

Books

Paula McLain's 'The Paris Wife': A novel about Hemingway's first wife

By Donna Rifkind April 17, 2011

Paula McLain's historical novel about Ernest Hemingway's first marriage has been climbing up the best-seller lists as steadily as reviewers have been dismissing it. The Los Angeles Times called the book "a Hallmark version" of Hemingway's Paris years, hampered by "pedestrian writing and overpowering sentiment." The New York Times concurred, calling Hemingway's wife Hadley "a stodgy bore" and McLain's prose cliché-ridden and plodding. So who's right: enthusiastic book-buying audiences or unsympathetic critics?

Score one for the consumers. "The Paris Wife" is a richer and more provocative book than many reviewers have acknowledged. What they call clichés are simply conventions that all historical novels share, including Nancy Horan's "Loving Frank," the acclaimed best seller that McLain's book superficially resembles. And "The Paris Wife" is a more ambitious effort than just a Hallmark version of Americans in Paris. It's an imaginative homage to Hadley Richardson Hemingway, whose quiet support helped her young husband become a writer, and it gives readers a chance to see the person Hemingway aspired to be before fame turned him into something else.

Building her fictional but scrupulously true-to-life narration around many source materials, including two full-length biographies of Hadley as well as Hemingway's posthumous memoir, "A Moveable Feast," McLain begins by dramatizing how damaged Ernest and Hadley were by the time they met in Chicago in 1920. Hadley's father had killed himself in their St. Louis home when she was 13, a grim foreshadowing of Ernest's father's suicide and, decades later, Ernest's own. She had also mourned the deaths of a beloved older sister and her mother.

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Ernest, who had been seriously wounded in Italy during the Great War while a teenager, was suffering from the shaking nightmares and depression that today we call post-traumatic stress disorder and was then known as shell shock. This early brush with death had a profound influence on much of Hemingway's future behavior and on all the fiction he wrote. McLain is right to underscore it, along with Hadley's abundant sympathy for his suffering, with compassionate sensitivity.

Ernest and Hadley were down when they met, but they weren't out. He was 21 and burning to be a writer. She was 28 and yearning to be a wife. They fell hard for each other. If the novel's beginning sections stumble over a few expository bumps (Hadley: "What do you mean to do?" Ernest: "Make literary history, I guess."), the narrative finds its flow a few months after the couple's wedding, when they make their way to Paris. Hadley's impressions of the city — dirty, war-shocked, tawdry and raw — stand out against Ernest's instantaneous delight, though in time she came to appreciate "the oddity and the splendor."

There was no doubt that here, on the cheap, Ernest was able to make Paris his informal university. Here he could learn from working-class Parisians as well as expatriate intellectuals, many of whom — notably Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein — served as mentors who helped him forge a blazingly new way to write fiction. He could study the Cezannes at the Musee du Luxembourg, figuring out how to translate the depths of their purity into language. And he could devote long, arduous hours to writing in cafes and garrets, knowing that Hadley, who hoped for his success as fervently as if it were her own, would be waiting for him soothingly at home.

Like all perfect setups, this one would not last. The tale of its ruin is familiar, but it gains freshness from Hadley's point of view. With his first flush of literary notoriety, Ernest cast off his mentors, alienating them with a self-sabotaging viciousness that became a lifelong habit. At the same time, his social circle widened to include a recklessly modern new crowd, including Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Duff Twysden — the model for Lady Brett Ashley in "The Sun Also Rises" — and Sara and Gerald Murphy. Their high-life bohemianism threatened Hadley, who was by now happily if squarely encumbered with a baby son. Then, in a still-sickening betrayal, Ernest engineered an exit from his marriage by conducting a prolonged, open affair with Hadley's friend Pauline Pfeiffer, the perilously chic Vogue staffer who became the second of his four wives.

McLain writes about Hadley's pain during the death throes of her marriage with a terrible delicacy, suitable for this modest, steadfast woman who was nobody's fool. (It's clear that the author knows plenty about abandonment: Her 2003 memoir, "Like Family," is a scorchingly frank reminiscence of growing up in foster homes in the 1970s.) At a low point, when Ernest, Hadley and Pauline are vacationing together in southern France, Hadley takes note of their three bicycles on a rock path. "You could see just how thin each kickstand was under the weight of the heavy frame, and how they were poised to fall like dominoes or the skeletons of elephants," she says. Hemingway fans will not fail to remember the haunting image in his story "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" when death approaches "in pairs, on bicycles, and moved absolutely silently on the pavements."

