

“In the end, [this book] beautifully illustrates that all of us are shaped by our families, our struggles, and our demons—just as Hemingway was.”

Andrew Theising, Author, Hemingway's Saint Louis

WRESTLING WITH DEMONS

In Search of the Real
Ernest Hemingway

CURTIS L. DeBERG



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Chapter 2



2024

Chapter 2: Making of the Myth



The preceding chapter is historical fiction. Only Hemingway and Jim Gamble know what was said during the long journey to Milan, and nobody but Hemingway and Brumback know what was discussed on July 14 before Gamble left the American Red Cross hospital. But most of the account is true. Both Gamble and Brumback were Hemingway's close friends. It's a fact that Gamble accompanied Hemingway on the long train ride to Milan. And Ted Brumback, most assuredly, authored the single-spaced, typed letter to Dr. Hemingway, dated July 14, 1918.¹

We also know that between July 8, the night of Ernest's wounding, and July 14, when he was admitted to the Milan hospital, he had time to mull over the details of his wounding. While he may not have enlisted in the Red Cross "because of any love of gold braid glory etc.,"² he knew there was a possibility that such glory was within his reach. As biographer Michael S. Reynolds said:

He had gone to war in search of heroics . . . If he was not a real hero, it was not his fault. Given the proper chance, he was sure he could have been brave. The medals were not a deep lie. Whatever his fears had been, they had not been made public. And most important, he had the wound that was the real proof, the real division between slackers and front line soldiers.³

A more recent biographer, Steve Paul, focused on Hemingway's time at the *Kansas City Star* and in WWI, the monumental eighteenth year in the aspiring writer's young life. Paul wrote, "One could wonder what lies he had told to himself and perhaps others. The Hemingway journey is long and winding and full of contradictions, as well as the eternal clash of fact and fiction. The interpretive problems posed by his invented self and the inventions of his later work have kept scholars busy for decades."⁴

The story of Ernest Hemingway is well known to aficionados, beginning with his birth in Oak Park on July 21, 1899. His father, Ed, was a taciturn obstetrician, and his mother, Grace, a flamboyant opera singer, whose income from her music lessons far exceeded the fees from her husband's medical practice. The up-scale Oak Park, a tony suburb of Chicago, was ten miles west of the city. Its political conservatism and religious piety began to suffocate him. Hemingway wanted to be out from under his parents' roof, where his overbearing mother was

always hounding her husband. Ed was often depressed and frequently resorted to corporal punishment to discipline his children.

Shortly before turning nineteen, Hemingway volunteered for the American Red Cross, went off to the Italian front, and was promptly wounded. While recovering in the Milan hospital, he met a pretty American nurse, fell in love, but was soon spurned. Less than two years later, he married a tall, auburn-haired woman from St. Louis. Soon, he and his new bride—Hadley Richardson, who was eight years older than Ernest—set out for the writers’ paradise of Paris, where the exchange rate was high, and the alcohol was cheap and legal.

Hemingway went through four wives, alienated his three sons, and betrayed more friends than you can count on two hands. The winner of the 1954 Nobel Prize for Literature saw the killing of bulls at the *corridas* in Spain; he gaffed marlin and bluefin tuna off the coasts of Havana and Key West, and he slayed big-game animals in Africa and grizzly bears in Montana. He was self-absorbed, and narcissistic. He told great yarns in the bars of Paris, Pamplona and Havana. If the lies were more colorful and entertaining than the truth, well, that was okay. That’s the livelihood of a fiction writer.

The magic of Hemingway’s yarns was that he mixed enough fact with fiction so that his audience could easily be left with the impression that he was, for example, a WWI soldier. To be clear, he was *not* a soldier. His enraptured listeners might also believe, erroneously, that his body was riddled with twenty-eight machine-gun bullets, that his scrotum was nicked by shrapnel, or that he heroically carried a wounded Italian soldier to the safety of a dugout in WWI.⁵

Even his parents weren’t immune from his yarns. At the end of May 1918, he wrote to his parents from New York City, on his way to France, and told them that he was engaged to silent film actress Mae Marsh. He’d never even met her. This fib caused his mother five sleepless nights before he sent his parents another letter confessing that he was only pulling their leg.

