READING HEMINGWAY IN YELLOWSTONE

By Craig Lancaster

Considering the summer of 1987 through the lens of nearly a quarter century, I wish now that I'd kept a journal or carried a camera to capture every little moment and object that demanded my interest. That summer, my parents packed up the Grand Marquis, tossed me, my sister Karen and my brother Cody into the back seat and pointed the car north, toward Yellowstone National Park, for a two-week vacation.

To be perfectly frank, I'd have rather stayed home in suburban Fort Worth and continued putting the moves on Lisa Fravert (who, it turns out, was far less interested in me than I was in her), but my folks compelled me to go. I cordoned off my share of the back seat, threatened my much-younger siblings with imminent death if they crossed into my territory, and dropped myself into two things that I hoped would stave off boredom and family interaction (which, if you think about it, are the same thing to a teenage boy): my Sony Walkman and Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

(Quick digression: Seriously, a Sony Walkman! Cassette-style, even. In my lifetime alone, a blink-of-the-eye 41 years, I've known music on eight-tracks, vinyl, cassettes, compact discs and, now, computer files so compressed that 400 songs can fit on a device half the length of my index finger. We cannot be far away from new music being piped directly into our cranial nodules, pre-selected by an algorithm that assesses every song we've ever heard and sends us new selections based on our biochemical responses of pleasure. It's going to be great.)

I'd discovered Hemingway the previous spring, when I was assigned to read *A Farewell to Arms* by my honors English teacher, Janelle Eklund. I hadn't held out much hope for it.

Hemingway struck me as hopelessly rooted in an era that had nothing to do with me or my life, a name on the spine of books in my parents' house that I'd never seen cracked. It was only after I did the work of crawling inside the book that I saw and appreciated Hemingway's genius – the spare, almost parched, approach to language, in which simple words built simple sentences that stacked up into simple paragraphs, the sum of which was not simple at all. To write in such a way requires supreme control, an unwillingness to expend a single unnecessary syllable. Long before I read Hemingway for the first time, I'd resolved to be a writer, and in my teens, I was still flailing around for my voice, often with poor results. On a given day, I could do bad imitations of Dave Barry, Stephen King and, God help me, Andy Rooney – sometimes all three of them in a single paragraph. In Hemingway, I found an approach to writing that I could understand and an ethic I could emulate. He had built his creative writing on a foundation of journalism, the career path I came to follow. It was, in so many ways, a perfect convergence of my developing sensibility and a tangible manifestation of where it could lead.

In Casper, Wyoming, where we spent a few days with extended family, I ventured into a mall bookstore and bought a collection of Hemingway's short stories, and this wrenched open a whole new realization of the man's talent. I'm going to employ an out-of-left-field comparison here, one I've used before: Hemingway's short stories remind me John McEnroe's career in doubles tennis. Both derived their greatest fame for other things – Hemingway for his novels, McEnroe for his Grand Slam singles titles and obnoxious bearing on the court. And yet, in these sidelight endeavors, both are possibly the greatest who ever lived. It's an incredible level of ability for one person to possess.

Onward, we drove, hooking up with my mother's sister and her family in Billings, where I live today. The merged families then made their way to Red Lodge, up the switchbacks on the

Beartooth Highway, to Cooke City – where I met a woman who'd known Hemingway, a connection to him that knocked me out – and into the park. This is where the haze of memory fails me a bit; I cannot remember the order in which we took in the sights, or how many days we stayed, or even the finer details of the majesty we saw. I spent a lot of time on narrow trails leading to viewing platforms, my 4-year-old cousin Dani riding on my shoulders. The rest of the time, I spent with my nose in Hemingway's prose and my ears under assault by Rush's *Moving Pictures*.

(Another quick digression: What's it going to take to put Rush into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame? I'm serious. I can think of few pop-culture travesties that irritate me more.)

I was 17 years old that summer, and now I am the age my mother was back then. The calendar turned over faster than I could have imagined, but even though time has erased the sharp edges of memory of that vacation, it will never leave me. I can glance to my left as I write this and see those two books – the very ones I manhandled that summer – sitting in my bookcase. I can walk out my door and into my city and state and know that I'm finally at home in the land I fell in love with as a teenager. I can pull up my current manuscript – backed up nightly on a Web-based server, a phrase I couldn't have conceived of twenty-four years ago – and know that I'm working at the dream Ernest Hemingway helped nurture in me, the writer's life.

Simply put, I'm a lucky man.

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