

A BIOGRAPHER'S ART

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Ernest Hemingway: A Biography

By Mary V. Dearborn

Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2017

752 pages.

Hardcover USD 26.76

Paperback USD 20.00

Kindle USD 4.99

Audio CD USD 34.50

WHY YET ANOTHER BIOGRAPHY ABOUT ERNEST HEMINGWAY? There has been no shortage of life studies of Ernest Hemingway, beginning with the landmark work of Carlos Baker's encyclopedic *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (1969), a detailed study of the mystical, bare-knuckled American literary warrior. The compendious five-volume biography of Hemingway by Michael Reynolds (completed in 1999) is yet another *tour de force* that will surely survive the test of time.

Over the past half-century, there have been approximately two dozen biographies of Hemingway, including multiple memoirs (including A.E. Hotchner's *Papa Hemingway* and others), and psychosexual readings of Hemingway, his work, and the myths that have surrounded the enduring Modernist icon. Indeed, slice biographies of literary figures have been the rage for some time and there are many recent ones, including *Hemingway at Eighteen* and *The Hemingway Brain*, and others. Hemingway's international reputation has steadily been on the ascent since his rise to fame in Paris in the 1920s and it shows no sign of abatement. And surely there are more biographies in Ernest's future since he will likely remain a major American cultural icon.

Mary Dearborn, the first female biographer of Hemingway, brings a wealth of biographic experience to Hemingway, including studies of the lives of Norman Mailer and Henry Miller.¹ The relationship between Mailer and Hemingway was complicated, at least from Mailer's perspective. Hemingway wrote only a single letter to Mailer (on August 12, 1959) in which Hemingway responds to Mailer's recent publication of *Advertisements for Myself*. Hemingway remarks, "I bought it and read it while laid up in bed and still liked it and thought it had shitty reviews. . . . It is funny when people write not only about what you do publish but about what you have written and not published as though they knew about it. It is like when you are set up really wonderfully and they begin to lure [you] into the trap." Hemingway concludes with a taut message to Norman: "Remember only suckers worry. You can't write, fuck, or fight if you worry. . . . Don't bother to be rude about it or to answer. I have no time to write letters with my work piled up and no time ever to be rude. Just wanted to write this to let you know I'd never received the book."²

Dearborn's professional and academic background are necessary, I believe, to take on such an enigmatic, complex figure like Ernest Hemingway. If Dearborn's earlier biographies reveal an astute biographer in training, her match with Hemingway shows her stepping into the ring of a championship bout. Hemingway is as big and ferocious as they come in American literature. But Hemingway has met his match with this biographer, precisely because she moves beyond biographical fact and enters complicated, risky terrain in doggedly questioning factors and experiences that produced the quintessential twentieth-century major writer. Readers are well rewarded by Dearborn's biographical insight into the riddle and enigma that was and is Hemingway. Carl Rollyson, a fine biographer who, like Dearborn, has also written a biography of Norman Mailer, extols her achievement: "Ernest Hemingway's legacy endures in Mary V. Dearborn's cautious and yet exhilarating new biography. She does not tout her achievement, but this is the first major Hemingway biography by a woman, and her gender makes a difference."³ Fredric Svoboda, a prominent Hemingway scholar, has remarked on Dearborn's biography: "Dearborn makes a good case for what we already knew about Hemingway's physical and psychological deterioration in later life, and also finds clear signs early on of what was to come."⁴ Yes, indeed, Dearborn has employed a range of interpretive strategies to meet the arduous challenge of telling the life story of one of America's most important—

and most byzantine—writers. Robert Wheeler, for example, examines the *locus* of place in *Hemingway's Paris: A Writer's City in Words and Images* (2015) and *Hemingway's Havana: A Reflection of the Writer's Life in Cuba* (2018), both works an exploration of the urban life that was so very important to Hemingway, his art, and the evolution of his personal narrative.

