



[For Whom the Bell Tolls](#), by Ernest Hemingway

In A Nutshell

Ernest Hemingway's 1940 novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, is a classic war romance (that's a war drama *and* a romance, in one). Set in the mountains of Spain in 1937, it tells the story of Robert Jordan, an American fighting for the Republicans (that's one side of the Spanish Civil War, not the American political party) who is ordered to blow up a bridge as part of a larger offensive. To help him with his mission, he has to work with a colorful group of local guerillas, one of whom he falls in love with.

A lot of blood, sweat, and tears went into this book, and we mean literally. It's actually grounded in, and informed by, Hemingway's own visits to war-torn Spain as a journalist and film production assistant in 1937 and 1938. He himself called the book "the most important thing I've ever done," though, admittedly, that was in 1939, before he won the Nobel Prize for Literature and the Pulitzer Prize for *Old Man and the Sea*.

The critics seemed to agree with his good assessment back then in 1940, or at least most of them. There was a widespread sense that Hemingway was "back," after taking rather too long of a vacation from noteworthy writing since his first two breakout successes, *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Sun Also Rises*. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was affirmed as "the great novel of the Spanish Civil War." It was the biggest seller in American fiction since *Gone With the Wind* as of 1943, and to date it still appears to be Hemingway's best-selling book. When released, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* shot immediately to the top, or near the top, of various "Best of" lists,

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whether it be best of the decade, best American books, or best novels, period.

But not everyone was so wild about it. In fact, violent controversy erupted around the book right after its publication. Much of this was political, as the environment at the time (remember, this was during WWII) was politically charged, to say the least. In one case, this cost Hemingway big time: the book was denied the Pulitzer Prize by Columbia University's president (he sided with the fascists), even though Hemingway's novel was unanimously voted the winner by the prize board. Result: no award for 1941.

Nowadays, other kinds of controversy surround the book. Some find Hemingway's depiction of the Spanish too unfair and inaccurate. More widespread is a debate about the book's realism: though the book seems very well-researched, and Hemingway's sketch of the setting appears meticulous, the episode around which the book revolves is made-up, and some claim it is difficult to see just how far Hemingway's "imagination" extends. Controversy or not, though, the novel does appear to have stood the test of time as *the* novel about the Spanish Civil War.

P.S. It's hard to read, or talk about, the book without a passing knowledge of the Spanish Civil War itself. So that's why we recommend you check out this University of Illinois website on the Spanish Civil War.

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- 1 The book begins and ends with the same image of Robert Jordan lying on the forest floor. Some argue that this establishes an underlying circularity in the book. In what ways might the book be circular?
- 2 It's become increasingly popular for feminist scholars to hate on Hemingway for creating shallow, formulaic, and stereotypical women in his books who either exist to serve men or are themselves basically just men. Do Maria and Pilar fit this characterization? Why might they, and why might they not?
- 3 Our own interpretation aside, what do you think of the idea that Spain is the real main character of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*? If it were, how would this change your understanding of the structure of the book?

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