BOOK REVIEWS

Paul Hendrickson, *Hemingway's Boat: Everything He Loved in Life and Lost, 1934-1961*. New York: Knopf, 2011. 544 pp.[1]

FOR BOTH HIS mastery of elliptical English prose and his flamboyant persona, Ernest Hemingway may well be the most influential American author of the 20th century. "I almost wouldn't trust a young novelist — I won't speak for the women here, but for a male novelist — who doesn't imitate Hemingway in his youth," declared the 84-year-old Norman Mailer in the *Paris Review*. Mailer's great friend William Kennedy gives us one such imitator in his latest novel, *Changó's Beads and Two-Tone Shoes*. After reading *The Sun Also Rises*, Daniel Quinn quits his job as a reporter for the Miami Herald and, intent on following Hemingway's trajectory from journalism to fiction, heads for Cuba. In Havana's Floridita bar, he is befriended by Papa himself, a brawling boozer at war with the world and his own prodigious talents. Challenged to a duel, Kennedy's Hemingway responds portentously: "Tell him if I wanted to die I wouldn't let *him* do it, I'd do it myself." And when Quinn tracks Fidel down for an interview in the wooded Oriente mountains, El Comandante embellishes the Yankee writer's legend. "I like the way he writes, how he has conversations with himself," the Cuban guerrilla says about Hemingway. "His novel on the Spanish civil war can teach you about battle." The outsized life of Hemingway — furloughed from World War I for an enigmatic wound; expatriate in literary Paris; author of *In Our Time*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and much else, boxer, bullfight aficionado, big-game hunter, deep-sea fisherman, marriage recidivist, Nobel laureate, suicide — provides one of the most enduring narratives of American literary history. Like his countrymen Mailer, Walt Whitman, and Jack London, Hemingway was a master at creating his own myth, and that myth has been catnip to chroniclers of all sorts. By now, anyone who presumes to biographize Hemingway must contend with Carlos Baker, A. E. Hotchner, Kenneth S. Lynn, James Mellow, Jeffrey Meyers, and Michael S. Reynolds, among others who have already staked out some part of the territory.

Sailing into what he calls "the vast, roily, envy-ridden sea of Hemingway studies," Paul Hendrickson weighs in with *Hemingway's Boat: Everything He Loved in Life and Lost, 1934-1961*. He adopts as his principle of navigation a concept borrowed from astronomy: *averted vision*. "The idea," he explains, "is that sometimes you can see the essence of a thing more clearly if you're not looking at it directly." Looking at the *Pilar*, the custom-built, 38-foot fishing vessel that Hemingway owned from 1934 until his death in 1961, Hendrickson is able to see things about its skipper not readily apparent to those left on shore. Similarly, in Julian Barnes's 1984 novel *Flaubert's Parrot*, the narrator's quest to find the stuffed bird that inspired a famous short story results in revelations about Gustave Flaubert, the

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narrator, and, one assumes, the reader. And in *Driving Mr. Albert: A Trip Across America with Einstein's Brain* (2000), Michael Paterniti ponders Einstein's life and work while transporting the scientific genius's brain from New Jersey to California. Not every writer adores this technique: Skeptical of synecdoche, Vladimir Nabokov, for one, warned, "The breaking of a wave cannot explain the whole sea."

Nevertheless, faith in the microcosm as quintessence of the macrocosm is surely what led a bidder to pay $3,000 at a recent auction for John Lennon's molar. A belief that a man's home is his fossil draws curious hordes to Monticello, Giverny, and Yasnaya Polyana. Hendrickson, too, seeks the universe in a grain of sand, finding direction through indirection. *Hemingway's Boat: Everything He Loved in Life and Lost, 1934-1961* is a triumph of biography as metonymy.

