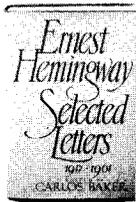


Opening Hemingway's Mail

by Anthony Burgess



**Ernest Hemingway:
Selected Letters
1917-1961**
edited by Carlos Baker
Charles Scribner's Sons
948 pp., \$27.50

As one who earns his precarious living by writing, I find the writing of letters—even necessary ones like rebuttals of accusations of libel or plagiarism—a source of chagrin and even guilt, since being a letter-writer gets in the way of being a man of letters. Some authors manage to fuse the opposed claims of letters and letters by practicing what is termed the epistolary art, anticipating the posthumous publication of their collected mail and royalties for their relicts. This entails showing a private face in a public place, which is not what letter-writing ought to be like. Auden wrote a sonnet about a literary man who answered “some of his long marvellous letters but kept none.” That seems reasonable, but my heart goes out to the shade of Sir Thomas Beecham, who never opened a letter in his life, unless it smelled of a check.

Reading Carlos Baker's fine biography of Hemingway, I was heartened to discover that there were whole drawer-loads of unopened mail in his various houses. But now I have this bulky selection (selection, mind, not collection) to attest that he was quite as bad as Lord Chesterfield or John Keats or Evelyn Waugh. All that can be said in palliation of his cacoëthes is that old Hem, in writing to his buddies, did not try to write good. Or not often. “Every time I write a good letter,” he wrote, rightly, “it's a sign I'm not working.”

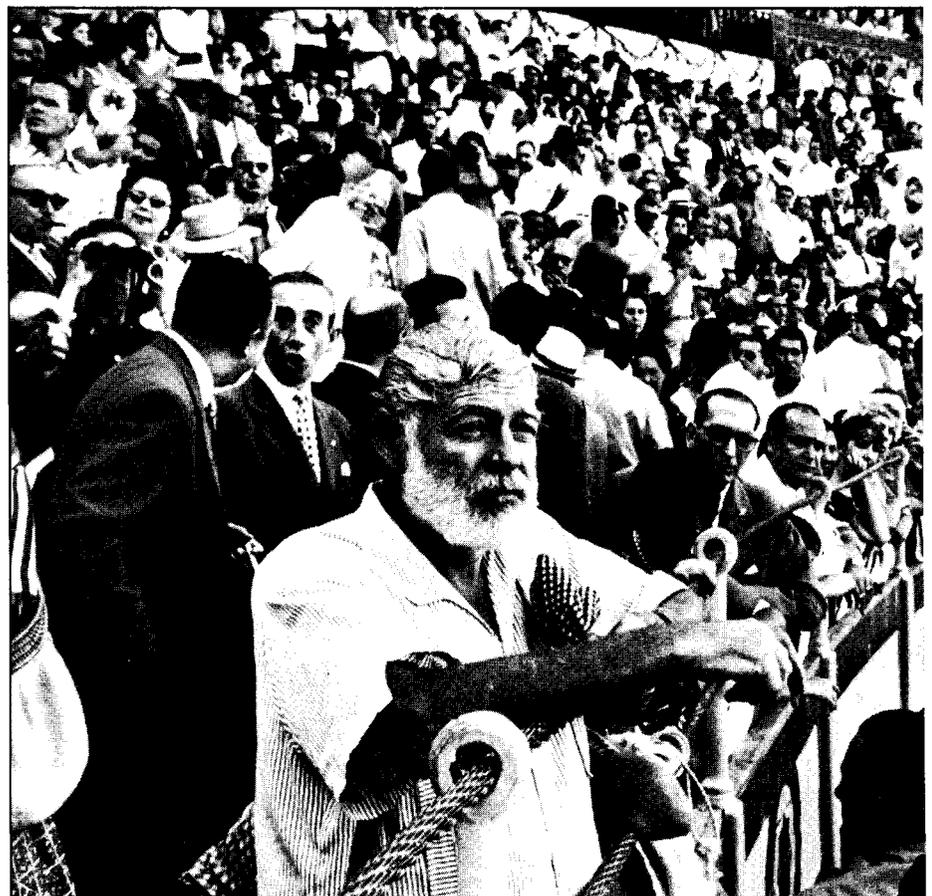
Hemingway's letters are “a kind of literature—direct, pungent, idiosyncratic, breathing speech more than lamp oil.”

But Baker, who has done the expected fine job of editing here, suggests that “Hemingstein the letter-scribbler” scribbled letters “as an antidote to the concentration of creativity” or else warmed up in the morning and cooled out in the afternoon with an undemanding allotrope of his craft. He was being the athlete, loosening fighting muscles or doing the jog of honor.

