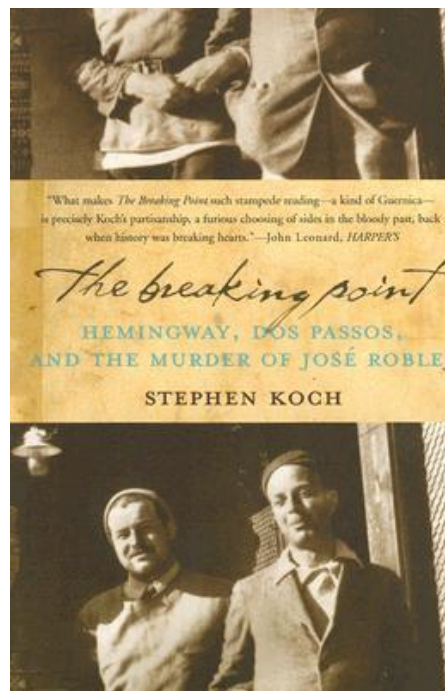




The Breaking Point: Hemingway, Dos Passos, and the Murder of José Robles

Stephen Koch

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"When John Dos Passos walked into Ernest Hemingway's room in the Florida Hotel in Madrid, the air was thick with tension. Hemingway was fuming; Dos Passos was caught off guard. They were there to witness the Spanish Civil War firsthand, but something more personal was going on: as Spain was unraveling thread by thread, so was their friendship." "Dos Passos was widely regarded as the literary voice of America's new socially engaged generation - his face had been on the cover of Time the week the war broke out. And he had long considered Hemingway one of his best friends. Yet they were completely opposite in personality, with Dos Passos's calm temperament and mild manner standing in stark contrast to Hemingway's machismo. Dos Passos was probably oblivious even to Hemingway's envy of him - an envy that was soon to erupt into full-blown resentment." "They had arrived in Spain as comrades, leftist writers-in-arms. But when Dos Passos went looking for his close friend Jose Robles - a Spanish-born Johns Hopkins professor who had moved back to Spain to help save the Spanish Republic - Robles was nowhere to be found. Dos Passos's search for Robles would eventually take his literary career and his friendship with Hemingway to the breaking point." Stephen Koch explores the short time the two men shared in Spain, and how their split changed the life and work of each man - and changed the course of American literature. The Breaking Point is the story of two lives at the intersection of friendship and murder, of love and death, and of literature and history.

The Breaking Point: Hemingway, Dos Passos, and the Murder of José Robles Details

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Kim says

In 1937, American novelists John Dos Passos and Ernest Hemingway, who became friends in Paris in the 1920s, went to Spain for first hand experience of the Spanish Civil War. What happened in Spain ended their friendship.

Dos Passos was a supporter of the radical left and was committed to the Spanish Republican cause. Hemingway had no particular interest in Spanish (or any other) politics, but he was interested in adventure and being in a war zone meant that there would be adventure.

Dos Passos' friend, José Robles Pazos, was a left wing Spanish academic who had taught at John Hopkins University. At the outbreak of war, he was on vacation in Spain and became actively involved on the Republican side. Robles disappeared in early 1937. Hemingway believed the story that Robles was shot as a Fascist spy, a story put about by the emissaries of the Soviet government, which was gaining increasing control over the Republican forces. Dos Passos didn't believe this story for a moment. Hemingway was wrong and Dos Passos was right: there is no evidence that Robles was a spy and Stalinists undoubtedly murdered him. Their differing views about this incident not only ended Hemingway and Dos Passos' friendship, but also led to Dos Passos breaking with left wing politics.

I was familiar with the bare bones of the story from reading Kenneth L Lynn's biography of Hemingway. This work adds flesh to the bones, so from that point of view it was worth reading. However, the writing style didn't work for me. The subject matter calls for a serious, sober, well-researched approach to the events it describes, but Koch seemed to be going for the feel of a thriller. While the story is something of a real life thriller, the fact that it was written in that way repeatedly took me out of the narrative. As a consequence, I found myself doubting the accuracy of Koch's account – or rather, the accuracy of some of its details - as I rolled my eyes when encountering yet another literary flourish.

This is not a book for general consumption. Nor, I think, would it be of interest to a serious scholar of the Spanish Civil War. To get anything out of it, you have to have an interest in the lives of its main protagonists and an ability to overlook its stylistic deficiencies. I'm less interested in the details of the war itself and more interested in the involvement in it of writers such as Dos Passos, Hemingway and Orwell, so I'll continue to look out for suitable works covering that aspect of the war. In this regard, We Saw Spain Die has been brought to my attention. It's author, Paul Preston, appears to have some expertise in the subject matter. I look forward to a more fulfilling reading experience. For this work, 2.5 stars.

