

The Letters of Ernest Hemingway Volume 1, 1907–1922

Author: Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961)

Editors: Sandra Spanier and Robert W. Trogdon

Publisher: Cambridge University Press (New York). 516 pp. \$40.00

Type of work: Letters, biography

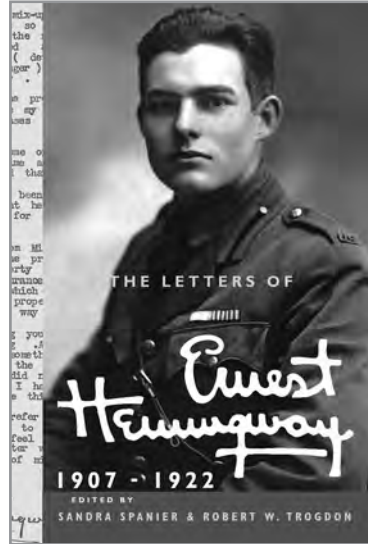
Time: 1907–1922

Locale: United States

The letters in this first volume reveal two forces that shaped the young Hemingway and made their mark on him for life: his middle-class upbringing in Oak Park and his experience in the war.

When writing his novels and short stories, Ernest Hemingway used a journalistic style and simple, unadorned prose to capture the everyday lives of men and women caught up in some of history's most momentous events. Indeed, the title of his first published book, *In Our Time* (1925), a collection of short stories and experimental modernist prose, reflects his desires to chronicle the triumphs and failures of his own modern culture in an intimate and knowing fashion. His unforgettable portraits of a generation of writers and artists grab readers and transport them to that time, giving them the experience of rubbing shoulders with such luminaries as Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ezra Pound. In *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), Hemingway shrewdly depicts the boredom and disillusionment with politics that marked the famous Lost Generation. His *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) portrays the ugliness of World War I and the cynicism of Hemingway's circle of literary friends. In *To Have and Have Not* (1937), he probes the despair, hopelessness, and injustices brought on by the Great Depression and in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), he explores the complex web of cynicism, patriotism, loyalty, individualism, and nationalism that arose out of the awful conflicts of the Spanish Civil War. In one of his most widely read novels, *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), Hemingway eloquently captures the brokenness of human hopes and desires, as a fisherman struggles mightily against forces of nature that are destined to overcome him and his dreams. More than any of the writers who were his contemporaries—Fitzgerald, Stein, William Faulkner—Hemingway vividly captured the lives of individuals as they struggled against society, nature, and each other in an attempt to preserve their hopes and dreams against the backdrop of a culture in turmoil.

As much as Hemingway's novels and stories offer a record of a tumultuous time in twentieth-century history, his own life fascinates biographers and readers of his



fiction. More than a dozen biographies have explored the many facets of Hemingway's adventurous and often raucous life. Many films have also attempted to portray Hemingway as a legendary hardfisted, hard-drinking writer who often tried to hide his insecurities behind a false bravado, embarking on big-game hunting or running with the bulls in Pamplona, Spain. Despite the depth of these biographies, however, certain aspects of Hemingway's life have remained unavailable until the publication of his letters, which come closer than any other of his writings to providing his autobiography.

During his life, Hemingway never intended his letters for publication. The great English novelist and critic Ford Maddox Ford once told Hemingway that he should always write his letters thinking about how posterity would read them. In a letter to Fitzgerald, Hemingway writes that he had such an adverse reaction to Ford's advice that he burned all of his own letters, including Ford's letters to him. Hemingway goes on to remark that he writes letters because it is fun to get letters back. It is through his letters that readers come to best know Hemingway, and he presents himself vividly in the ones that editors Sandra Spanier and Robert W. Trogdon have collected for what will be a multivolume edition, the first volume of which covers his childhood, youth, and earliest forays into journalism and fiction.

As Spanier and Trogdon point out, Hemingway's parents cultivated the habit of letter writing in their children when their children were young. At age three, the young Ernest wrote a letter to his mother describing his Christmas gifts from Santa Claus. When he was a teenager heading off to camp, his father provided him with postcards that he used to write to his family while away. The habit of letter writing was so firmly a part of his life that Hemingway always encouraged his friends and family to write with all the news of their own lives. Yet as much as he loved to receive letters, he often put off writing them. As a writer, Hemingway was sometimes afraid that if he spent too much time consumed in writing letters, his best content would end up there rather than in his stories or articles. He often apologized for the dullness of his letters, such as in one sent to his mother in 1915, in which he tells her that he is so exhausted from writing articles as a reporter for the *Toronto Star* that he feels his letters are quite commonplace. Hemingway writes his letters in a range of voices, and as this collection of his earliest letters makes clear, he always has a clear sense of his audience (public or private) when writing. Hemingway's distinct voice booms loudly through his letters, even as he performs for whatever audience to which he is writing. He corresponded with many of the twentieth century's greatest artists and writers, including Fitzgerald, Pound, Stein, Anderson, John Dos Passos, Pablo Picasso, Ingrid Bergman, Marlene Dietrich, and Gary Cooper.

As prolific a letter writer as he was, Hemingway was often afraid that his words might be regarded as libelous and offensive. Although some of his letters, such as those to the editors of newspapers or magazines, were intended for publication, his letters to family and friends were private ones, and he was constantly wary of biographers getting too close to these materials and publishing them. In May 1958, Hemingway directed his literary executors not to publish, or consent to allow others to publish, any of the letters he wrote during his lifetime. In one of the most fascinating stories of this volume, the editors trace the long and winding chronicle surrounding the fate

