

“In the end, [this book] beautifully illustrates that all of us are shaped by our families, our struggles, and our demons—just as Hemingway was.”

Andrew Theising, Author, Hemingway's Saint Louis

WRESTLING WITH DEMONS

In Search of the Real
Ernest Hemingway

CURTIS L. DeBERG



WRESTLING WITH DEMONS

IN SEARCH OF THE REAL
ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Curtis L. DeBerg

Prologue



2024

Prologue

The fifteen-minute flight in the ultra-lightweight plane was uneventful. As we eased in for the landing, the pilot and I had barely touched down—for only a second or two—when he pulled back on the controls. We took flight again. I thought he was showing off, doing an unannounced stop and go. I looked at him, and instead of a smile, I saw panic.

He yelled, “Get your foot off the pedal!”

Say what? I’d flown in the co-pilot’s seat of dozens of small planes throughout my life. My steadfast rule when landing has always been, “Feet on floor, hands in lap.”

“Get your foot off the pedal!” he repeated, his level of panic clearly escalating.

I shouted back, “My feet are on the floor! My feet are on the fucking floor!”

In the next few seconds, the plane—only a few yards above the ground—veered to the right, directly at two trees in front of a railroad embankment. The pilot pulled hard on his horizontal control bar and gunned the engine. Mercifully, we took flight—at least for a few seconds, anyway. That’s when the right wing clipped the top branch of the tallest tree (as I was to learn later from the official investigation report; I also learned that the pilot was inebriated). The two-seater plane nose-dived into the field, spinning like a corkscrew from a height around fifty to a hundred meters.

The last thing I remember before hitting the ground is saying to myself, “I’m dead.”

Almost eight years ago, my universe changed. I was fifty-nine years old. Up until then, I hadn’t broken any bones except for two cracked ribs in a softball collision. At the time of the softball accident, I was a young man, only twenty-three, straight out of college, and working for a national accounting firm as a Certified Public Accountant.

My luck ran out, though, when the airplane crashed. I fractured my left wrist, with both the radius and ulna cleanly broken. The left side of my pelvis was crushed, and, worst of all, the left tibia—the bone connecting the knee and ankle—was severely broken in two places. My body was so contorted by the dashboard and instruments in the crash that I couldn’t see my leg. The pilot’s son-in-law, Piotr (pronounced Peter), was first on the scene, arriving within minutes of the crash. Afterward, in the hospital, he said, “Curt, it’s a good thing you didn’t see your leg; the bone was sticking out through your blue jeans.”

At the time, it wasn’t my leg that gave me the most pain. Nor was it my wrist, dangling limp and flat, against my forearm. What hurt the most was my pelvis, and I cried out, “My ass is killing me!” In agony, I screamed, “Help me, please, Piotr, help!”

Only a few seconds after the crash—the twisted steel still groaning, glass falling out of my hair, and the pungent smell of fuel leaking from the gas tank—I was giddy. I screamed, “I’m alive!” I’d survived a plane crash. But I hurt like hell: I had bruised lungs, several broken bones, and a head laceration. One thing crossed my mind—Ernest Hemingway. He survived two plane crashes on back-to-back days in January 1954. His halcyon years as a serious fiction writer were over by then—*A Moveable Feast* (1964) was mostly a memoir and published posthumously—but he still had some gas left in the tank despite his growing need for alcohol and his frequent “Black-Ass” moods.¹

I loved Hemingway’s stories, and I knew a little about his own life story. I dreamed of going to Paris, Cuba, and Ketchum, Idaho someday, to learn more about the great writer. If I recovered from my crash, I told myself that I’d travel the world in his footsteps to learn more

about him and his work. Little did I know that I'd make some astonishing new discoveries along the way.

Hemingway was noticeably different after his two plane crashes in 1954. His writing was curtailed—or, at the very least, his *disciplined* writing was curtailed. When he wrote, he often did so with a drink in his hand. He frequently repeated himself. Close literary friends became distant ones, or no longer friends at all. His relationship with his three sons became strained. His personality became more erratic, delusional, and, finally, psychotic. In the six months before his suicide, he made three unsuccessful attempts to end his life.

Hemingway insisted that much of the trauma he endured had a negligible effect on him as a writer. One of his earliest biographers, Philip Young, was one of the first to suggest that his traumatic war wounds had influenced him as a writer. Hemingway downplayed Young's so-called *wound theory*. Referring to Young's book, Hemingway said in a 1954 interview, "If you haven't read it, don't bother. How would you like it if someone said that everything you've done in your life was done because of some trauma. Young had a theory that was like—you know, the Procrustean bed, and he had to cut me to fit into it."²

When questioned by George Plimpton, in 1954, Hemingway said that "the effects of wounds vary greatly. Simple wounds which do not break bone are of little account. They sometimes give confidence. Wounds which do extensive bone and nerve damage are not good for writers, nor anybody else." Hemingway once offered Scott Fitzgerald some advice:

How the hell can you bleed over your own personal tragedies when you're a writer? You should welcome them because serious writers have to be hurt really terribly before they can write seriously. But once you get the hurt and can handle it, consider yourself lucky—that is what there is to write about, and you have to be as faithful to it as a scientist is faithful to his laboratory. You can't cheat or pretend. You have to excise the hurt, honestly."³

My own plane crash left me with extensive bone and nerve damage, certainly not good for writers. I considered myself lucky. I felt the urge to become a writer, and, no, I couldn't bleed over my own personal tragedy.