A First Wife Can Be So Stolid and Clueless and Plain and Pregnant

By JANET MASLIN FEB. 27, 2011

The strikingly attractive cover of “The Paris Wife” depicts a glamorous, poised-looking woman perched in a Paris cafe. She wears a belted, tailored dress reminiscent of the late 1940s or early 1950s. Her face cannot be seen, but her posture radiates confidence and freedom. The picture is interesting because it has absolutely nothing to do with the book it is selling.

The heroine of “The Paris Wife” is Hadley Richardson, the athletic, sturdily built, admittedly unfashionable homebody who married Ernest Hemingway in 1921. They were divorced in 1927. Hadley was, by all accounts including this one, a very fine and decent person, but she was the starter wife of a man who wound up treating her terribly. Had she not married him, no novelist would be telling her story.

But Paula McLain has built “The Paris Wife” around Hadley. Or at least she has planted Hadley in the midst of a lot of famous, ambitious people. The advantage to this technique is that it allows the reader to rub shoulders and bend elbows with celebrated literary types: the stay-at-home way of feeling like the soigné figure on the book cover. The drawback is that Ms. McLain’s Hadley, when not in big-league company that overshadows her, isn’t a subtly drawn character. She’s thick, and not just in physique. She’s slow on the uptake, and she can be a stodgy bore.

“Why couldn’t I be happy?” she asks herself at the start of the novel. “And just what was happiness anyway?” She has just met the younger Hemingway at a party in Chicago in 1920; she herself wasn’t all that young during their courtship. “I was 29, feeling almost obsolete, but Ernest was 21 and white hot with life,” she confides. “What was I thinking?” (Come on. We know what she was thinking.) And: “He was a light-footed lad on a Grecian urn chasing truth and beauty. Where did I fit in exactly?”

“The Paris Wife” raises fewer questions about Hadley’s thinking than it does about Ms. McLain’s. This novel draws heavily on research, but it does so in confounding ways. When Hadley describes writing a letter to her sweetheart, for instance, is the book paraphrasing a real letter? Let’s hope so, because if not, she is just being dull. “I made my reply last all day, putting things down as they happened,” Hadley says, “wanting to be sure he could picture me moving from room to room, practicing the piano, sitting down to a perfect cup of ginger tea with my friend Alice Hunt, watching our gardener prune the rosebushes and swaddle them in burlap for winter.”

Hadley’s real voice, at least as quoted in Hemingway’s Paris memoir, “A Moveable Feast,” isn’t dissimilar to Ms. McLain’s version. But in the context of his writing she sounds much livelier. Historically, Hemingway used his first wife as a sounding board as he framed his own ideas. He also invoked her with wit, selectivity and care.

The first third of the “The Paris Wife” is its most cliché-ridden. (“Did you ever think it could be like this?” “I can do anything if I have you with me.”) And it moves ploddingly. (“Grace had me pinned in the parlor, talking about the superiority of European lace, while Dr. Hemingway hovered with a plate of cheeses and beets he’d preserved himself, from his garden in Walloon Lake.”) For the reader’s purposes, these two can’t get to Paris fast enough. They go there from Chicago after the playwright Sherwood Anderson recommends the change of scenery. “Everything’s interesting and everyone has something to contribute,” he says. “Paris, Hem. Give it some thought.”

Once the couple gets to Paris, the book's real name dropping begins. Along come Ezra Pound, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein and James Joyce. And their great works become topics of stilted banter. Here is Ms. McLain's version of lifelike chat: " 'Everyone says "Ulysses" is great,' Ernest said. 'I've read a few serialized chapters. It's not what I'm used to, but you know, something important is happening in it just the same.' " As for Hadley, she doesn't add much to these conversations, but she replays them for the reader. And she is very polite: "I spooned up my delicious soup as quietly as a mouse." "The Paris Wife" turns into a bizarre pastiche when Ms. McLain begins borrowing and repurposing familiar voices. Hadley walks by the Île St.-Louis, goes down to the Seine, watches the fishermen and eats fried goujon — just as Hemingway did in his essay "People of the Seine." Zelda Fitzgerald paraphrases Daisy Buchanan's dialogue from "The Great Gatsby." The noisy, real-life models for characters in "The Sun Also Rises" suddenly drop into the story en masse. And Hadley learns to talk more like her husband. She begins using simple declarative sentences. In the end he says Hadley is "everything good and straight and fine and true." She says he is "fine and strong and weak and cruel."

