

COOPER & HEMINGWAY: THE TRUE GEN

By John Mulholland

ERNEST HEMINGWAY: Writer, war correspondent, international adventurer, lover, drinker, brawler. The tabloid reputation -- filled with truths, half-truths and flat-out untruths -- grows ever-wider. If you made up a character like Ernest Hemingway, how many would believe it? The mercurial Hemingway left people enchanted, hostile, endeared, confused, charmed, bruised, engaged, bitter. He was an extraordinary, unforgettable presence. As more than one person remarked: "Hemingway sucked the air out of a room."

Though Hemingway's extraordinary life and career has been exhaustively covered (too often the tabloid-sensationalism of this coverage has over-shadowed his unrivaled literary legacy), less thoroughly examined has been his fascinating friendship with another American legend, film icon Gary Cooper.

On paper, it might seem impossible that the 20th century's best-known writer and the tight-lipped, all-American "common man" would develop such a close friendship; a friendship which would last for over 20 years, until their deaths a mere seven weeks apart in 1961. Utter opposites ... nothing in common ... the liberal intellectual artist and the conservative movie star. And yet ...

"Coop is a fine man; as honest and straight and friendly and unspoiled as he looks. If you made up a character like Coop, nobody would believe it. He's just too good to be true." Ernest Hemingway on Gary Cooper to editor Maxwell Perkins.

Sun Valley, Idaho, September 25, 1940: A mutual friend described their first meeting: "They were like strange schoolboys sizing each other up, a line scratched in the dirt between them, until they 'got 'er done'. Then they were like old buddies from that moment on."

But is the friendship of these two men who were "old buddies" immediately really so surprising? Consider these classically "less is more" passages from Hemingway, which are the only physical descriptions we ever get about the following Hemingway heroes:

"The young man, who was tall and thin, with sun-streaked fair hair, and a wind- and sun-burned face ..." Robert Jordan, For Whom The Bell Tolls.

"The old man was thin and gaunt ..." The Old Man, The Old Man And The Sea.

"He was a big man ... and his hair was faded and streaked from the sun. He carried no extra weight ..." Thomas Hudson, Islands In The Stream.

Robert Jordan ... the Old Man ... Thomas Hudson ...

... Or Gary Cooper?

Alistair Cooke went so far as to call Cooper, "Hemingway's Pygmalion."

Today, fifty-plus years after their deaths, people are asking the question: what is masculinity? In groping for an answer, many are looking back to another time to understand what real masculinity is, to come to grips with what manhood means in the face of impossible odds.

Not the courage of a so-called super-hero. But the courage of an ordinary man facing extraordinary circumstances. Not muscle-bound, ultra-professional warriors, not bullets-don't-kill, super-masculine, super-heroes. Ordinary people ...

A long time ago, Ernest Hemingway and Gary Cooper dealt with this very subject, as no one had before, as no one has since. Hemingway's fiction and Cooper's persona -- which served as Hemingway's alter ego on screen -- was never about brute winning, smash-mouth masculinity. What made/makes it so special, so moving, so *timely*, is that it was not about masculinity as a one-note, implacable force of nature -- a la, Schwarzenegger/Stallone, etc. -- rather, it was about the self-respect that comes from comporting oneself with courage in the face of impossible circumstances.

Here's Alistair Cooke again, on Cooper as the apogee of grace under pressure, the archetype of the Hemingway hero: "Cooper was the self-sufficient male animal, the best kind of hunter, the silent infantryman padding dutifully forward to perform the soldier's most poignant ritual in 'the ultimate loneliness of contact'." In other words, Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* is about none other than the classic Hemingway/Cooper hero.

One article examining their deep friendship perhaps nailed it best: "For all the surface differences, underneath, Coop and Papa were kindred spirits. They both hid feelings too deep for words."

Masculinity yesterday and today: We live in an age when a man who doesn't "express" his feelings, who doesn't "open up" to others, is looked upon with disfavor, if not outright contempt. Given this mood, the Hemingway/Cooper friendship is even more intriguing; because their friendship serves as a perfect -- a supreme -- example of something which is far, far too glibly disparaged in today's climate; i.e., a deep, unapologetically masculine friendship.

Born at the turn of the 20th Century – Hemingway in 1899, Cooper in 1901 – they grew to manhood under the sway of the so-called Roosevelt Tradition. An approach to becoming a man exemplified by Theodore Roosevelt, Owen Wister, Frederic Remington, etc. According to the Roosevelt Tradition, young men became men by testing themselves against the outdoors, against nature, against the wild.