There is still great interest in Hemingway’s legacy. There are over a dozen Facebook groups devoted to him. Scholars meet every other year at the International Hemingway Society Conference to examine every aspect of his literature and his life. Every year, starting on Ernest’s birthday, Key West hosts a week-long celebration in his honor highlighted by a look-alike contest.

Hundreds of books have been written by relatives, friends, biographers, journalists, historians, and appropriators. Appropriators include authors of biographical fiction where Hemingway appears as an important character, usually celebrating him both as a writer and a man. Some appropriators, however, criticize his writing or denigrate him. For example, Hemingway’s former friend, John Dos Passos, created an unlikeable character named George Elbert Warner in his 1952 novel, *Chosen Country*. Warner was unmistakably modeled after Hemingway.

What can I offer with this book? First, it is unique in that it spans genre—part biography and part appropriation. Second, it both celebrates and criticizes Hemingway. Third, it presents a new perspective, with some new information and analysis. And last, I can relate to the man. He was always on the move. He loved to travel. He enjoyed being outdoors. He loved several women. He told stories. He was from the Midwest, raised in a religious, conservative community. He survived a plane crash—no, make that two.

To all of this, I can say, me, too. Except I survived one plane crash so far. Knock on wood.

This book takes you on a journey through time and across continents, starting in July 2019. I write as I go along, not with pencil and blue tablet or typewriter, as Hemingway would have written, but with the notes feature on my cell phone or with my laptop computer. I hire professional photographers where I can and take plenty of pictures of my own and share them on my Facebook groups. I imagine how Hemingway would see the world today. How would he live in a world with 24-hour cable news, Uber, and global warming? Would he be trying to save big-game animals, rather than kill them, on a planet of eight billion people with shrinking natural resources? When he was born, only 1.6 billion people were sharing the earth.

I refer to two Hemingways in this book. “Ernest” is the physical Hemingway who was born in 1899 and died in 1961. The second Hemingway is his ghost. I call him Modern Day Hemingway, or MDH. He joins me as we start our world tour in Oak Park, where he was born and grew up. After that, MDH and I drive north to check out Ernest’s summer stomping grounds, to Petoskey and Horton Bay, Michigan. From Paris, we visit places like Montreux, Switzerland, and Schruns, Austria, just like he and Hadley did in the 1920s. We board a train to Milan and Rapallo, as he and Hadley did in 1923. After that, we venture to Murchison Falls in Uganda, where Ernest and his fourth wife, Mary, survived not one, but two plane crashes in January 1954.

From there, it’s off to Madrid for a week, and then we fly to Bimini, in the Bahamas. We return to Paris before heading off to the Basque Country of Spain: Pamplona, San Sebastián, and Burguete. We don’t see the bulls run because of COVID-19, but we party in the streets—masks on, of course—and stay up until the wee hours of the morning. On the first day, we see the sun rise.

We take a train to the French Riviera and peer over the retaining walls of what was once Villa America the spacious mansion owned by Gerald and Sara Murphy. Hemingway famously paid a visit here in 1926 when he was torn between two lovers: his first wife, Hadley, and his soon-to-be second wife, Pauline.

We return to Venice, where Hemingway stayed in the winters of 1948–49 and 1949–50, at a time when he fell in love with the Veneto region. It was here that he also fell in love with Adriana, a teenage beauty from the aristocratic Ivancich family. We drop by one of Hemingway’s favorite hotels, The Gritti Palace, a wondrous Gothic structure just across from the Basilica di Santa Maria on the Grand Canal.

Our journey continues on Hemingway’s path from Key West to Havana; from Montana to Wyoming; and, finally, to Ketchum, Idaho, where, at about seven o’clock in the morning on July 2, 1961, he ended his life in a fashion befitting a Greek god. Using one of his favorite double-barreled shotguns, a Monte Carlo B model from W. & C. Scott & Son, he trudged up the stairs from the gun room in the basement.⁶ He walked to the vestibule at the front door—directly beneath Mary’s bedroom—and inserted both barrels of the weapon into the roof of his mouth. With his head tilted back and his big toe on the trigger, he killed himself in the same way he’d rehearsed so many times before, when he took macabre pleasure in the uneasiness of his nervous friends looking on in horror.⁷

At the outset, I planned to take readers on a journey along Hemingway’s life path, but my research pointed away from the prevailing wound theory as one of the main factors affecting much of his literary work and personal life. After learning the truth behind his WWI injuries, I became convinced that it wasn’t his physical or psychological trauma that propelled him to literary stardom, making him one of the world’s most identifiable celebrities. The wound theory

was too convenient. The man was far too complex for such a simple explanation. As time went along, I was convinced that other factors were more important.

