

# You Must Read Hemingway

Excerpt from

*The Renegade: Natalia Ginzburg, Her Life and Writing* by Sandra Petrignani

Translated by Minna Zallman Proctor

“Natalia Ginzburg is the last woman left on earth. Everyone else—all the others—they’re all men.” This remarkable statement opens Italo Calvino’s review of Ginzburg’s second novel, *È stato così* (*The Dry Heart*). The review appeared on September 21, 1947 in Piemonte’s *l’Unità* newspaper. A twenty-four-year-old Calvino proceeded from there to describe Natalia Ginzburg as a “strong woman” and a “strong writer,” one who “believes in things, those scarce things that can be ripped from the vacuum of the universe: mustaches, buttons.” Calvino’s take on Ginzburg was ultimately this: She was ancient woman, who moved through a world of relics, inhabited by colorless women and men who smoke pipes. She was singular. “She doesn’t reveal so much as periodically identify already distinctive words or situations: Ah ha, I must be in love... This feeling must be jealousy... and so—as in *The Dry Heart*—I will now take this gun and kill him.”

It is a pity we’ll never know Ginzburg’s reaction to the review, which positioned her in a new fictional landscape, modern precisely because it was ancient, and more than anything else, entirely not the “sincere, sentimental, and evasive language” that Calvino would have never loved. Entirely different from “that wanton femininity which is characteristic of writers like Virginia Woolf, and imitated by all those other, women writers, including Italians.”

In a letter to Ludovica Nagel (“Chiodino”) from a few days earlier, Natalia wrote: “Dear Ludovica, I’m well. I don’t have much money but I’m happy. This is a happy moment. I love a man and he loves me. It had already started this summer and I wanted to tell you about it so many times but it wasn’t happening then the way it is now. Or, at least I didn’t know exactly if it was. This is why I’m so happy—no self-recrimination or deception.” She wrote that *The Dry Heart* was about to be serialized in the newspaper *Italia socialista*. “I hope they don’t forget to pay me something. It will barely help but it will be some something nonetheless.”

When I interviewed Nagel, I asked her about the unknown lover—if it was Silvio Micheli or, lending credence to ancient publishing gossip, Calvino himself. He’d just published *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (*The Path to the Nest of the Spiders*) and led, it’s been said, an exuberant love life. But Nagel clammed right up. “I don’t remember,” she said. “I don’t know if I ever knew. But if I did, I might keep it a secret, because it was only a fling.” A flirtation that ended quickly. By the next January, Natalia was disconsolate: “I’m in a terrible mood about everything. Everything is black [...] I put up an ugly tree for Christmas, yet the children were pleased. It was just a branch tied to a chair with twine and some decorations. But they did get a lot of presents. Lola put up a beautiful tree. Calvino is in San Remo. Read Hemingway’s stories. They are marvelous. Read ‘The Snows of Kilimanjaro’ first, right away. So long, my dear. I’m sending hugs. Write me.”

Italo and Natalia had met the year before, in the winter of 1946, at the main offices of Einaudi in Turin. He was working for *l’Unità* and had stopped by to pick up some books to review. Cesare Pavese, who would soon after convince Calvino to leave journalism for publishing, was away in Rome at the time. So the two of them chatted “in the hallway by a radiator” Natalia remembered, writing about the encounter for *Indice* in 1985 after Calvino died. “I remember the radiator perfectly, the snow falling outside, but I can’t remember

what we talked about.” Perhaps they spoke of their mutual hero, Ernest Hemingway—never imagining that only two years later they would meet him together.

“We were so excited to go, but terrified he wouldn’t want to meet us.” And yet, the legendary writer welcomed them into his hotel room, and they all sat around a “small table illuminated by, it would seem, candles?”

Elio Vittorini had introduced Hemingway to Italian readers in 1940, when he included one of his stories in the anthology *Americana*. The following year the publisher Giulio Einaudi sent *For Whom the Bell Tolls* to Natalia and Leone Ginzburg in Pizzoli, where they were living in exile, proposing its translation. Leone admired the novel, but Natalia loved the stories more. In a 1990 interview for *Corriere della sera*, she said “After Chekhov and Mansfield, Hemingway is one of the great short story writers,” (the statement adjusted a previous, slightly reductive judgment she’d made about Katherine Mansfield). Einaudi published several of Hemingway’s books in translation, including *The Fifth Column and the First Forty Nine Stories* (which came out in Italy as just “49 Stories”).

Natalia Ginzburg, along with Calvino, and Giulio Einaudi, went to Stresa, the resort town on Lago Maggiore, to meet Hemingway. Giulio had initially wanted to go with Cesare Pavese, as he was the expert in American Literature, but “Cesarito” was in one of his black moods and said, “If Hemingway wants to meet me, he can come here.”

There are two artifacts left from that Stresa trip. First, a letter from Calvino to Silvio Micheli, dated October 11, 1948: “I spent several lovely days in Stresa with Hemingway, along with Natalia and Giulio Einaudi.” The second is a postcard, preserved in the Morante Archive at the Biblioteca Nazionale, with a picture of Lago Maggiore on the front, addressed to “Alberto Moravia and Elsa / via Sgambati 9, Roma” and dated the first of October. The card reads: “Best wishes always!” in English and is signed by Ernest Hemingway, Giulio Einaudi, and Italo Calvino—they all signed their first and last names. In the corner Natalia had added “warmest greetings” in Italian.

The American writer was almost fifty years old at the time, and (perhaps while sitting at the candlelit table) told a thirty-two-year-old Ginzburg and twenty-five-year-old Calvino about the time his wife lost his manuscript in a taxi. He also revealed one of his writing secrets: “I stop writing every night, when there is something that still needs to be written. That way, in the morning when I get back to work, I don’t have to lose time firing up my imagination again.”

In the 1990 interview, Ginzburg recalls Hemingway as “a very nice man.” For his part, Hemingway, in a letter to Giulio Einaudi following the Stresa meeting, wrote: “Say hello to Natalia for me. Her books are gorgeous.”

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