

## Compare Hersey to Hemingway

### Journalism into Fiction – How Did Hemingway Do It?

by Bill Henderson

**When Ernest Hemingway was a young reporter, he filed stories from Europe for the Toronto Star.** Many of them chronicled the struggles of various European countries to recover their stability following the catastrophe of WWI. Here, he observes the movement of refugees from Eastern Thrace to Macedonia. Later he turned it into fiction.

Take a look at the two versions:

#### From *The Toronto Star*: reporting

In a never-ending, staggering march the Christian population of Eastern Thrace is jamming the roads towards Macedonia. The main column crossing the Maritza River at Adrianople is twenty miles long. Twenty miles of carts drawn by cows, bullocks and muddy-flanked water buffalo, with exhausted, staggering men, women and children, blankets over their heads, walking blindly in the rain beside their worldly goods.

This main stream is being swelled from all the back country. They don't know where they are going. They left their farms, villages and ripe, brown fields and joined the main stream of refugees when they heard the Turk was coming. Now they can only keep their places in the ghastly procession while mud-splashed Greek cavalry herd them along like cow-punchers driving steers.

It is a silent procession. Nobody even grunts. It is all they can do to keep moving. Their brilliant peasant costumes are soaked and draggled. Chickens dangle by their feet from the carts. Calves nuzzle at the draught cattle wherever a jam halts the stream. An old man marches bent under a young pig, a scythe and a gun, with a chicken tied to his scythe. A husband spreads a blanket over a woman in labor in one of the carts to keep off the driving rain. She is the only person making a sound. Her little daughter looks at her in horror and begins to cry. And the procession keeps moving.

#### From *In Our Time*: fiction

Minarets stuck up in the rain out of Adrianople across the mud flats. The carts were jammed for thirty miles along the Karagatch road. Water buffalo and cattle were hauling carts through the mud. No end and no beginning. Just carts loaded with everything they owned. The old men and women, soaked through, walked along keeping the cattle moving. The Maritza was running yellow almost up to the bridge. Carts were jammed solid on the bridge with camels bobbing along through them. Greek cavalry herded along the procession. Women and kids were in the carts crouched with mattresses, mirrors, sewing machines, bundles. There was a woman having a kid with a young girl holding a blanket over her and crying. Scared sick looking at it. It rained all through the evacuation.

**In the Star dispatches**, the purely informational terms and phrases are there because he was writing journalism; his primary responsibility was to convey objective information clearly and directly. And though his reporting had an aesthetic edge to it, to create emotion was not his job.

**By contrast, look what happened** when he “repurposed” the passage in his first volume of fiction, *In Our Time*. What differences do you see? Which version do you find more moving? More purely informative?

**If you are a fiction writer**, seeing these passages displayed side by side should confirm what you’ve learned and are still learning: fiction is about feeling, sensation, and meaning, as well as finding ways to “inform” readers emotionally, through subtext, nuance, indirection, misdirection, and all the other “secrets” of the trade.

**The dual display should also contain a powerful message** for experienced nonfiction writers hoping to cross over into fiction. To you folks—reporters, academics, columnists—who are already confident, experienced writers, I can only say: don’t let your experience work against you. Fiction is truly another country. Take some time and care to learn its ways.

In Our Time: 1 of 3 Riffs on Hemingway

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By

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I was brought up short by the snap of recognition the other day.

In classes I often use the late Michael S. Reynolds’s wonderful books on Hemingway. Last week we looked at secondary source material that Hemingway probably read before he wrote of the execution of the six Greek cabinet ministers (“Chapter V”) in *In Our Time*. This is Hem’s whole chapter:

*They shot the six cabinet ministers at half-past six in the morning against the wall of a hospital. There were pools of water in the courtyard. There were wet dead leaves on the paving of the courtyard. It rained hard. All the shutters of the hospital were nailed shut. One of the ministers was sick with typhoid. Two soldiers carried him downstairs and out into the rain. They tried to hold him up against the wall but he sat down in a puddle of water. The other five stood very quietly against the wall. Finally the officer told the soldiers it was no good trying to make him stand up. When they fired the first volley he was sitting down in the water with his head on his knees.*

Reynolds reproduces two newspaper accounts of the real event. The first, from the AP, is a romantic cliché. “Ex-Ministers Die Bravely,” the headline reads. “Leaders Met Death Jauntily.” The article is all monocles and top hats, gay chatter among the condemned, the presentation of a silver cigarette case by one of the ministers to the officer of the firing squad “as a sign of his appreciation of the latter’s courtesy and tact in the exercise of a painful duty.” The “immaculately dressed” men refused to be blindfolded, and death was pronounced by waiting physicians as “instant.” There was a small, tasteful funeral afterward with relatives.

As Reynolds points out, this kind of sentiment died (temporarily, I would add) in the trenches of WWI, and Hemingway, who had covered the retreat of the Greek army (the catalyst for the executions) for the *Toronto Star*, would have known it.

“The most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in, shock-proof shit detector. This is the writer's radar, and all great writers have it,” he said famously, in a later interview.

The second media account of the executions, a reprint in the *New York Times* of a London newspaper article, revealed more of the truth: One of the ministers, Gounaris, was taken from a hospital and left on a stretcher a mile-and-a-half from the city “in a dying condition,” while the van went back for the five others being held in jail. When the van returned to Gounaris, one of the five prisoners was already dead from heart failure. Gounaris couldn't stand, so he was given injections of strychnine to strengthen his heart long enough for the firing squad to shoot him. The dead man was propped up beside him for the ceremony. After the ministers had been shot, “the firing party rushed forward and emptied their revolvers into the corpses,” including the guy who'd been dead before they even started. Then the bodies were taken to a public cemetery and “thrown out casually in a heap in the mud...”

The difference between the two reports sounds familiar. Think of the early and late news versions of executions in our time; what began with self-congratulations ended with horrified finger-pointing. (Note to future hangmen: Protocol insists you leave the head on. Otherwise it's just not cricket.)

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