To examine the lives of these two American icons is to examine masculinity in the 20th Century – where it came from, how it developed, and what it means to men and women in the 21st Century.

Hemingway biographer Michael Reynolds has documented just how deeply immersed Hemingway was in the West long before he ever set foot there. He grew up dreaming of its vast spaces, its unspoiled wilderness, its mythic landscape. From suburban Oak Park, Illinois, he lived vicariously through the stirring western tales of Owen Wister and Stewart Edward White. But these flights west existed only in his imagination. Reality was Oak Park, the constricts of urban Chicago.

A thousand miles to the west, Gary Cooper was living a boyhood in vast and rugged Montana about which young Ernest Hemingway could only fantasize. From an early age, Cooper was fishing and hunting and exploring the high lonesome, working the family ranch, attending a one-room schoolhouse with (literally!) cowboys and Indians. What was myth and fantasy to Ernest Hemingway was mundane reality to Gary Cooper.

Hemingway favorite Owen Wister was an early, if unwitting, link. Wister and Hemingway finally met in 1928 during Hemingway's first trip to the West. Wister, already impressed with Hemingway's talent, offered him valuable advice and support.

A year later, in 1929, Cooper made his first talking picture: Owen Wister's *The Virginian*. It solidified Cooper as a genuine star in talking pictures. It also solidified in the public's mind Gary Cooper as a true man of the west. And Ernest Hemingway was very much a part of this public.

In 1932, *A Farewell To Arms* served to bring them closer. Cooper starred as Hemingway hero Frederick Henry in the film version of the novel. Even though Hemingway detested the film, he was very impressed with Cooper's rendering of Frederic Henry. In fact, Hemingway saw the actor behind the movie star in Cooper long before the critics caught on. He wrote in a letter to Cooper: "So much finer actor than anybody knows, including you."

Success and the publicity juggernaut: By the thirties, every move Hemingway made was seemingly covered in the daily press. His larger-than-life persona became as much the focus as his literary output -- which included such timeless short stories as Snows of Kilimanjaro, The Short Happy Life Of Francis Macomber, etc. And if Hemingway didn't produce another novel of the literary heft of The Sun Also Rises or A Farewell To Arms, his output was nonetheless impressive -- Death In The Afternoon, Green Hills Of Africa and To Have And Have Not.

Cooper's heroic screen character also took shape during these years. Though he excelled in dramas, romances, and both drawing room and screwball comedies throughout the thirties, Cooper proved even more popular in such rousing films of adventure and intrigue as: *The Spoilers*, *Lives Of A Bengal Lancer*, *The Plainsman*, *The General Died At Dawn*, *Beau Geste*, *The Real Glory*, etc. By decade's end, he had become in the public's eye the ideal American male -- quiet, honest, unassuming, stoically shouldering without complaint the weight of communal responsibility, doing the right thing no matter the personal toll.

Both men were living their lives in the public eye. Hemingway would remain forever ambivalent about the merchandising of authors as images and icons, yet would also remain forever helpless before the prospects of stardom. Cooper, whose livelihood demanded an identification with the public, abhorred the publicity and public posturing demanded of the world's biggest movie star. He was that genuine rarity, an international personality without attitude.

If Cooper remained rather in awe throughout his life of Hemingway the artist, the intellectual, Hemingway remained in equal awe of how Cooper handled himself in public -- whether at The Manhattan Cafe in Shoshone, Idaho, at the Stork Club in New York, the Ritz Hotel in Paris, or the Floridita Bar in Havana -- with truly gracious and modest aplomb. "Coops was the true gen," as Hemingway said.

As artists (A word both men scoffed at), the writer and the actor were masters of minimalism. Indeed, both men pretty much own this century's patent on "less is more."

More than once, long before they met, Hemingway observed to friends that he and Cooper had the same spare approach to their crafts. Both were minimalists, leaving much that was important unwritten/unsaid. It was for the reader/viewer to glean the reality beneath the surface.

As early as 1938, Hemingway had been trying to get mutual friends to introduce him to Cooper. They talked on the phone several times, but it wasn't until September 25, 1940, that they finally met. Immediately, they went off together hunting near Sun Valley.