Instead, I'd take biographer Kenneth S. Lynn's advice and scrutinize other factors, such as his relationship with his mother. The more I read, the more I learned that his career was also greatly affected by remorse (for his first two divorces), pain (other than the mortar wounds), anguish, and rivalry. And after reading two more biographies, by Denis Brian⁸ and Andrew Farah,⁹ I also learned that Hemingway's hypomanic personality was an overarching factor that affected him throughout his entire life.

Each of this book's five parts begins with a personal letter that I write to Hemingway as I visit some of the most meaningful places in his life. In the second chapter of each part, MDH and I have conversations, in much the same manner as Kirk Curnutt's *Coffee with Hemingway*.¹⁰ Readers can consider the first two chapters of each part as biographical fiction or historical fiction. Ron McFarland refers to these genres as *appropriations* of Hemingway.¹¹ In other words, these chapters are fictional, but the stories are based on well-documented material.

The third chapter in each part has an essay that is best classified as a biography. These chapters are not appropriations and have more endnotes than the first two chapters. For example, in the third chapter of Part I, I include an essay called "Bitch of a Son," a less-than-flattering look at Ernest's contentious relationship with his parents, especially his mother.

The fourth chapter of each part is mostly a memoir. Here, I interject my own life story into the picture. The conclusion sums up the book before COVID-19 shut down the world for most of the next year.

Finally, I have included an epilogue summarizing my Hemingway odyssey since the COVID-19 restrictions were changed, allowing me to return to the United States in the summer of 2021 to sell my house and have two additional surgeries on my left leg. In the fall of 2021, I moved back to France, but not to Paris. Instead, I moved to Hendaye, in the heart of Hemingway's beloved Basque Country, with the new love of my life, Marie Lange Delacroix. We live above our coffee/tea/chocolate store, and my library in the back of the store includes over three hundred books by or about Hemingway. I affectionately call it the Hemingway reading room.

Back in Hemingway's time, and in the first half of my life, there was no internet. One of the best forms of entertainment was to curl up with a delightful book next to a fire, under a tree, or on a train. It was fantastic to get lost in the word paintings written by some of the truly great authors.

Hemingway was such an author. I hope that my book will inspire you to read or reread Hemingway's books and short stories. His literature is art, and it endures. Though his stories often deal with war and death, his work still merits reading today. I also hope this book encourages people to read about his personal life story—in my opinion, his story is as good as any biography or appropriation ever written about him.

As I began my journey in Hemingway's footsteps in the summer of 2019, I began to distill the newly discovered information. For example, was Hemingway confessing to a crime when he told Malcolm Cowley in 1948 that he was still in deep trouble in Italy—the kind of trouble that had no statute of limitations? He added that he was "hurt very badly: in the body, mind, and spirit, and also morally."¹² *Morally?* Had he caused harm to others?

Another example: was he feeling guilty in 1954 in his plane-crash rumination about causing the death of someone else in wartime? Hemingway said, “In my nocturnal dreams, when they are not the bad kind that you get after a war where other people are killed sometimes by your fault, I am nearly always a very gay and witty person faintly addicted to the more obvious types of heroism and, with all, a most attractive type.”¹³ *By his fault?* This remarkable statement can genuinely be categorized as an admission of sorts that he may have been the cause of Temperini’s death.

