

# The Nick Adams Stories

by Ernest Hemingway

## StoryLines Midwest Discussion Guide No. 5

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### About the author

Ernest Hemingway was born in Oak Park, Illinois, in July 1899. At 19, he joined the war in Europe as an ambulance driver, was wounded, fell in love with his nurse, and came home to Oak Park and the family's summer house in Michigan. He later returned to Paris and began writing fiction. After the success of his short fiction and first novel, Hemingway increasingly became a public figure, known for enthusiasms that included bullfighting, fly-fishing, big game hunting, deep-sea fishing in the Gulf of Mexico. He married four times, traveled widely, lived in Spain and Cuba, Key West, Wyoming, and Idaho. In 1954, he became the third American to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was hospitalized at the Mayo Clinic in 1961 for severe depression; later that summer, at his home in Ketchum, Idaho, he took his own life.

### Discussion questions

Hemingway reinvigorated the short story form by stripping it down to bare events, by leaving some things unsaid. For instance, Nick concludes his description of the dead after a battle ("A Way You'll Never Be") with this sentence: "The hot weather had swollen them all alike regardless of nationality." Does this restraint correspond to Hemingway's outlook on the world? In what ways?

What values and sensibilities inform the character of Nick Adams in these stories? Can they be described as "Midwestern" in any way? What about some of the other characters? What is it about northern Michigan that helps Hemingway to express the themes that are important to him?

Hemingway scholar Philip Young writes: "Hemingway's world is one in which things do not grow and bear fruit, but explode, break, decompose, or are eaten away. It is saved from total misery by visions of endurance, competence, and courage. . . by a pleasure in the countries one can visit, or fish and hunt in, and the cafes one can sit in, and by very little else." Do you agree? What sort of world view does this describe?

### Additional readings

Carlos Baker. *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story*, 1969.  
Anthony Burgess. *Ernest Hemingway and His World*, 1978.  
F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald: A New Collection*, 1989.  
Ernest Hemingway. *The Sun Also Rises*, 1926.  
*A Farewell to Arms*, 1929.  
*For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 1940.  
*The Old Man and the Sea*, 1952.  
*The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway. The Finca Vigia Edition*, 1987  
*A Moveable Feast*, 1964.

StoryLines America is supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities and administered by the American Library Association to expand American understanding of human experience and cultural heritage. Additional support from Barnes & Noble  
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Northern Michigan, the setting for many of the stories in this book, exerted a powerful pull on Ernest Hemingway's imagination throughout his life. Hemingway's family, who lived in Oak Park, Illinois, summered at Walloon Lake, near Petoskey, Michigan. His son wrote that Hemingway told "wonderful stories" about his life in Michigan, and wished he could have stayed a boy there forever. A few months before his death in 1961, Hemingway wrote, "The best sky was in Italy or Spain and in Northern Michigan in the Fall."

When Ernest Hemingway died, he left behind thousands of pages of unpublished writing—work he thought unfit for publication and work never finished. Much of it, including *The Nick Adams Stories*, has since seen print. Nick Adams was the first of Hemingway's alter egos, and the prototype for the Hemingway hero. The stories featuring Nick were among the earliest writing Hemingway published; they appeared, accompanied by non-Nick stories, in three collections, *In Our Time* (1925), *Men Without Women* (1927), and *Winner Take Nothing* (1933). This new volume arranges the stories, for the first time, according to Nick's age, and adds eight pieces found among Hemingway's manuscripts.

Reading the complete set of Nick Adams stories is illuminating for at least two reasons: we get a fuller accounting of Nick's life, and we're given a view of Hemingway's writerly judgment in action. The better-known and revered of these stories *are* stronger—mature and confident. The basic Hemingway themes are already in place: the emotional desolation felt by young survivors of the Great War (a "lost generation," Gertrude Stein dubbed them); the presence of fear as a basic human condition; the need to live authentically, to have "grace under pressure."

