

The Trouble with Hating Hemingway

By Paula McLain

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It's sometimes astonishing to me that it's become my actual job to defend Ernest Hemingway to smart women everywhere. I wanted to hate him, too. When I first picked up his memoir, *A Moveable Feast*, in 2008, I immediately latched onto how fantastic it would be to novelize Jazz-age Paris, possibly the most dazzling and glamorous of all possible worlds. Telling the story from Ernest's first wife's point of view could be a feminist act, I thought, giving voice to Hadley Richardson, an extraordinary woman no one had ever heard of before, and whose side of the story had never been told. I could sock it to Ernest, so to speak, for breaking her heart, for being a bully and a philanderer and an egomaniac. But what I didn't count on was her, Hadley, stepping in to change my mind.

I'd never written historical fiction at that point, or done a stitch of research for a book. I couldn't have known how the process of finding Hadley as a character would essentially knit me into her voice and consciousness. "Point of view" wasn't a literary term or strategy, suddenly, but a powerful engine of total empathy and immersion. Through her eyes, I met the young Hemingway, just as she did, at a party in Chicago in 1920. He was just twenty to her twenty-nine, and electrifying to talk to or even to stand near. He was impossibly alive, and aching handsome, and though he could sometimes be boastful, she easily saw through that to the self-doubt and insecurity just beneath

the surface. He was sensitive and idealistic and wildly ambitious, too. He hadn't published anything yet, but was dying to change the world with his writing.

Hemingway did do that of course, and then some, going on to become the most important literary voice of his generation. He ruined his marriage on the way, and alienated all of his friends and allies, and I was there for all of it, or so it very much seemed. I wrote *The Paris Wife* in a fever, pouring out the first draft in seven months, in a Starbucks near my house in Cleveland. Hardly a Parisian café, but every day, I steeped myself in biography and history, in archival letters and photographs and literature from the time—and essentially fell into Bohemian Paris, and into Hadley's mind and experience. It was more exciting and absorbing than any writing I'd ever done, and more transformative, too. I began to realize that hating Hemingway wasn't just going to be tricky. It was going to be impossible. I was already too close, and he was already far too real, and too human.

Still, there were challenges along the way. The size and strength of Hemingway's personality often worked as a kind of dazzle camouflage, hiding the real man and his intentions, his inner life. There were times when I found I simply didn't understand why he was making certain decisions or behaving the way he did. Why had he chosen Hadley out of all the possible women fluttering in his sphere, for instance? Why, after they'd fallen deeply in love, and had a marriage with so much promise, did he betray her with her best friend? To answer these questions, and as an imaginative exercise, I decided to write from his POV in key moments. It was only an exercise, a problem-solving gambit. But something dramatic happened when I crossed over into his consciousness, and

sincerely tried to understand him. He got all the way in. If I had begun this book in judgment—how *could* he? I had arrived fully at compassion. *How* could he? And *why*?

Writing *The Paris Wife* was so immersive and enmeshing that when the book was finished, I pushed away the thought of ever turning to Hemingway again as a character. I closed the door, gratefully, and moved on. Years and years passed before my subconscious intervened with an intense and mesmerizing dream. I was fishing with Hemingway on his boat, *Pilar*, and there was another woman on board, hand-feeding a marlin that had leapt up from the Gulf of Mexico. It was Martha Gellhorn, I realized, his third wife. I knew she was a journalist and war correspondent, but not much more. When I Googled her the next morning, still gripped by the dream, I quickly realized that her life and accomplishments were very special. There was a feeling of inevitability, too. I'd been led to her, and I had to follow through and tell her story.

Once I embarked, I fell hard for Martha, and connected to her completely. In fact, it's possible that I've never written a female character that feels as kindred to me as she does. Simultaneously, here I was meeting Hemingway *again*—this time through Martha's eyes. He's so different from that 20-year-old Hadley first encountered. In his prime, both physically and otherwise, he'd become one of the most famous writers in America, if not the world. But he was also as susceptible as ever to self-doubt, and his inner demons. That tension and complexity in him makes him endlessly interesting to me. I feel I'll never get to the bottom of him, but perhaps that's always the case, in life as well as fiction.

Finding and being found by Hemingway has been one of the greatest surprises of my life, and a wonderful ride. I've stood in front of the bed he was born in, walked through his high school in Oak Park, stood on the lawn at Windemere cottage, up in Michigan, where he took his first steps. I've stalked him through France and Spain, from Paris to San Sebastian, Pamplona to Antibes. Chicago, Toronto, and Kansas City. Key West and Cuba and Sun Valley, where he ended his life at dawn on July 2, 1961. Last September, I was invited to speak at the Hemingway Seminar at the Community Library in Ketchum. The library now has stewardship of the Hemingway home in Ketchum, and allowed me to spend several hours in the house with no real agenda other than to be there. To sit in his room in a rocking chair and imagine his sadness in those last days. To stand on his porch overlooking the Big Wood River and take in the gold hills and the flowering bright yellow rabbit brush, the air smelling of wild sage.

On my last day in Ketchum I stood at his grave, decorated with all sort of things people bring to him. Empty whiskey bottles. Pens. Coins. Hand-written notes. There was a cigar box propped open, with an index card listing all the objects in the box and their meaning. Blades of grass from Windemere Cottage. Mint from a cold stream running into Sturgeon Bay. Cloth from a red bandana worn in Pamplona for the running of the bulls. The box was full, and the list went on and on. Suddenly I burst into tears, for here was a gift from a true acolyte and aficionado. Someone who'd spent a lifetime collecting these things only to leave them there, at the foot of the master. The devotion was so moving, I'll never forget it. Perhaps I'll do the same with my books of him one day.

Whether or not Hemingway would recognize himself in the pages, I couldn't say. I've written him as truly as I might—imperfect pilgrim as I am—and all for love.