

Book Review: Writer chronicles his long pursuit of his 'best friend,' Ernest Hemingway

by Various UT Authors

For years, David Nuffer carried around a talisman in his pocket, a fossilized shell no bigger than a lump of sugar. Its monetary value is nil; its connection to a literary lion, priceless.

When Nuffer grew worried about losing the slippery piece, given to him by a friend, he placed it with other treasures that represented a decades-long quest — a quest to learn everything he could about Ernest Hemingway.

Now Nuffer, 76, has transformed nearly 40 years of absorbing all he could about his hero of letters into a book, "The Best Friend I Ever Had" (XLibris, \$29.99 at Amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com). Acting in some ways as a guide to his literary endeavor was the "Papastone," that lucky charm Hemingway plucked from an isolated beach in Cuba and gave to his friend Nita Jensen Houk in the 1950s. She in turn passed it to Nuffer in the late '80s.

"She showed me the Papastone the first time I met her," Nuffer said. "She kept it in a jewelry box.

"After we became friends, and she was sick as a dog with lung disease, in the mail comes this little box, and I open it up and here is this shell. She gave me this cherished possession of hers. I cried. How can you describe it?"

Hundreds of tomes have come before, chronicling, dissecting and interpreting the larger-than-life writer who died by his own hand in 1961 one summer morning in Sun Valley, Idaho. Nuffer's book adds another dimension to this otherwise familiar landscape, springing from the reminiscences of those closest to Hemingway — his friends and family.

"The Best Friend I Ever Had" is a 172-page homage to Hemingway that includes numerous, never-before-published photos Nuffer took himself or received from Hemingway friends. Interviews are fresh material the author gathered through correspondence and meetings with 10 Hemingway intimates — among them Hemingway's wife, Mary, son Patrick, friends in midcentury Cuba, including a prominent jaijai player, and Tillie Arnold, his best friend in Ketchum, Idaho.

Nuffer augments these personal accounts with previously unpublished letters from Hemingway's doctors at the Mayo Clinic following his shock treatments there in 1960 and '61. But he hastens to add that his book is not rooted in academia nor meant to be a biography.

"I took the things these people told me about him and didn't try to interpret anything," Nuffer said. "I just put down what those folks told me."

In doing so, Nuffer reveals Hemingway in a personal light that even early reviews by scholars grudgingly admit they never knew. As with any artistic creator, Nuffer said, Hemingway had a strong ego and emotions that ran the gamut. As an artist, he needs to be judged by different standards, he said.

"When you understand and accept that, you find how beautiful and gentle and what a great friend he was,"

Nuffer said. "No one was like him in the last century."

How Nuffer initially met these people and forged strong friendships with some — particularly Arnold, who he kept in regular contact with for years before her death at age 99 in 2005 — is something Nuffer calls "the Hemingway touch." Although some of the encounters with people in the book were innocuous enough and easily made, Nuffer said, others took on a magical quality with time.

After mailing a piece he wrote about Ernest to Mary Hemingway, he never dreamed he'd get a response, but he did.

"A letter appeared in my mailbox," Nuffer said. "I was stunned, just stunned. Celebrities don't ever reply to anything."

That letter was the beginning of a five-year correspondence between Mary Hemingway and Nuffer.

In 1989 in Sun Valley, Nuffer met Tillie Arnold at a cocktail party before a Hemingway convention. He came to her rescue with her favorite drink — bourbon on the rocks — as she was being grilled rabidly by other guests clamoring to get the inside scoop on their idol.

"People who knew him are constantly besieged with questions such as 'What is he like?'" Nuffer said. "I never asked for anything. I never wanted anything.

"I never prevailed upon anybody. I just played it really straight, and we became friends."

In the years following, Nuffer and Arnold remained close, with Nuffer and his wife, Mary, visiting Arnold in her homes in Idaho, Arizona and La Habra Heights, Calif.

Few are as well-equipped to write about Hemingway as Nuffer, who would never describe his avocation as an obsession but rather "Hemania." In the book's preface, Nuffer immediately adds "... although I don't consider myself manic."

But why Hemingway?

"First, he was the best writer of fiction in the last century," Nuffer said. "He always said, 'You don't write books from the standpoint of the left politically, you write books that are good or bad.'

"He was also very objective, tremendously objective. You admire that about him, too."

Secondly, Nuffer said, Hemingway knew full well the frailties of man. His heavy drinking and the ensuing years of ill health after surviving two light plane crashes contributed to that.

"He had a feel for almost every human condition," Nuffer said.

Nuffer, the founder of Nuffer, Smith, Tucker Inc., read Hemingway in high school and college, and "Death in the Afternoon" sparked a lifelong interest in bullfighting. But it wasn't until 1971, when Nuffer was 39, that he went looking for "For Whom the Bell Tolls" at the library. It was one of the few Hemingway books he hadn't yet read.

The conversion was complete.

With his wife, Nuffer began traveling to places where Hemingway lived and worked. To date, his pilgrimages have taken him to more than 160 Hemingway-related sites in Canada, Cuba, Europe and the United States, including 15 homes or apartments, and the rooms where he was born and died.

He has quaffed Hemingway's beverage of choice, a daiquiri (called a Papa Dobles by the reverent), at Hemingway's favorite bars in Cuba and Paris. He once sneaked into a back room at an antique shop in Canada so he could type on a typewriter Hemingway used when he was a reporter at the Toronto Star.

He has also collected quite a trove. Among the more than 250 books on his shelves (including practically every academic and biographical text ever written about the man), there are first editions of most of Hemingway's books, a brick from the backyard of Hemingway's home in Key West, Fla., and all 26 issues of Ken, a late '30s leftist magazine that carried articles by Hemingway about the Spanish Civil War.

There is also the Papastone.

Last year, Nuffer finally sat down to tackle the daunting task of organizing the reams of notes, letters and medical records he had collected. It took him 10 months to write his manuscript, which, after shopping around unsuccessfully to literary agents, he decided to self publish.

"This is a life love," Nuffer said. "I sent my manuscript to five agents — three in San Diego, one in New York and one in Los Angeles.

"They all came back and said 'No.' I knew I had to self publish."

Nuffer often muses about whether Hemingway's spirit had a guiding hand in this book.

"Hemingway may be looking after me. It's hard to say," Nuffer said. "I hope so. I hope he's happy with this book."

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