



FOUR DAYS AFTER THEIR WEDDING (NOV. 21, 1940) IN WYOMING, ERNEST HEMINGWAY AND MARTHA GELLHORN TRAVELED THROUGH KANSAS CITY AND PAUSED FOR AN INTERVIEW WITH A REPORTER FROM HIS OLD PAPER. PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE ERNEST HEMINGWAY COLLECTION, JOHN F. KENNEDY PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY, BOSTON. USED WITH PERMISSION OF *THE KANSAS CITY STAR*.

Hemingway's Kansas City Return

Steve Paul

I wanted to write about the whole damned world if I could get to know it.

—Ernest Hemingway

He was a hero now. A superstar. With his graying brush of a mustache and his new honey-haired bride alongside, he cut a swaggering figure as he paced the hotel room to chat. Sure, an interview for old time's sake would be swell. It would be fun to reminisce. A break from the grinding drive.

It was a Monday in November 1940, cool and wet with rain, when Ernest Hemingway and Martha Gellhorn arrived in Kansas City for the night. They'd motored in from Wyoming. They had been married in Cheyenne four days earlier. They planned to catch a train to New York, boarding at the vast, bustling Union Station, which Ernest knew well from his days as a beginning newspaper reporter more than twenty years in the past. "The 'Cub' Comes Back With a Bride," is how the paper put it the next morning. Hemingway's return "to His First Field" was front-page news in Kansas City. Just a few weeks earlier, Scribner's had published Hemingway's big new novel of the Spanish Civil War. So the author, who had witnessed one war as a teenage noncombatant in the Red Cross ambulance service and covered

others as a journalist, was ready for adulation, and he was happy to toast the old haunts in this Midwestern American city.

Hemingway wore boots, a plaid tie, and a casual tweed jacket with the cuffs folded up. Rain peppered the window. He picked through his memories of Kansas City and shared them with Paul Fisher, a reporter for *The Star's* morning edition, who was assigned to meet up with the famous writer. Hemingway stood in his room at the Muehlebach Hotel, the downtown landmark whose dark halls he'd walked twenty-two years earlier. In his newspaper days here, the hotel pressroom had given Hemingway a place to work and relax out of sight from his bosses at *The Star's* building eight blocks away. He wrote letters back home on Muehlebach stationery. He told Fisher you could sleep in the bathtub "if your knees articulated properly." After a long day and night chasing stories, that uncomfortable shut-eye had been more convenient than taking the streetcar home. A few years after this visit, Hemingway would remember the Muehlebach and place it in the dreams of his melancholy colonel, Richard Cantwell, in *Across the River and into the Trees*. The hotel "has the biggest beds in the world," Cantwell says to the young countess, "and we'll pretend that we are oil millionaires."

But now Hemingway remembered the Kansas City of his youth, the brief, formative apprenticeship he served on the way to seeing the Great War in Italy and becoming a writer. What a time it was. There was a shoot-out between detectives and internal revenue agents, and Hemingway crawled under a car as the bullets flew. An oddball case of mistaken identity among lawmen—that was a good story, good enough that Fisher folded a memory of it into his opening paragraph. That was the Hemingway people expected: a man who talked big and brash, a man who knew how violence molds the world and shapes people, a man, indeed, who was shaped by violence and the trauma of war. When William M. Reddig, *The Star's* book critic, reviewed *For Whom the Bell Tolls* a month before this visit, he said of Hemingway, "He still is the great chronicler of

violence and death, the one novelist who most accurately and dramatically portrays the foremost phenomenon of our time.”

For Hemingway, Kansas City was a transitional place, a stopping point between suburban youth and that traumatic, life-defining war. But also, for him, it was a place that made violence real. It took whatever boyhood education he had accumulated in the northern woods and gave it adult sinew and bone. The newspaper work brought him close to violence almost every day: knifings and street crime, grit and desperation, the kinds of urban eruptions that gave Kansas City a Wild West reputation, even two decades into the twentieth century.

Of all the places that shaped the life and myth of Ernest Hemingway—think of suburban Chicago, northern Michigan, Paris, Spain, Africa’s safari lands, Key West, Cuba—Kansas City is the least romantic and most unknown. Hemingway came to know it as a place where eighteen-year-old boys became men. By day it was buttoned up, civic minded, bustling with church conventions and war bond luncheons. After dark, it offered a different side. The young Hemingway, tall, gangly, and boyish-faced, reveled in what he found there. He learned, for better or worse, from sage and wild journalists, from late-night hospital surgeons and ambulance drivers, from lawmen and jaded drunks. The heartland city gave substance to an idea that he would put to use just a few years later in *The Sun Also Rises*: “It is awfully easy to be hard-boiled about everything in the daytime, but at night it is another thing.”

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