“The last thing I remember about English in high school,” wrote Hemingway somewhere, “was a big controversy on whether it was *already* or *all ready*. How did it ever come out?” Only once did a regular solecism get past his editors: *A Moveable Feast* (orthog-

raphy, not title, not book) will infect high school students forever. In the letters there is no tidying up, and there is a free flow that resists all the rules of propriety. Here he is writing to Scott Fitzgerald from Key West, May 28, 1934:

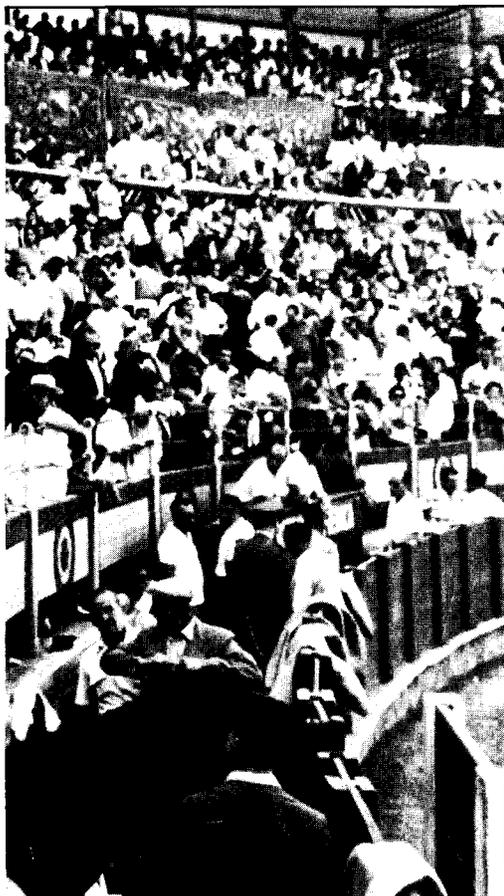
For Christ sake write and don't worry about what the boys will say nor whether it will be a masterpiece nor what. I write one page of masterpiece to ninety one pages of shit. I try to put the shit in the waste-basket. You feel you have to publish crap to make money to live and let live.... Forget your personal tragedy. We are all bitched from the start and you espe-



cially have to be hurt like hell before you can write seriously....

And then blunt words about Zelda being crazy and Scott not really being a rummy. It is sound refreshing stuff.

There will be readers of these letters who will say that he is trying to turn himself into one of his own characters. But it is rather the other way around. All novelists make their characters talk like themselves. What you get here is the undiluted Hemingway voice. You even get what has been termed Hemingway Choctaw, telegraphese worked up into an idiolect. Thus, as early as 1921 he wrote from Chicago to Grace Quinlan: "Guy I usually eat lunch with is sick. So talking to you instead." Probably his most admired phrase was one picked up from an Indian (whether or not a Choctaw has not been recorded): "Long time ago good, now heap shit." There is no attempt to modify the direct simplicities for the highly literate. To Bernard Berenson (Dear B.B.): "Anyway (get out Big Glass) and read it. We all love you very much and let us all go



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to (I wasn't brave) gether and have fun. God (Gott) BLESS You and our love my true love."

The Hemingway style is probably the best one for expressing love, whatever Hemingway thought love was. The four wives get good manly loving letters with no Keatsian nonsense. Adriana Ivanich, in the fall days of 1954, when the old soldier needed the delicious incestuous guilt of an Earwicker-Isabel situation, gets things like "Daughter I love you and miss you so much. You know we were pretty good maybe and with things bad we *never* fought." She also gets "Ingrid is the same. Sweet and good and honest and married to the 22 pound rat. This not jealousy. Maybe he is the undiscovered 42 pound rat. He makes good children anyway." The rat is Roberto Rossellini.

Hemingway is fine on commiseration, too. To Charles Scribner he writes from La Finca Vigia (July 9-10, 1950): "Am no good at these bedside letters; but follow the doctor's advice, within reason, and take care of your damn ticker. That's one thing that we have only one of. Max died on us like a rabbit." We all know who Max was. That "within reason" is very endearing. He tells Arnold Gingrich, the editor of *Esquire*, from Key West (November 16, 1934): "That's certainly a hell of a damned disease you have.... I'm damned sorry about it." And, from the same place, a few months later, he writes, superbly I think, to Gerald and Sara Murphy, who had just lost their eldest son at the age of 26 after a long illness:

Absolutely truly and coldly in the head, though, I know that anyone who dies young after a happy childhood, and no one ever made a happier childhood than you made for your children, has won a great victory. We all have to look forward to death by defeat, our bodies gone, our world destroyed; but it is the same dying we must do, while he has gotten it all over with, his world all intact and the death only by accident.

