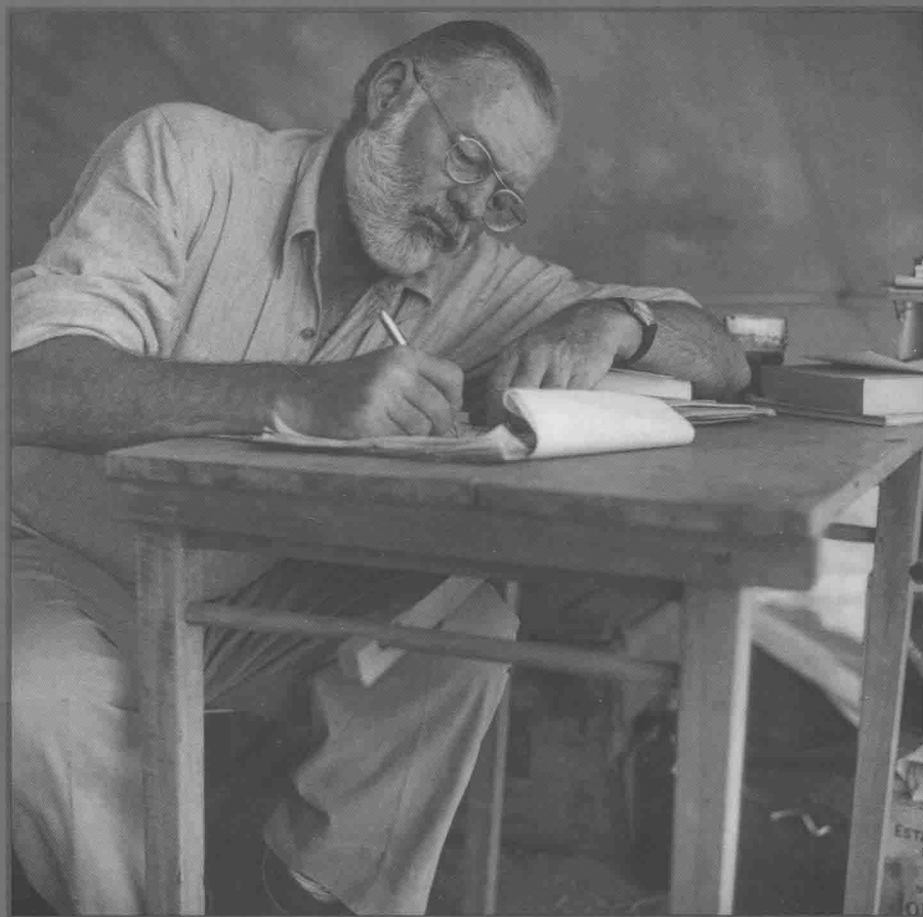


# THE HEMINGWAY SHORT STORY

A STUDY in CRAFT for  
WRITERS and READERS

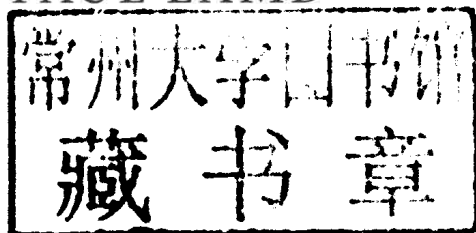


ROBERT PAUL LAMB

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WRITERS and READERS

ROBERT PAUL LAMB



Louisiana State University Press

Baton Rouge

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For Kip Robisch

A beloved, multi-award-winning educator who has taught  
generations of students to examine everything they take for granted  
and to think for themselves

An unswervingly ethical man who always stands up for what is right,  
devotes himself to helping others, and never ditches his principles  
out of inconvenience or fear

An advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves—animals  
in the wild—dedicated to protecting them and the earth's ecosystems  
from a culture of death bent on senseless extermination  
for “fun” and profit

A brilliant scholar whose masterpiece, *Wolves and the Wolf Myth  
in American Literature*, is the absolute gold standard  
of contemporary, scientifically based ecocriticism

An author of original ecocritical fiction

and

A true friend whose wisdom, kindness, and decency  
I will forever cherish

This one's for you, #54

But giants of his sort are truly modest; there is much more  
behind Hemingway's form than people know.

—JAMES JOYCE

Of his own writing Ernest said, "Nobody really  
knows or understands and nobody has ever said the secret.  
The secret is that it is poetry written into prose and  
it is the hardest of all things to do."

