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This text, winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Prize Award, explores the many tragic facets that both nurtured Hemingway's work and eroded his life.

Hemingway Details

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Jay says

Paul Hendrickson, in his book *Hemingway's Boat*, says of Kenneth Lynn's "unforgiving" biography of Papa: "[It is] often absurd in its psychological interpretations of Hemingway as it is brilliant in its creative analysis of his work." In the bibliography he speaks of Lynn's "psychoanalytic (and often ridiculous) text."

There is truth to Hendrickson's characterization. Lynn's study does move between the brilliant and the absurd, between the reasoned analysis of Hemingway's writings and the wildly speculative in regard to what he believes is the impact of Hemingway's supposedly androgynous upbringing by a domineering and unbending mother.

It is clear by the end of the first chapter that Lynn is not overly sympathetic to Hemingway as a person. Lynn emphasizes time and again Hemingway's self-absorption, his viciousness, his destructive competitiveness, his mercurial nature. He also—and here enter Lynn's "psychological interpretations"—is persistent in underscoring evidence that confirms Hemingway's gender confusion that in his writings is seen in the themes of transvestism, twin hood, the female in the male, death, depression and suicide. All of which hark back to his mother who in Hemingway's early years dressed him in female clothing.

Although Lynn is harsh in his portrayal of Hemingway and insistent on his psychoanalysis, the study is, if controversial, still engaging. The text flows easily and is often insightful particularly in his treatment of selected pieces of the Hemingway canon. The final chapter that deals with the years from 1945 to Hemingway's death in 1961 does seem a bit thin in terms of its content but there are other biographies to fill that thinness. There are few other biographers, however, who discuss so extensively the writings of Hemingway and their relationships to Hemingway's actual life.

Lynn's treatment of particularly Hemingway's fiction does raise an important question. That fiction is closely tied to his life—to the places, people, incidents and concerns that defined him. But does exposing the real in Hemingway's fiction diminish the impact of the work? Does that fiction once linked to the real Hemingway become merely sources for recreating Hemingway's life? Do they lose in that process their artistic and/or creative value and impact? Those who answer "yes" to that question may want to avoid Lynn's study.

Alex Fresta says

I was hesitant in deciding to finally read a Bio of the great "Papa". He had been one of my favorite authors for so long, I was a little scared that his books would lose the effect they had once had and that I would never enjoy them as much again. (I was a big Picasso fan at one point in my life, but after reading his bio and finding out he was a monster, I lost all interest in his paintings.) Reading *For whom the bell tolls* as a teenager is one of my best literary memories and I admit to crying at the end.

I was very, very relieved to find that upon finishing this fair, totally unbiased and perceptive Biography, I am more interested in Hemingway than ever and intend to read all his novels again. I would recommend this biography for all Hemingway fans or anyone who is interested in his "real" life, not just the lies and myths.

This is a portrait of flawed, contradictory and tortured man. It is also a portrait of a true literary genius.

Robert says

Perhaps the best literary biography I've ever read. It destroys the myths about Hemingway and exposes the ignorance of his critics without deifying him. The book takes a hard look at the psychological basis for Hemingway's life and work, especially the role of his mother. It provides an excellent supplement to his work with information drawn from sources as wide ranging as the Italian language to 19th century child-rearing practices.

Larry says

This biography is not for Hemingway beginners, and I'm glad I read it after some others. This wasn't planned - I just happened to find Michael Reynolds' books first. I don't mean that to sound condescending. What I mean is that if Lynn's book is the first or only one you read about him it might mess with your perceptions of the great writer too much.

It's like looking at only one face of a many-sided and varied object. You need to see more of the different sides to really understand the whole (or begin to).

For newly infatuated Hemingway lovers it will undoubtedly leave a bad taste in your mouth to see him with so many of his flaws and hangups laid out, and may even cause you to forget why you liked him at all.

Or, for those inclined to look for it, this book might merely confirm what you knew all along, that he was at base a difficult, even vicious person, someone completely defined by sexuality struggles and alcoholism.