Hemingway once said: “All life ends in death. And it’s a dishonest writer who doesn’t tell you this.” In Hemingway’s view, death was essential to the whole scheme of nature. Though Hemingway admired those who understood this, it was those who possessed, within themselves, the actual ability to dispense death whom he most admired. Or, as he once expressed it: “Can you take on the Godlike attribute of dispensing death? “

Gary Cooper could. And did. Cooper was no celebrity hunter; a movie star out to prove his manhood by firing a rifle. Hemingway knew at once that he had found in Gary Cooper a kindred spirit.

At the time they met, Cooper and Hemingway were experiencing career highs. Both were at the top of their professions and both were at the peak of their masculine powers.

For Whom The Bell Tolls (The film of which Cooper would star in, Hemingway’s hand-picked choice) had recently been published to extraordinary critical acclaim. It had been topping the best seller charts for months. In Hemingway’s words, “It was selling so fast it is ridiculous.” It had also just been sold to Hollywood for the highest price yet paid for a novel: \$150,000.

Cooper, who earlier in the year appeared on the cover of Time Magazine, was the highest salaried wage earner in the United States. He was about to embark on a year -- 1941 -- which few, if any, actors have ever matched. He would star in three critical and box office smashes: *Sergeant York* (For which he received his first Academy Award), *Meet John Doe*, and the screwball classic, *Ball Of Fire*.

They were shy men. Not just Cooper, but Hemingway, too (Though from the lazy, crude, sound-bite revisionism spewed out about Hemingway, one would never know this). Sophisticated, yes. Worldly, yes. But first and foremost, shy. Together, they sought out solitude in the great backwaters of Idaho and Montana. Both eagerly anticipated these trips, which could last for weeks. Now they could shed their increasingly rigid public personas and relax, be themselves.

Hemingway’s youngest son, Gregory, offered this insight into the bond between Cooper and Hemingway: “They really did enjoy each other. You could tell by the resonance of their voices and the way their eyes smiled. And there was nobody around to impress, that was the beauty of it, just their wives and kids. Both of them were great actors -- yes, my father was one, too -- who had forged, consciously or otherwise, two of the most successful hero images of the century. There was never any rivalry between them, and there was no reason for any.”

However, there was politics.

More than any actor before or since, Gary Cooper personified on screen the ideal Hemingway hero. And yet, Cooper was also a “friendly” witness before the House Unamerican Activities Committee in 1947. Those were dark times, careers derailed, families destroyed, lives ruined. And though he named no-one and refused to offer the title of any so-called suspect script and very specifically told the Committee he wanted no-one hurt, Cooper was under no illusion that this was his finest hour.

The Cooper’s and the Hemingway’s spent the holiday season together at Sun Valley in 1947. Hemingway let Cooper know that he was disgusted with his appearance. That HUAC went beyond political alliances and had nothing to do with liberal/conservative ... left wing/right wing.

But as with any good drama, there was a second act ...

In 1951, while making *High Noon*, screenwriter Carl Foreman came under pressure from both HUAC and the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (led by John Wayne). The vocally “liberal” producer Stanley Kramer and Foreman’s “liberal” friends backed away from Foreman. Only former HUAC witness Cooper continued to support him, even offering to go to testify before the Committee in Foreman’s behalf. In Foreman’s words:

“Cooper put his whole career on the block in the face of the McCarthyite witch-hunters who were terrorizing Hollywood. He was subjected to a violent underground pressure campaign by John Wayne and others aimed at getting him to leave the film, and he was told that unless he agreed to do so, he, too, would be blacklisted in Hollywood for the rest of his life. But Cooper believed in me. He saw it through. He was the only big one who tried. The only one.”

Cooper’s willingness to put his own career in jeopardy in defense of Carl Foreman is even more impressive when we realize that he was going through a major career decline during this period. As was his kindred spirit ...

Both men’s marriages were in jeopardy. Cooper’s affair with Patricia Neal had grown increasingly public. And messy. There was only one person Cooper would turn to for advice ... best friend and kindred spirit Ernest Hemingway. He and Neal went to see Hemingway and his fourth wife, Mary, at their home outside Havana, in Hemingway’s beloved Cuba. What Cooper didn’t know, however, was that Hemingway and Mary were in the middle of their own marital crisis.

Hemingway had fallen in love with Adriana Ivancich, the young woman who came to serve as the model for the young Renata in *Across The River And Into The Trees*. Mary was aware of this. Thus, when Cooper showed up soliciting advice on leaving his wife and marrying Patricia Neal, Mary was livid.

