

BOOK CLUB NEWS

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For Whom the Bell Tolls by Ernest Hemingway



Hemingway (center) with Dutch filmmaker [Joris Ivens](#) and German writer [Ludwig Renn](#) (serving as an International Brigades officer) in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, 1937

“No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine; if a Clod bee washed away by the Sea, Europe is the lesse, as well as if a Promontorie were, as well as if a Mannor of thy friends or of thine owne were; any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee. - John Donne, 1624 CE

Discussion Leader: Evelyn Kain



Hemingway was born in 1899 and died by his own hand in 1961 due to body pain, illness and, possibly, the onset of dementia brought on by excessive drink. He was a major influence during the Modernism period following WWI, a founding member of a “Lost Generation” (as coined by Gertrude Stein) which also included other ex-patriot American writers living in Paris during the Twenties: John Dos Passos, F. Scott & Zelda Fitzgerald and Ezra Pound, among others. Modernism obliterated the Victorian-era styles of behavior, writing & fashion, and exploded

the traditional ideas associated with Art (Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism), Science (relativity, quantum mechanics) and Religion (Darwin, Nietzsche) while ushering in the new science of Psychology (Freud).

For Whom the Bell Tolls, published in 1940 and considered by many as Hemingway's masterpiece – as well as the best “war novel” ever written – was inspired by the author's experience as a foreign correspondent during the Spanish Civil War of the late thirties. His style represented a clear departure from the flowery literature of the 19th century: Hemingway was terse (70% of his sentences are statements without subordinate clauses, adverbs or adjectives) and included rich dialogue, moral ambiguity and the codification of both “heroic violence” (the seeking of restored order after the chaotic and horrific WWI) & the “iceberg principle” (there is much meaning behind the written line).

Here are some of the questions we considered when reading the text: What is the connection between the John Donne quote that Hemingway included on the frontispiece? What is your reaction to Hemingway's style? Why was Robert Jordan fighting in a foreign war? Why does Hemingway give first and last name to Robert Jordan but only a first name to other characters? What is the significance, if any, of Mary's name? Discuss the relationship between Pilar and Robert? Mary and Robert? Pablo and Robert? What are some of the scenes that stick in your mind? What role does the landscape play? How does Robert Jordan die? What is the novel's attitude toward war, or the perspective of the politicians and military? Of the people? Why is this novel considered a classic? What are its grand themes?

The go-around among our c attendees was not terse. “Story-telling was great, by Hemingway as narrator and by the characters.” “He writes better of death than of love.” “He is superficial.” “I enjoyed the cadence of the story.” “The characters were stock; he is a better short story writer. . . I used to like Hemingway.” “I was caught up in the dialogue.” “An excellent description of the nitty-gritty of war.” “Loved the movie; always hated Hemingway's writing. I don't see it as a classic.” “I'm reading more analytically now.” “I enjoyed the lore of the countryside; i.e. when to cook the hares.” “You have to make a choice: fight or die.” “I preferred *Homage to Catalonia* by George Orwell.”

(cont'd)



“Mr. Hemingway has always been the writer, but he has never been the master that he is in "For Whom the Bell Tolls." The dialogue, handled as though in translation from the Spanish, is incomparable. The characters are modeled in high relief. A few of the scenes are perfect, notably the last sequence and an earlier one when Jordan awakes to the sound of a horse thumping along through the snow. Others are intense and terrifying, still others gentle and almost pastoral, if here and there a trifle sweet.” - The New York Times, October 21, 1940

Thank you, Evelyn, for your expert leadership of a discussion that could take up an entire semester.

Join us February 16, 2018, when we will discuss ***The Underground Railroad*** by Colson Whitehead, led by David Kelly. Happy reading!