I now knew real pain. It bedeviled me as it bedeviled Hemingway. I didn't know the extent of Hemingway's demons, nor did I know what really drove him to become a great writer. In this, Hemingway was right, and Philip Young was wrong—it wasn't his physical or psychological wounds from World War I. And no, it wasn't post-traumatic stress syndrome, either.

As I trekked to Hemingway's homes, vacation spots, and war zones, I came to discover that Hemingway was right to challenge the wound theory as one of the main influences shaping his career and personal life. Other factors were more important, one of which was fear. He was deathly afraid that, if people learned the truth of what really happened to him in WWI, they would regard him as a faker, a liar, or a fool.

Beyond any doubt, he wasn't a hero. On the contrary, he may well have caused the death of an Italian soldier. Instead of a medal for valor, he likely deserved a one-way trip home to Oak Park, Illinois. Living with such a big lie would have weighed heavily on any man and is one of the main reasons "that his inner landscape was a nightmare and he spent his nights wrestling with the gods," as Norman Mailer said after Hemingway's suicide.⁴

Thanks to three new, important pieces of information, as uncovered by James McGrath Morris and Italian war historian, Marino Perissinotto, we now have more evidence with which we can examine Hemingway's WWI experience. Their findings contradict Hemingway's varying accounts of what happened that day at Fossalta. Learning the truth about what happened in Italy would be a huge first step in unraveling the mystery behind much of Hemingway's life and his future war stories.

First, Fedele Temperini, an Italian soldier, died in the front-line trench on July 8, 1918. Second, Temperini bore the brunt of the explosion. By being between Hemingway and the mortar bomb, he either inadvertently or intentionally saved Hemingway from far more serious injuries, or even death. It wasn't the other way around, where Hemingway tried to save Temperini's life by hauling him for over a hundred yards to the safety of a dugout. Third, no other soldiers were killed in the same trench as Hemingway that night.

Though not part of McGrath Morris's and Perissinotto's findings, we also know that Hemingway was disobeying orders by being in no-man's-land. His decision to enter the front-line trench may well have prompted the enemy to point its mortar cannon in his direction. Such reckless behavior wouldn't be worthy of a medal but, quite possibly, an outright discharge, or something far more sinister, like being charged with a criminal offense.

The book that follows is part biography, part memoir, and part historical fiction. It wasn't supposed to be this way. I never meant to write anything "heavy" about Hemingway. In fact, this book started out as a lighthearted travel book. But after surviving the plane crash, I wanted to use my pain, as Hemingway would say, to write a good travel story. But the more I learned, the more befuddled I became. It was like whack-a-mole—so much of his literature seemed autobiographical, and so much of his real-life story was fiction. Just when I learned one new bit of information, another was proven false, while three new questions arose. As biographer Steve Paul aptly noted, there is a continuous clash of fact and fiction. What could I offer that is new? What more could be said about the most famous writer of the twentieth century? To top it off, who would care? To many, Hemingway's time had come and gone. The values he lived by weren't today's values.

People still care about Hemingway, some for his literature, others for his remarkable life story, and yet many others for both. *Wrestling With Demons* offers a new perspective and new information about Ernest Hemingway. I identify and explore five other demons that haunted him: his parents' disapproval, remorse, chronic pain, anguish, and a deep-seated sense of rivalry with other writers and war combatants. The effect of these demons on Hemingway, as we shall see, was exacerbated by his hypomanic, bi-polar personality. My deep dive into his war experience sets this book apart from other Hemingway biographies. His fear that the lies about his war experience would be discovered would make him look like a fool. I show that he was not a hero. On the contrary, his recklessness may well have caused the death of an Italian soldier and the wounding of several others. Living with the lies of his WWI experience would have weighed heavily on any man. As Mailer said after Hemingway's suicide, he may have been wrestling with the gods. But he was also wrestling with the devil and his demons. In many ways, Hemingway's life story is better than an old man wrestling with a big fish or losing his life on the battlefield.

Notes

Prologue

¹ Hemingway often referred to these bouts of depression as the “Black-Ass” or “Black-ass”, usually hyphenating and capitalizing both words or the first word only.

² *EH-TLI* p..

³ Hotchner, p. 128, location 2059. (Note: Whenever “location” is referenced in future endnotes, the citation refers to a *Kindle Edition* reference.)

⁴ Mailer, p. 134.