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Hemingway Deadlights: Papa brought to life in a new Mystery Series

by [Jill_Dearman](#)

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Michael Atkinson has written film criticism for *The Village Voice*, *The Believer*, *Spin*, *Film Comment*, and many other publications., and is the author of seven books, including *Exile Cinema: Filmmakers at Work Beyond Hollywood* (SUNY Press)



Exile Cinema and a debut volume of poetry, *One Hundred Children Waiting for a Train* His debut novel



Hemingway Deadlights, out this month, allows us to go on an investigative binge with the lionized author and get to know him in a gritty, intimate way. Below my writer to writer interview with Atkinson:

JD: Could you describe the essence of *Hemingway Deadlights* and tell us how the idea came to life for you?

MA: The essence of it is simple -- a mystery in which Hemingway is fictionalized into literally investigating a murder, of an old Key West drinking buddy, who was (he discovers) mixed up with all kinds of trouble, which tangles our aging, blocked, drunken, world-famous protagonist with the CIA and Castro and the Cuban revolutionary movement. Of course, the mystery is just the grill, turned up high, and Hemingway himself is the steak. The key to it was his character -- we know so much about this man, and yet almost everything we know is mythology, either to pantheonize him (as a writer and as a lifestyle model) or to cut him down. I thought that there was a third way -- he's just a man, a drunken egomaniac with a bitter stone of self-knowledge in his gut, a genuine genius and massive celebrity whose life just isn't the grand celebration he thinks it should be, and a man struggling with ideas of masculine rectitude, in a world slowly overcome by commercialization and cheapness. It doesn't sound it from the way I just described it, but I've always seen him as a comic figure -- every poignant or pathetic biographical episode you can name can also be seen as high comedy. That was very important to me -- I wanted the books to be fun to write and fun to read. Once I realized that his dreamy sense of righteousness and his restless energy, pickled by a crucifying booze habit, was essentially farcical, the first book sailed.

JD: How much of a Hemingway fan are you and what's your first memory of reading Hemingway?

MA: I'm not actually a Hemingway purist or anything -- I also love Fitzgerald, Pynchon, Marquez, Orwell, Carver, Munro, Bradbury, Proust... In writing these books, I feel like I've already read too much about him, as I think a lot of us have. But there's little sense in denying that Hemingway was the most powerful influence on English prose of the 20th century, bar none -- Fitzgerald could write sweeter, more poetic prose, but Hemingway's trick was to write in our heads what he left unwritten on the page, and the relationship an attentive reader has with a Hemingway story is far more involved and tense and reciprocal than with

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any other writer. Someone who could sing, like Fitzgerald, essentially lays it out for you, line by line, and you stay in your seat, sighing. With Hemingway, you're a partner in the experience, and you have to sit forward and sense the suggestions between the lines. He didn't just renovate prose-writing, he renovated the way we read.

My first Hemingway experience was with stories -- "Hills like White Elephants," "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," and so on, and that's a good thing, because they rule in a way the novels do not. The exception to that is

 [The Sun Also Rises](#) which took my breath away then and now. You read "Hills," and you get a master's class in how to write dialogue so that every single line, even "Yes" has acres of unspoken intention and mysterious emotional freight behind it. Having the real tragedy lurk there unspoken, and building a drama and history out of it in your head while the dialogue tries to avoid talking about it, that's what Hemingway tried to do, and what he did.

JD: How intimidating was it to take such (fun!) liberties with such an iconic author?

MA: It was fun -- I hope readers will have as much fun as I did writing, but I tend to doubt it. But I wasn't intimidated -- he's too much part of the cultural flow, too familiar. You could sit down right now and write a Hemingway story if you wanted -- "We had bread and cognac, and it was good," and so on. It would be a pale shadow, of course, but my point is that his voice is already present in our everyday lives. His biography is, too, and that's part of the reason I picked him: who else has as rich a lode of stuff in his or her life? Global travel, two wars, hunting, newspaper reporting, endless celebrity friends and enemies -- my series could go on indefinitely with this man's timeline. But mostly, if you view him as a self-defeating, vain, but well-meaning bulldozer, who thinks he's king of the world but is routinely made to realize he's not, then you can't be intimidated. The bigger an icon gets, the riper he is to be humanized.

JD: You are a poet and a film critic as well; how do those experiences inform your work as a novelist?

