

## Blame It on Hem

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I became an ardent fan of “Big Ernie” way back in high school when I checked his volume entitled *Death in the Afternoon* out of my local Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, public library. Perhaps teenagers have a certain fascination with death as, at that age, the subject seems to be such a remote one from the reality of their own young lives. I grew even more fond of the so-called “Hemingway Code” when I discovered that my best friend in my junior year named David Frisque also loved this author and his works, especially his two short stories “Fifty Grand” and “The Killers”. Ernie was a subject that we just naturally bonded on, and it made our friendship grow even stronger. My friend David may have tragically passed away from a heart attack at the early age of just 50 in 1993 while he was pursuing a second Ph.D. degree in computer science in Ann Arbor, Michigan. But my own passion for all things Hemingway has not waned at all in the interim. In fact, when my two friends AJ and Kathy Mohr informed me that they were going to Key West, Florida, on a recent New Year’s cruise vacation, I begged them to take time and to visit the Hemingway House and to send me some photos. I thought that I could at least tempt Kathy because, as a cat lover, Hem’s polydactyl critters’ descendants still roamed the grounds there. (They actually agreed and I have included one of their photos at the end of this memoir.) Whether they also had a drink at Sloppy Joe’s is still unknown.

So, how then does this early adoration of Ernest Miller Hemingway have anything to do with what went on to become my long career in university and college teaching? I have previously recounted in my memoir entitled “Greece Is the Word” that while I was in the midst of taking a complicated series of MAC flights in order to house-sit Ted & Frances Sullinger’s rented villa on the island of Hydra that I had a layover at Torrejon AFB outside of Madrid. I was taking an extended break from teaching English for UMUC at Kagnew Station in Asmara. There was no sense just sitting around the terminal, so I hopped a bus and made my very first visit to the Spanish capital. I quickly made my way to the Plaza Mayor and found some delicious tapas to sample at the nearby Mesón del Champiñon. With one hunger abated, and without any hesitation, I asked for directions to the famous Plaza de Toros (Las Ventas). With help, I managed to find the #2 line subway and paid the slight fee for the twenty-minute ride to Hemingway Heaven. Unfortunately, it was now early November of 1970 and the bull-fighting season had already ended. But that inconvenience did not stop me from patrolling the building’s perimeter and imagining what the place would have been like only a few short weeks earlier. To that point, it was the closest I had been to an actual place where my literary hero had often entered and cheered his own heroes who wielded the deadly espada. What that side trip accomplished was the whetting of both of my appetites, the physical one for Spanish cuisine and the literary one for being able to tread the sacred ground of Las Ventas. During my tenure with UMUC as an English instructor, I made two other short forays back to Spain: once in December of 1972 and again in early March of 1974, both of which trips did not happen during the bullfighting season. I guess that my Hemingway timing was always just a bit off.

Once I left the protective bubble of the UMUC experience in 1975, where foreign travel was available every weekend, and also during the extended breaks between terms, I returned to the US with a small family to support and grad school on my schedule. All of that knowledge of how to navigate from one country to another had no outlet and little hope of ever being put to good use again. After three years of pursuing a Ph.D. degree, I needed to find a job in order to take care of a wife and two growing sons. When I applied to teach at UW-Platteville, I did have the glossy resume of my eight years with

UMUC to speak on my behalf, and it did the trick. It was there where I met a fellow English professor who was running an extra program beyond his regular teaching duties where he was taking students abroad for study. To say that I was jealous would be an understatement. However, there was no chance that I would be allowed to horn in on his coveted territory. But the seeds of wanting to do something similar were planted as I taught there for four years and then moved on to teach at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater for two more. There again, I was the “new kid on the block” and nothing beyond composition courses were to be given to me. It was a job that I needed for keeping my small family afloat, but it was also a dead-end situation with no possibility of achieving tenure. However, those two jobs did eventually provide me with the opportunity to secure employment with Eastern Iowa Community College District, a position where once again my impressive UMUC resume won me the one open full-time position out of what were originally almost one hundred job seekers. There were three colleges in that district—and none of them had any signs of a travel-abroad program. It did not take me long to rekindle my hopes of establishing such a program, along with my creating a school literary magazine, setting up an Elderhostel program (which I had taught for at Platteville earlier), and resurrecting a dormant theater program at the school. The very first summer break found me taking a small group of students and community personnel on a trip to Madrid, Paris and London. At long last, after well over ten years of not being able to travel abroad, I was back on the ground in Europe and putting my glorious UMUC years of travel experience to good use. It was not quite the expatriate life that Hemingway with his passion for bullfighting had, but it was the best that was available to me and I managed to draw it out for over thirty years while also teaching full-time in Iowa.

