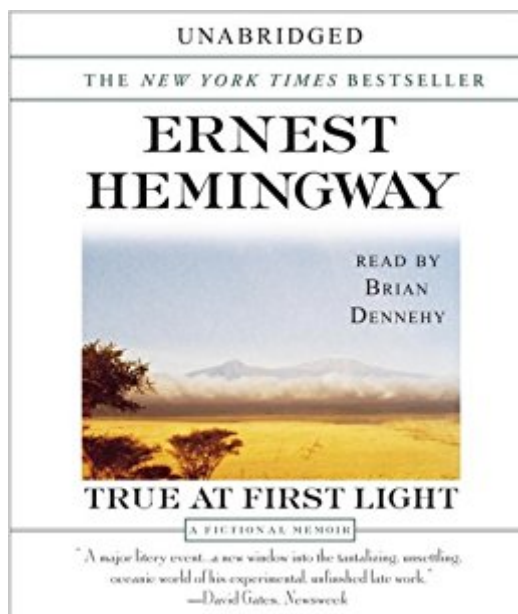


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# True At First Light



## Synopsis

ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S LAST UNPUBLISHED WORK! A blend of autobiography and fiction, *True at First Light* opens on the day Ernest Hemingway's close friend Pop, a celebrated hunter, leaves him in charge of the safari camp and news arrives of a potential attack from a hostile tribe. Drama continues to build as his wife, Mary, pursues the great, black-maned lion that has become her obsession. Equally adept at evoking the singular textures of the landscape, the thrill of the hunt and the complexities of married life, Hemingway waves a tale that is rich in laughter, beauty, and profound insight. *True at First Light* is the breathtaking final work from one of this nation's most beloved and important writers.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Ernest Hemingway's final posthumous work bears the rather awkward designation "a fictional memoir" and arrives under a cloud of controversial editing and patching--but all of that ends up being beside the point. Though this account of a 1953 safari in Kenya lacks the resolution and clarity of the best Hemingway (*The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*) it is "real" Hemingway nonetheless. Let scholars work out where memoir leaves off and fiction begins: for the common reader, the prose alone casts an irresistible spell. In *True at First Light* the glory days of the "great white hunters" are over and the Mau Mau rebellion is violently dislodging European farmers from Kenya's arable lands. But to the African gun bearers, drivers, and game scouts who run his safari in the shadow of Mount Kilimanjaro, Hemingway remains a lordly figure--almost a god. Two parallel quests propel the narrative: Mary, Hemingway's fourth and last wife, doggedly stalks an enormous

black-maned lion that she is determined to kill by Christmas, while Hemingway becomes increasingly obsessed with Debba, a beautiful young African woman. What makes the novel especially strange and compelling is that Mary knows all about Debba and accepts her as a "supplementary wife," even as she loses no opportunity to rake her husband over the coals for his drinking, lack of discipline in camp, and condescending protectiveness. As usual with Hemingway, atmosphere and attitude are far more important than plot. Mary at one point berates her husband as a "conscience-ridden murderer," but this is precisely the moral stance that gives the hunting scenes their tension and beauty. "I was happy that before he died he had lain on the high yellow rounded mound with his tail down," Hemingway writes of "Mary's lion," "and his great paws comfortable before him and looked off across his country to the blue forest and the high white snows of the big Mountain." Passages like these--and there are many of them--redeem the book's rambling structure and occasional lapses into self-indulgent posturing. Joan Didion dismissed *True at First Light* in *The New Yorker* as "words set down but not yet written," but this fails to acknowledge the power of these words. The value of *True at First Light* lies in its candor, its nakedness: it provides a rare opportunity to watch a master working his way toward art. --David Laskin --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Who wants to go on an 11-hour audio safari with an aging, ego-bloated Hemingway? That's the immediate drawback to listening to this posthumous memoir-turned-novel (edited into its current form by the legendary author's son Patrick). If anyone is capable of breathing life into Hemingway's late tale of big-game hunting with his wife in East Africa, however, it is Dennehy, one of the finest narrators in the spoken-audio field. Here he works to convey the essential nature of Hemingway's character; he contrasts the sparse elegance of Hemingway's descriptive prose style against the more swaggering posture of his ever-present pride. By the time Hemingway wrote this book, he was well aware of his celebrity, his aura, his powers. As was able to flatly say, "I love command." Dennehy plays up this self-conscious quality, offering it as a portrait of the author's psyche. It's that sense of performance that makes this audio adaptation spark to life. Based on the 1999 Scribner hardcover. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Ernest Hemingway's *True at First Light*, edited and published posthumously by his son Patrick, has often been savaged and trashed by many literary critics and reviewers from coast to coast. Few seem to be hunters and fewer still have ever hunted in Africa. One reviewer writing in the *New York*

