ForeWord Reviews

Hemingway vs. Fitzgerald: The Rise and Fall of a Literary Friendship

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As best friends and best rivals, conflict defined this epic friendship. Donaldson records their relationship with timeline precision, acute insight and flowing excerpts from the men's personal and public writings. The detail sparks within readers a sense of an intimate understanding of these two very different men: Fitzgerald as a worshiping fan and apologetic drunk, Hemingway as a coarse man with an obscenely superior attitude.

The true charm of this book is the extensive use of the authors? own words. Donaldson takes from their notebooks, ledgers and letters to recreate the past as these men saw it. He shows that even under the veil of fiction, their novels themselves tell the real story of their unstable lives. "Madame, it is always a mistake to know an author," Hemingway advised in Death in the Afternoon.

Some of the most memorable of characters Fitzgerald and Hemingway wrote about were real people, explains Donaldson, who is author of Fool for Love: F. Scott Fitzgerald and editor of The Cambridge Companion to Hemingway. Fitzgerald nearly carboned his friends Gerald and Sara Murphy who lived on the French Riviera to create Tender in the Night's Dick and Nicole Diver.

The excessive alcohol and grand parties were as much a reality as a topic of stories for Fitzgerald, and Hemingway voluntarily put himself in harm's way to prove his own bravado throughout his life (although the stories often exaggerated his feats).

If anything, Donaldson's attention to detail is his fault. The literary examples at times are strung together, stretching for pages, perhaps too long for some readers that are already familiar with their novels and interested instead in the relationship itself.

Yet, this thorough research also lead to the discovery of several errors in prior analysis—such as one British television writer's failure to recognize the sarcasm behind Fitzgerald's claim that Hemingway often used the phrase "Yes, we have no bananas."

Their friendship was its strongest at the start of Hemingway's career. Fitzgerald earns much of the credit for teaching Hemingway as he finished The Sun Also Rises how to succeed in writing, editing and selling his art. Competition soon undercut their friendship, however, as

Fitzgerald's glory waned and Hemingway's peaked.

Although obvious rivals, Donaldson himself finds it impossible to judge them against one another: "Hemingway and Fitzgerald were different, not better. Each was great in his own way. In that league no one had to lose for both of them to be winners."

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