

**True At First Light:  
A Fictional Memoir**

**by Michiko Kakutani,  
New York Times, June 22, 1999.**

AFRICA was a fine subject, and he had written about it well and truly in the past, but the old days were gone now, and he was old and weary and ailing, and what he wrote this time was not good and it was not true. The writer was a proud man and he took pride in his writing, and when the writing of the Africa book did not go well, he put it away. Long ago, he said that there was nothing worse for a writer than for his writing 'which has been rewritten and altered to be published without permission as his own,' and he believed this as he believed few things. Later, when he was gone, others would forget his pride and his love of words, and they would publish his Africa book and other books he had put aside. They would publish the books because the writer was a famous writer and he had many readers, but they would do damage to his name.

Poor Hemingway: although his instantly recognizable style helped remake the writing of English prose in the first half of this century, it would grow mannered and flaccid in the latter part of his career, and it would make him an easy mark for feckless imitators and hostile critics. His public persona, which initially brought him fame and wealth, would become a kind of prison, and in the years after his death, it would also make him an object of derision among feminists and multiculturalists intent on judging him by contemporary mores as a bigoted, sexist pig.

No one has given such critics more ammunition than his estate and publishers, who have brought out a succession of posthumously published books consisting of writing that Hemingway himself chose not to publish – books that show Hemingway in the worst of all possible lights, his prose a near-parody of his earlier style; his self-portraits exercises in self-aggrandizing bravado. The latest of these volumes is True at First Light, a so-called 'fictional memoir,' laboriously extracted by Hemingway's son Patrick from a 200,000-word, untitled manuscript.

The book, which is roughly half the length of the original manuscript, purports to chronicle a safari trip in Kenya that Hemingway took with his fourth wife, Mary, in 1953. It recounts the story of Mary's efforts to kill a lion that she has been tracking for six months, and the narrator's involvement with a young woman from the Wakamba tribe who is referred to as his 'fiancee' or 'extra wife.' Although First Light is not as embarrassing a performance as Garden Of Eden (published in 1986) or The Dangerous Summer (published in 1985), it is decidedly mediocre Hemingway, a pallid, perfunctory echo of Green Hills Of Africa, a 1935 nonfiction work that itself holds up poorly next to

his two classic African stories, *The Snows Of Kilimanjaro* and *The Short Happy Life Of Francis Macomber*.

As Edmund Wilson has observed, Hemingway was able to externalize and objectify the conflicting elements of his own personality in his fiction. This capacity for self-criticism, however, tended to fade away when he wrote in the first person, and it disappeared entirely as Hemingway became increasingly concerned with living up to his public persona and mythologizing his own life – problems pointed up all too clearly in *First Light*.

Indeed, this book seems completely intent on creating a portrait of the author as the white alpha male, an *Übermensch* fought over by women and looked up to by Africans. He protectively watches over his wife, making sure she is not hurt while she is hunting, and he takes it upon himself to help the local villagers rid themselves of the scourge of marauding lions and leopards. He presumably embodies Hemingway's belief that blood sports are a test of manhood and honor, and he adheres to the hunter's code of ethics – that is, always kill cleanly and never leave an animal wounded.

He looks at a picture of a man strangling two lions and is 'deeply moved.' He declares that 'love is a terrible thing that you would not wish on your neighbor.' And he thinks to himself 'how nice it was that there was no African word for I'm sorry.' He seems to think of himself as brave and honorable, when in fact he comes across as patronizing, paternalistic and self-deluding. He makes a lot of snide remarks about the Masai, describing them as 'a syphilis-ridden, anthropological, cattle-worshiping curiosity', and petulantly knocks such literary rivals as Henry James, John O'Hara and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Although Patrick Hemingway argues in his introduction that *First Light* is not a journal but a work of fiction, the book hews closely to accounts of Hemingway's 1953 safari set down by biographers, who have pointed out that the author did become involved with an African woman and did 'go native,' shaving his head and hunting with a spear. The main difference between these biographical accounts and *First Light* concerns Hemingway's – or 'the narrator's' – prowess as a hunter and all that that implies in the author's macho aesthetic. While the biographies stress the writer's humiliating difficulties with his marksmanship on this trip, *First Light* focuses on Mary's disappointing encounter with a lion: an encounter in which the Hemingway character must come to her aid, kill the lion and then try to cheer her up.