Times even accused Hemingway of killing a tiger in Africa, a most difficult feat unless he gunned one down in the Johannesburg zoo! It is true that *True at First Light* is not great literature, but it is a slow, loving portrait of what for the middle aged white male author of declining prowess was the ideal safari in the mid 1950's. In many ways, it is the ultimate male hunting and adolescent fantasy and shows, in stark relief, the inner, adolescent Hemmingway at his most vulnerable. The elements of fantasy in this African safari are many. First, it is of almost unbelievable length. Indeed, when Hemingway picks up the narrative, it is already over three months long, with his wife Mary having been on a vision quest for a black maned lion for 96 days! Moreover in this dream safari, Hemingway is no longer just the hunting client. Although in real life, unlike Robert Rurak or James Mellon, Hemingway never really rose to the level of hunting greatness and was guided on most of his expeditions. In *True At First Light*, he has graduated to true white hunter status and is left on his own by his mentor, the legendary Percy Perceval. He is in charge of the district, guiding his own safari, warding off disease among the Africans, protecting his people from the Mau Mau insurgents and showing one and all how to get the job done. And what a shot he has become. When Miss Mary finally gets a shot at her lion, she manages to wound it in the foot and it is left to Bwana Hemingway to kill it at a great distance in the failing light. Later, Hemingway and a British game ranger pace off the distance and agree never to tell the distance for it is too great! You bet. There is also enough alcohol flowing for even the most ardent of Bud Lite commercials. Pop pops a cold can at breakfast, carries around a flask of wagini with him all day, knocks back a fair amount at lunch and then really gets up a head of steam as the sun is setting. Never a hangover in this fantasy, and not much about poor health habits either, although Miss Mary does ask that he not hit the beer at breakfast on the day they are finally going for the lion. After 94 days, she is rather keen on ending this lion quest once and for all without getting killed herself. In real life, of course, Miss Mary knows of what she speaks for she once awoke in the middle of the Gulf Stream with the Papa-piloted boat going round and round in big circles, Papa having passed out at the wheel about midnight. In Hemingway's dream fantasy, the sex is pretty good too. In fact, it's damn good. Remember this is pre-Viagra, so the 60+ year old Hemmingway having sex three times in one night, with his own wife, in the dark, on a small camp cot without benefit of vibrators, erotic imagery on the Playboy Channel or any other stimuli after a hard twelve hours of drinking belongs in the Guinness Book of Records even before you throw in his cavorting with the African lass Debra. Debra, of course, belongs in every white hunter's fantasy. She is a young, compliant Wa-Kamba girl completely smitten with our hero. She is lovely and proud and apparently has incredible breasts and she adores Hemmingway. She loves riding around in the Land Rover, her hand resting firmly on his pistol and hard leather

holster. He brings her haunches of meat and wishes he could take her back to the US as his second wife but there are (more's the pity perhaps) laws against this sort of thing, although not here out in the distant African bush. Whenever he is not finishing off one of Mary's wounded animals or being in charge of the district, he is cavorting with Debra, teaching her to communicate in, of all things, Spanish. Not chatting her up in Wa-Kamba or English or Swahili but in Spanish. When I learned this, I was absolutely sure this was a fantasy for whatever possible use could this poor girl have for Spanish except to say "I love you" to him in this dream fantasy? Best of all for all white male hunters in their sixties, the wife is very, very understanding even encouraging. In this novel, Mary rather than getting upset about Hemingway's cavorting with Debra, Miss Mary says, "I like your fiancée very much because she is very much like me and I think she'd be a valuable extra wife if you need one." This is a level of support almost beyond belief. Could Miss Mary have been an early prototype for Hillary Rodham Clinton? Perhaps best of all, the fantasy never ends. The book itself staggers to an inconclusive conclusion with them planning to take the safari on the road "to the Belgian Congo" and when Miss Mary asks Hem if they have enough "money" to keep the safari going, he allows as how they do. Most hunting tales are an amalgam of reality and fantasy and this is no exception certainly. Perhaps one will find it a tad self indulgent, not unlike Barbara Streisand directing herself in "The Mirror Has Two Faces" or Robert Redford doing the same in "The Horse Whisperer" ("Will this film ever end?"). But it's all in a good cause. So there you have it, fabulous shooting, on your own and in charge, lots of sex, no hangovers, no guilt and an endless safari into the future. It is rare we see the male psyche so exposed and vulnerable showing us what it needs to survive, let alone flourish. Karen Blixen once wrote "True hunters are in love with the animals they kill but it is not reciprocated." There is a lot to that observation, although Hemingway might argue otherwise. Indeed Hemingway seems to have always understood its ramifications most clearly wanting, "To live bravely, to die bravely and to go directly to the Happy Hunting Grounds." Because once he stops trying, he is done. As Hemingway says in *True at First Light*, "I'm not hopeless because I still have hope. The day I haven't you'll know it bloody quick." Reading *True at First Light* is a lot like watching Frank Sinatra come out of retirement to sing. You know he'll never hit those notes again he used to, and his pacing is going to be off, but there is something touching and poignant and affirming about listening to him try. *True at First Light* a good read once one suspends disbelief, especially about the author's shooting skills, his sexual prowess, the Mau Mau uprising and Papa being in charge of his own safari, as well as a counter-insurgency campaign against them.