The four of them talked all day and long into the night. The barely hidden cross-currents made for a tense time. Three accounts have been given of what was talked about, but there is a *Rashomon*-like quality to them, since each differs from the other. Indeed, as the years passed, both Mary and Ernest offered later versions which conflicted with their earlier accounts. Only the very private Cooper never offered his own account.

The Lions In Winter: If both men were riding extraordinary critical and popular acclaim when they first met in 1940, by 1950, both also were mired in severe career slumps. Hemingway had scrapped two novels -- both would be published posthumously, Islands In The Stream and Garden Of Eden (Severely truncated) -- and a third had been published to a scathing critical response: Across The River And Into The Trees.

Younger writers -- Irwin Shaw, Norman Mailer, James Jones, Budd Schulberg -- were being hailed by critics and dominating best seller lists. Many critics were saying Hemingway was finished.

Cooper dropped out of the Top Ten Stars in 1950, the first time in 10 years. He was appearing in feeble efforts like *Distant Drums* and *Dallas*. Younger actors -- Gregory Peck, Burt Lancaster, Kirk Douglas, William Holden, Marlon Brando, Glenn Ford -- were getting the plum roles which only a few years before had been his.

Gary Cooper and Ernest Hemingway had to face harsh reality: They were no longer young men. For two men who lived for the athletic outdoor life, this was sobering indeed. To be a man in his fifties meant something entirely different than being a man in his thirties or twenties.

Hemingway used to say that you judge a man, not by how he handles success, but by how he handles failure. Consider the summer of 1952.

In late July, *High Noon* opened. Hailed as an instant classic, it put Cooper back on top. He won his 2nd Academy Award and became the Number One Box Office draw.

Six weeks later, Hemingway's Old Man And The Sea appeared full-length in LIFE Magazine. It was hailed by critics and sold 5.5 million copies of LIFE before becoming a best-seller in hard cover. It went on to win Hemingway his only Pulitzer Prize, and was instrumental in earning him the Nobel Prize in 1954.

Gary Cooper and Ernest Hemingway were back on top. What is fascinating about this is that *High Noon* and Old Man And The Sea are essentially the same story. Both tell of an *older* man, shunned and mocked by friends, who is forced to face alone an implacable enemy, and, when finally he triumphs, discovers only a bittersweet victory.

The two men, among the preeminent male image-makers of the century, had defined and forged a masculine style in print and on screen for 25 years. Hemingway's fiction -- and Cooper's screen persona in countless roles -- had shown the world about courage and self-respect in the face of death. Now, in *High Noon* and Old Man And The Sea, both men were questioning whether this was even valid anymore. Where is self-respect when victory could be as acrid as defeat? If the act of courage, no matter how pure and noble, ends up as bleak; then self-respect isn't noble, it's absurd.

The American hero, in literature and film, would never be the same again.

While together in Paris in 1956, Hemingway told Cooper that he wasn't sure how much writing he had left in him. Cooper told Hemingway that they'd both been around a long time; indeed, not entirely in jest, he wondered if maybe they'd stayed too long.

Cooper was right, both men had been around a long time. In fact, of those who started out in the twenties with them -- Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Sinclair Lewis, etc., and Gable, Cagney, Bogart, etc. -- only Hemingway was still a best-selling novelist and only Cooper was still a Top-Ten Box Office draw.

Hemingway had told Cooper in 1946 that he was starting a novel about World War II. When Cooper immediately expressed interest in both producing and starring in a film version, Hemingway was receptive. However, the novel -- Across The River And Into The Trees -- met almost universally negative reviews when finally published in 1950. This, coupled with the fact that both men were suffering career lows at the time, made it impossible to get the film off the ground in the early fifties.

Several times throughout the decade, Cooper and Hemingway attempted to put together the ingredients to launch the film. But real life continued to conspire against it.

Politics, America and dramatic irony, mid century: While Cooper the fair-minded conservative represented the United States in the late fifties as the United States Information Agency's Good-Will Ambassador to Russia (In fact, at the same time, Cooper was also offered the title role in a Russian film of *Don Quixote*; which he did not immediately turn down), the liberal Hemingway suddenly found his Cuban paradise, his *Island in the Stream*, smack in the deadly middle of international geopolitics. This irony was not lost on either man.