—MARY WELSH HEMINGWAY

## Preface

This book is a sequel to *Art Matters: Hemingway, Craft, and the Creation of the Modern Short Story* (2010). In *Art Matters*, my goal was to provide the definitive study of Hemingway's short story aesthetics, exploring what he learned from previous artists—such as Poe, Cézanne, Maupassant, Henry James, Chekhov, Crane, Stein, Joyce, Eliot, and Pound—and how he developed this inheritance to create the unique style and innovative techniques that would revolutionize the craft of both fiction and the short story over the past century. The book was framed by a polemical preface, introduction, and coda arguing for Hemingway's central place in the canon through his unsurpassed influence on his contemporaries and later authors, an influence that has cut across the artificial boundaries which culture and politics create: nationality, race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion. These authors, among them fourteen Nobel Prize Laureates, include writers as diverse as Raymond Chandler, Isaac Babel, John Dos Passos, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Sean O'Faolain, Nathalie Sarraute, John Steinbeck, Halldór Laxness, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Elio Vittorini, Eudora Welty, Albert Camus, Bernard Malamud, Ralph Ellison, Saul Bellow, William Burroughs, Camilo José Cela, Heinrich Böll, J. D. Salinger, Jack Kerouac, Norman Mailer, Nadine Gordimer, Flannery O'Connor, Elmore Leonard, Gabriel García Márquez, John Munonye, Edna O'Brien, Derek Walcott, John Updike, Joan Didion, Cormac McCarthy, Kenzaburo Oe, Ellen Gilchrist, Mario Vargas Llosa, Raymond Carver, Russell Banks, Jean-Marie Gustav Le Clézio, Robert Olen Butler, Ann Beattie, Terry Tempest Williams, and Junot Díaz. The bulk of the book examined through close readings the major elements of Hemingway's art and explained exactly how each functions: dispassionate presentation, authorial judgment, suggestiveness, concision, omission, impressionism, focalization, repetition, juxtaposition, story openings and endings, the illustrative stamp, constructive dialogue, story characterization, and setting. In addition, it introduced and developed a new set of terms and concepts for analyzing the

short story as a distinct literary genre while also redefining older literary terms, such as *impressionism* and *expressionism*, which had become hopelessly misunderstood by critics.

I did not have the necessary space in *Art Matters* to explore any individual story fully. Instead, in order to analyze the many technical aspects of Hemingway's art, I drew upon exemplary passages from most of the fifty-three stories and eighteen vignettes he wrote between 1922 and 1939. Early in the book, I observed:

Such a dissection has its obvious value; it gets beneath the surface to show how texts actually work. But it also tends to make stories into clinical specimens, treating parts of them rather than looking at each story as a whole. Hemingway, I should hasten to note, would probably have detested what I am doing here. As penance, in a future book I intend to examine a number of stories thoroughly as autonomous texts, putting back together what here I so callously take apart. The short story is a living thing; even in its final form it continues to grow, change, and reveal hidden aspects of itself to new generations of readers. But, as with human bodies, a certain knowledge of basic anatomy illuminates.<sup>1</sup>

Encouraged by, and grateful for, the response of critics and creative writers to *Art Matters*, I wish to make good on that penance I promised and present readings that do justice to a number of individual Hemingway stories. Although *The Hemingway Short Story* is best read after *Art Matters*, I have shaped it so that it can be read on its own. Therefore, whenever I use a term coined in the previous book, I explain it in a shorthand fashion so that the reader will get its gist. I also use endnotes to *Art Matters* for those interested in reading fuller definitions of the terms along with detailed analyses of examples drawn from Hemingway's stories. In this manner, I hope, the craft readings in this book can be enjoyed with profit on their own while not being constantly interrupted by forays into the critical terminology developed in my earlier volume.

The same three premises articulated in the preface and introduction to *Art Matters* also inform *The Hemingway Short Story*, although—once we are done with this preface—I will try to refrain from repeating my polemics and occasionally combative tone. I have no desire to beat a dead horse and, to be candid, I'm done trying to justify a study of the aesthetic principles and techniques of the most influential fiction writer of the past hundred years. It's not that I've ceased to care, but the importance to all

literary critics of understanding craft *should* be self-evident. Eavesdrop on any group of professionals—musicians, surgeons, athletes, jurists, fly fishermen, psychologists, pilots, political strategists, actors, firefighters, poets, journalists, skilled artisans, engineers, teachers, comedians, soldiers, or *fiction writers*—and you will discover that, whatever else they may discuss, when they get serious they talk about their craft. If it's deemed essential by actual fiction writers, then it should matter to anyone claiming authority about fiction. A literary critic indifferent to craft is like a football analyst uninterested in the mechanics of pass blocking. It's manifestly ridiculous but, unlike the football analyst (or the offensive tackle practicing his craft), such literary critics will not lose their jobs as a result of their ignorance. Nevertheless, I'm a realist, and all putative critics of fiction who dismiss literary art are welcome to cast a cold eye on this book and go their merry way. I wish them well. But for anyone who believes that art does, and will always, matter, and that cultural studies, however important (and they certainly are), do not possess a monopoly on literary criticism, the following three assumptions underlie both books.