Throughout the book Ms. McLain relies on clumsy foreshadowing, to the point where Hadley can spy a "delicious-looking" baby, then find out on the very next page that she is pregnant. Once the Hemingways' son is born Hadley's situation rapidly becomes untenable. Hard-partying bohemian expatriates don't much like babies. And they don't like fidelity either. After Hadley makes the dreadful gaffe of losing the valise that held all of Hemingway's early work, the great man thinks he has an excuse to be angry. His mind and body begin to wander.

At this point Pauline Pfeiffer worms her way into the novel so boldly that even Hadley senses trouble. Pauline, who is as chic as Hadley is frumpy, makes herself an instant fixture in the Hemingway household. She wildly flatters Hemingway about his writing. She gives Hadley the alarming pet name "Dulla," and then insists on becoming Hadley's closest chum. She borrows Hadley's slippers, merrily saying, "You won't be able to pry them off me." In a feat of world-class back stabbing she crusades secretly to become Hemingway's next wife (the second of four).

Was this changing of the guard an end for Hemingway? Or was it a new beginning? Get ready for abundant debate on issues raised by "The Paris Wife,"

because what it lacks in style is made up for in staying power. This is a work of literary tourism that expertly flatters its reader. It invokes an artist-packed Paris where “nearly anyone might feel like a painter.” It keeps Hadley so trusting and good-hearted that it’s impossible for the reader not to spot trouble, i.e., get smart before she does. And it heats up a blaze of righteous indignation on her behalf.

Oh, Hadley, you could have been such a fine helpmate to that man if he hadn’t been such a louse. Isn’t it pretty to think so?

THE PARIS WIFE

By Paula McLain

320 pages. Ballantine Books. \$25.

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The Paris Wife Reader's Guide

BY PAULA MCLAIN

Category: Literary Fiction | Women's Fiction |
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READERS GUIDE

For many years, I taught high school English and had the very particular experience of treading through canonical Hemingway stories such as "Hills Like White Elephants" and "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," with mostly baffled sophomores. I knew Hemingway the writer well enough to give a lecture on his theories of grace under pressure, but Hemingway the man was eclipsed by the puffed-up details of his mythology—the big-game hunting, bullfighting, boozing, and philandering. I'd read his memoir, *A Moveable Feast*, at one point in my own undergraduate education, but all memory of the book had long since disappeared into the oatmeal-like morass of things I'd read but didn't remember for seminars. And so when I picked up *A Moveable Feast* again, just a few years ago, I came to the book with entirely fresh eyes, and fell madly in love. As I turned the pages, my hands shook. I felt utterly transported into the world of 1920s Paris, and into the smaller, more profound (for me) world of Hemingway's first marriage, to Hadley Richardson.

Hadley is the heroine of *A Moveable Feast*. In small scenes and exchanges of dialogue, Hemingway renders Hadley and their connection with a tenderness and poignancy that moved me, but also set my writer's mind ticking. Just who was Hadley Richardson? How had these two young lovers met, and what was it like to be married to Ernest Hemingway before he became the writer and near-mythological figure we know so well? My curiosity was spurred even further by the fact that when he wrote *A Moveable Feast* at the tail end of the 1950s and early '60s (it was published in 1964, after his death), he was well into his fourth marriage. Those early days in Paris were nearly forty years behind him and yet, in the final pages he writes of Hadley, "I wished I had died before I ever loved anyone but her."

What had happened between these two, who'd clearly had an extraordinary connection? I simply had to know, and so began a process of research that ultimately led me to write *The Paris Wife*. Along the way, I searched out multiple biographies of both Hadley and Ernest Hemingway, read and reread his early stories and novels, and visited the Hemingway archive at the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library in Boston. It's like a shrine: a lovely small room with some of his furniture, an animal skin rug, art, and personal effects. And of course they have all of his works in manuscript form, as well as the bulk of his correspondence. I went there expressly to read Hadley's letters to him during their eleven-month whirlwind courtship in 1920–21, and those are amazing. Her voice is incredible—charming, candid, funny, romantic—and I began to believe I could write the book I was dying to write, because I'd found and understood her.

