured the words he wanted and needed.

According to Hemingway's own Iceberg Theory of Fiction Writing, only about 10 per cent of any story should be on the surface. The overwhelming balance should be beyond view. The subtext of a story is what the story is actually about. And almost by definition, that 90 per cent extra cannot be there in the first draft.

Nonetheless, *True At First Light* gives us some magic moments as well as some magnificent paragraphs, resounding with the voice of Hemingway that American writers and readers have grown up on. You hear that voice as the writer explains how a man of honor can have the heart of a child. You hear it again in the single paragraph in which he

watches an airplane land at a campsite, and later as he talks about what it's like to lie in your bed listening to a lion roaring in the night. Hemingway describing how he discovered bird watching is a minor gem. His memories of growing up in Michigan are fine and exquisite. The long passage in which he describes how as a youth he had to kill his horse Old Kite is as poignant and sensitive and touching as anything Hemingway ever published.

Sometimes his technique is almost invisible. In one episode, for instance, we meet his gun bearer and native guide Nguili, who 'loved to pour beer and see that the foam rose just at the very last and topped the beer without spilling'. Hemingway then goes on to describe the young man, his background, and his talents in depth, including that unimportant detail that he was 'almost as good looking as a girl without being at all effeminate'. But the careful reader watches how the writer segues out of this description and effortlessly back into his narrative by repeating that, for Nguili, 'one of his great pleasures, since he was not yet allowed by tribal law to drink, was to pour beer for those who were allowed to drink it'.

Hemingway digresses, of course, and at times he is amusing. His attempt to proclaim himself the possessor of an alternative religion to Christianity has its moments. He talks about what books he is reading and what he likes about them. About bookstores in Nairobi. How he chanced upon D. H. Lawrence and his wife once in Paris, but did not introduce himself. He brings up Evelyn Waugh's paranoia and how Hemingway gave Waugh a worthless pistol to carry. Then there are the memories of a female concierge in Paris with whom he once made love.

Occasionally the author offers us his famous pearls of wisdom about the wilderness. ('The animals that die the soonest learn the fastest'.) Some are ham-handed just because they are pontificated by a ham-handed author, while others just haven't been sculpted through revisions. My personal favorite: 'Never trust any man until you've seen him shoot at something dangerous or that he wants really badly at fifty yards or under.' As in all first drafts, even this nugget needs more polishing.

Curiously, there is little Bad Hemingway material here, the kind of writing that is so often lampooned by writing contests. (Could it be that what we call Bad Hemingway was just as laboriously dredged from the author's sweat glands as the Good Hemingway we praise so highly?) Yet the reader is often left wondering, how would Hemingway have edited *True At First Light*, had he taken on the task himself, rather than leaving it to his son?

In his prime, Hemingway liked to build long sentences using the conjunction 'and' as a bridge between non-sequiturs. And in *True At First Light*, one paragraph that begins with a paean to whiskey segues to ostrich boots from Hong Kong and then on to different women he has known and then on to those special women he has known who discovered

‘more ample bitchery or fuller drunkenness’ on a safari with him. But did Hemingway write this section deliberately and carefully, or had he just not gotten around to revising it? And what of the single paragraphs here that stretch on for more than two pages? Hemingway started out as a journalist. He was renowned for his use of white space. What are the odds that he would have permitted these great blocks of prose to remain intact?

As you might expect, *True At First Light* has its blood sports. The author reminisces at one stage about a buffalo he shot ‘in an emergency, which served as meat’. Not only is he unapologetic, but he remembers how the buffalo had a pair of horns ‘worth keeping to recall the manner of the small emergency Mary and I had shared. I remembered it now with happiness and I knew I would always remember it with happiness. It was one of those small things that you can go to sleep with, that you can wake with in the night and that you can recall if necessary if you were ever tortured.’

Is he intentionally being pompous? How would the author have massaged this recollection, had he taken the chance?

Hemingway always said that a writer’s greatest duty was to be true — both to himself and to his readers. But he writes in this ‘fictional memoir’ that:

In Africa a thing is true at first light and a lie by noon and you have no more respect for it than for the lovely, perfect weed fringed lake you see across the sun baked salt plain. You have walked across that plain in the morning and you know that no such lake is there. But now it is there absolutely true, beautiful and believable.

Perhaps with this book Hemingway learned how mutable the truth really is. Or he might be referring to the editing process: What a writer thinks is true at first light can evolve in his eyes and become a lie by noon.

The late, great American writing teacher John Gardner once compared the writing process for a novelist to the efforts of Doctor Frankenstein. Gardner described how the writer brings all these dead pieces of flesh together and hopes for a bolt of lightning to make it all come alive.

Maybe the greatest difference between the tyro novelist and the old pro is knowing that there are some stories which just won’t gel. The old pro knows he has trunkloads of manuscripts that didn’t come together. Stories that didn’t work. Stories that resisted illumination.

Authors can agonize and fantasize, but sometimes a story resists its birth. The writer can complete the manuscript, can tweak it and tease it and rub at it. But editing a manuscript that is going nowhere is like flogging a dead horse. Ernest Hemingway knew he had no story in *True At First Light* worth pursuing. Too bad his estate didn’t agree.