

The riches of Papa

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Ron Charles revisits the short stories at the core of Hemingway's brilliance. C1.



“The masters of the short story come to no good end,” wrote Ernest Hemingway, in a bitterly prescient moment. He was, of course, a master of the short story who came to his own no good end with a shotgun.

But now is not the time to speak of endings. This week marks the 118th anniversary of Hemingway's birth. Today, no living fiction writer towers over American culture the way Papa once did. His cultivated blend of machismo and existential stoicism captivated a lost generation shattered by war. His elliptical style mesmerized readers for decades — and remains so highly contagious that students still fall prey to its impassive tone and declarative simplicity. The International Imitation Hemingway Competition ran for nearly three decades, ending in 2005, but the number and quality of entries that poured in over the years suggest it could have gone on forever.

Isn't it pretty to think so?

I've always had an uneasy relationship with this Nobel Prize winner. I got to know the young woman who would eventually be my wife in a seminar on Hemingway. The earth moved, though not at first. If she was attracted to the testosterone writer, I don't know what attracted her to me. Hemingway and I were both raised by Christian Science mothers in the Midwest, but beyond that, the similarities end. He had more wives than I've had dates. He rushed into danger to get material for his writing; I

rushed into writing to get away from danger.

But as I studied his life, all that boxing and boasting and bingeing struck me as symptoms of deep insecurity. Surely, a real man wouldn't be quite so selfconscious about being a real man, right?

Those tensions are richly explored in a new biography by Mary V. Dearborn, but I can't help feeling that, for most of us, the secret to appreciating Hemingway's work lies in staying away from

Hemingway's life. His bravado, his pomposity and, frankly, his inconsolable sadness risk overshadowing his art. What the New Critics called "the biographical fallacy" is always irresistible, but it's especially tempting when dealing with a writer who aggressively encouraged it. Trying to match up every event in a story to the author's life is a swell way of reducing a great work of fiction to a flawed autobiography.

Consider that Hemingway's best novel, "The Sun Also Rises," tells the story of an impotent man. That's rich material for a biographical critic, but most of us should just look at the masterpiece on the page. More than 90 years after it was published, it's still an astonishingly powerful work largely because of its ferocious restraint. When I taught "The Sun Also Rises," most of my students had no idea what was keeping Jake Barnes and Lady Brett Ashley from jumping into bed, and who can blame them? Jake's affliction is rarely alluded to and is never described. Thou may differ, but where Hemingway's later novels seem, to me, freighted with melodrama and distracting verbal tics, "The Sun Also Rises" whispers its chilly despair with unruffled grace.

You can see how he perfected that style in an illuminating new edition of his short stories. This is the fourth volume in the Hemingway Library series, and to read it is to be shocked again by the fecundity of his genius. Writing one story that takes root in literary history is remarkable, but here is classic after classic, including "Indian Camp," "Big TwoHearted River," "The Killers," "Hills Like White Elephants," "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" and "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber."

Some of the stories, such as "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," appear with alternate endings and notes showing additions and deletions. This material has long been available to scholars, but it's presented here in a thoroughly accessible way by Seán Hemingway, the author's grandson, who edited the volume and provides a helpful introduction.

There was a time when it seemed Hemingway, like so many other once indispensable writers, might fade away. (Quick show of hands: Who's still reading John Dos Passos?) As the decades passed, the parodies seemed to preempt him. More enlightened attitudes about women threatened to render Papa irrelevant. And, really, who thinks hunting is heroic anymore?

But like the handsome bullfighter in "The Sun Also Rises," Hemingway's work just keeps getting up no matter how many times it's beaten down.

Admittedly, my renewed fondness for his stories is boosted by a recent trip to Spain with my wife and younger daughter. "There is no other country in the world like Spain," Hemingway wrote in "For Whom the Bell Tolls," and that was in the midst of a civil war! Today, it remains a place of unsurpassed beauty and friendliness.

But on our last day in Seville, we searched for a ride to the airport for more than an hour before learning that all the taxi drivers were on strike. There seemed little chance of catching our plane, the first in a complex series of flights that had to transpire with perfect timing.

My daughter walked over to the Plaza de Toros de la Maestranza, one of the oldest bullrings in Spain. In her broken Spanish, she asked if anyone there could help us. A young man named Juan indicated that he would drive us to the airport for 20 euros. We piled into his rusty jalopy, and only as we were hurtling down the highway did I see the next day's headline in my mind: "Three American naifs accept ride from mysterious Spaniard and vanish."

I shouldn't have worried. Juan, it turns out, was an actual bullfighter. Our hero had to be back at the ring by 9. He drove with grace. He "never made any contortions, always it was straight and pure and natural."

We were in Hemingway's world.