

When We Fell in Love

By Craig Lancaster

When I was in high school, I had two teachers who stood out from the rest in the way that they prepared their students for life beyond the doors of dear old Richland High School. As it turned out, they were husband and wife – Rolf and Janelle Eklund. Rolf, my junior-year history teacher, disdained the regurgitation of facts and the vagaries of multiple choice. His tests always carried a heavy essay component; he wanted to get at not just what we knew but also how we interpreted it. Janelle, my junior-year English teacher, filled our heads with literature and put us through the paces as writers. She also introduced me to Ernest Hemingway, to my eternal gratitude.

Rolf is gone and greatly missed by many. Janelle is still with us and has read two of my first-draft novels so far. She is a lighter touch with the red pen than I remember, or perhaps I've simply learned my lessons. In any case, her gift of Hemingway serves me well, all these years later.

The header of my blog (<http://craiglancaster.wordpress.com>) carries a slice of Papa's wisdom: "Prose is architecture, not interior decoration." During the spring I turned 17 years old, I wasn't nearly aware enough to realize just what "A Farewell to Arms" (http://www.amazon.com/Farewell-Arms-Ernest-Hemingway/dp/0684801469/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1287460986&sr=1-1) would mean to me. All I knew was that the writing – so lean, so unadorned – was quite unlike anything I'd read before. I recall some classmates chafing at the short, simple sentences, but I was enthralled. I still am. Consider the opening:

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised

powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterward the road bare and white except for the leaves.

The short first chapter continues in a similar vein, painting vibrant pictures with the simplest of words and sentence structures, not a syllable wasted. I tore through that book, and though there were details and themes that didn't register with the teenager I was (those came on subsequent readings, later), I knew I'd found a writer I wanted to read.

Indeed, I inhaled Hemingway that subsequent summer, finishing "For Whom The Bell Tolls" (http://www.amazon.com/Whom-Bell-Tolls-Scribner-Classics/dp/0684830485/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1287461019&sr=1-1) while on a family vacation to Yellowstone, knocking around with Nick Adams and Hemingway's word-perfect short stories the following fall, and on and on through his oeuvre. During the next few years, I learned the difference between good Hemingway and bad (E.B. White's satirical "Across the Street and Into the Grill" (http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1950/10/14/1950_10_14_028_TNY_CARDS_0002_26387) is a brutal, but deserved, takedown of "Across the River and Into the Trees" (http://www.amazon.com/Across-River-Trees-Ernest-Hemingway/dp/0684844648/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1287461114&sr=1-1)).

Parallel to all of this, I absorbed what I could about Hemingway, the man, and I found joy in the idea that his training as a writer was not unlike the path I envisioned for myself. I had fixated on becoming a journalist, like my stepfather and his father before him, and already I was learning to hone my sentences to their necessary components. I was developing an eye for eradicating the subtle redundancies that turn otherwise good writing flabby. I thrilled every time I found one vivid verb that could replace a more pedestrian adverb-verb combination.

(A quick parenthetical detour, something Hemingway would have never done: My more elucidatory tendencies, such as using more words than I technically need in the name of cadence, were developed later, when I learned that, try as I might, I could never be quite as spare as Hemingway.)

That parched approach remains with me. In the revision stage, by far my favorite part of writing, most of my improvements come not in what I enhance but in what I delete. My just-released second novel, “The Summer Son,” (http://www.amazon.com/Summer-Son-Craig-Lancaster/dp/1935597248/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1287461202&sr=1-1) went from about 79,000 words to 72,000 during my second, third and fourth drafts. To whatever extent it became a good book, the transformation happened as I carved out pieces of it.

Through my twenties and thirties, other writers crowded in where Hemingway once stood alone. I found that Steinbeck’s taking of the pulse of the West resonated more with my sensibilities. Introduced to Ivan Doig’s work by chance, I became a great admirer of his ability to breathe life into characters and eras, and I was awed by his pure poetry on the page. I bounced quarters off Elmore Leonard’s drum-tight plots. I disappeared into Stephen King’s boundless imagination.

But when I sit down to write, I know that I need only find some good wood, a reliable hammer and nails of the proper length. If I get the architecture right, the rest will take care of itself.