

A DIP IN HEMINGWAY'S POOL

By Richard Taylor

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Halfway back on my final lap, a group of 30 tourists and their guide rounded the corner of the pool house.

Travelling on a murderously lean budget, I planned to fly to Key West for an illicit swim in Hemingway's swimming pool for a book I was working on about swimming with famous writers called *Water and Desire*. When a friend heard about my dip she said, "Be careful they don't shoot you, eh? Remember, you'll be in the Evil Kingdom where shooting trespassers is normal."

I had prearranged the cheapest room in very expensive Old Town Key West at the Eden House Hotel. My room was affectionately referred to as the 'broom closet', which had a small bed and no bathroom. I shed heavy clothes and luggage and slipped into my bathing suit, sandals and T-shirt then headed out into the oily heat of tropical sunlight to the Ernest Hemingway Home and Museum a few blocks away.

As an angst-filled, aspiring writer at university, I'd been seduced by Hemingway's tragic notion of corrupted innocence, and the way he found intensity in everything he did. I had come across a few pages of swimming in the last section of his novel *The Sun Also Rises*. The main character, Jake Barnes, stoically takes his lost illusions into the ocean during solitary swims that made me realize I had taken up long-distance swimming not just for the pure joy of it, but as a means towards salvation and self-therapy.



I'd already been to the Hemingway House one rainy afternoon in the mid Seventies on a hippie van trip with my young wife Dale, surfing and swimming the perimeter of North America. Seeing the inner sanctum of Hemingway's writer's studio with its writing table and old Royal portable typewriter had reinforced my desire to become a writer. Two days later while visiting Disneyworld, Dale and I stepped out of a shuttle bus at Donald Duck parking lot and discovered that our van had been stolen. A brand new surfboard, portable typewriter, my early manuscripts and Dale's paintings - everything we owned from a year of travelling had vanished, and was never recovered.

Hemingway had also lost some of his early manuscripts when his first wife Hadley left his small suitcase in Paris. He was a restless dreamer who had lost his innocence as an ambulance driver in the First World War. He had lived in Paris, Switzerland, Italy, published books, courted adventure and war and swam off the beaches of Spain and the French Riviera. A few months after his father visited him in Key West Hemingway lost his father to suicide. Recently he had also lost his first wife Hadley, because he had taken on a second, Pauline. Together they bought the house on Whitehead and Duval St. in Key West, America's only Caribbean Island, 90 miles from Cuba.

On an early visit to Key West Hemingway spent most of his time swimming, fishing, drinking, and rewriting 39 drafts for the ending of *A Farewell To Arms* which is about an army deserter who loses everything, including his wife and newborn to childbirth. The opening three sentences of that novel, like the beginning of life itself, hints at a terrible beauty:

"In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in



Writer Richard Taylor enjoys tranquil view of the Gulf of Mexico, one that Ernest Hemingway also shared while hammering out stories on a Royal typewriter, similar to the one above.

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."

In his study above the swimming pool Hemingway had also written his book about the art of living and bullfighting, *Death in the Afternoon*; his novel of the Great Depression, *To Have and Have Not*; his African Safari book, *Green Hills of Africa*; and a collection of stories, *Winner Take Nothing* which includes one of my favourites, *After The Storm*. Inspired by a true story about the sinking of a Spanish liner off Key West, this whole story takes place in the water. After a big hurricane, a man swims out to see what he can salvage from a sunken liner. Hoping to find treasure, he's the first one there. But when another storm approaches, he has to leave, and ends up with nothing, except for an experience both he and the reader never forget: "I could hold on for a second to the edge of the port hole and I could see in and there was a woman inside with her hair floating all out... I could see the rings on one of her hands. She was right up close to the port hole and I hit the glass twice and I didn't even crack it. When I came up I thought I wouldn't make it to the top before I'd have to breathe."

In air scented with frangipani, jasmine and The Gulf Stream, I arrived at the Hemingway House that is surrounded by an imposing stone wall Hemingway had built to keep his privacy. All through the Depression and up to the beginning of the Second World War Hemingway lived here in a house full of servants in a neighbourhood that included spooky churches, whore houses, cock fights, a lighthouse, a naval installation, and a 6 hour car ferry service to the guilty pleasures of Havana Cuba. And for a decade in between his travels and adventures, Hemingway found a temporary home where he could live and write.