A third example: was he being truthful in an earlier deleted draft of *A Farewell to Arms* when he said that the Italian, Passini (or was it Temperini?), saved Frederic Henry’s life (or was it Hemingway’s?) by putting himself between Henry and the mortar bomb? In a letter to journalist Cowley on September 5, 1948, who was writing a feature article about Hemingway, he says that the account of Frederic Henry’s wounding was the most accurate portrayal of his own woundings at Fossalta.¹⁴

In trying to answer these questions, a good place to start is by looking at what tormented him—in other words, his demons.¹⁵ Hemingway’s creativity and genius were fueled by conflict, and he wrote best when in an agitated state. I’ve managed to identify five of his demons. The first four are his parents, remorse, physical pain, and anguish. The fifth is rivalry. Unquestionably, the quest for his parents’ approval haunted him. A strict, taciturn father and a flamboyant, narcissistic mother were the main source of his angst. He was deeply remorseful for how he treated his wives, especially Hadley.¹⁶ It was she who enthusiastically encouraged him, bolstering his confidence that his writing was new and powerful. Also, it was Hadley who originally came up with the *iceberg theory*¹⁷ to describe Hemingway’s writing style. Hemingway was haunted by their divorce, and he looked back with great remorse for his mistreatment of her. It was Pauline—wife number two—who ensured that he kept employing it. She carefully edited his work between 1926 and 1938, when he was most prolific. But Pauline’s wealth always bothered him; he needed her family’s money, but he resented his dependence on her. His third wife, Martha Gellhorn, was a prolific writer in her own right, and she prompted him to begin writing again when he was happily resting on his laurels after the publication of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in 1940. Hemingway loathed the competition. As for his last wife, Mary, she and Ernest constantly bickered. But, like his other wives, Mary read his work. From 1946 until his death in 1961, she played a significant role in his writing. A prime example of Mary’s influence was her plea that Hemingway refrain from killing off Santiago at the end of *The Old Man and the Sea*.

His third demon was physical pain, starting with his mortar wounds in WWI. Most biographers have it right in one respect—Ernest Hemingway’s war experience in 1918 was a major factor influencing his future career as a writer. These writers surmise that a head concussion, leg wounds, and the emotional trauma from an exploding shrapnel bomb supplied the impetus for so many of his future novels and short stories.

His fourth demon was anguish; a result of depression, alcoholism, and, later, paranoia. Many scholars opine that he also suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). His problems were worsened by hypomania, defined as “a condition in which you display a revved-up energy or activity level, mood or behavior. The new ‘energized you’ is recognized by others as beyond your usual self. Hypomania is a less severe form of mania, and both are commonly part of bipolar disorder.”¹⁸ Hemingway’s keen powers of observation, disciplined work ethic, and competitiveness were part of his hypomanic personality.

Finally, his fifth demon was his unquenchable thirst to defeat those he saw as rivals, both dead and alive. Many historians focus on his rivalry with other writers. But this book contends that there were two non-writers who Hemingway perceived as rivals: Lt. Edward M. McKey as a Red Cross rolling canteen volunteer and Fedele Temperini. Hemingway admired heroes and once said that, to be a hero, one had to sacrifice one's life. By this definition, McKey and Temperini both qualified. There's evidence to suggest that Hemingway was jealous of McKey's "good fortune" to be the first real hero of the Second Battle of the Piave; also, he was remorseful for causing "others" to die in war—he may well have been referring to Temperini.

Hemingway created life situations for himself as fodder for his craft. War? He was off to Italy and Normandy. Bullfighting? He boarded a train to the *corridas* in Pamplona, Valencia, and Madrid. Big-game hunting? He drove to Montana to stalk grizzly bears or took a ship to East Africa to track leopards and lions. Deep-sea fishing? He bought a thirty-eight-foot custom fishing boat and headed to the Gulf Stream.

But, like a scientist doing fieldwork, he always returned to the lonely writing laboratory. His tools: sharpened pencils, a Corona typewriter, and *cahiers* (notebooks) to record his findings. The more experiments he conducted, the more he learned, and from this knowledge came invention. Love him or hate him, Hemingway is still *A Moveable Feast*. You can pick up one of his books or biographies and devour it.

Everywhere I go now, it seems, Hemingway is with me. He's my own moveable feast. I tend to think of his novels, like my favorite, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, as the main course—*le boeuf* or *le poisson*, if you will. His spartan, muscular prose, especially early in his career, sizzles with action. The meal has plenty of spice, undoubtedly gleaned from his vast travel experiences primarily spanning the Midwest, American West, Key West, Europe, East Africa, and Cuba.