So, the answer to my opening question is an emphatic Yes. Hemingway's art has shaped Dearborn's art in making things new, thus justifying yet another Hemingway biography. If Dearborn is successful, and I believe that she clearly is, the biographer affects the lives of her readers as she succinctly sums up the driving force behind her work: "Hemingway . . . changed the way we think, what we look for in literature, how we choose to lead our lives. He changed the way we think about death—how it's experienced, how to come to terms with it." Dearborn's readers, if engaged to the level that she encourages, join her in a metaphysical quest for understanding life through literature, and the outcome can be transcendental. Few biographers set the bar this high, either for themselves or their readers. One illustration of Dearborn's biographical approach is when she discusses Hemingway in 1932, when he was finishing *Death in the Afternoon*, his treatise on bullfighting. "The book," Dearborn writes, "may have been informed by Hemingway's view of bullfighting as the most masculine of pursuits (there was no place for a woman in the bullfighting world, except to receive ears from matadors)." This accounting carries implications for Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, where bullfighting is obvious a central issue in the novel, representing masculinity as well as other strategic dimensions of culture, especially love in the lost generation: Pedro Romero presents a bull's ear to show his love for Brett Ashley, who callously and irreverently discards it in her hotel drawer.

What is particularly seductive and engaging about Dearborn's approach to biography is that she makes no secret of the fact that we interpret writers and their work to fit the matrix of our own idiosyncratic worldviews, cultural contexts, and personal interests. In the interpretive lexicon of Heidegger, our personal forestructures (*Vorstruktur*), are always evolving as we accrete experience in confronting interpreting situations that require an understanding of what we are interpreting based on a continuous cycle of determining pre-interpretations, arriving at a unified totality of understanding, and recognizing the relationship between the parts and the whole. A Heideggerian approach to Hemingway is a minefield because the rich dynamic

that takes place when the experience of reading Hemingway interacts with our own experience of reading our own lives as they relate to character and conflicts in Hemingway's fiction. This interaction is how Mary Dearborn reads Hemingway's life as a way of reading our own lives (including hers) and she is a distinct departure from many biographers, who often attempt to determine the authenticity of their subject by recording diurnal experiences over time with meticulous precision. Dearborn captures essential moments in Hemingway's life to shed light on how these carefully selected moments and movements in an author's life bring meaning to our interpretations of Hemingway's work. Biographical details and insights, for Dearborn, exist primarily to facilitate interpretive insight and change our lives and the result is an energized, enriched hermeneutic circle in the interpretive lives of her readers. Mary Dearborn is far more than an accountant-scribe recording historical events.

One of Dearborn's most incisive modes of biography is to examine Hemingway from a *hautological* perspective: there is no opting out of inheritance for Hemingway, for his biographers, or for his readers. Dearborn reflects, "By the end of World War II, and while still in his forties, he had done himself out of many of the rewards of the good life: he had three failed marriages behind him, had few good friends, was not writing well, and had surrounded himself with flunkies and sycophants." Dearborn mines the lode of Hemingway's experiential fragments, large and small, and determinedly follows the practice of moving beyond, at least by implication, the meaning of those selected events. Biography is always about inclusion and exclusion. Dearborn pays close attention to critical experiences in Hemingway's youth and beyond precisely because they provide insight to interpreting his literature, as she notes: "I thought once that I might begin to understand Hemingway if I understood what it was like to know him when he was beginning his career in Paris in the 1920s, before what we now know, before he was enveloped in the cloak of fame." Dearborn, in preparing for the biography, recalls her imagination of Hemingway's personality: "Everyone would be drawn to this young man—eager to be part of his energy field. He would be more curious than anyone you'd meet, and he would make you curious too." The dynamic reciprocity between reader and artist is what infuses and informs Dearborn's approach to biography. Clearly, Dearborn is not a disinterested, passive observer but is rather an engaged interlocutor with the man

and his art. Her goal is simple: to understand Hemingway the person is to more richly understand his work.

Dearborn is a hardcore realist and chronicles Hemingway with staunch objectivity: She recounts, in analyzing the post-1930s period, that “something began to go wrong. The potential for this eventuality was there all along—it was in his genes, and in his childhood in the eccentric Hemingway household. Even at his peak, sentimentality and a garrulous streak sometimes crept into his writing.” Readers of Hemingway will recognize these qualities in his fiction as in his characters, in mysterious confluences that imitate the tensions and stress of a “troubled” life. Dearborn sees Hemingway as an exploratory, interrogative artist and she, in her own way, shares this trait as part of the genomic phenomenological orientation that characterizes so many modernists, including—and especially—Hemingway.