That the book attempts to explain and understand the dark sides of Hemingway's personality doesn't mean we have to view the author solely in this light, however, just like we shouldn't be required to see him only as a romantic figure, some heroic example of masculinity.

When it comes to "great" people, those who have led what we might call extraordinary or outsized lives, maybe we feel a stronger desire to study their makeup, to better see how they did what they did.

For me Hemingway was many things, some good, some bad, and Lynn's book uses a psychological focus to look into what may have been behind the "bad." That's what it's mainly about. I think it's an important contribution to an overall understanding. It doesn't - it can't - explain every last thing about him.

The reason we are so fascinated with him, the simple and basic reason, is the same one for all geniuses - we are awed by his amazing gifts. That can't really be explained; it just is. What he did with his artistic talent and how he managed his life in light of it is to me the real story, and Lynn's book is definitely an interesting chapter.

For recent initiates to Hemingway biographies, like I was a few years ago, a great first or early read is Reynolds' Hemingway in Paris. It gives you all of the good stuff about his life over there and his

development as a writer. The excitement of what he was beginning to achieve is matched by the romantic setting, the trips around Europe, and the social interactions within his new circle. Like always with Hemingway, it was as if he was writing his own life, and this was a really fun part.

The book also shows the flaws and darker things about him that were always there. It's especially devastating when he leaves Hadley after finding some success. That decision marked the end of the "good" times in Paris and apparently haunted him, as he hints at the end of his life in *A Moveable Feast*.

Nathan Eilers says

Lynn's book is a thesis biography, which means that in addition to giving you the essential info about the famous author, he wants to paint his subject a certain way. Lynn wants his reader to think of Hemingway as an author who wrestled with his sexuality all his life. While this is true to a point, Lynn really takes it way too far. I argued a lot with him in the margins. Anyway, it's a useful biography but not great.

Kanjoos says

Currently reading this one. A model for other biographies, this book is well-written *and* balanced. If you like Hemingway you'll probably gobble this up regardless of how good it is; if you dislike him there's enough about his suspicious lifestyle and upbringing that'll prick up your ears; if you're like me and have conflicting feelings about Hemingway, this should do well to clarify them and make you see things you wouldn't otherwise see in his stories. A book of four-star quality with minus-a-star's worth of conclusion-jumping and psycho-pseudoscience (Freud has cropped up at least three times so far).

Melanie says

I came late to the party re Hemingway, having only read maybe two of his books at the age you're supposed to read him. Then after recently reading *A Moveable Feast*, I wanted to learn more about his life. Lynn's biography is one of the most fascinating books I've ever read. It did frequently piss me off, because Lynn almost invariably puts an unflattering spin on Hemingway in ambiguous or even neutral situations. However, the last few pages of the book, especially the last two paragraphs, sum up Hemingway's life and legacy beautifully.

Michael says

I picked it up some years ago. Ernest Hemingway has always been a hero of mine. But I would say when I mentioned this, "That I am not a fan for the reasons most people are." It was obvious to me even as a much younger person what he was up to- creating a persona, playing a part- writing his own script. The biographer did an outstanding job here. This book is not to be missed if you are interested in EH.

Seth Augenstein says

There are jerks, the alcoholic whirlwinds who can't help themselves... and then there's Hemingway. A brilliant book for showing the warts - and explaining how they inspired some hit-and-miss Literature.

Ken French says

Very good overview of his life. Occasionally falters when trying to psychoanalyze his subject. I like Hemingway less after reading this.

Fred Landis says

"What's the use of trying to live in such a g- place as America when there was Paris and Switzerland and Italy."

How does a person get away with statements like this and still remain the home-town hero of every place he laid his hat?

Hemingway has a reputation as a misogynist. Here we find that his first wife Hadley destroyed a year of his work in a fit of jealousy. He divorces her, he slaps her? He hugs her and moves on.

Like David Lean, he saw the art in the editing: "He had written 'The Sun Also Rises' in six weeks and had spent five months revising."