Hemingway has been unfortunate in his literary executors. They often seem to have acted out of

greed rather than with an eye to the heritage of this major American writer. *Islands in the Stream*, though flawed, was well worth the effort of placing it before the public. That can't be said for the "new edition" of *A Movable Feast*, which is a blemish on the publisher. And it can't be said for this effort.

this a book for die hard Hemmingway fans. It is pretty much a rough draft of something he was working on when he died. It can get really boring for extended periods. It pretty much loses any compelling need to read further once the lion is killed. I kept at it because of the imagery. You can almost see Africa. Ps. A working knowledge of several African languages will be very helpful.

Great literature work.. Easy to read and captivate you.. "I'm happy with being forced to do nothing. We have such a wonderful exciting life every day that it is good to be forced to stop and appreciate it. When it is over we are going to wish we'd had time to appreciate it more." - Mary Hemingway, Taken from *True at first Light* by Ernest Hemingway

For the individual who feels they were born 50+ years too late, can't time travel to old Africa to hunt, a total must read.

*TRUE AT FIRST LIGHT* by Ernest Hemingway Possibly the last of several posthumous publications, timely retailed on Hemingway's hundredth anniversary, *True At First Light* is called a fictional memoir. The author never kept a diary or journal to record events as he lived them but wrote when it suited him from memory. These 320 pages should be read by anyone interested in anything written by Hemingway, with this caveat: don't expect a product deemed ready for publication. Still, the book serves as a record and description of events and people in an Africa that, like the author, exists bigger than life, but only in memories and memoirs. Aficionados can glean gems of sentences and paragraphs that alone make the reading worthwhile, perhaps the best giving title to the work: *In Africa a thing is true at first light and a lie by noon and you have no more respect for it than for the lovely, perfect weed-fringed lake you see across the sun-baked plain. You have walked across that plain in the morning and you know that no such lake is there. But now it is there absolutely true, beautiful and believable.* Within these same covers, Hemingway rambles with single sentences that fill a page and change thought progression several times, leaving the reader numb and out of breath, but then magically follows with concise, imagery-filled prose: *White flowers had blossomed in the night so that with the first daylight before the sun had risen all the meadows looked as though a full moon was shining on*

new snow through a mist. Æ Good stuff, that. The book Æ's theme shows clear in this detailed hunt scene, vintage Hemingway that puts you there: Æ™ Now I figured that I was far enough to the left and began moving in toward the lion. He stood there thigh deep in brush and I saw his head turn once to look toward me; then it swung back to watch Mary and G.C. His head was huge and dark but when he moved it the head did not look too big for his body. His body was heavy, great and long. I did not know how close G.C. would try to work Mary toward the lion. I did not watch them. I watched the lion and waited to hear the shot. I was as close as I needed to be now and have room to take him if he came and I was sure that if he were wounded he would break toward me as his natural cover was behind me. Mary must take him soon, I thought. She can Æ get any closer. But maybe G.C. wants her closer. I looked at them from the corner of my eyes, my head down, not looking away from the lion. I could see Mary wanted to shoot and that G.C. was preventing her. They were not trying to work closer so I figured that from where they were, there were some limbs of brush between Mary and the lion. I watched the lion and felt the change in his coloring as the first peak of the hills took the sun. It was good light to shoot now but it would go fast. I watched the lion and he moved very slightly to his right and then looked at Mary and G.C. I could see his eyes. Still Mary did not shoot. Then the lion moved very slightly again and I heard Mary Æ's rifle go and the dry whack of the bullet. She had hit him. Æ The entire narrative covers only a few months of 1952 in a Kenya safari camp. Writing in first person, Hemingway describes the landscape, animals and humans with his own unique opinions of their worth. His ego breaks through in every observation, giving those interested a good helping of his obvious desire--and need--to be in control of everything and everybody. He even creates a new religion, with himself in the shining middle, of course. For those wanting only to read a book about Africa by Ernest Hemingway, try *Green Hills of Africa*, written in the thirties and submitted by the author for publication. If your interest is simply the Africa of the first half of this century, read *West With the Night*, by Beryl Markham. She spent most of her life in Africa and just happens to be the first person to fly non-stop from Europe to America. To quote Hemingway, Æ™...she can write rings around all of us who consider ourselves writers. Æ True *At First Light* is worth reading but perhaps is best defined by its title.

This was less than expected, but that's what one gets when a son and an editor finish up the manuscript. It's almost a parody of my friend Hem's style. Stick with the early works.

I must have missed the point. So much of this book involved conversations that were unintelligible to

me.

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