Refreshingly, Dearborn did not launch her project with interpretive pre-determination. As she observes, “I have no investment in the Hemingway legend. No doubt I come to him with my own baggage, but I cannot see what the legend has to offer to a female reader.” Many artists struggle with a range of demons and these experiences are obviously common fare for biographers. Dearborn does not shrink from them as she aggressively addresses Hemingway’s inability to submit to medical treatment: “His habits of mind, the limitations of the psychopharmacology of his day, and the desire to avoid embarrassing himself as a public figure made it impossible for him to get the help he needed.” Dearborn goes on to suggest that Hemingway’s creative reactions to his progressively intensifying nemeses: “His later fiction indicated a persistent confusion about gender identity, or, to put it more positively and progressively, an openness to fluidity in gender boundaries.” This insight transcends cisgendered approaches to Hemingway that have characterized many Hemingway biographies, particularly notions of Hemingway as a prowler when it came to women. “Because he would marry four times,” Dearborn recounts, “it’s taken as a given that he was a ladies’ man. But he was far more romantic in nature than most womanizers are.” Dearborn tells us that she is explicitly uninterested in promoting the perspective that Hemingway is viewed distinctly differently by men and women. “Studying Hemingway,” she notes, “is about the rough opposite, the cultural constructions of gender—how sex roles are determined by the forces around us rather than our genes. It is through figures like Heming-

way that masculinity gets defined—even if that same cultural construction affects him in turn.” Thus, Hemingway and his art are released to fly on their own (at least by Dearborn), free from the restrictions of genetic inheritance.

Trauma is destiny. There has been a trend in Hemingway Studies, for example, to examine Hemingway’s physical and psychological conditions in ways that suggest Hemingway’s and his work. One recent example (2017) includes an investigation into Hemingway’s Brain as a result of traumatic accidents or probes into his mental state as the legacy of inherited conditions and numerous accidents that caused significant trauma.⁵ And there have been many Hemingway familial suicides, yet it is a redoubtable task to directly relate these injuries and correlatives to Hemingway’s art, in an explicable manner, that suggests causation (sometimes with little self-awareness) in an attempt to explain the man and/or his literature. This kind of explanatory mode is not Dearborn’s methodology, but rather she uses critical episodes in Hemingway’s life as points of departure to approach his aesthetic sensibility and the residue(s) that they generate. Dearborn routinely presents historical facts that may reasonably resonate in readers’ minds as they deal with familial trauma. Experienced readers of Hemingway are very much aware of his preoccupation with death and suicide. Dearborn recounts, for example, a small family anecdote with big inferences to be drawn. Immediately after Ernest’s father’s suicide, “Grace sent Ernest his father’s watch. In a much misunderstood gesture, she also sent him the gun with which his father killed himself. She evidently had promised it to him right after Ed died.” This simple vignette opens up interpretive possibilities related to motifs of suicide in Hemingway’s fiction (perhaps reinforced, for example, in “A Clean Well Lighted Place”). Dearborn chronicles, of course, strategic life changing events in Hemingway’s life, but not to explain the man but rather to treat the special (kairic) events as foregrounding and forestructuring Hemingway’s evolution (and perhaps later devolution) as one of America’s foremost literary artists.

Ernest Hemingway has been dead for six decades. Mary Dearborn has brought him back to life in a new and compelling way. Her piercing, probing reading of Hemingway’s life energizes new ways of engaging his immortal literature. Hemingway was always interested in the “true gen” and so, too, is Mary Dearborn. For both of them, it might be said that their real work is being.

NOTES

1. Mary Dearborn is keenly aware, of course, of Mailer's lifelong preoccupation with Hemingway. As J. Michael Lennon notes in his definitive biography of Mailer, while attending Harvard Mailer wrote a play, "The Naked and the Dead," which has resonance with Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" as two characters in Mailer's play "quit and go on a fishing trip to regain their equilibrium, as Nick Adams does in 'Big Two Hearted River.'" J. Michael Lennon, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life*, Simon & Schuster, 2013.
2. The holograph text of the letter is reprinted in "Letter to Norman Mailer," *The Mailer Review* Vol. 7, No.4, Fall 2010.
3. Carl Rollyson's review, "Ernest Hemingway: A Biography" by Mary V. Dearborn," first appeared in *The San Francisco Chronicle* (June 10, 2017) and was subsequently reprinted in <sfgate.com>. Rollyson is the author of a biography of Hemingway's third wife: *Beautiful Exile: The Life of Martha Gellhorn* (Aurum Press, 2001).
4. This comment appeared on the Hemingway listserv <heming-l@mtu.edu.> <<https://www.hemingwaysociety.org/hemingway-email-discussion-list>>. Date unknown.
5. Andrew Farah, *Hemingway's Brain*. U of South Carolina P, 2017.