

1990

Book Review: *The Hemingway Hoax*

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Recommended Citation

Osborn, William (1990) "Book Review: *The Hemingway Hoax*," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 20.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol6/iss1/20>

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Joe Haldeman, *The Hemingway Hoax* New York: William Morrow, 1990.

MacDonald Harris, *Hemingway's Suitcase*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990.

In December, 1922, Ernest Hemingway, covering news in Lausanne, wired his wife Hadley in Paris to join him for skiing at Chamby. Among the luggage she took with her was a green leather overnight bag in which she had stuffed her husband's manuscripts—hand-written originals, typescripts, and carbons. While her train waited in the Gare de Lyon she stepped away from her luggage to get something to read. When she returned, the green bag was gone and all Hemingway's early work except "My Old Man," which had slipped behind a drawer in their apartment, and "Up In Michigan," which Hemingway had mailed to a publisher, was lost. The suitcase was never found. What became of it is the question that anchors the plots of two new novels.

The protagonist of the first, Joe Haldeman's *The Hemingway Hoax*, is Hemingway expert John Baird. As the story opens, Baird is in Key West to do research on the missing suitcase. There, he is approached by a con man named Castle, who suggests he alter his ambitions from writing an article about the suitcase to "creating" the lost stories themselves and passing them off as genuine. Baird is more receptive than he might be if he hadn't depleted his trust fund by living a life that far exceeds his university salary. His bored, young, sexy wife Lena is initiated into the plan, and the three set to work.

The subsequent plot focuses on the movement of Baird from ordinary pedant to

forger extraordinaire. He and his accomplices pay meticulous attention to creating type that exactly matches the idiosyncrasies found in Hemingway's manuscripts. They search for paper old enough and of the right kind. They work out questions of style and content so that the forgeries won't contradict any of the great man's published work.

But the plan comes to the attention of a group of nameless, god-like entities called the "Spacio-Temporal Adjustment Board" (STAB), whose function it is to make sure that events in a multitude of simultaneously-existing universes don't interfere with their own or each other's predetermined futures. STAB sends a nameless envoy, temporarily in human form, to tell Baird that most actions taken by any given person have no long-term effect on the historical future, but that Baird's criminal behavior will. It turns out that if publication of the fakes isn't prevented, the macho attitudes they exude ("[T]here are some things a man just doesn't have to take, not if he's a real man") will lead in the year 2006 to one of "two middle-aged politicians . . . president and premier of their countries . . . [insulting] the other beyond forgiveness," thus starting a nuclear war that will leave the planet devoid of life.

Unfortunately, the skeptical Baird has become a man who enjoys his forgery too much to stop doing it. After offering numerous incentives to quit, all of which Baird refuses, the envoy finally arranges for Baird to receive something of inestimable value. The arrangement leads to a snap ending that leaves the reader breathlessly perplexed, his definition of reality broadened.

MacDonald Harris's *Hemingway's Suitcase*

opens with a complete new Nick Adams story and goes on to include four others, each a charming Hemingway “original.” Beware, though: Harris’s wit is straight lye to the fabric of the Hemingway myth. In “The Lady with the Dog,” for instance, the “lady” turns out to have given “just about everybody in the gang” a venereal disease—“a particularly virulent form . . . that came from the Middle East”—all except Nick, who has struck out with her. When Nick informs Helen about the VD, she tells him, “You always know about every thing. How canal boats work. Which horse to bet on. And especially about women.” To which Nick replies, “Oh, I know a lot more than that. Hunting and fishing. Military strategy. The psychology of cats. I’ve got the whole Paris Metro system in my head.” In “A Friend from Detroit,” Nick hangs out with his buddy “Mr. George” (George Elliot), about whose gender Nick seems confused. During a bird hunt, George comes back from visiting the bushes but, “didn’t wash his hands before he ate his sandwich, probably because the water was so cold with needles of ice in it. George was a good friend but Nick was glad he wasn’t a woman and married to him. He could imagine all kinds of George’s habits you would find out about if you were married to him.”

Unlike *The Hemingway Hoax*, in which the stories are created during the course of the novel (but are not included), the stories in Hemingway’s Suitcase exist prior to the opening. It is never clear whether they are meant to represent the lost Hemingways or fakes written by the wealthy Nils-Frederik Glas. Glas encourages the confusion because preserving the mystery of authorship could be rewarding. If the stories are proved genuine, the dead author’s estate will

own them. If they are demonstrably fake, they will be worth far less than real Hemingways. But if Hemingway scholars can be convinced they are genuine while there is no documentary proof, the estate won’t be able to claim them and the public might be convinced to think of them as some literary bonbon.

Unfortunately, all this ambiguity throws the protagonist (Glas’s son Alan), who has been trying to compute the degree of genuineness of his relationships with his wife Lily and all the other members of his family, into deep existential uncertainty. Nevertheless, Alan, who is a failing Los Angeles literary agent, will, if all goes well, sell the manuscript, and Glas’s best friend Wolf, a rare book dealer and document expert, will help produce facsimiles enough like the manuscripts lost by Hemingway to fool the literary establishment.

At one point, Alan buys a present for Lily, a strange mask that becomes a double metaphor. The mask is real, yet beneath it is another reality, the face it conceals. Of course Lily’s face conceals yet another reality, the one that Alan is ever-eager to quantify—the degree of her regard for him. Then he begins to wrap the mask in gift paper, but he can’t finish; he’s inadvertently left the tape inside. He tries to figure out how he can have it both ways: hold the package closed and still get at what’s inside—maintain the surface, yet gain access to the essence.

In *The Hemingway Hoax* this concern with having one’s cake and eating it is interrogated under the familiar science fiction rubric of spacio-temporal ambiguity. In *Hemingway’s Suitcase*, it becomes manifest in Glas’s attempt to follow a path that will allow the new Nick Adams stories to be per-

ceived as genuine and at the same time fake. The implicit question in both novels is whether “knowing” is an objective or subjective condition. Alan ends up claiming that who authored the stories “really doesn’t matter. . . . If somebody makes something that’s so much like some thing else that you can’t tell the difference, then there’s no difference.” This is a conclusion Jorge Luis Borges’s author-critic Pierre Menard, whose “rewriting” of *Don Quixote* turns out to be a verbatim transcription of the original, wouldn’t want to defend.

These two novels have different strengths. Haldeman’s, with its twisting of time and space and its concern with the mechanics of forgery, is longer on plot than Harris’s, whose funny Hemingway pastiches and slow turning of Alan’s psyche is more successful with atmosphere and character. One wishes for a fusion of these strengths in a third novel based on the event in the Gare de Lyon. Whether that event actually took place is an open question. Hemingway was as fierce a revisor of his own life story as he was of his fiction. Why would Hadley bring the stories on a skiing trip? Why every copy? Doubt makes the genesis of these two novels slippery, but considering their themes, perhaps that’s appropriate.

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