I had grown up strictly a city boy, so my only exposure to bulls before reading Hemingway’s nonfiction book was through a couple of cartoons that I saw when I went to the movies on Saturday morning in my hometown. I remember the Walt Disney cartoon called “Ferdinand the Bull” (1938) and also the more funny Warner Brothers’ “Bully for Bugs” (1953). Neither cartoon made me want to witness bulls being made into a death sport. However, once I began my side career as a foreign tour guide by taking groups of students and community personnel to Europe and beyond, my desire to see a bullfight in person became more firmly rooted. I made several trips to Spain over the course of those years of taking students abroad. As noted earlier, my very first trip in 1985 went to Madrid, Paris and then on to London. Our in-country guide on that occasion was Dr. Michael Jacobs, who also wrote many travel books and who became a life-long friend until he passed away suddenly in 2014. He was a true Hispanophile and wrote dozens of books on Spain and later on Spanish South America. My favorite book of his was called *The Factory of Light* (2003), a loving tribute to the Andalusian village of Frailes which became his adopted second home. I even took one of my student tour groups to see him there in that village in March of 2002. We were the very first group of Americans to make the effort to visit that village and so were treated like royalty that day, even having a special meal prepared by a master chef. But I digress only slightly as on that same occasion the friend of Michael’s who had arranged to have our huge tour bus go there and navigate its tight and narrow streets also made me an offer to come back to Spain in July to visit him in Pamplona for the Festival of St. Fermin. More’s the pity that I never followed through on that opportunity. However, on a later 2013 return trip to southern Spain, we made a stop in Ronda where I was at least able to step into the Plaza de Toros de Ronda, the first bullfighting ring in Spain, built in 1785, and the true Mecca for any aficionado.

So now, after all of this background, the question arises about whether or not I actually ever got to witness a bullfight in person. Well, the short answer is “yes”. However, it did not happen in Spain. My luck was such that I somehow always managed to be in Spain either just before or just after the bullfighting season. (Even those teasing huge black-bull billboards that dot the landscape all over Spain are not there to promote bullfighting. They just are ads for the Osborne Sherry Company to help sell

their brandy.) Nor was it in Mexico, a country that I have surprisingly yet to visit. The moment actually came about completely unexpectedly while I was shepherding a group of students and community people around, of all places, France. I had organized a tour in 1994 in part to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the D-Day landings. We began our trip in northern France, making stops in Paris and then going up to Normandy to check out Omaha Beach and then the very emotionally moving adjacent cemetery. We also made a point of taking in the fascinating Mont St. Michel while in the area. When the trip moved south, we visited several chateaux in the Loire Valley, especially Amboise and Chenonceau. Other key stops included Bordeaux for wine tasting, and then the fortress city of Carcassonne (where Kevin Costner's *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves* was filmed, among dozens of other movies) and also where I tried to push our driver and the guide to take a "slight" detour into nearby Andorra, which they vigorously declined to do. As it turned out, I was quite glad that they had refused my demand.

As the trip was winding down, we were heading towards the French Riviera with a stop in Nimes, including a city tour on a Sunday morning, followed by a free afternoon. I should have known that something was amiss when we pulled up to our hotel on Saturday evening to drop off our bags and to check in. The hotel was over 5 km from the city center, the reason for which soon became apparent after Sunday breakfast as we boarded the bus and made our way to the starting point for the city tour, where we picked up the local city guide. The town was packed with people crowding everywhere. Then on that city tour, I happened to notice the many colorful posters slapped up on the walls which advertised a completely unexpected corrida. It just so happened that that Sunday was the final day of the very short six-day "Feria de Nimes" and it fell right into my lap. Would Ernest Hemingway himself have passed up such an opportunity? Not bloody likely! The crowds seemed to be gathering at the ancient Roman Arena of Nimes where our city tour ended. When the city tour finished around 2pm, I asked to use the microphone on the bus and announced that I intended to go to the afternoon bullfights and asked if anyone in my group wished to join me. A few hands rose timidly out of my group of twenty-five. A couple of my students and three community adults were the only ones brave enough to join me. The most curious fact about those five individuals was that they were all females! I asked the driver to let the six of us out there before the rest of the group returned to the hotel. Our guide said to me, "Dinner tonight is promptly at eight o'clock. If you go to the corrida, stick together and watch your purses and fanny packs. There are hundreds of gypsies in those crowds, and they are very skillful at their special trade."

