

Cooper & Hemingway: The True Gen

A Documentary

The "True Gen"

"The True Gen" is believed to have been first used by members of the Royal Air Force during World War II. Others say that gen is merely short for genuine. Whatever the case, "The True Gen" is used to distinguish accurate information from rumor, innuendo and speculation. Ernest Hemingway picked up the expression and used it frequently...

Coop is a fine man; as honest and straight and friendly and unspoiled as he looks. If you made up a character like Coop, nobody would believe it. He's just too good to be true."
-Ernest Hemingway on Gary Cooper.

And if you made up a character like Ernest Hemingway, how many would believe it? The mercurial Hemingway left people enchanted, hostile, endeared, confused, charmed, bruised, bitter. To everyone, he was an extraordinary, unforgettable presence.

Hollywood's tight-lipped Common Man and the most famous American writer of the 20th Century ...utter opposites ... nothing in common ... impossible as friends ...and yet these two celebrated Americans -- Gary Cooper and Ernest Hemingway -- were the best of friends, from 1940 right up to their deaths a mere seven weeks apart in 1961.

Today, fifty-plus years after their deaths, their intriguing and at times contentious friendship -- which roamed from Idaho and New York and California to Cuba and France -- resonates on fascinating and diverse levels.

To examine the lives of these two American icons is to examine masculinity in the 20th Century -- where it came from, how it developed, and what it means to men and women in the 21st Century. We live in an age when a man who doesn't "express" his feelings, who doesn't "open up" to others, is looked upon with disfavor, if not outright contempt. Given this mood, the Hemingway/Cooper friendship is even more intriguing; because their friendship serves as a perfect -- a supreme -- example of something which is far, far too glibly disparaged in today's climate; i.e., a deep, unapologetically masculine friendship.

Not cold. Not distant. Not emotionally stunted. Rather, a friendship in which needs and admiration are circuitously expressed; through gestures small, muted; and when language is used at all, it is kept to an indirect minimum. Silence is not a state which need be filled with talk. Silence is not unnerving ... threatening.

As artists (A word both men scoffed at), the writer and the actor were masters of minimalism. Indeed, both men pretty much own this century's patent on "less is more."

Before Raymond Carver, Eudora Welty, George Saunders, so many others, there was Hemingway. As Elmore Leonard has said: “Ernest Hemingway influenced more writers than any other author. Period.”

Check out Clint Eastwood, Viggo Mortensen, Kevin Costner, etc. Cooper was there first. As Tom Hanks put it: “Watching Gary Cooper in his first film, WINGS from 1927, we’re seeing the future of screen acting. He does something which is far closer to ‘being’ than acting.”

Long before today’s paparazzi, there were the 1920s, the dawn of celebrity as we know it. Cooper and Hemingway both came to public consciousness at this time. Just as today is a mine field for the famous, so too back then. How Cooper and Hemingway handled their fame defined both men over their entire careers.

Fashion is a dominant force in today’s culture. But as Bill Blass pointed out, it was Gary Cooper who led the way. Cooper, Blass said, was one of only two men to have had a lasting impact on masculine fashion in the 20th Century. Indeed, it was Gary Cooper who invented the stone-washed jeans! Givenchi hailed Cooper as a man of utter fashion perfection.

In this day, when many movie stars are heavily involved in politics, Cooper was there ahead of them. Cooper, the so-called conservative, stood up in 1951 and put his career on the line for an ex-Communist, screenwriter Carl Foreman. He risked blacklisting himself when he threatened to walk off HIGH NOON if Foreman’s name were removed. Nor was Hemingway silent during those brutal HUAC days. His comment that the HUAC Congressmen “were lower than snakeshit” would sound right at home on any of today’s free-wheeling political blogs.

Today’s medical news is often dominated by new drug treatment for bi-polar behavior, new ways to treat manic-depression. So, too, in the 1950s. Hemingway had suffered severe head trauma after a plane crash in Africa in 1954. It took a toll on him, emotionally and physically. On top of which, his inherited mood disorder had grown increasingly severe. The drugs for his hypertension were causing deep depression, which was being treated by electro shock therapy. Which caused Hemingway to lose his memory, which is fatal to a writer. Thus creating even greater depression. The more things change ...

But THE TRUE GEN is far more than just a study of these two extraordinary men. It is also a study of America in this century. For their internationally renowned careers were played out over the same five turbulent decades: the hedonistic 20s ... the grim Depression 30s ... the war-ravaged 40s ... and the deceptively slumbering 50s. Smack into the erupting sixties. Their final, poignant chapter closed at the beginning of a decade which would challenge many of the very ideals and precepts which both men so prominently represented.

Their torch was passed to a generation with new ideas about masculinity and heroism.

However, September 11, 2001, changed everything. Since 9/11, Americans have begun taking a new look at courage, at masculinity. And they’re looking, not to our own times, but back to another time to understand what real masculinity is, to come to grips with what manhood means in the face of impossible odds. Not the courage of a so-called super-hero. But the courage of an

ordinary man facing extraordinary circumstances. Not muscle-bound, ultra-professional warriors, not bullets-don't-kill, super-masculine, super-heroes. Ordinary people ...

A long time ago, Ernest Hemingway and Gary Cooper dealt with this very subject, as no one had before, as no one has since. Hemingway's fiction and Cooper's persona -- which served as Hemingway's alter ego on screen -- was never about brute winning, smash-mouth masculinity. What made/makes it so special, so moving, so timely, is that it was not about masculinity as a one-note, implacable force of nature, rather, it was about the self-respect that comes from comporting oneself with courage in the face of impossible circumstances.

Hemingway's fiction has suddenly become timely, indeed. Hemingway hated war and his fiction is ferociously anti-war. His novels and stories examine the complexity of war, of men's fears in the face of battle. Both President Barack Obama and Sen. John McCain have called For Whom The Bell Tolls Robert Jordan (whom Cooper portrayed in the film) their favorite fictional character.

Today, politicians around the globe, from American Presidents to leaders in Germany and Japan, champion themselves as latter-day Gary Coopers. However, perhaps nothing speaks to Cooper's timeless international legacy more than his presence in bars and cafes throughout Poland, in cities and hamlets. To this day, huge colorful posters showcase Gary Cooper in his iconic role in High Noon. Under the headline 'At High Noon', there is the red solidarity banner of the Polish Solidarity movement. The date, June 4, 1989, was the date of the first truly democratic Polish elections. Cooper is carrying, not a gun, but a ballot.

And so, perhaps Gary Cooper and Ernest Hemingway didn't really pass the torch, perhaps they merely lent it.