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Review · John Raeburn

The Young Hemingway. Michael Reynolds. Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986, 289 pp. \$19.95. *Along With Youth: Hemingway, The Early Years*. Peter Griffin. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 258 pp. \$17.95. *Dateline: Toronto*. Ernest Hemingway. Edited by William White. New York: Scribners, 1985. 478 pp. \$19.95. *The Garden of Eden*. Ernest Hemingway. New York: Scribners, 1986. 247 pp. \$18.95. *Hemingway: A Biography*. Jeffrey Meyers. New York: Harper and Row, 1985. 644 pp. \$27.50. *The Dangerous Summer*. Ernest Hemingway. New York: Scribners, 1985. 228 pp. \$17.95.

Hemingway's life continues to fascinate readers a quarter-century after his suicide, as the number of books under review here testifies. While few American lives in the twentieth century were better publicized, none at the same time seems more elusive or enigmatic. The self-confident omniscience of the Public Hemingway is difficult to reconcile with the frayed insecurities of his apparently autobiographical fictional heroes, just as the well-known bellicose man of action appears to be an entirely different being than the writer with an almost religious devotion to his art. Because Hemingway was himself a hero of his time as well as a writer of the first magnitude, the story of his life has unusual cultural as well as literary significance.

The books discussed here roughly span his entire life. Michael Reynolds' *The Young Hemingway* and Peter Griffin's *Along with Youth* examine the writer's youth in Oak Park and Michigan, his wounding in the Great War, his first fumbling attempts to write; both conclude with his voyage out to Paris and destiny in December 1921. *Dateline: Toronto* reprints all his dispatches from Europe written for the *Toronto Star* just before his first books were published in the mid-1920s. *The Garden of Eden*, set in 1927, reverberates with biographical allusions to its author's own life in the 1920s although strictly speaking it is not an autobiographical

novel. Hemingway began writing *The Garden of Eden* in 1946 and its preoccupations to some extent also represent those of his middle years. Jeffrey Meyers' *Hemingway: A Biography* is a comprehensive life, but stronger on the latter half of the author's life, after 1930. *The Dangerous Summer*, about a bullfighting *mano a mano* in 1959, was the last work Hemingway published in his lifetime, revealing more about a man near the end of his tether than it does about its nominal subject. Taken together, these six books suggest a rich, complex range of possibilities for understanding the life and assessing the achievement of this paradoxically public and private man.

Hemingway never wrote a single story about Oak Park, the proud middle-class "village" adjoining Chicago where he grew up and which he seemed to dislike so thoroughly that once he escaped it he hardly ever returned. He did, however, often fictionalize his parents, never flatteringly. His youthful protagonists were afflicted with ineffectual, henpecked fathers and overbearing, suffocating mothers, these parental portraits a harbinger of the cliché of the destructive suburban family. Oak Park, though, left a lasting mark on Hemingway; what he learned there is just beneath the surface of his fiction and in much of his behavior. And his parents, whether at home in Oak Park or at the Hemingway summer cottage in Michigan, were more complex than he said they were, less suburban stereotypes than victims of an irresistibly unfolding human tragedy.

In *The Young Hemingway*, Michael Reynolds brilliantly reconstructs the culture of Oak Park before the Great War, its adoration of Teddy Roosevelt, its fascination with Africa and other exotic foreign locales, its moral and intellectual earnestness, its self-righteous provincialism. He has scoured the files of the local newspaper, read the minutes of Board of Education and Town Council meetings, examined town histories, even looked up the acquisitions records of the local library. Reynolds' prodigious, imaginative research allows him to specify just what Oak Park indelibly stamped onto the young Hemingway's character—a belief in loyalty, nobility, honor, love, courage, self-reliance, and above all duty—and to clarify why his writing is so filled with loathing for the modern world, because it no longer honored the verities Oak Park taught. He could never write directly about it, Reynolds shrewdly suggests, because it was "inviolate," irrevocably lost to the modern times of which he had made himself the chronicler.

Reynolds' portrayal of Hemingway's parents is equally astute and original. According to their son, Grace Hemingway drove her husband to suicide. She was "an All-American bitch"; he was weak and a coward. Reynolds' account is more complicated. From 1913 on, just when his son most needed his support, Dr. Hemingway suffered from recurrent depressions which made him moody, irascible, and withdrawn around his family. Grace Hemingway, a creative and dramatic proto-feminist, became the dominant force in the family and her son's adolescent rebellions focused on her rather than on his father. If Reynolds' book has a heroine, it is Grace Hemingway, whose influence on all her children, especially her older son, was decisive.

Several times Hemingway said that writing had a cathartic effect for him: he could "get rid of" disturbing memories of the past if he wrote them up. But often his stories revised the past to fit his present needs, and this seems to be the case with his fictions about family life. He needed to have Grace Hemingway as a villain so as not to have to confront his father's mental illness, shameful in the culture of Oak Park and frightening to a son also afflicted with similar suicidal bouts of melancholia. Such mythmaking was a pattern in Hemingway's art and behavior. The writer was a Prospero with magical abilities to remake the world in any form he wished: what had been literally true was less important than what one wanted or needed to be true.

Peter Griffin's *Along with Youth* covers much the same ground as Reynolds' book, but not nearly so well. Reynolds imaginatively moves forward and backward in time from his base of 1919–1921; Griffin's book is shapelessly chronological. Reynolds has absorbed his material and every detail serves a purpose; Griffin dumps undigested gobbets of data into his narrative, making for some eye-glazing *longueurs*. For example, Griffin reprints five previously unpublished short stories written before Hemingway went to Paris, most of them without editorial gloss or any apparent relevance to themes in his biography. These mediocre—or worse—stories are discussed (but not reprinted) by Reynolds and made to illuminate Hemingway's first literary models, his ambitions, his tendency to mythologize his own experiences. Griffin is naively credulous about the veracity of Hemingway's fiction; Reynolds explores both how and why Hemingway imaginatively reshaped his past. Finally, Reynolds seems to inhabit the world of his subject, as the very best biographers do; Griffin usually

seems outside, uncertain of the patterns his data make.

Hemingway's earliest literary models were slick stories from *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Red Book*, their traces apparent in his early journalism for the *Toronto Star*. *Dateline: Toronto* reprints all 172 of Hemingway's *Star* pieces, written between 1920 and 1924, and indicates how rapidly this callow Oak Park youth developed. The earliest pieces, written before he went to Paris, are mostly cooked-up features about such ephemera as shoplifters' techniques or portrait photography; their limp humor and flaccid provincialism align them with similar features in popular periodicals of the day. In Paris he wrote about politics, about bullfighting, about his travels in half-a-dozen countries. As life in the wider world opened to him, he learned to characterize economically, to find the telling detail, to evoke an experience vividly. Not yet in the habit of saving his best journalistic observations for his fiction, he wrote about the debacle of the Greeks' retreat from Adrianople and then about their cabinet ministers being executed in the rain, the *données* for compressed narratives he would shortly write, totally unlike anything in popular magazines. William White's banal introduction to this volume asserts that Hemingway's early journalism played a significant role in his development, which it surely did, but readers will have to look elsewhere to find any discussion of just what that importance was.

In one of his last *Star* pieces, Hemingway wrote about men who falsely claimed fabulous identities and exploits; "this kink," he said in a telling aside, "may be the same that in another man would make a Joseph Conrad or a great painter." The artist as imposter was not an original idea, but it has special relevance for Hemingway and his work. Readers have always had difficulty distinguishing Hemingway from his fictional protagonists, and for good reason. His self-advertisements as a man who lived it up to write it down blurred the distinction, and he was a writer whose blend of autobiographical and imaginative materials was unusually rich.

The latter seems to be the case in *The Garden of Eden*, where certain events in Hemingway's life and his literary methods and principles are ascribed to a writer-protagonist who resembles his creator, but the plot itself is entirely made up. The greatest imposture here, though, may be his publisher's in presenting this as Hemingway's last novel. He began writing *The Garden of Eden* in 1946 and worked on it intermittently until his death, when it totalled some 1500 manuscript pages. Carlos Baker, not

known for the severity of his critical judgments about Hemingway's work, looked at it sometime later and pronounced it a mess. A Scribners editor cut this mammoth manuscript by two-thirds, eliminating, he says, a sub-plot, although a sub-plot twice as long as the plot is a rare beast indeed. He made "minor interpolations" and "some routine copy-editing corrections," but we are assured that the "work is all the author's." We'll see. At a stroke Scribners has provided useful employment for a new generation of dissertation writers.

Provisionally, then, let us accept it as an authentic Hemingway novel and be grateful for it. It has nothing of the stature of his best work but is nonetheless full of interest, even revelation. *The Garden of Eden* takes place over several months in 1927, beginning with the honeymoon of David Bourne, a novelist of Hemingway's exact age at the time with two successful books to his credit, and his wife Catherine, in le Grau du Roi, where Hemingway honeymooned in 1927 with his second wife. All is idyllic until Catherine suggests that she and David reverse erotic identities. These sexual demands, which both fascinate and frighten him, become obsessional; and under pressure from her demonic behavior (he nicknames her "Devil"), their relationship begins to unravel. On the Riviera they meet Marita, who becomes the lover of first Catherine, then David. David is both attracted and repelled by this ménage-à-trois, and by the fact that he loves both women. Catherine descends into true madness and leaves, but not before burning two short stories David had just written about Africa, leaving untouched the narrative he has been writing of their life together.

The Garden of Eden is presumably that narrative, or its residue, related years later by a third-person narrator who must be David Bourne himself. In the usual sense this is not an autobiographical novel: Catherine resembles Zelda Fitzgerald or Nicole Diver more than any of Hemingway's wives, and as far as is known Hemingway and his second wife, Pauline Pfeiffer, were alone on their 1927 honeymoon. But an autobiographical reading is nevertheless inescapable. David Bourne's theories of writing, even his routines for it, are exactly Hemingway's: write in pencil in a *cahier* early in the morning, then relax without thinking about it; use simple declarative sentences and readers will infer all that has been left unsaid; make it up truly and it will be as if the reader has had the experience himself. David's stories are about Africa, soon to be Hemingway's own

literary terrain, and concern particularly the complex relationship between fathers and sons, an almost obsessive subject with Hemingway in his 20s and 30s. Reviews of David's books, moreover, have given him an outsized and inaccurate personal fame at variance with his authentic self. Catherine burns his press clippings along with his stories; Hemingway told Scribners in 1927 to stop sending him reviews of his work.

Even more tantalizing autobiographical parallels present themselves. As Hemingway recounts in *A Moveable Feast*, he was simultaneously in love with two women in 1926, which he said was the worst kind of luck. Money, too, entered into this romantic dilemma. Pauline Pfeiffer was wealthy, which did not make her less attractive to Hemingway; although later, in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" and *A Moveable Feast*, he would blame her wealth for corrupting him. Catherine is wealthy, too, and her money and the proprietary privileges she feels it gives her are an increasing source of tension with her husband. After she takes his stories from his suitcase and burns them, she blithely says, "I paid for them." The burning of the stories cannot but remind readers of two incidents, one factual, one fictional although often taken as true. Hadley Hemingway, his first wife, packed all his manuscripts in a suitcase and lost them in late 1922, a devastating blow to him and, according to Jeffrey Meyers, to his marriage. Ezra Pound thought she was jealous of Hemingway's writing and lost them deliberately, although the evidence for this is dubious. In "Now I Lay Me," Nick Adams' mother cheerfully burns all his father's Indian artifacts, woman's tyranny at its most hateful. David's response to his loss might be Hemingway's and Dr. Adams' as well: "He felt completely hollow. It was like coming around a curve on a mountain road and the road not being there and only a gulf ahead."

The novel's fascination with bisexuality, lesbianism, and erotic reversals may also have had their precedents in Hemingway's life. Hadley Hemingway's mother had accused her of having lesbian tendencies, and until her marriage Hadley lacked confidence in her heterosexuality. Pauline Pfeiffer's lesbian sister, Ginny, tried to seduce Hemingway's erstwhile mistress, Jane Mason, on a trip to Mexico in 1937. And sometime around 1946, just when Hemingway began to write *The Garden of Eden*, Pauline Pfeiffer began a series of affairs with Elizabeth Bishop and other women. Finally, Mary Welsh, his fourth wife whom he married in 1946, reported that she and Ernest were androgynous in bed.

The significances of this blending of imagination and experience in *The Garden of Eden* need to be worked out, for they have the potential of enlarging or perhaps modifying our understanding of Hemingway's psychic life and of his other fiction. The novel seems to confirm that he was fearful of women, for example, at the same time that it has at least the trace of a proto-feminist subtext. Catherine is mad, her sexual obsession is destructive, and she burns his manuscripts, but the reader is also invited to sympathize with her frustration at having nothing to do, with being "a housewife," a woman in a society made for men. Her wish for sexual reversal seems to have as much or more to do with power in the world as it does with eroticism. Perhaps with Catherine as foreground, Lady Brett Ashley, even Mrs. Adams, will look different.

The essential loneliness of all living things is the lesson David's youthful hero learns in his story of an elephant hunt; for David, love is a way to try to temper loneliness, but is inevitably doomed to failure. In a sense, then, all of the attention in *The Garden of Eden* to the dynamics of romantic relationships is beside the point. What matters to David is art; it entirely transcends such momentary distractions as finding love or losing it. Reality is in the imagined world, not the quotidian one. For the writer, art is salvation: "The writing is the only progress you make." Even if the man is riven, the artist—the true artist—is always whole. The novel ends on a note of triumph as David, his wife mad, his marriage broken, his manuscripts burned, begins to write the stories again and finds he can tell them even better this time.

Hemingway subscribed early and late to *The Garden of Eden's* Flaubertian apotheosis of art, but his need to reiterate it was particularly strong after 1945 to counterbalance his fame as a swashbuckling man of action and then as Nestor. In those years, too, he often felt his imaginative powers were deserting him, and thus the novel may be seen as an almost plaintive assertion that they would somehow return, however muddled his present life.

One of the strengths of Jeffrey Meyers' *Hemingway: A Biography* is its profound respect for Hemingway as an artist, not the same thing as admiring all his works or the man who wrote them. In Meyers' report, Hemingway is more often than not boastful and self-indulgent, overbearingly competitive, exploitative of friendships, duplicitous with his wives, callous toward his sons, and a sychophant around wealth. That he could

sometimes be generous, courageous, and inspiring is also noted. What is important to Meyers, though, is what Hemingway wrote, and how the life he lived affected his fiction. This is a critical biography, and a competent one, a welcome diversion from the factual lumber-piles which often masquerade as biographies of American writers. Its admirable structure reflects its ambition to be more than a compilation of data; Meyers organizes his material into compact essays, bringing together all the relevant information about a particular theme, but never blurring chronology.

Meyers believes that in Hemingway's best works "the style is clear and the meaning obscure" while in his less successful ones "the prose is turgid and the theme overt." In other words, he wrote best when he transformed his personal feelings and worst when he was most doggedly autobiographical. This standard makes Meyers undervalue *A Moveable Feast*—his discussion of it is thin and perfunctory—but in general it is persuasively and intelligently applied to Hemingway's fiction. An exception, however, is his curious treatment of *Across the River and Into the Trees*, published in 1950 and Hemingway's worst novel. Meyers' discovery that the career of Chink Dorman-Smith, Hemingway's friend since 1918, was the inspiration for Colonel Cantwell's travails is original and important, as is his argument that the book was in some sense a confessional self-portrait. Meyers is fully aware of the novel's egregiousness, but he is so taken by his view of it as confessional that he comes very close to arguing that it's good because it's bad, its excesses a warrant of its integrity.