My first premise is that a writer is not merely a social construction, a site upon which cultural forces contend, but a complex human being, a professional in his or her craft, and capable of agency in consciously making decisions that create a literary text from blank pages of paper. In 1968, when Roland Barthes famously declared the “death of the author,” he did so for three related, necessary, and beneficial purposes. First, he wanted to open up the study of literature, which he rightly felt was “tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions. . . . [E]xplanation of the work is still sought in the person of its producer, as if, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, it was always, ultimately, the voice of one and the same person, the *author*, which was transmitting his ‘confidences.’” Second, he wanted critics to view texts (to use Mikhail Bakhtin's term) as “unfinalizable,” to see a literary work as “a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture” with everything “to be *disentangled*, but nothing to be *deciphered*[.]” By divorcing the text from our obsession with the “Author-God,” we could view it “in all its reprises, all its stages,” and thus there would be “no end to it, no bottom; the space of writing is to be traversed, not pierced.” Third, he wanted to liberate not only the text, but also to emphasize the vital role of the reader in the consumption of a work of literature: “a text consists of multiple writings, proceeding from several cultures and entering into dialogue, into



parody, into contestation; but there is a site where this multiplicity is collected, and this site is . . . the reader[.]”<sup>2</sup>

Barthes’s landmark essay on the death of the author made perfect sense, but over time many in the academy began to literalize what he had clearly intended as a metaphor. Scholarship that focused on actual writers of fiction consciously practicing their craft became, in the minds of many academics, a “fetishization” of the author and tantamount to heresy. If the purpose of Barthes’s essay was to open up criticism to a multiplicity of methodological approaches—*none* of them dominant—unfortunately and ironically it was undermined by the religious right of cultural studies, which stigmatized any scholarship on the formal elements of fiction as a return to the dreaded “New Criticism.” Like branding someone a “Communist” in the 1950s or a “Liberal” today, invoking the label “New Critic” effectively dismissed any further discussion. All too typical of academia, which boasts of its love of diversity but often betrays little appreciation for what diversity really means, and which shows scant tolerance toward anything different from what’s currently fashionable, a new hegemony simply replaced an older one. Or, as one perplexed junior colleague condescendingly asked me about *Art Matters*, “What cultural labor does your project perform?” To which I replied in my best native Bronx accent, “yuh mean my book?—well, uh, none, I guess.” For critics, who suffer from what I think of as “an anxiety of significance,” the death of the author served another, unconscious purpose. It made the critic paramount and the author secondary, putting the cart before the horse. But let’s be painfully honest here, shall we? I know of no critic who wouldn’t kill to have written *Ulysses*, but I seriously doubt that Joyce would have preferred to have been a Joyce critic. Again, some plain speech: without literary critics, we would still have literature, but without writers, literary critics would either have to retrain themselves as historians or else get a real job.

A second premise of both volumes is that the bifurcation between art, craft, technique, and form, now the province of creative writing programs, and cultural critique, the current territory of literary studies, is spurious. Nowhere is this divide more striking than in the approaches to the texts of Hemingway, who is arguably the single most studied fiction writer in creative writing craft courses while, in literary criticism, he has become mainly the subject of gender, sexuality, ideological, historicist, and biographical studies.<sup>3</sup> Such a division is nonsensical, because an understanding of art informs, complicates, and deepens cultural studies, and

vice-versa; they are far from incompatible. For example, modernist fiction is well known for such formal techniques as breaking up linear chronology, returning to the same scenes through the eyes of different focalizers, abdicating the (author)ity of the writer, withholding exposition, and leaving texts open ended. The authors of these works did not engage in such practices to be clever or to make reading their books difficult; opacity, for them, was never the goal. Instead, there is an important relationship between their form and their content. In modernism, emerging in a period in which cultural absolutes were crumbling, we see a focus on epistemology—not what we know but *how* we know what we know. This is as true of an explicitly epistemological novel such as William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* as it is of Hemingway's impressionism or Willa Cather's expressionism, which foreground the immediacy of experience over retrospective understanding and force readers to fill in interstices in the texts with their own experiential knowledge. Modernism's concern with epistemology is linked to the modernist belief that "reality" is multiple and intangible; it is produced by the individual perceiver. For this reason, modernism focuses on the consciousness and the unconscious, where reality resides. The many formal techniques of modernism, then, serve to question the false order that previous historical genres like realism and naturalism imposed upon life. This weakening of traditional narrative structures, which compels the reader to become more active in producing meaning from the text, creates a homology between the fragmented world as seen by the writer and the fragmented text as presented to the reader. Far from an empty formalism, then, studies of such modernist techniques are essential to any understanding of what modernism was and how it created its cultural representations and critiques. To sum up—and I cannot state it too strongly—*what* a text means and *how* it means are interconnected. Form and content are two sides of the same coin.