The sumptuous repast isn't complete, though, without two or three sputtering hot, bubbling side dishes. These are his short stories, like "Big Two-Hearted River" or "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber. During the meal, wine flows. We're treated to bottomless bottles of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Tempranillo, or Rioja red wine, like the steady stream of letters he wrote throughout his lifetime. For dessert, we might consider his *Esquire* articles and poems to be the *mousse au chocolat* or *crème brûlée*. And, finally, let's not forget the newspaper articles he wrote for the *Kansas City Star* and *Toronto Star*—these are the *digestifs*.

Hemingway, the expert storyteller, couldn't keep himself, though, from constantly mixing fiction into his real-life stories. Carlos Baker called these stories *yarns*.¹⁹ Hemingway's friend, Aaron E. Hotchner, called them *practical-joke fantasies*.²⁰ Others were not so gracious. Third wife Martha Gellhorn called him a liar, and even labeled him an *apocryphiar*—someone who knowingly allows the untrue parts of stories to go uncorrected, either for the storyteller's personal benefit or to settle a score.²¹

Notes

¹ Chapter 13 provides all footnotes and references for the *history* part of the historical fiction.

² See letter to Marcelline Hemingway, c. 30 October and 6 November 1917, *LETT-VI*, p. 59.

³ Reynolds *YH*, p. 23.

⁴ Paul, S., p. 152.

⁵ Hemingway told his friend, Aaron Hotchner, that his injuries from the war included being “nicked in the scrotum by a piece of shrapnel.” See Hotchner, p. 48.

⁶ Calabi et al., location 2885.

⁷ As an example, see Brasch, p. 54.

⁸ Brian, p. 308–321.

⁹ Farah, p. 148, fn 50.

¹⁰ Curnutt, Kirk. *Coffee with Hemingway*. Foreword by John Updike. London: Duncan Baird Publishers, 2007.

¹¹ McFarland, Ron. *Appropriating Hemingway*. McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers. Kindle Edition, 2015.

¹² Letter from Ernest Hemingway to Malcolm Cowley, August 19, 1948. It reads:

“Look, Malcolm, if you want to do me a favour only put in about Italy what I wrote you. That I was wounded on such and such a day...that I had such and such decorations...and leave out everything else...As you must know from *A Farewell to Arms* (an entirely made-up novel) and from “In Another Country” and “A Way You’ll Never Be” (two un-invented stories) Italy and that part means more to me than I can ever write. I was in very bad trouble there and if you write anything about it somebody will start digging around and I will, eventually, be in bad trouble again...If this doesn’t make sense do it anyway and I will leave you a letter in case should ever die and will give you the dope on the unfortunate things there which are not covered by any statute of limitations...In the first war, I now see, I was hurt very badly; in the body, mind and spirit and also morally.”

See <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2004/the-maurice-f-neville-collection-of-modern-literature-pt-iibrfeaturing-detective-and-mystery-fiction-n08012/lot.339.html>, last accessed on December 6, 2023. When Hemingway says he “made something up,” he is referring to fiction that he “invented” based on three ingredients: his real-life experience, his knowledge gained from the observing the experiences of others, and his own imagination. When he refers to a story as being “un-invented,” he is referring to fiction that was “related to him by other people.” See Brasch, pp. 65-66. If Brasch is correct, then it invalidates the conclusion that stories like “A Way You’ll Never Be” are autobiographical (e.g., see Knodt, 2016).

¹³ *BL*, location 6488. This article by Hemingway appeared in “The Christmas Gift,” appearing in *Look* magazine, April 20 and May 4, 1954.

¹⁴ The article appeared in *Life* magazine. See Cowley, Malcolm. 1949. “A Portrait of Mister Papa.” *Life* magazine. January 10.

¹⁵ There are various definitions of demon, some in the supernatural sense and others in a religious sense, involving the devil. The definition that makes practical sense in my book is “a person, habit, or obsession thought of as evil, cruel, or persistently tormenting.” See <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/demon>. Last accessed on October 24, 2023.

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of how Hemingway treated Hadley in Paris, see Donaldson, Scott. *The Paris Husband: How It Really Was Between Ernest and Hadley Hemingway*. New York: Simply Charly, 2018.

¹⁷ Diliberto, p. 65.

¹⁸ See <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/21774-hypomania>. Last accessed on October 24, 2023.

¹⁹ Baker, p. ix.

²⁰ Hotchner, p. 89.

²¹ Gellhorn.