Beginning to truly hear a character's voice is like finding a piece of magic string that pulls you inside her consciousness, and helps you see the world through her very particular point of view, unfolding the story as only she can tell it. Hadley's speaking voice in my novel isn't the real flesh-and-blood woman's in a literal way. I didn't have permission to use Hadley's words verbatim and didn't even search that permission out, because I was writing a novel, not a biography, and wanted the freedom to discover and invent beyond the literal scope of her paper trail. But reading her letters helped me hear her clearly as I worked, and what I ultimately developed is an alchemical combination of her voice and my own.

Because I was essentially living inside Hadley's character as I worked on the book, I also began to fall hard for young Hemingway. I couldn't help myself, really, because I was getting to know him as she did, slowly and intimately. Through her eyes, I found him to be incredibly likeable—vulnerable, and full of self-doubt and impossibly high ideals. I began to sympathize with him more and more as the obscuring vestiges of his

persona began to fall away—the machismo and swagger and big game safaris, those details that suggested he was merely one of his own troubled characters. I was left with a deep curiosity about who Hemingway really was. What were the forces that pushed on him psychically and emotionally? How could he betray Hadley, his best friend and muse?

Trying to get to the bottom of those questions led me to write a few select passages from Ernest's perspective. This was a terrifying proposition. Hemingway's style is so iconic and recognizable to us, I worried some readers might misunderstand and think I was in competition with him, pitting my language against his. (As if I'd even try!) I'm so glad I pushed through and didn't give in to cowardice, because I believe the final book is truer and more balanced for showing his thoughts and feelings. Not all readers will be won over by my version of Hemingway, but I hope the majority will feel they've glimpsed his complexity and some portion of his humanity. He was such a big person and, as Hadley once said in an interview, had "more sides to him than any geography book could ever chart."

I'm often asked if I traveled to Paris for my research, and the answer is yes. After a fashion. I'd never attempted a historical novel before, and felt I needed to focus completely on my writing in order to do it well. So I quit my teaching job and got serious about my writing routine. From nine to three, five days a week, you could find me tucked into a brown velveteen chair at my neighborhood Starbucks in Cleveland, where I live. This was in late 2008. I had no idea the economy was about to take a nosedive, and that it was the worst possible time to downshift in my career. I was dying to get to Paris, and yet I didn't have the funds to go around the corner. My savings were dwindling rapidly, but I pushed all my anxiety to the side and surrendered to the demands of the book. A Starbucks in Cleveland is hardly a Parisian café—and yet in a way that didn't matter. Every day's work was like traveling back in time. I slipped through a miraculous portal to the Boulevard Montparnasse, where Hemingway was writing in a worn blue notebook and staring out the window into the rain. Hours vanished in a blink as I was deliciously swept away.

By the time I finished the first draft seven months later, I had six hundred dollars in my savings account and was on the verge of applying for a job at Whole Foods. But because life is very good, the book found a wonderful home at Ballantine, and I could keep working on it, now with the help of my brilliant editor, Susanna Porter. In the summer of 2010, when the novel was finally complete and about to go into production, I didn't have to think twice about what I would do to celebrate: I would go to France and Spain, to the places I'd already been to over and over in my imagination, as I traced the Hemingways' travels during their years of marriage—from Paris to San Sebastian, then Pamplona, then Antibes.

Connecting to Ernest and Hadley's experiences in a physical way was beyond remarkable. I stood outside the chipped blue door of their first apartment in Paris, at 74 Cardinal Lemoine, where they arrived as newlyweds in the winter of 1921. Hadley's letters described the apartment as dark and cramped, "full of funny angles and corners." I wasn't brave enough to ring the bell to see if the current tenant would allow me up, but even if I had been, it wouldn't have been the same apartment where Hadley moved the furniture from room to room and, pushing hard against homesickness, tried to make a home. That space I already knew by heart.