The third premise of both books is that a short story is not merely fiction that takes up less room. Rather, the short story is a distinct literary genre, complete with its own conventions that have developed over time, and different from such longer forms of fiction as the novella and the novel. In many ways, as I demonstrated in *Art Matters*, the story is closer to lyrical poetry than to the novel—a point made by authors as different as Frank O'Connor, Wallace Stevens, and Hemingway himself.<sup>4</sup> The language of the short story is more complex because it has more to do in a smaller amount of space, and therefore relies on multiple meanings, compression,

omission, suggestiveness, implication, and nuance. As a result, it demands, and rewards, the sorts of full close readings usually reserved for poems rather than readings of selected passages that are, for practical purposes, necessarily typical of criticism on the novel.

These are the sorts of close readings that comprise this book: readings in which we observe the author consciously practicing his craft, how that craft is inextricably entwined with the story's cultural representations, and the many ways in which close examinations of stories reward us. The lengthy first chapter is a full craft reading devoted to "Indian Camp" that presents the biographical contexts of the story's creation and speculates on how these found their way into the narrative, analyzes the shortcomings of its deleted opening, presents a complete reading of the final text, and concludes with a coda on "Fathers and Sons." I chose "Indian Camp" for several reasons. It is Hemingway's initial story masterpiece and, by first analyzing the amateurish opening, which he simply chopped off, and then proceeding to the final story, we can see the exact moment in which Hemingway became Hemingway, the story in which he originally brought into play many of the technical innovations of his craft. It is also the story in which he introduced his most memorable and autobiographically based character, Nick Adams;<sup>5</sup> combined with the coda on "Fathers and Sons," we view Nick at the first and final chronological points in his saga, and there are surprising connections. Following the exhaustive reading of "Indian Camp," the second chapter, on "Soldier's Home," examines a story that has been the subject of an ongoing critical debate in Hemingway studies and demonstrates how a focus on form, technique, and narrative argument can help us to resolve that debate and deepen our understanding of the story's terrain of cultural meaning. The third chapter is on "A Canary for One," which exemplifies a number of Hemingway stories where nothing appears to happen. Or, to put it more precisely, it is a story that seems to elude all methodological approaches (except for biographical ones) and, as a result, has been admired but neglected by scholars. The chapter shows how such a story must be read in terms of craft to be fully appreciated. In the final two chapters, I let Hemingway have his own say on the nature of reading and writing. The fourth chapter explores "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen" as a metacritical story about the act of interpreting and misinterpreting texts themselves. This story, also admired but neglected by scholars, shows Hemingway fully aware of what would later be termed "reader-response" or "reader-oriented" criticism: how the different

intertexts, conceptual frames, and experiences that readers bring to a text determine the ways in which they interpret that text. The fifth chapter, on the much analyzed "Big Two-Hearted River," employs its deleted ending to view both the original and final versions of the story as metafictional, that is, a story about the nature of writing stories, including the writing of itself. Throughout these chapters, my methodology is best defined as *craft analysis*, the sort of approach that Flannery O'Connor proclaimed essential if one wishes "to understand a story" because it gives us the "tools that operate inside the work and not outside it": tools that "are concerned with how this story is made and with what makes it work as a story."<sup>6</sup>

In *Art Matters*, I appropriated Henry James's famous metaphor from his preface to *The Portrait of Lady*, about the "house of fiction" and its many windows, in order to posit that the house of criticism, too, should have many windows. Inclusiveness, in both criticism and life, is always more rewarding than exclusiveness. Diversity and multiplicity help us to see the world, and the literature that represents it, more complexly and accurately. For James and Hemingway, and I suspect for most writers and readers, a greater awareness is always the ultimate goal of reading. Northrop Frye's statement, made over half a century ago, seems a particularly apt admonition to critics today: "that every increase of appreciation has been right, and every decrease wrong; that criticism has no business to react against things, but should show a steady advance toward indiscriminating catholicity."<sup>7</sup>

For those readers, then, who appreciated the vista afforded by *Art Matters*, I hope that the view presented in this new volume proves equally illuminating and enjoyable.