Finally, in 1959, Cooper and Hemingway decided the only thing to do was produce *Across the River And Into The Trees* themselves. They started to form their own company, not only to make *Across the River And Into The Trees*, but also to do a film based on Hemingway's Nick Adams stories.

It is very enticing to speculate on what might have come of this intriguing partnership; unfortunately, it was not to be. Again, real life intervened.

Hemingway had suffered severe head trauma after a plane crash in Africa in 1954. It took a toll on him, emotionally and physically. On top of which, both his drinking and inherited mood disorder had grown increasingly severe. The drug treatment for his hypertension was causing deep depression, which was being treated by electro shock therapy. All of this was causing Hemingway to lose his memory, which is fatal to a writer. Thus, creating ever greater depression.

Cooper had himself also suffered with injury and illness throughout the decade. But there was one final great Hemingway role for Cooper: Major Thomas Thorn in *They Came To Cordura*.

There's double irony to this. First, Cooper's last great Hemingway role wasn't based on a Hemingway work. Second, the final film ended up so mangled and butchered by the studio that it suffered the same ill-fate as had most of the films actually based on Hemingway's novels and stories. Hemingway appreciated the sad irony.

First-time novelist Glendon Swarthout's *They Came To Cordura* was published in 1958. Many reviewer's noted Swarthout's lean, Hemingway style. Typical was The Cleveland Plain Dealer critic: "One of the most gripping novels I have ever read ... Hemingway can move aside and make room for Swarthout."

The story of Major Thomas Thorn and his quixotic -- and ultimately doomed -- attempt to understand the true meaning of courage, *They Came To Cordura* promised to be the definitive analysis of the heroic mystique Cooper had personified for over 30 years on film ...

... And that kindred spirit Ernest Hemingway had made timeless on the printed page.

... Robert Jordan is the Old Man is Thomas Hudson is ... Major Thomas Thorn.

Unfortunately, the film *They Came To Cordura* was taken from director Robert Rossen and re-edited by the studio (Rossen died while in the midst of trying to buy the derailed film back from the studio to restore it to his original vision; perhaps it will yet happen.). The existing film is both brilliant and flawed. But in his shattering, late-career, pull-out-all-the-stops performance as a would-be coward, Gary Cooper gave us a brilliant and definitive depiction of the Hemingway hero --

-- The man who gains self-respect by comporting himself with courage in the face of impossible circumstances.

The final, poignant chapter: Hemingway, who had been hospitalized and treated for depression in early 1961, had also grown increasingly disturbed and depressed with the realization that his good friend Gary Cooper -- the man whom he had come to admire in many ways as a real-life personification of his fictional heroes -- was suffering from terminal cancer.

Cooper had told Hemingway on the phone, tight-lipped, circuitous and uncomplaining right to the end: "I'll bet I beat you to the barn."

He did.

But not before one last phone conversation between the two men. Hemingway, himself very ill, phoned Cooper on the night of April 18, to congratulate him for receiving an Honorary Oscar that night at the Academy Awards. It was a final, touching farewell. Deep feelings expressed circuitously ... minimalists to the end. In life as in art.

On May 13, 1961, Gary Cooper died. Seven weeks later, on the morning of July 2, Ernest Hemingway took his own life at home in Ketchum, Idaho. In the end, Ernest Hemingway took on the "awesome responsibility of dispensing death."

There is an appropriately dramatic irony to the fact that the lives of two men, whose artistic legacies had offered a moral compass to a nation groping for values during the Depression and the dark war years, should suffer untimely ends at the dawn of the erupting sixties. Their final, poignant chapter closed at the beginning of a decade which would challenge many of the very ideals and precepts which both men so prominently represented.

It was as if, remaining true to their own code of conduct, i.e., comporting themselves with courage, dignity and self-respect, they were passing the torch of heroism to a new generation. A new generation with new ideas about heroism, masculinity. But now, so many decades later, with all that has seemingly changed in our post-9/11 world, we've begun looking back to understand, to appreciate what heroism means today.

Take Katniss Everdeen, the heroine from *The Hunger Games*. For all the modern trappings, the extraordinary katniss is a female reworking of the Hemingway/Cooper hero -- Robert Jordan and Thomas Hudson, Sgt. York and Will Kane. Given what this popularity says about a new look at heroism, about being a man, a woman -- perhaps Cooper and Hemingway didn't really pass the torch, perhaps they merely lent it.