

May 4, 1969

Dear Marge:

Molto grazia sua review of Carlos Baker's book. Very good.

I will of course be looking forward to your subsequent thoughts as you wade through this tome. One must praise Baker for his tremendous job, but qualitatively, I find much to be desired, and you got at it with the drabness crack. Baker writes smoothly enough but he somehow fails to evoke. He is a master at forcing beauty into a mold of ordinaryness. Someone took the example of Hem's famous "fight" with Max Eastman over the latter's charge that Hem seemed to have "false hair on his chest." Eastman had written this in an amusing review of *Death in the Afternoon* called "bull in the afternoon." Well, it is a perfectly marvelous tale, complete with the versions of both sides; Max himself in later years wrote a fairly fair account, one of the best parts of which recounted how Hem showed his friends a copy of *Death in the Afternoon* with a greasy smudge print on it from having been shoved into Max's nose. Well, in Baker, this anecdote covers several hundred pages, that is the pieces of it extend out that long, and by the time the last dog is hung there is no story, no humor, no nothing. The trick is that sentence by sentence Baker writes good but there is no big skeleton holding it up and no tension. My own biggest complaint, though it may not be yours, is that Baker sits in judgment on Hem, calling him all matter of things on the say-so of his friends and enemies and questioning the validity of practically everything that Hem himself says. The new York Sunday Times apparently agreed with me because the headline over the review (which was inside, further downgrading the work) was: (in effect) the Hemingway trial now in progress, Judge Baker presiding. Do you know this book is so long and so lacking in shove that I myself am still plodding through it. Of course I hit the highlights first, shooting from the appendix, and then I began the kiver to kiver bit and that aint easy, McGee. The thing that troubles me is that even the downgraders, as in last Sunday's Times, call it the last work in scholarly research and declare it to be a solid "beadrock" of facts if nothing else. Well, of course, this is simply not true, as you yourself know, and as I do. He has Bill Horne as best man at Horton Bay, among many other boners; Horne wrote me yesterday that he had received an inscribed copy of the book from Baker but that he was not the best man. In Baker's very first paragraph of the actual book, he said Ed Hemingway bought the Walloon Lake property from old Henry Bacon. Well it was not Ed, it was Grace and none of the deeds of the various lots on either side of Walloon showed that Grace had included her husband in the ownership, as was and is the custom with other marrieds. Small point, perhaps, but it was somehow reflective of who wore the pants in that family and now don't get mad at me. I thank heaven for Mrs. H. being what she was. If she had been any different I suppose we would never have had this rebellious young man writing the stuff he finally did. What I mean to say is that Baker is an academic who reads file cards and letters and spends hours in the library, but it would never occur to him to go to the Emmet County courthouse to look up the deeds to the Hemingway summer homestead. As for the hemlock splinter incident, I don't believe a word of it, and not because I am a fan eater. It was not Hem's m.o. as they say. He talked this sort of thing but the evidence is that he didn't do it. All for now and love,