

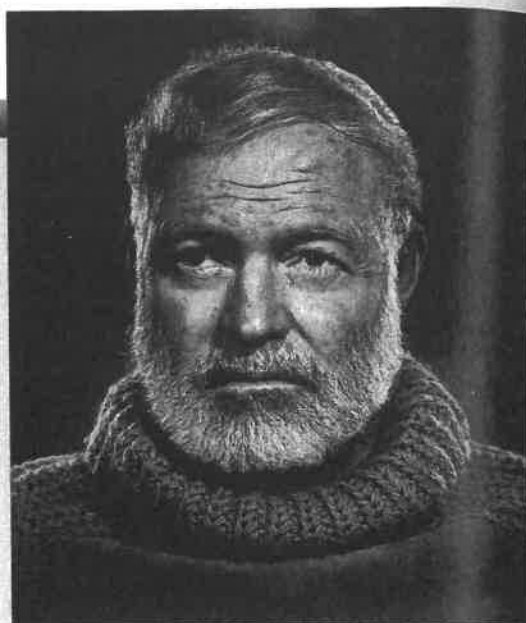
## Ernest Hemingway

(1899–1961)

Few American authors have offered as powerful a definition of the twentieth-century hero as Ernest Hemingway has. Hemingway's fiction presents a strict code of contemporary heroism. His vision centers on disillusionment with the conventions of an optimistic, patriotic society and a belief that the essence of life is violence, from which there is no refuge. As Hemingway saw it, the only victory that can be won from life lies in a graceful stoicism, a willingness to accept gratefully life's few moments of pleasure.

Although this ideal of rugged machismo may now seem superficial, it powerfully affected generations of American readers. Moreover, Hemingway launched a new style of writing so forceful in its simplicity that it became a measure of excellence around the world.

Hemingway's life, like F. Scott Fitzgerald's, bore a notable resemblance to the lives of his fictional characters. He was born in the Chicago suburb of Oak Park on July 21, 1899. His father, a doctor, initiated him early into a love for the Michigan woods and the hunting and fishing that could be found there. Growing up, Hemingway boxed and played football devotedly, but he also wrote poetry, short stories, and a column for the school newspaper. Graduating from high school in 1917, just as the United States entered World War I, he yearned to enlist, but he was rejected by the army because of a boxing injury to his eye. He landed a job as a reporter for *The Kansas City Star*. Hemingway reached the war a year later as an ambulance driver for the Red Cross in Italy, but after six weeks he was wounded in the knee, seriously enough to require a dozen operations. This wound was a central episode in both Hemingway's real life and his creative




one. During his long convalescence in an Italian hospital, he fell in love with a nurse who became the model for the heroine of his novel *A Farewell to Arms*.

After the armistice in 1918, Hemingway returned to Michigan. His experience of coming to terms with the war is reflected in his story "Big Two-Hearted River." In the story, Nick Adams, a war veteran, camps and fishes alone in the woods, escaping from the world in order to heal himself from both a physical and a psychological shattering.

### An American in Paris

In 1921, newly married and with a commission as a roving reporter for *The Toronto Star*, Hemingway set off for Paris. It was the era of the American expatriates, when writers and painters crowded the cafes of the Left Bank of the Seine. Here Hemingway worked at the craft of fiction and met other important writers, among them F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce, and Ezra Pound. But most important, he met the American writer Gertrude Stein (1874–1946). She read all his work and advised him to prune his descriptions and to "concentrate." Hemingway took her advice and spoke fervently of writing "the truest sentence that you know" and of arriving through straight presentation of unvarnished fact at a "true, simple declarative sentence."





Hemingway's first book, *Three Stories and Ten Poems* (1923), along with *The Torrents of Spring* (1926), a parody of his friend Sherwood Anderson's work, drew scant notice. Then, late in 1926, he published *The Sun Also Rises*, a novel based on his life in Paris but transplanted to Pamplona, the Spanish town famous for its annual running of the bulls through the streets. The novel brought Hemingway widespread critical attention. Gertrude Stein's remark, "You are all a lost generation," was the novel's epigraph, and the book did reveal the postwar epoch to itself. Many readers of Hemingway's age embraced it as a portrait of their shattered lives.

Hemingway, around thirty years old and married for the second time, went on to write an even more powerful and successful novel, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). This is the beautifully told story of Frederic Henry, a wounded ambulance driver. Disillusioned with the war, he falls in love with Catherine Barkley, an English nurse, and flees with her to Switzerland, where she dies in childbirth. Frederic's farewell to the dying Catherine is one of the great love scenes in fiction.

#### Author and Adventurer

After the major success of *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway established himself as a worldwide adventurer, as though a heroic style was as important to his life as to his fiction.

During the early 1930s, Hemingway brought out two nonfiction books that revealed his fascination with bullfighting and big-game hunting—*Death in the Afternoon* (1932) and *Green Hills of Africa* (1935). In 1940, just as the literary world was writing Hemingway off as a has-been novelist, he presented another triumph, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

The outbreak of World War II drew Hemingway back into uniform. Although officially a correspondent, he gathered around himself a small army of adventurers. During one battle, Hemingway's band was sixty miles in front of

the Americans' advancing line. When the Allies at last reached Paris in 1944, they found that Hemingway had already "liberated" the bar at the Ritz Hotel.

By 1952, Hemingway's celebrated literary accomplishments and his continuous pursuit of excitement and danger had made him as famous as any film star. In spite of his flamboyant exploits, he produced yet another widely acclaimed novel in that year, *The Old Man and the Sea*, which won the 1953 Pulitzer Prize. It tells of an old Cuban fisherman who hooks a giant marlin far out at sea and battles the fish for two days and nights. Although he finally succeeds in subduing the great fish and lashing it to the side of his boat, sharks tear at the carcass until the man is left with only the marlin's skeleton. The tale has been interpreted as Hemingway's metaphor for life: a vision of the hero weighed down by the years but still able to use his skill to taunt fate and so win a kind of victory from it.

In 1954, Hemingway won the Nobel Prize in literature. He now divided his time between his house in Ketchum, Idaho, and his restless travels all over the world: to Cuba, China, Venice, Spain, and Africa. His health deteriorated, and periods of elation alternated with episodes of severe depression. After a visit to the Mayo Clinic for treatment, he returned to Idaho. On the morning of July 2, 1961, he rose early, and with two charges of a double-barreled shotgun, he killed himself.

"He put life back on the page," wrote the critic Alfred Kazin, "made us see, feel, and taste the gift of life. . . . To read Hemingway was always to feel more alive."

#### For Independent Reading

Try these famous novels by Hemingway:

- *A Farewell to Arms*
- *For Whom the Bell Tolls*
- *The Old Man and the Sea*