Jb says

Finished the book this morning and I was glad to do so in wonderful weather because otherwise, my mood would have been wrecked. Hemingway's final days, months (years) seemed to be filled with desperation--and Lynn does a great job of portraying the slow spiral of his mental health. Lynn spends more time on Hemingway's early days than his latter years, but let's face it, they were jollier (as jolly as Papa could make them). Overall, a good read and a great insight into Hemingway's life, even if it is a tad heavy with psychological ping pong.

Rustyjoint says

It seems only a bit trite to write about the man who described his own life and adventures so much more eloquently.. not to discredit the author's work entirely, he's a very worthy writer in his own right and the book isn't bad by any means, it is just a matter of what he has to contend with.. and I'm sure Hemingway's recount of his life may be a bit self- and time-fetishized.. in short, I read this once, did not regret doing so, but I will most definitely go to one of Hem's own works in the future..

Timothy Hurley says

Well written literary biography of one of the masters revealing perhaps a genius, but also a very flawed human.

Kim says

I read some of Hemingway's work when I was at university and I wasn't impressed. The bull-fighting, the drinking, the over-the-top machismo didn't appeal to me. So it was no more Hemingway for me for several decades. Then last year, in preparation for a holiday in Paris, I read *A Moveable Feast* and was intrigued. The prose was wonderful. Likewise the evocation of 1920s Paris. The impression I gained of Hemingway as a man was less positive: mean-spirited was the term most forcefully brought to mind. However, reading that book, being in Paris and walking in Hemingway's steps, developing an interest in the so-called Lost Generation, reading some more of Hemingway's fiction and seeing him through the eyes of the biographers of other Lost Generation figures led me to this book. It covers Hemingway's life from his birth in Oak Park, Illinois to his suicide in Idaho, with all of the high and low points in between.

Lynn employs a psychological approach, which was initially mildly annoying. (Hem's problems were all his mother's fault, don't you know!) But as I read further I became convinced that Lynn was on to something. Hemingway's relationship with his parents - and particularly with his domineering mother, whom he blamed for his father's suicide - clearly had a lasting impact not just on his attitude to life, but also on his fiction. The writer John Dos Passos, Hemingway's close friend until they fell out during the Spanish Civil War, described Hemingway as the only man he'd ever known who truly hated his mother. That observation appears to have been well based and it would have been impossible for an emotion that strong not to spill over into Hemingway's fiction.

Another issue upon which Lynn focuses is Hemingway's sexual ambivalence, the expression of which is a fascination with androgyny. This aspect of Hemingway's make-up Lynn traces to his mother's treating him as his older sister's twin and dressing him as a girl for much longer than it was usual to dress boys as girls in the early 20th century. Whether or not Lynn's correct about the cause, his thesis that Hemingway was fascinated with androgyny is well supported by references to Hemingway's fiction and presents a different view to that of Hemingway's public person of aggressive masculinity. It also gives some credence to Zelda Fitzgerald's description of Hemingway as "bogus" and "phony as a rubber check". She may have discerned something about Hemingway that was not part of the myth he cultivated so assiduously.

As far as literary biographies go, this is an excellent one. It's much more than a list of dates and achievements and it deals with the less attractive aspects of Hemingway's personality and behaviour in a fair and balanced way. The analysis of Hemingway's literary output is also fair and balanced. The prose is easy to read, neither simplistic nor overly academic in tone, and the work is amply footnoted and supported by an extensive bibliography. It has renewed my interest in reading more of Hemingway's fiction, at least the best of it. It has also allowed me to feel empathy for the confused, mentally and physically ill man who wrote *A Moveable Feast*. Hemingway's journey from this

... a confident young man sure that his destiny was to become a great writer, to this

... a broken, paranoid, alcoholic, suicidal wreck of a man, is heartbreaking.

ETA: Thank you to Travelin, who directed my attention to this article in the *New York Times* which refers to the FBI's surveillance of Hemingway, which started in the 1940s. It shows that one reason for his apparent paranoia was justified.