MA: I think the poetry has fueled everything else -- I've gone through years where I've written two or more poems a day, everyday, and the choices you make in writing poems, the striving toward fresh syntax and startling perspectives and rhythm and a kind of human inclusiveness, all while maintaining clarity, is great training ground for being an interesting writer doing anything else. Whatever distinction my criticism has, I think it's because I care deeply about my sentences, which I like to be challenging and smart and surprising. I would regard my film writing and essays as being poetic in tone. (Also, I should say I earned a lot of money in college writing papers for other students -- my fee went from beer to over \$12 a page, and all you needed to do was bring me books to get a guaranteed A or B. Any subject, and I'd rap it out inside of a single evening -- there may be no better practice for expository writing. I never took a writing workshop.)

For the novel, obviously the muscles I used for poetry and criticism had to be relaxed to a large degree -- I had to be kind of Hemingway-ian, but I didn't want to ape his style (which was a deliberate and painstaking style, not the way he spoke or thought, and so I sought after a fugue of all three). But the startling word choice, the noir metaphors (which was something Hemingway contributed to in his own way), the freedom to take things right out of the air -- that's the poetic habit at work. At the same time, Hemingway's cranky concision certainly does ring in your ears when he's on every page, harrumphing around at the world.

JD: You are one of the most prolific and motivated writers I know; what advice would you give to writers who are more distractable?

MA: I don't know if I have anything new beyond the old butt-in-seat dictum. For me, deadlines work like gangbusters -- with a deadline, my Herculean procrastination powers are neutralized by conscience and guilt. I had a year to write the second book in my series, and at the halfway point I was maybe a quarter done. Then I got scared, and the approach of my deadline kicked my tush.

But I suspect it has to be a real deadline, not an invented one. It helps that this is my job, writing, and if I'm not doing it I feel like a worthless slacker. (Someone I read remembered hanging with Chaplin on the Riviera, and how the man left the beach to go inside to write because, he said, "If I don't feel as if I haven't paid for my supper"). It helps to deliberately daydream. When I'm stuck on something, I drive on errands, and knotty problems solve themselves. It also helps to read a lot, and not just Pulitzer winners (though I often don't stay interested in those for very long), but all sorts of stuff, non-fiction, too, and keeping looking for ideas you can use to make stuff.

That's a perspective I've learned that might be helpful: that making stuff is premier among life's pleasures. It takes energy, but it beats watching TV or playing cards or indulging yourself with wine or cake or Pirate's Booty or manicures or anything else at all. All of these things are a variation on the Buddhist idea of escaping from yourself and into the momentary

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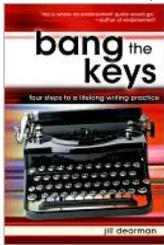
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action. But making stuff, with language or music or clay or wood or paint or toilet-paper tubes, is by far the most effective "escape," the most invigorating way to dodge emptiness. And you end up with something at the end. There are no life moments that don't involve my love for my wife and children that are as much raw fun for me as writing a sharp, startling, memorable sentence. If you don't feel this way, writing will always be a hobby for you. But if you get this thrill, then you simply need to (as I do, being human) ask yourself at any given time, what would I rather be doing, and would I in fact rather be doing it, instead of making up stuff and putting those words together and creating something new?

JD: What a pleasure to have Mike here to submit such beautiful sentences and sentiments. And for those who guzzle the first mystery up in a drunkard's hurry, worry not: the second Hemingway mystery, "Hemingway Cutthroat", will come in 2010.

What was your first experience with Hemingway? Love him? Hate him? Or is there a sentence-ifier you find more inspiring? Let us know, and for more craft tips check out my new book for writers,



Bang the Keys and visit the salon at <http://www.bangthekeys.com>. Put down the bottle and pick up your pen ...

Message Edited by Jon_B on 08-20-2009 11:55 AM

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by [Shotmonster](#) on 08-24-2009 09:38 AM

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I love the idea of writing as an escape into one's self. And it's true, no matter what the fate of a project, just having done it, having written something, is often accomplishment enough.

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by [BLOGGER Jill_Dearman](#) on 08-24-2009 07:27 PM

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Hear. Hear. In this overstimulating world it does seem as if we are too inundated with other people's thoughts, to tune into one's own is a delicious enterprise!

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