I paid my admission, and entered the house, trying not to make eye contact with any of the tour guides. Each preserved room is filled with photos, paintings, first editions, and period furniture. One of my favourite curiosities is an ancient Spanish dining room table surrounded by 6 leather chairs with metal holders on their backs where swords were sheathed to insure that each man was prepared to eat in peace. The gnarly descendants of Hemingway's cats lounged around each room, prowled the gardens, and pussy footed along the edge of the shimmering waters of the swimming pool.

I trailed behind a group of tourists, listening to a tour guide embellish the Hemingway legend as he led us through various rooms of the two buildings. At a surreal miniature graveyard for cats, we stared at innumerable grave stones with names like Frank Sinatra and Marilyn Monroe, and I wondered how Franky and Norma would have felt knowing Hem had cats named after them. Near the swimming pool I learned that in the early 30's Hemingway had purchased the house for \$8,000. In later years while Hemingway was reporting on the Spanish Civil war and hooking up with his third wife to be, writer Martha Gellhorn, his second wife Pauline had the first pool in Key West gouged out of the coral bedrock of their backyard. It cost \$20,000. When Hemingway returned home from Spain he accused Pauline of using his last penny for the pool. Near the edge of the water I leaned over among the tourists marvelling at the lost penny entombed in cement under protective glass.

The pool is long and narrow, impeccably clean, and way too inviting. A chain around it means: NO SWIMMING. I sat in front of the pool and watched a lady who gazed over the waters as though communing with the master. Finally she wandered off through the gardens. By this time I had removed my sandals, shirt and sat in my bathing suit. No one was around so I insinuated myself beyond the chain and slipped into the refreshing water. I wanted to savour this swim, so I eased forward with a very slow, ardent breast stroke, swimming with Hemingway who often took a half mile dip before dinner, then read in the evening after a day of writing chapters of his Spanish civil war novel, *For Whom The Bell Tolls*. How many famous people had swum naked in this water? At one point Hemingway used to keep a very large pet turtle in the pool, which I'm sure alarmed guests who came over for a splash. After Hemingway left Pauline, she stayed on at the house for another 10 years with their sons, and each Sunday she invited famous and not so famous friends to come over for a swim in the pool.

At the wall, I turned and started stroking towards Hemingway's writing studio. Hemingway loved water. It played a key role in his life and most of his writings. There are photos of him swimming naked in the sea at a deserted beach near his house in Cuba where he temporarily found peace and tranquillity from his own celebrity. In one photo, only his bespectacled head is out of the water as he holds a newspaper in his hands while he contentedly reads. Hemingway's author-as-hero-legend, and his intensity for life are as well known as the way he succumbed to death. Early on he defined life as, 'grace under pressure' - something I was learning about

myself, because my dad was blind and in the early stages of Alzheimers and the real reason for me being in Florida was so that I could drive my ailing parents back home to Canada.

Back in Hemingway's day, a famous writer who was also a world travelling romantic adventurer attracted a media frenzy to whatever he did and wherever he went. But in some ways he ended up the Elvis Presley of literature. In his last years when Hemingway was afraid of losing his house in revolutionary Cuba, his virility and health, and his ability to write, Hemingway confessed to his trusted secretary Toby Bruce that things were 'confused in his head'.

"Nothing works right in the old machine anymore," Hemingway lamented. A couple of months after Hemingway's father had shot himself, his mother Grace sent her son a crate to Key West. Inside, Hemingway found canvases of his mother's awkward paintings, a mouldy chocolate cake, and the Smith and Wesson revolver his father had used on Dec. 6, 1928, 33 years before Hemingway shot himself.

Half way back on the final lap of my swim, a group of 30 tourists and their tour guide rounded the corner of the pool house. They stared open mouthed at me in the water, crowding to the edge between me and my clothes on the bench. Giving me the filthiest look, the tour guide said, "You'll have to leave the premises." Someone in the crowd chanted, "Way to Go." Another gave me two thumbs up, and someone asked, "How's the water?" Still perturbed, the tour guide said flatly, "We don't have liability for swimmers." And I mumbled, "I'm writing a book about swimming with writers. I just couldn't resist."

A couple of people clapped as I sheepishly hauled myself out of the water, schlepped over to my clothes, and quickly dried off with my shirt. The other tour guides were making their way towards the pool area so I decided that I had better disappear before they called the cops, or worse - before someone got the idea of putting a dome over the pool and selling plastic bottles of pool water for 3 bucks, and ungrammatically calling it WATER THE GREAT PROSE MASTER SWAM IN. So I hurried out the gate down to the end of Duval Street to take a dip at the seedy beach where Tennessee Williams used to swim in the nude.

Richard Taylor who teaches at Carleton University has published *House Inside The Waves* and has trolled his toes in most of the seven seas.