Book Review: The Hemingway Hoax

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol6/iss1/20

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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 "The 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.
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attention of a group of entities called "A Stuntman Board" and to make sure the story simultaneously interfere with their forebears. The story, temporarily, that most accurately portrays that most accurate person have no particular future, but only their will. It turns out that the fakes isn’t fakes they exude the same just doesn’t have the same flavor will lead to a compromise middle-aged entity of their identity that is either beyond our realm of war that is one’s life.

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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, an unusual gift that both is a metaphor. The gift is a strange mask that becomes a double metaphor. The mask is real, yet beneath it is another reality, the face it conceals. The mask is real, yet beneath it is another reality, the face it conceals.

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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 something 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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