*The Nick Adams Stories* can be thought of as "the education of Nick Adams." If there's a central idea at work, it's coming to terms with loss. Nick is a boy on a fishing trip with his father and uncle when we first meet him in "Indian Camp." The father, like Hemingway's, is a doctor, called upon to perform an emergency Cesarean section on an Indian woman, using no more than a jackknife and fishing line. The father is a man of intense self-control; he wishes in the end he'd not given Nick this harrowing glimpse into adult realities. The story introduces us to the image of death in Hemingway's work (it's never far off, especially suicide), as well as to the motif of fathers and sons.

"The End of Something" and "The Three-Day Blow," also set in the woods of northern Michigan, treat the ending of a love affair, and, along with "Cross-Country Snow," show Nick's stubborn ambivalence about relationships with women. Critics have argued that the first two of these properly belong to the time before Nick leaves for the war.

"The Killers," among Hemingway's most celebrated stories, relies on pitch-perfect, darkly comic dialog to sharpen its air of menace. Gangsters come to a diner looking for a retired fighter named Ole Andreson. Nick and the cook are tied up in the kitchen and everyone waits. Later, when Nick is freed, he goes to warn Andreson, and is stunned by the man's passive acceptance of his fate. "I can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it. It's too damned awful," Nick says. "Well," the owner of the diner replies, "you better not think about it."

In "Now I Lay Me," "In Another Country," and "A Way You'll Never Be," Nick is a soldier recovering from war wounds. Hemingway, a Red Cross ambulance driver in Italy during the First World War, took 227 pieces of shrapnel in his legs when an Austrian shell exploded near him. He managed to help a wounded Italian soldier to safety, then was hit, also in the leg, by machine gun fire. A similarly wounded soldier, Frederic Henry, would be the central figure of what many consider Hemingway's finest novel, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Likewise, Nick's fear of death, coming at the onset of darkness and preventing him from sleeping, is an image that surfaces repeatedly in Hemingway's work.

"Big Two-Hearted River" shows Nick after the war, trout fishing alone in the solitude of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Little happens here, except for the rudiments of camping, yet we can see in Nick's mindful, almost ritualistic actions, a young man trying to heal himself. We can feel, as one critic has written, "the most precarious state of nervous tension which he is desperately holding under clenched control." Like many Hemingway short stories, "Big Two-Hearted River" is a masterpiece of the unsaid.

*The Nick Adams Stories* concludes with "Fathers and Sons." Nick is now 38, the writer he'd vowed to become in the earlier stories. His son asleep beside him, Nick drives through quail-hunting country thinking about his own father, for whom he still has deeply mixed feelings.

Writer Ford Maddox Ford famously said that Hemingway's words seem like "pebbles fetched fresh from a brook." Of all Hemingway's achievements, his prose style may be his enduring legacy. Its simplicity was deliberate—a purification, a purging of all that was fussy and overblown about the Victorian sensibility.

Throughout *The Nick Adams Stories*, even in unfinished pieces such as "The Last Good Country," it's not hard to find classic Hemingway sentences:

*The water from the spring was cold and fresh in the tin pail and the chocolate was not quite bitter but was hard and crunched as they chewed it.*

It's a prose rich in unadorned nouns and verbs, in short, physical Anglo-Saxon words. It has a stark, confident sound, often said to be "biblical," achieved by carefully repeating key words, by seldom subordinating one idea to another, joining them instead with a succession of "and"s or "but"s. Hemingway wanted readers to experience his imagery directly, with a minimum of authorial intrusion.

As often happens to the reputation of an artist, especially one whose work is revolutionary or who becomes a larger-than-life public figure, Hemingway's underwent waves of reevaluation, during his lifetime and afterward. His prose style, his existential outlook, his white-bearded "Papa Hemingway" persona were often parodied. Some readers found racism or anti-Semitism in the man and the writing; others objected to his depiction of women. And yet, as Frederick Busch affirms, "The work remains, the art functions . . . [it] works awfully effectively on the soul of a reader who is not rigidly, ideologically insensible to it."