Hemingway's own death is not directly foreshadowed. But, from Rochester, Minnesota, on December 4, 1960, he writes a totally unnecessary letter "to whom it may concern," exonerating his fourth wife Mary from complicity in nonexistent crimes. As we

know from the Baker biography, Hemingway was suffering at the time from the delusion that the Feds and the IRS were after him. "She had no guilty knowledge of any of my finances nor relations with anyone.... She was never an accomplice nor in any sense a fugitive...." Also from Rochester on June 15, 1961, he writes to the son of his doctor, George Saviers, a letter that any sick nine-year-old boy would be glad to receive (the boy, Fritz, was suffering from a viral heart disease): "Saw some good bass jump in the river. I never knew anything about the upper Mississippi before and it is really a very beautiful country and there are plenty of pheasants and ducks in the fall. But not as many as in Idaho and I hope we'll both be back there shortly and can joke about our hospital experiences together." The postscript says: "Am feeling fine and very cheerful about things in general and hope to see you all soon." Fewer than three weeks later he, as Baker puts it, "unlocked the basement storeroom, chose a double-barreled Boss shotgun... pressed his forehead against the barrels, and blew away the entire cranial vault."

One must always ask the question, when confronted with a hefty sack of letters from a writer who wrote good but not perhaps enough, whether we would give up the letters for another, real book. I have always said that I could do without Shakespeare's *Sir Thomas More* or *Love's Labour's Found* if I could see one of his laundry lists, let alone a yearning epistle to Mistress Hathaway. With this Hemingway tome I have no regrets. That he possibly wrote enough (though not perhaps enough in his best years) is attested by the wretched *Islands in the Stream*. The letters, since they essay no literary effects, are all the more a kind of literature—direct, pungent, highly idiosyncratic, and breathing speech more than lamp oil. The character who emerges is the one we already know—sweaty and in shorts and cussing readily—but there is no new and unexpected qualification (secret paedophilia or bookishness). The Hemingway of the letters is almost totally likable. Or likeable. ■

Anthony Burgess is the author, most recently, of *Earthly Powers*.

A Moscow Mystery

by Ken Follett



Gorky Park
by Martin Cruz Smith
Random House
384 pp., \$13.95

The publisher is calling *Gorky Park* a suspense thriller, but in fact it is a mystery. I know how this kind of mislabeling happens. The editor says: "This is a really good, unusual mystery and I want to print 100,000 copies." To which the marketing director responds: "Jeez, nobody buys mysteries, we better call it a thriller."

He has my sympathy but not my assent. Mysteries are about *understanding*; thrillers are about *winning*. In a mystery you are never really sure who the villain is or what he is up to until the end of the book (and sometimes not even then if you have not read carefully). In a thriller you usually know what the villain wants and how he plans to get it. Often you know perfectly well how the story will end—Germany will lose World War II, de Gaulle will not be assassinated, New York will not be destroyed by the nuclear device in the closet in the Pan Am Building. The tension comes from trying to figure out how the hero will avert disaster and survive. The task of the mystery-writer is to make you share a detective's curiosity, whereas the thriller-writer must make you share a hero's fear.

Of course many stories weave back and forth across the borderline. A common formula is the story that begins as a mystery, with someone wondering "What the hell is going on around here?" then half way through turns into a thriller when he finds out exactly what is going on and subsequently does his damndest to put a

stop to it.

Gorky Park stays firmly on the mystery side of the line. The detective—Chief Investigator Arkady Renko—plays his cards so close to his chest that you are never sure what he is after. You never see the story from the point of view of the bad guys, and you never know in advance what they will do.

It has many other standard elements: a disillusioned, brilliant detective with a ruined marriage; a rich, perfectly groomed protagonist; a corrupt and obstructive bureaucracy; and a girl who is by turns suspect, hostile witness, and loving collaborator.

Nevertheless it is a highly distinctive mystery, miles ahead of the pack, and given some promotion it should reach and please the wider readership which that marketing director is after. There are two reasons for this. One is simply that Martin Cruz Smith is a most enjoyable writer. The other is that *Gorky Park*, like all the best mysteries, works as a novel.

Smith has a delightful turn of phrase. He says of a frightened Jewish surgeon in Moscow: "He held his emotions like gold in a fist." He renders gruesome police-procedural detail with just the right humanizing, comic touches. Here is detective Arkady in the mortuary with the pathologist Levin:

Beauty lay on the autopsy table.
"Andreev will want the neck, too,"
Levin said.

The pathologist put a wood block under the neck, making it bow up, and pulled back the hair. With a rotary saw he sliced through the bones. The smell of burning calcium spread. Arkady had no cigarettes; he held his breath.

Levin cut under the seventh cervical vertebra along the angle of the vertebra's spur. As bone separated, head and neck rolled off the table. Arkady reflexively caught the head, and as quickly put it

back. Levin switched off the saw.

"No, Investigator, she's all yours now."

Arkady wiped his hands. The head was thawed. "I'll need a box."

Change the names to Carella and Kling and this scene might be taken from an 87th Precinct mystery by Ed McBain. It would be harsh to call Smith an imitative writer, but it must be admitted that he is cheerfully derivative. (His last novel, *Nightwing*, was a

