

On Ernest Hemingway and Manhood

Robert S. Griffin

www.robertsgriffin.com

I've been reading a lot about Ernest Hemingway lately with an emphasis on Ernest Hemingway the man; I haven't been reading what he wrote. Or better, I've tried reading what he wrote and keep getting about ten pages into it and quitting. Invariably, Hemingway's prose is a series of short pedestrian declarative sentences strung together with "ands," and that annoys me no end. About two paragraphs into him, I wind up counting "ands" and lose train of what he's saying. Ten pages of that and I'm back perusing ESPN.com, which I've got to stop doing.

To get at what I'm talking about, from Hemingway's memoir *A Moveable Feast*:

So I went to the far side of the street to look up at the roof in the rain and see if any chimneys were going, and how the smoke blew. There was no smoke and I thought about how the chimney would be cold and might not draw and of the room possibly filling with smoke, and the fuel wasted, and the money gone with it, and I walked on in the rain. I walked down past the Lycee Henri Quatre and the ancient church of St- Etienne-du-Mont and the windswept Place du Pantheon and cut in for shelter to the right and finally came out on the lee side of the Boulevard St-Michel and worked on down it past the Cluny and the Boulevard St-Germain until I came to a good cafe that I knew on the Place St-Michel.

What? And then the next paragraph is just like this one, and the next and the next and the next . . . and it is on to the top sports stories of the day. (I know, a lot of "ands" in this last sentence of mine. But then again, every one of my sentences isn't like that, plus I'm just knocking out these little web site thoughts, nobody is giving me a Nobel Prize for Literature like Hemingway got.)

Frankly, I'm mystified by the adulation Hemingway receives as a writer. But I do find myself interested in the way he conducted his life, as well as the way he has been portrayed by the people who have written about him. The past few weeks, I've gone through a series of biographical books on Hemingway.¹ One that particularly caught my attention is by David M. Earle and entitled *All Man!*

*Hemingway, 1950s Men's Magazines, and the Masculine Persona.*² Earle recounts how Hemingway was depicted back in the 1950s as a masculine ideal in popular, or pulp, magazines directed at men—all of them long gone as far as I know—among them, *Argosy*, *True*, and *Men's Illustrated*.

Reading the Earle book, which I recommend, good book, some wonderful illustrations, I was taken by the contrast between the concept of manhood promoted in those old magazines, as exemplified in Hemingway, with the one offered up by a wide circulation magazine aimed at men in our time to which I subscribe, *Men's Health*. I'll briefly sketch out that contrast, and tack on a point drawn from a couple of other sources, to get both you and me thinking more about how men are defined these days in the public discourse—say, on the TV show “The Bachelor,” and in movies and books and in schools and so on—and what it all means. The fundamental question I'm trying to inform in this presentation: what, really, is a true and laudable man?

In articles accompanied by pictures of Hemingway in all his burly, hairy-chested, bearded, and virile glory, the 1950s men's magazines depicted him as both a hero and mentor to young men. He was this blood-and-guts soldier (he never actually fought in a war, he was an ambulance driver and a journalist who wrote stories about the battles, but we're focusing on the image, the ideal, here and not on reality), an expert and lusty sportsman, a two-fisted drinker (no Bud Light, thank you, Hemingway was not counting calories), and a conqueror of women who lived life to the max. One profile quoted him as saying, “I'd like to see all the new fighters, horses, ballets, bike riders, dames, bull-fighters, painters, airplanes, sons of bitches, big international whores, restaurants, and wine cellars . . . and I would like to be able to make love until I'm 85.” (He blew his brains out with a shotgun at 61, but we are not dealing with that here . . . or maybe we are.) A *Man's Illustrated* piece declared, “When Ernest Hemingway fights his last fight, no matter when or how he goes, we'll be able to say of him, ‘There went one of us—perhaps the best of us. There went a man—a *real man*.’”

For sure, according to these old magazines, a real man didn't take his cues from woman. *Men's Illustrated*: “There aren't many men like Hemingway left in this soft-bellied world of ours. You may be one of them. If you are, then you belong to the select few who,

along with Hemingway, are members of a vanishing breed of giants in a society dominated by women and women's ways." In a review of Hemingway's book *Men at War*, *Sir* magazine declared, "If you are a wishy-washy guy, a mama's boy, a sentimentalist, you will not like this book."

And *vive la différence* between men and women back then, including in eyes of woman—no celebration of men who have found their feminine side, none of that. In an article, the actress Zsa Zsa Gabor (who remarkably is still alive, albeit understandably not doing very well health-wise) had Hemingway at the top of what she called her "sexiting men" list. "Hemingway's such an outdoor man!" Zsa Zsa enthused. "So different in every way from women. He's more masculine than anyone he's ever written about. If you could be with him, you'd never want to read a book." Is it possible to find this sentiment expressed by a woman in our time?