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# I

## *Full Encounters of the Close Kind*

As the contract only mentions excisions it is understood of course that no alterations of words shall be made without my approval. This protects you as much as it does me as the stories are written so tight and so hard that the alteration of a word can throw an entire story out of key.

—HEMINGWAY TO HORACE LIVERIGHT (1925),  
*Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters*

I write one page of masterpiece to ninety one pages of shit. I try to put the shit in the wastebasket.

—HEMINGWAY TO F. SCOTT FITZGERALD (1934),  
*Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters*



## Really Reading a Hemingway Story

### THE EXAMPLE OF "INDIAN CAMP"

I'm trying to do it so it will make it without you knowing it, and so the more you read it, the more there will be.

—Ernest Hemingway (on his work in the mid-1920s), *A Moveable Feast*

### Prologue: The Contexts of "Indian Camp"

From mid-February through April 1924, the start of an extraordinary period of creativity that would last five years, Hemingway completed eight of the stories that would comprise the bulk of *In Our Time*.<sup>1</sup> The first of these stories, "Indian Camp," marked the introduction of Nick Adams, who had briefly appeared in an earlier *in our time* vignette and would become Hemingway's most memorable and autobiographical character.<sup>2</sup> "Indian Camp" was both the first Nick Adams story and, as it would turn out, the earliest story in Nick's chronology. It was also something else. Of his three previously published stories, "Up in Michigan" and "My Old Man" had been derivative, heavily influenced by Gertrude Stein and Sherwood Anderson, respectively, and "Out of Season" was merely competent. "Indian Camp" was therefore another "first"; it was Hemingway's initial masterpiece in the genre.

The original version of the story begins with Nick undressing inside a tent. As he watches the shadows of his father and Uncle George projected by the campfire on the wall of the tent he feels ashamed of something that happened the night before. In a flashback to that night, the two men head off in a rowboat to troll for fish. Before they leave, Nick's father tells him that in the event of an emergency the boy should fire three rifle shots and they will return immediately. Nick walks back to the tent and tries to sleep, but the dark and silent woods frighten him, and his vague anxiety turns into a fear of death. In a flashback within this flashback, Nick recalls sitting in church a few weeks earlier singing a hymn and realizing, for the first time, that he will someday die. He remembers spending that night in the hall reading a book to keep his mind off of dying. The story then returns



to the original flashback as Nick's fear overwhelms him, he fires the three shots, feels relieved, and goes to sleep. On the lake the two men hear the shots, with Uncle George angry about having his fishing ruined and making a number of nasty comments while Nick's father feebly defends his son. The men enter the tent, Uncle George awakens Nick by shining his flashlight on him, and the boy tells a lie about having heard something that sounded like a cross between a wolf and a fox prowling about the tent. The story then flashes forward to the morning of the night on which it opened, as Nick's father finds two trees leaning against each other in the wind and asks Nick if that was what he heard. The boy is evasive, but his father calms him by giving advice on how to protect himself in a thunderstorm. The story returns to the present as Nick, still undressing, hears a boat pull up on the beach; the shadows of the two men disappear, and his father yells for him to get dressed and put on his coat.

On the beach two Indians and a second rowboat await. The Indians row them across the lake as Nick's father explains to Nick that there is an Indian lady at the Indian camp who is sick. After docking, the five characters walk up the beach, through a meadow, along a trail in the woods, and up a logging road into the hills. When they get to the camp, they enter a shanty in which a pregnant Indian woman lies in a bunk while her husband, who had hurt his foot with an ax, is in the bunk above her. Nick's father explains to his son that she is having a difficult childbirth, and Nick is unnerved by her screams. Nick watches his father prepare to operate, and then assists in a brutal, makeshift Caesarean performed with fishing equipment and no anesthetic. A boy is born, but Nick, despite his father's explanations, is too upset to watch. His father's post-operative exhilaration is cut short when he checks on the Indian father in the upper bunk and discovers that sometime during the operation the man cut his own throat from ear to ear with a razor. Nick also sees the gruesome sight. As he and his father leave the camp at dawn, Nick asks a series of questions about death, questions to which his father can offer no satisfactory answers. The story ends with two paragraphs of description of Nick and his father on the lake, concluding with the phrase that Nick "felt quite sure that he would never die."<sup>3</sup>

In an interview near the end of his life, Hemingway was asked, "How complete in your own mind is the conception of a short story? Does the theme, or the plot, or a character change as you go along?" The author replied with a disarmingly frank statement about how stories get written: