

A WAY THEY'LL NEVER BE

By Michael Ventura

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Suddenly on July 21 it was the 100th anniversary of Ernest Hemingway's birth. I say "suddenly" because, unlike F. Scott Fitzgerald's in '96 or Duke Ellington's this spring, Hemingway's 100th birthday came and went with a minimum of observance -- no media-hyped academic conferences, no high-profile magazine covers, no retrospectives by marquee-name writers in the major Sunday venues. Besides the inevitable tourist hooplas (contests for who has the best Hemingway beard), there were merely some tepid reviews of this or that new biography and a few op-ed columns -- pieces that shared an air of weary condescension and assumed a dully masticated consensus that Hemingway's youthful work is good but overrated, he wrote nothing noteworthy after about 1936, and anyway he was an insecure, misogynist, macho braggart whose life constitutes nothing less than an embarrassment to American literature.

This has been forgotten: that the "macho" youth, barely 18, volunteered in the First World War not for the infantry but for the Red Cross ambulance corps, and was severely wounded while saving the life of a wounded soldier; and that the stories he wrote of war were never about glory but were about the spirit-shattering fear that people endure in combat, and about how such fear never entirely goes away even when the war is long over. "Later he had seen the things he could never think of and later still he had seen much worse. So when he got back to Paris that time he could not talk about it or stand to have it mentioned." [*The Snows of Kilimanjaro*] In fact, many of Hemingway's stories, no matter what their setting, are about cracking up or trying to recover from a crack-up. Before Hemingway, no American writer had written so nakedly not only about having cracked, but about the possibility that he could break again at any time -- themes his critics almost universally ignore.

And this has been, if not forgotten, then underplayed: that after wartime experiences which would have gutted the talent of almost anyone, the young Hemingway (in his twenties and with no education beyond high school) painstakingly forged a prose style which quickly became the foundation of most American prose since -- a style so supple and functional that writers from Dashiell Hammett to Raymond Carver could ape it slavishly and yet still be praised for their originality, because it's a style that (like Charlie Parker's) allows for tremendous variation while always retaining its originator's stamp. This same young uneducated writer then performed an astonishing act of synthesis: He took the narrative innovations he found in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*, and in the short stories of Stephen Crane, Anton Chekov, James Joyce, Ring Lardner, and Sherwood Anderson; combined them with what D.H. Lawrence taught the world about writing dialogue; and smelted these disparate influences into a story form that is "the short story" as it is now taught in virtually every college-level creative writing class in the world -- while also originating the pungent staccato rhythm of dialogue which quickly became the standard not only for the best Hollywood screenwriting but for *noir* as a genre.

A politically correct academia may hate Hemingway's life; and they may resent him for being such an intellectual giant that he achieved his innovations without recourse

to the education that is their sustenance; but they can't help teaching his style and his forms because he remains the most influential writer of the 20th century. To paraphrase James Agee: There isn't anybody writing American prose who doesn't owe Ernest Hemingway more than s/he owes anybody else.

But this was left unremarked on the 100th anniversary of his birth.

And this, too, was forgotten: that the "macho" young man who wrote *The Sun Also Rises* wrote of a man who's had his dick shot off. How macho is that? Jake, the narrator, feels masculine, feels potent (his dick is gone, not his balls), yet he's unable to do anything about it. His experience of the world (the war) has deprived him of his life as a man. Name another writer who's portrayed so graphically, so inescapably, the fragility of being male: a man's terrified dependence upon having an erection. When Hemingway wrote *The Sun Also Rises* literary sexuality was taboo, and both D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce had been driven from their homelands for challenging that taboo. Hemingway took the risk, and did so in what is still the most imitated novel of the century in terms of form -- imitated by people who haven't even read it, but have read only its likenesses.

Those who insist on the macho image of Hemingway look not at his work but at what he did for entertainment: hunting, fishing, bullfights, boxing. Most of us prefer to be entertained while sitting on our asses watching a screen upon which others play-act at doing the exciting stuff. Hemingway was too restless, reckless, and desperate for such passivity. If he wasn't in the midst of the real thing he wasn't entertained. But look at *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *To Have and Have Not*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and the short stories, and you will see one unifying theme with nothing macho about it: that no matter how good or brave or strong you are; no matter whether you can or cannot love; no matter what you know or learn or believe; no matter how rich or poor or beautiful or ugly you may be; and whether you're on the side of the angels or not -- no matter what, sooner or later you will be defeated by internal and external forces beyond your control. Your one final option is the grace with which you meet defeat. That will be the final test: Are you capable of such grace or not? To know that not merely death but defeat awaits you, and that defeat will probably come before death, yet nevertheless to live and act from the core of your soul and to stand for the good as you see it with no hope of reward -- this was Hemingway's uncompromised and uncompromising definition of courage.

Few want to be reminded that the life of the spirit depends upon how we withstand being broken. So his critics talk a lot about his life and a little about his style, and his sycophants imitate his beard, but they all steer clear of Hemingway's vision because of the ruthless demands his vision makes upon one's integrity.

He led a tortured inner life which he vented upon his intimates. The same can be said of many of us (though that doesn't excuse anything). And, like most of us men, he didn't see deeply into women. With the exception of Lady Brett in *The Sun Also Rises*, he failed to write women who had the complexities of his male characters. But I don't think a misogynist would have said, as Hemingway did upon being awarded the Nobel, that the prize should have been given to Isak Dinesen (Karen von Blixen), the author of *Out of Africa* and *Winter's Tales*.

It's also forgotten that Hemingway was his own harshest critic. In *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* he painted a more brutal portrait of himself than anyone else has: "Each day of not writing, of comfort, of being that which he despised, dulled his ability and softened his will to work ... He had destroyed his talent himself ... by not using it, by betrayals of

himself and what he believed in, by drinking so much that he blunted the edge of his perceptions, by laziness, by sloth, and by snobbery, by pride and by prejudice, by hook and by crook ... It was a talent all right, but instead of using it he had traded on it."

Two decades on, in his Nobel acceptance speech, he summarized the life and fate of the writer: "He does his work alone and he must face eternity, or the lack of it, each day."

Hemingway lived and finally died by that.

Strangely, the quality of Hemingway's work least remarked on is his constant and insistent expression of love and of happiness (and there is nothing harder to write about than happiness). He loves the land, the sky, and the sea. He loves the play of light upon just about anything. He loves Paris and Cuba and Spain and Michigan. He sees flashes of stunning beauty even amidst the terrible and the gruesome. Even the approach of his greatest dread can be beautiful: "So this was how you died, in whispers that you did not hear." Again and again he dwells upon the sweet and often silly happiness of being in love. Sometimes it works and sometimes it's corny, but he never shies from giving sweetness and happiness their place, for they were as crucial to his vision as fear, defeat, and death. Hemingway said it all in one sentence that occurs to me more and more as I grow older. It is from one of those later books that critics are now so fond of discounting, *Islands in the Stream*: "But out of all the things you could not have there was one that you could, and that was to know when you were happy and to have all of it while it was there and it was good."

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