The question of whether or not they actually killed the bulls in the Nimes Arena was soon answered when we passed a dozen or so stalls selling cubes of "steak de toro" on wooden skewers. So we all knew that there would definitely be blood on the sands that afternoon. Hemingway seemed to be smiling down on me from somewhere. How much my female companions appreciated that smile was perhaps another matter. The first moment of truth came as we joined the lines to purchase our tickets. The tour bus was long gone and there was no turning back now. I watched as several obvious gypsy urchins began darting in and out of the lines and then cautioned my ladies to secure their purses under their armpits. I wrapped my light jacket tightly around my waist, covering both my fanny pack and the rubber band-wrapped wallet in my front pocket. The last problem that I wanted to deal with was any loss of passports, money or credit cards. The line inched steadily forward and soon we all had our tickets in the cheap "sol" seats in the sun. The ancient arena had looked impressive from the outside, resembling the Colosseum in Rome, but the inside was even more impressive with its hundreds of fans soon growing into thousands. The atmosphere was truly electric with anticipation. My long-awaited Hemingway moment had finally arrived.

At 5pm, the full arena was treated to the pageantry and music of the parade of picadors, or lancers, mounted on horses draped with thick straw mats around their animal bodies, followed by the flagmen called banderilleros, then the small boys bearing the swords and finally the colorful matadors, the true stars of the event, dressed in their gaudy “traje de luces” or suits of lights. Now Hemingway’s book was really coming to life before my very eyes. I only wish that the rest of the afternoon had lived up to what I had read about in his *Death in the Afternoon* so many years before. For example, in the second bullfight, the picador took an inordinate amount of time doing the lancing, which allowed the bull to have enough strength to make a full charge at the flanks of the horse, and in doing so goring the horse through the heavy straw mat; the horse collapsed and died on the spot and had to be hauled out of the arena to the jeers of the unappreciative crowd. In the third bullfight that we saw, the matador allowed his bull to get too close and a horn caught the cape wielder under his right arm, slitting the suit of lights and again bringing jeers from the crowd. That matador staggered around a bit, and did manage to deliver the “coup de grace,” but again there seemed to be no cheering for that effort in spite of his fulfilling his task while being injured and with blood visibly flowing from under his arm. Clearly, there were not going to be any Manoletes or Juan Belmontes displaying their skills in Nimes on that particular Sunday afternoon. Perhaps none of these French participants were very skilled in their various moments in the bright sunlight. Some of the banderilleros seemed to take more than the necessary number of attempts to place their hooked flags into the already-wounded bulls. To me, the capework of the matadors was not as skillful as I had imagined that it should be, especially the more dangerous passes with the muleta. Perhaps hearing the displeasure of the crowd caused the matadors to hurry up their time in the ring just to get the afternoon over with before any more accidents occurred. So the time dragged on as one bull after another was rolled onto the mat and pulled out of the arena by two horses to become the next “steak de toro” snack. Suffice it to say that no ears or tails were awarded over the course of the deadly displays that we six tourists witnessed.

Perhaps it was the heat of the sun as we squirmed in our uncomfortable stone seats, but by the end of the fourth bullfight, all of my ladies were pleading for me to take them out of the arena. They had seen enough bloodshed, and not all of it from just the four badly massacred bulls, to last them for perhaps a lifetime. According to tradition, the sixth bullfight should have been the best one, but we were long gone before that final bull was dispatched and were not there to witness it as I helped usher my small group out. We left along with a number of other French patrons who were perhaps equally disgusted with the day’s proceedings as well, and we found a line of taxis outside of the Nimes Arena. We broke into two groups of three and I told both drivers the name and address of our hotel. The taxis soon spirited us away from the center of town to its outskirts and we arrived at our destination just after seven-thirty as the sun was descending into the western skies. We six freshened up and made it in time for dinner that night, but none of my group seemed to have much of a stomach for the meal, especially the meat course. A few of the other fellow tourists did ask me what the bullfights were like, but I just stammered out a hasty and desultory summary while trying to steer the conversation onto more pleasant topics. That afternoon did not at all live up to Hemingway’s glowing nonfiction descriptions in his *Death in the Afternoon*. Yes, there had been “death,” but it was not all quite that glorious in its reality.

So when I returned to Spain in 2002 and was offered the opportunity by Dr. Michael Jacobs’ friend to come to Pamplona, I am certain in my own mind that my passing up this grand opportunity was likely conditioned in part by my earlier experience in Nimes. I still taught Hemingway in my subsequent Introduction to Literature courses, especially his novel *The Sun Also Rises*. However, I would be lying if I did not say that Hemingway’s descriptions of Pamplona and the pageantry there were not at least colored in my mind by my own personal experiences. But then Hemingway’s character Jake Barnes did not have such a grand time at the Pamplona feria himself. Chalk it up to the fact that the

thrilling expectations that one has as a young man often do not turn out to be as wonderful as one had hoped. Can I really blame Ernest Hemingway? Not completely, for it is all a part of one's own education and the choices that one makes along the way in growing up. Life always has its share of disappointments. How one overcomes them is a testament to the sort of person that one becomes. Call it growing up and lessons learned.



**Ernest Hemingway's studio in Key West, Florida, as photographed by my friend Kathy Mohr on her recent trip with her husband Aaron over the 2024 New Year's holiday.**