The weakest section of Meyers' generally capable biography, though, deals with Hemingway's politics during the 1930s. Hemingway "was basically bored by politics," Meyers says, and "like most artists, his main interest was in turning inward and developing his own creative genius." This false opposition makes Meyers oversimplify Hemingway's political activities and misrepresent the political dimension of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Meyers may be bored by politics but Hemingway was not. He liked to think of himself as a political savant and wrote voluminously of politics in these years; as much as anything else, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was a political novel, at once shrewd and naive about the politics of the Spanish civil war. His acid portraits in it of Gaylord's Hotel, La Pasionaria, and Andre Marty must be weighed against his credulous iteration of Stalinist cant. The Anarchists, for example, are always crazies and thus deserved to be suppressed and liquidated, and the Stalinist interpretation of the Bar-

celona civil war within the civil war in May 1937—the same month in which the novel’s action takes place—is put forward as gospel. Meyers’ uninterest in the novel’s political dimension leads him to make some howlers, as when he identifies the Trotskyist POUM as an Anarchist organization, or when he calls the lynchings in Pilar’s village “communist atrocities,” in spite of Hemingway’s careful identification of the most barbarous acts as those of Anarchists. Meyers is not alone in underestimating the significance of Hemingway’s politics. Michael Reynolds says Hemingway was “one of the least overtly political writers of his generation.” What of Faulkner, Wolfe, Fitzgerald, Crane, Cummings? In fact, only Dos Passos and Wilson were more overtly political. These misapprehensions point to the need for a searching contextual examination of Hemingway’s politics, especially in the 1930s.

Meyers’ account of Hemingway’s last years is both harrowing and moving, the descent into delusion, paranoia, and suicide by a great artist now bereft of memory, dazed by what was happening to his body and mind, still trying to discipline himself but no longer able to summon the personal and artistic reserves he once had. His physicians utterly failed him, Meyers says, and his suicide was a final act of courageous will. It may be too much to say that *The Dangerous Summer*, first published in *Life* in 1960, anticipates all this, but it did indicate that something was terribly wrong.

The Dangerous Summer is the poorest work Hemingway ever published, as even he recognized. When it appeared he called it a “mess” and said it made him feel “ashamed and sick.” Its prose was slack, its form bloated (despite having been radically pruned first by Hemingway and then by *Life*), its pace distended. Although it is nominally about bullfighting, its real subject was Hemingway himself; and while he insisted that his life was entirely satisfactory, an alert reader would think otherwise. Hemingway sometimes acted foolishly but he was not often careless about what he published. That he allowed this vastly inferior work to appear in *Life* was itself a symptom of decline. Even more ominous was the furious contempt for the bullfight public he compulsively expressed in it, for this public was analogous to the one he was even then addressing in *Life* and which he had cultivated so assiduously by making himself a celebrity. One of the bullfighters makes a distinction in himself between the man, who has integrity, and the torero, who must please his public by doing things which violate that integrity. Hemingway embraces this distinction,

which he says was true for him, too, and the eagerness with which he does so indicates how divided he felt he had become. The celebrated culture-hero “Papa” was incongruent with the integral man and artist, and that division could not be borne indefinitely. Without the artist’s ability to organize his truest perceptions—and *The Dangerous Summer* suggested it was rapidly waning—he would be left only with an empty fame supported by a gullible, ignorant public.

Like fiction itself, biographical criticism inspires a voyeuristic interest, which may be one of its less attractive if entirely human features. But it also makes for more sentient readers with heightened alertness to the ways in which a transforming imagination distills essences from the perishable stuff of everyday life. As with those stories of artists and writers written by Hawthorne and James and others, artful biography provides a pleasurable and instructive medium for readers to imagine and appreciate the costs and rewards of creative work. And finally, biography is ever a salutary reminder that writers are not demiurges but participants in a specific culture whose works inevitably bear the imprint of their cultural experience and who themselves have an uncommon power in turn to shape culture. If this is true of all writers, it is especially true of Hemingway, whose influence on his century continues to be large and whose life more than ever suggests valuable and intriguing ways of connecting art and culture.