

Exploring a Famous Friendship Opens Door to an Era of Very Different Fame

By Molly McCaffrey

The True Gen—an expression used by Ernest Hemingway to distinguish truth from rumor... the real from the phony.

There is no shortage of films or books about Ernest Hemingway these days... Woody Allen crafted a story about a wistful man traveling back in time to meet Hemingway and his "Lost Generation" contemporaries in *Midnight in Paris*. Clive Owen and Nicole Kidman starred as Hemingway and his third wife, Martha Gellhorn, in *Hemingway and Gellhorn*. Paula McLain wrote *The Paris Wife*, a fictional retelling of Hadley Hemingway's time as Hemingway's first wife.

And now there's *Cooper & Hemingway: The True Gen*, a documentary by John Mulholland chronicling the long friendship of Hemingway and mythical actor Gary Cooper—known as Papa and Coop to their friends.

The film opens with quotes by important writers and politicians—President Barack Obama, John McCain, former President Bill Clinton, Tom Stoppard, Joan Didion, Junot Díaz—asserting the influence these two legends had on their individual lives, collectively sending the message that everything in life ultimately goes back to Ernest Hemingway and Robert Jordan, the character Cooper played in the film version of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. It's an assertion the film essentially proves by connecting them to everyone from Elmore Leonard to Indiana Jones.

And that's a fitting beginning to a film that details what it was like to be a famous writer and actor in the 20th century. What's interesting is that, though the same is still true of actors, it's not as true of writers, and as a result this documentary serves as a glimpse into a time that appears to be gone—a time when writers had a real voice, a time when writers were as celebrated as actors, when writers were so well known that journalists wrote about it every time they hit the local pub or went on a fishing trip, often embellishing and exaggerating to fulfill the fantasies the public had created about writers such as Hemingway.

Yes, we have our Stephen Kings and J.K. Rowlings today, but beyond that, writers aren't really household names anymore, and they certainly wouldn't be mobbed at a bullfight the way Hemingway was in his later years. In that sense, this film feels like an ode to another era, an era when you had to be famous for *doing* something rather than for just *being* someone. This celebrity wasn't something Hemingway or Cooper seemed to mind either, both of them cultivating tough guy images and hiding their intellectual sophistication. At one point in the film, Cooper complains about the press running an untrue story about Hemingway getting in a bar fight, but Hemingway scoffs, claiming the stories helped his image.

It also, in some ways, feels like an ode to a different kind of man, a man—the film's voice over claims with obvious longing—we don't see anymore: strong, silent, rugged, masculine, even macho. The kind of man epitomized by Hemingway and Cooper. But even though the film makes that point—somewhat offensively—the footage and letters and interviews actually characterize these two men as sensitive and thoughtful rather than overly brutish, depicting their friendship as a relationship based on trust, loyalty, supportiveness, and intimacy rather than a bond formed over fishing and hunting or drinking and carousing. In fact, Hemingway's image as an obsessive sportsman is challenged when it's explained that, more than anything else, Hemingway was consumed by books, traveling with a small library and often locking himself away for hours to read and write even while vacationing with Cooper and their wives. Hemingway's image as a lover of war is refuted, too, when one interviewee insists, "He hated war" and claims Hemingway didn't like to talk about his time in WWII—this

despite the fact that other interviewees talk of how often the younger Hemingway exaggerated his involvement in WWI. But apparently after witnessing first-hand the storming of Normandy, Hemingway became disgusted with war and refused to talk about it with anyone.

He did, however, discuss his relationship with Cooper, writing, "Cooper and I have the same style: Less is more. We don't spell it all out." They also shared a dislike of talking about their craft, believing it "emptied the well." Though Hemingway's letters make it seem like the two were friends because they had so much in common, the film demonstrates that their connection was just as much based on their differences as well as their commonalities.

They were, of course, opposites on the surface—Hemingway a liberal from the Chicago suburbs, Cooper a conservative from Montana. Hemingway short, squat, and disheveled; Cooper tall, slim, and fashionable. Hemingway was honest, too, about liking Cooper because he wasn't a writer and obviously not a threat either. And though Hemingway was somewhat moody—he talked frequently about his "black-ass" moods—he saw Cooper as a calming influence. On one notable occasion, Hemingway lost his temper with a hotel employee who had interrupted him while writing, but Cooper wouldn't stand for that kind of behavior, making Hemingway apologize and act civilized, leading the viewer to believe that Hemingway was drawn to Cooper for his cool demeanor as much as his manliness.

And their ability to help each other went both ways.

Hemingway criticized Cooper for his philandering and talked his friend into returning to his wife after a prolonged fling with actress Patricia Neal, advice Cooper took, saving his marriage. This image of Hemingway as the pro-marriage intermediary directly challenges the one often put forth in the media of a misogynistic womanizer who changed wives with every decade. Instead, in this film Hemingway is shown to be a thoughtful man who regretted the mistakes that had led to the end of his own marriages and hoped to avoid such issues in the future.

Hemingway is also, notably, portrayed as having the same concerns as other writers, obsessing over his work to the point of being miserable. As he once said about himself, "I have to write to be happy... and obsession is terrible." He was also intensely jealous of his contemporaries—so much so that he often picked fights with younger writers to assert his dominance over them. He was haunted by the idea of failure and plagued with insecurities about his writing—often making deprecating statements about his career out one side of his mouth while lambasting awards committees that hadn't chosen his work out of the other side. Like many writers, he worked on too many projects at once and sometimes missed his deadlines and page limits. He disparaged Hollywood but understood, too, that film would change the way people saw stories. And he was frustrated with what he saw as his publisher's inability to market and promote his work, writing his own promotional taglines. In other words, he was as anxious as any other writer, always worrying about whether or not he had it in him to write another great book. Honestly, the Hemingway depicted in this film makes this writer feel relieved to know he suffered from the same issues the rest of us do. In that way and many others, *The True Gen* offers viewers a story not merely about Hemingway and Cooper but about what it means to be human—the dreams of youth, the tentative steps into adulthood, the self-doubt and restlessness that follows early accomplishments, the wisdom that comes with maturity, and the fear of death that accompanies aging.

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