Writing *The Paris Wife* has been the most rewarding experience of my professional life—and it's a gift that keeps on giving. When I travel for events and talk to book clubs, I'm overwhelmed by readers' passionate responses to the book, and to Hadley in particular. I love it when book club members confess to having heated late-night discussions over glasses of nice French wine: How could she let him get away with that? How could she have done otherwise? Or how, once they've turned the last page of the book, they immediately Google Hadley—to see her face and to trace the details of the rest of her life, to know that things ended well for her. She's as alive for them as she is for me—a real and complex woman who struggled bravely with choices that loom for all of us, and with the Herculean feat of staying true to herself when the stakes grew impossibly high. Talking to readers who've just come away from the book—tearful or exhilarated but always ready to hop the next flight to Charles de Gaulle—keeps me ever connected to Hadley, Ernest, and their stirring love story. The journey goes on, and I'm happy and grateful you've come along for the ride.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. In many ways, Hadley's girlhood in St. Louis was a difficult and repressive experience. How do her early years prepare her to meet and fall in love with Ernest? What does life with Ernest offer her that she hasn't encountered before? What are the risks?

2. Hadley and Ernest don't get a lot of encouragement from their friends and family when they decide to marry. What seems to draw the two together? What are some of the strengths of their initial attraction and partnership? The challenges?
3. The Ernest Hemingway we meet in *The Paris Wife*—through Hadley's eyes—is in many ways different from the ways we imagine him when faced with the largeness of his later persona. What do you see as his character strengths? Can you see what Hadley saw in him?
4. Throughout *The Paris Wife*, Hadley refers to herself as “Victorian” as opposed to “modern.” What are some of the ways she doesn't feel like she fits into life in bohemian Paris? How does this impact her relationship with Ernest? Her self-esteem? What are some of the ways Hadley's “old-fashioned” quality can be seen as a strength and not a weakness?
5. Hadley and Ernest's marriage survived for many years in Jazz-Age Paris, an environment that had very little patience for monogamy and other traditional values. What in their relationship seems to sustain them? How does their marriage differ from those around them? Pound and Shakespeare's? Scott and Zelda's?
6. Most of *The Paris Wife* is written in Hadley's voice, but a few select passages come to us from Ernest's point of view. What impact does getting Ernest's perspective have on our understanding of their marriage? How does it affect your ability to understand him and his motivations in general?
7. How is Hadley challenged and restricted by her gender? Would those restrictions have changed if she had been an artist and not “merely” a wife?
8. One of the most wrenching scenes in the book is when Hadley loses a valise containing all of Ernest's work to date. What kind of turning point does this mark for the Hemingway's marriage? Do you think Ernest ever forgives her?
9. Hadley and Ernest had similar upbringings in many ways. What are the parallels, and how do these affect the choices Hadley makes as a wife and mother?
10. In *The Paris Wife*, when Ernest receives his contract for *In Our Time*, Hadley says, “He would never again be unknown. We would never again be this happy” (page 195). How did fame affect Ernest and his relationship with Hadley?
11. How does the time and place—Paris in the twenties—affect Ernest and Hadley's marriage? What impact does the war, for instance, have on the choices and behavior of the expatriate artists surrounding the Hemingways? Do you see Ernest changing in response to the world around him? How, and how does Hadley feel about those changes?
12. What was the nature of the relationship between Hadley and Pauline Pfeiffer? Were they legitimately friends? How do you see Pauline taking advantage of her intimate position in the Hemingways' life? Do you think Hadley is naïve for not suspecting Pauline of having designs on Ernest earlier? Why or why not?
13. It seems as if Ernest tries to make his marriage work even after Pauline arrives on the scene. What would it have cost Hadley to stick it out with Ernest no matter what? Is there a way she could have fought harder for her marriage?

14. In many ways, Hadley is a very different person at the end of the novel than the girl she was when she first encountered Ernest by chance at a party. How do you understand her trajectory and transformation? Are there any ways she essentially doesn't change?

15. When Hemingway's biographer Carlos Baker interviewed Hadley Richardson near the end of her life, he expected her to be bitter, and yet she persisted in describing Ernest as a "prince." How can she have continued to love and admire him after the way he hurt her?

16. Ernest Hemingway spent the last months of his life tenderly reliving his first marriage in the pages his memoir, *A Moveable Feast*. In fact, it was the last thing he wrote before his death. Do you think he realized what he'd truly lost with Hadley?