A real man according to this 1950s ideal had work to do, it was at the core of who he was as a man, and it was his work, not some corner-office supervisor's notion of his work. When asked about work—and of course for him it was writing—Hemingway replied tersely: "Know your work. Do your work. Live with your material." A real man had a vocation, work that defined and expressed and developed him; it was essential to his essence as a man. He didn't just diligently do his job; he truly, with all of himself, engaged his work; he felt intimately connected to it, one with it, and it was work worthy of a man, he made sure of that. He wasn't satisfied with just any job somebody would deign to throw at him, and he wasn't counting up sick days. He was too much his own man to do that.

Just now, I skimmed through my *Men's Health* magazines, which for some reason I have stacked up in on a bookcase shelf in the living room. The first thing that jumps out at me is there is not a strand of body hair to be found on any of the men pictured, including underarm hair; all of it shaved smooth, not the hint of a nub to be found. And are these guys buffed: six-packs and pecs beyond belief. The articles inform you how to make her laugh, how to win over a crowd, and how to land a dream job. Titles jump out at you: "Hero Muscle in Half the Time!" "How to Charm a Stunner." "The Flat Belly Muscle and How To Work It."

I imagined Hemingway still alive and having modernized his antiquated ways. There he is in *Men's Health* magazine with his

shirt off, shaved as clean as a peeled orange, clenching his tiny waist to bring out his bumpity-bump abs, count them—how many gym workouts and egg whites must it have taken for Hemingway to achieve this sculpted state, unbelievable. And the articles: “How to Make Her Laugh” by Ernest Hemingway. “How to Win Over a Crowd” by Ernest Hemingway. “How to Land A Dream Job” by Ernest Hemingway. “Hero Muscle in Half The Time” by Ernest Hemingway. “How to Charm A Stunner” by Ernest Hemingway. “The Flat Belly Muscle and How To Work It” by Ernest Hemingway.

Men's Health has an advice column. Every month, men send in their questions and get answers. Here's a question in this month's issue: "Is there a surefire way to tell whether she's into me or just being nice?"

Let's attribute the answer in this month's *Men's Health* to Ernest Hemingway. In this instance, it is the Ernest Hemingway of back then, and it's on film, not written out. Beefy, bearded, hairy-chested Hemingway is sitting in a deck chair on his boat *Pilar* after a day of ocean fishing for marlin holding a glass of bourbon in his meaty hand. He speaks directly to the camera, his eyes locking on ours, and with utmost seriousness and sincerity--imagine this is your mind's eye--recites the exact words of this month's *Men's Health* reply to the questioner. "If she laughs at your jokes and maintains eye contact," Hemingway intones, "she thinks you are cute and charming. If she goes a while without checking her phone, you are pulling her in. If she finds ways to touch you (the elbow brush, the light tap), she's open to physical contact. If she constantly adjusts her top and fixes her hair, she's trying to impress you. And if she circles back when her friends leave, she wants to keep the conversation going." Hemingway maintains eye contact with the camera, sips his bourbon, and nods his head up in down--yes, yes indeed.

All kidding aside, the 50s man--any of them, we don't have to just stick to Hemingway, I'm old enough to remember them--would look upon fawning over and empowering a woman in this fashion pathetic and sad, beneath the dignity of a man, simply unacceptable. The way of the 50s man is you get on with your life with zest and zeal and women come to you, to share in your adventure, you don't chase after them.

Clearly a Hemingway man takes no crap from a woman. Interestingly enough, I couldn't find a quote in the Earle book that

got at this directly, nor could I locate a quote in my *Men's Healths* that spelled out the current wisdom on this matter—it's clearly implied in both cases, then and now, I'm sure of that, but it's not talked about explicitly. I'll have to think more about what that's about. Anyway, I've taken the liberty of quoting here a self-professed, Hemingway-influenced writer prominent in the '50s—and later, he had a lengthy career before dying in 2004—Norman Mailer and the contemporary best-selling psychologist David D. Burns to get at the different takes, then and now, on this topic.

If the woman in your life is giving you serious trouble or bringing you down, what do you do about it?

Says current writer Burns: 1. You find some validity in what she is doing. 2. You put yourself in her shoes and see the world through her eyes. 3. You ask her gentle, probing questions to learn more about what she is thinking and feeling.³

Says Hemingway aficionado Mailer: “When they start grinding you into dry goatball powder and you become a whining piteous concentration camp victim, you split if there's one sperm cell left.”⁴

I'll abruptly end with that. I hope these few comments have gotten you started thinking about this concern. How about if you take it from here?

Notes

1. One I particularly recommend is Brian Denis, *True Gen: An Intimate Portrait of Hemingway by Those Who Knew Him* (Delta, 1989).
2. David Earle, *All Man! Hemingway, 1950s Men's Magazines, and the Masculine Persona* (The Kent State University Press, 2009).
3. David Burns, *The Feeling Good Handbook* (Plume, 1999), p. 377.
4. J. Michael Lennon, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* (Random House, 2013) p. 325.