Soon after returning from safari in East Africa in 1934, Hemingway coaxed an advance from Arnold Gingrich, his editor at *Esquire*, and made his way to Howard E. Wheeler's shipbuilding operation on Cropsey Avenue in Brooklyn. There he bought a sleek, mahogany twin-cabin cruiser for $7,495 and, after having it transported down the Atlantic coast, docked it near his home in Key West and his *finca* in Cuba. Borrowing a private nickname for his second wife, Pauline Pfeiffer, he dubbed the boat *Pilar*. Hemingway praised the *Pilar* as "a wonderful fishing machine" and delighted in piloting it through the Caribbean in quest of marlin, the majestic species whose population he became adept at depleting. Hendrickson provides detailed information about seaworthy craft and the craft of catching aquatic creatures. He evokes Key West as raffish, not yet glamorous, and pre-Castro Cuba as a Yankee playground. But the book's true strength lies in the way it weaves in multiple stories — not only of the boat's famous owner but also of many of the estimated 500 guests who visited the *Pilar* during the 27 turbulent years in which Hemingway was its skipper. Though he could be boorish and abusive, Hemingway was mostly a gregarious fellow who chafed at the seclusion necessary to compose his sentences. Hendrickson describes him as "a man in a solitary profession … [who] could barely stand to be alone, no matter how he'd curse at the world for not leaving him alone." Guests aboard the *Pilar* included eminences such as John Dos Passos and Archibald MacLeish, but also others whom Hendrickson, drawing on letters, interviews, and a ship's log, retrieves from obscurity. Particularly memorable are three mini-biographies embedded in the book's overall account of a troubled, ailing literary heavyweight struggling to stay afloat.

The subject of one biography-within-the-biography, Arnold Samuelson, was a 22-year-old aspiring writer who hopped a freight from Minnesota and made his way to Key West, to knock on the Maestro's door. Hemingway took an immediate liking to him, nicknamed him "Mice," and employed him for a year as factotum on and off the boat. Drawing on his published writings, his diary, and conversations with Samuelson's daughter, Hendrickson follows the man through an unconventional life haunted by a fatalism similar to his mentor's. Early publications in *Esquire* and elsewhere manifest genuine literary talent, but when Samuelson died naked and alone in 1981, he was the unfulfilled curmudgeon of a small West Texas town. Also taking a solo turn is Gregory "Gigi" Hemingway, the third of the writer's three sons, who became a physician but continued to disappoint his legendary father. A transvestite

who underwent an incomplete sex change operation at 63, he shared his father's discomfort with gender identity, but to more tragic result. Arrested for indecent exposure in 2001, he died in the Miami-Dade County Women's Detention Center. Hendrickson summarizes the relationship between a famous writer known to everyone as "Papa" and his resentful, wayward son thus: "Gigi did little but disappoint and often disgust his father. The reverse could also be said."

The book's most endearing character is Walter Houk, whom Hendrickson befriended in California as the octogenarian was experiencing the onset of Alzheimer's. Despite his fading memory, Houk vividly recalls how in 1950, serving in the American embassy in Havana, he met Nita Jensen, Hemingway's secretary. They married in the novelist's house, and Houk developed a close friendship with the writer. Hendrickson traces Houk's later career as a diplomat, travel writer, and painter, though, for all his adventures and accomplishments, the two years in which he and his wife were regulars on the *Pilar* remain freshest in Houk's failing mind. Sounding again the theme of biography as metonymy, Hendrickson sees in this wistful old man — who, despite numerous freelance bylines, inhabits the margins of literary history — "the story of all the rest of us." Hemingway was a bigot and a bully, particularly cruel toward those closest to him. Hendrickson, however, recognizes that "kindness and gentleness and understanding and probity seem never far from his most appalling behavior." At one time or another, Hemingway behaved appallingly toward each of his four wives and three sons. Behind their backs, his friends became the object of scathing derision. But, as an example of Hemingway's extraordinary generosity, Hendrickson recounts the way he encouraged an indigent young writer named Ned Calmer who was struggling to support an ailing wife and an infant daughter. In addition to other favors, Hemingway, unsolicited, slipped Calmer $350 to enable him to take his family back to the States. In later years, Calmer tried to reimburse his benefactor but discovered after Hemingway's death that the famous novelist had never cashed his check.

