

Re-reading 'The Old Man and the Sea'

By John Vollinger
Go! Magazine

Through the seemingly endless waves of the pandemic, and in reading about the effect it's had on our culture, my mind has often turned to the resiliency of the human spirit, and from where it arises. In this spirit, I felt compelled to reread Ernest Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea" — a novel I hadn't read since early in my high school career, and one that seemed completely baffling to me at the time.

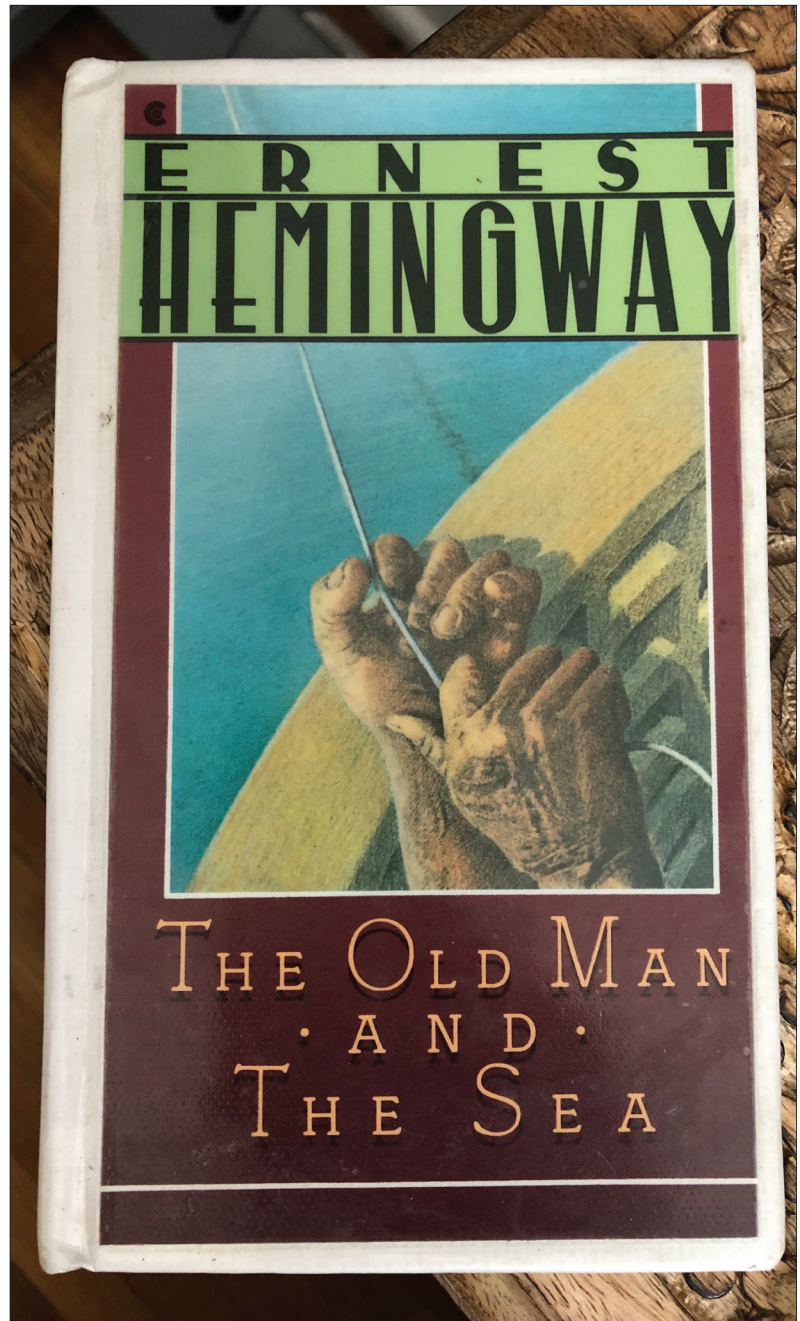
This is not to say that I found the subject matter difficult to comprehend — in fact, the writing is quite straightforward, in keeping with Hemingway's style — but there were certain qualities of the characters, and their circumstances, for which I had no reference point at that age. I believe that we gain a different perspective on what it means to show up

and work hard in our lives — or at least that the reasons why seem to shift as we get older.

The book itself is not very long (the copy I read was 127 pages of rather large text) and the style is quite direct. The book primarily centers on a solitary fishing excursion by an elderly fisherman, Santiago, who has had a long string of misfortune, not catching any fish for 84 days. On this, the 85th day, Santiago grapples with a fish larger than he has ever seen (or even heard of, for that matter), which tests his experience and endurance to its very limits. I will refrain from spoiling his success or failure at his endeavor, but through this simple account, Hemingway makes many comments on the differences, and similarities between humans and non-human animals: What do we have that these latter creatures do not, and which is more noble?

Hemingway ultimately leaves the reader to meditate on Santiago's motivations for fishing, and for giving so much in his pursuit of this particular fish, and whether it was even worth doing. To this end, we see him partially through the lens of Manolin, a young fisherman who was mentored by Santiago, and who regards the elder man as perhaps the greatest fisherman in the town.

In really trying to understand this book, I went back to reflect on the title. "The Old Man and the Largest Fish Anybody Had Ever Seen" (aside from being less catchy than "The Old Man and the Sea") would miss the point of the book, despite the entire narrative focusing on the man and the fish. The point, I believe, boils down to our individual relationships with the world, and can help us contemplate the reasons why we, at times, face such enormous forces with such bravery.



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