And when Gerald and Sara Murphy, the glamorous Americans who were the life of the expatriate party in Paris, lost their 15-year-old son to meningitis, Hemingway offered heartfelt consolation, using a convenient nautical metaphor: It seems as though we were all on a boat now together, a good boat still, that we have made but that we know now will never reach port. There will be all kinds of weather, good and bad; and especially because we know now that there will be no landfall we must keep the boat up very well and be very good to each other. We are fortunate we have good people on the boat.

Hemingway began his *Pilar* period in a state of elation. In a letter to Clifton Fadiman sent on November 26 1933, five months before buying his boat, he surveyed his life with satisfaction:

> Look, I'm 35, I've had a damned fine life, have had every woman I ever wanted, have bred good kids, have seen everything I believe in royally f——d to hell (for Scribner's sake amen), have been wounded many times, decorated many times, got over all wish for glory or a career before I was 20, have always made a living in all times, staked my friends, written 3 books of stories, 2 novels, a comic book and one

> fairly exhaustive treatise and every chickenshit prick who writes about my stuff writes with a premature delight and hope that I may be slipping. It's beautiful. But I will stick around and write until I have ruined every one of them, and not go until my time comes.

True to his word, on July 2, 1961, in Ketchum, Idaho, far from the sea, Hemingway determined that his time had indeed come and pulled the trigger on a 12-gauge shotgun inserted into his mouth. Despite transcendent moments, the *Pilar* years were a time of artistic and emotional decline. Hemingway never fully recovered from two plane crashes in East Africa in 1954 that left him a physical wreck.

Hemingway was a sedulous slacker who loafed and invited his soul and, by doing so, was able to compose consummately concentrated prose. Hendrickson likens his style of writing to the way he caught marlin: The art of slacking, of holding back before you try to set the hook, is counterintuitive, counterreflexive, which is probably why Hemingway was so damn good at it — in both fishing and literature. This immense thing is coming at you, his back projecting out of the water like a submarine, a submarine with wings, and then he hits it, smashes at the bait, explodes and boils the sea around him, and all you can think to do — against every instruction and mental reminder — is to jerk back on the rod. The most natural impulse in the world. But if you do this, if you sock without first trying to slack, almost certainly you'll lose the fish — and maybe your line as well. You'll horse the bait right out of his mouth, or worse, you'll snap your line like a matchstick.

Through its diversions and digressions, *Hemingway's Boat* follows a similar method of slacking. Begun in 1977, the annual International Hemingway Imitation Contest calls for submissions that constitute "one really good page of really bad Hemingway." Parody is homage, implicit recognition of the authority of its target. By writing "bad Hemingway," his imitators concede that Papa still comes out best. Apart from parody, anyone writing about Hemingway risks embarrassment by the example of the Master's own trenchant prose. Nevertheless, without trying to mimic Hemingway, Hendrickson offers more than a few true sentences of his own. His account of a fishing trip with Patrick Hemingway might stand, synecdochically, for the brilliance of the writing throughout his book: In the gathering dark of that mid-June 1987 evening, the water seemed to lie around us like glass. We stood about fifteen yards apart. Fat, pulpy rainbows began rising to our casts. You couldn't quite see them but you could hear them sipping and slurping and breaking the water. Patrick worked his rod like a wand, sending his line in great noiseless loops far out onto the stream. We fished for about an hour and barely spoke. But at one point, after he'd reeled in a particularly beautiful rainbow and held it at the surface of the water in one hand and had expertly removed the hook with his other hand and had then studied his prize for an instant more before delivering it back to the inkiness from which it had come, Patrick called over in the softest voice, "I love fishing after dusk. It's called fishing off the mirror."

With its narrative economy, its attention to detail, and its respect for the rhythm of the sentence, Hendrickson's prose poetry is worthy of its subject. In a sense, all biography is metonymy. Somewhere between 60 billion and 120 billion human beings

have lived on this planet, and an account of any one of them succeeds when it says something true about us all. Since at least the age of Plato, some writers have focused on the One, others on the many. *Hemingway's Boat* does both.

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