JoséMaría BlancoWhite says

This book is absolutely important for people interested specially in the following topics: Spain, 20th century history, communism, literature (Dos Passos, Hemingway), politics, and modern history in general. It will be interesting to the general reader because it is written almost like a detective story; the author has done a tremendous work of investigation.

By the way, this new book follows up on Stephen Koch's previous work "Double Lives", which is, I believe,

the "intellectual father" of this new book, since they are very related.

There is much to be amazed of, much to learn about, in this story. The role of the Soviet Comintern in world politics and its consequences in our social lives is something that I can't stop being amazed at. How they handled people, propaganda, ideas, deserves more attention from the people, so we taken in again.

There are three contending sides in this political/criminal story: the communists (aka Stalinists) and their servants (propagandists, artists, hit-men), the independents (non-Stalinist communists, anarchists, and other revolutionaries), and the vanity-fair people (rich, stupid, intellectual and irresponsible fellows who lent their names to one or the other side of the battle that caused the lives of many REAL working-class people. This book is a good incentive to pause and reflect upon the miseries that many irresponsible self-called intellectuals have caused on common folk. They never fought, they never risked their lives, but they helped to provoke (and still do) the wars and dictatorships of the 20th century immensely. From Marx (who never met a factory worker in his rascal life) to Picasso, Garcia Marquez, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Hammett, Orwell, even Einstein or Delano Roosevelt, were to some extent puppets in the hands of the soviet agenda.

Here we have the Stalinists (Comintern) killing thousands of anti-fascists and saying they were fascists, and at the same time having deals with the Nazis in Germany in order to share Europe between the two countries. And everybody believed it! But what this book is about is not so much the big picture, but the involvement of some of its most relevant artistic protagonists. We deal here with very personal and human stories.

Jesus was right, you mustn't hate your enemies, you must love them. If you go out looking for enemies, whether it is "the rich" or the "Jews", you may find him where you never thought: in your own side. Robles looked for enemies among the rich in Spain (ironically, he was one of them), took sides with those he thought were the "good" side against those he thought were the "fascist" side; well, he got his own awakening.

Michael Hayes says

Interesting take on the Spanish Civil War. Dos Passos had been a longtime leftist, but the murder of his friend Jose Robles, what he found out about it and how he was treated during his search for the truth began his turn to the right, which continued for the rest of his life.

Hemingway does not fare too well in this book. He is portrayed as something of a fool.

Manuel Barrios says

Interesante acercamiento a las figuras de Hemingway y Dos Passos con el telón de fondo de la Guerra Civil española y el asesinato, a manos de miembros del NKVD del profesor José Robles. Como en otras obras de Koch, el tema desarrollado de manera demasiado literaria. En cualquier caso, un obra interesante

Dale says

This is a pretty interesting history of Hemingway, Dos Passos, and the Spanish civil war. Very anti-

Hemingway, pro-Dos. And very anti-Soviet.

Mardel Fehrenbach says

Interesting book. I knew something about the period so it was not a surprise. I have always thought Dos Passos was a better writer than Hemingway, and is undeservedly forgotten. The book was entertaining and provided some new perspective. There is some explanation here as to why Dos Passos' writing seems to fade after his period in Spain, and why Hemingway's writing flourished. Oddly though, I assumed I would continue to dislike Hemingway as a person apart from his writing, but in the end the book only made me feel sorry for him, as if he both squandered his talent as he destroyed others. But aside from any knowledge of the works of the actual authors, the story was interesting on its own, if not also maddening as it portrays many of the less savory aspects of human behavior.

Cathie says

Ernest - male, chauvinist pig with a flair for life and a talent for writing about that life.
Dos Passos - an idealist who was a good friend to the end.
Spanish Civil War - a puppetshow with the Russian communists as the puppetmasters.
Jose Robles - a victim of the show.

An interesting detective story as well and well written and documented.

Katy Koivastik says

A wonderful, atmospheric read. Spain and the Spanish Civil War is a subject I know very little about and so I read with rapt attention. Hemingway is portrayed as a callous brute, but John Dos Passos comes off as a fascinating and sympathetic person and writer; someone about whom I'd like to know more and possibly read. Dos Passos' search for the truth about his old friend Jose Robles Pazos is heartbreaking.

Robert says

Although not as well-written and not as ambitious in scope, this book is an excellent follow-up to "Homage to Catalonia" and "The Anti-Communist Manifestos."

Craven says

A book about John Dos Passos and Ernest Hemingway's falling out amidst and as a result of the the Spanish Civil War. This book has everything, art, friendship, betrayal, war. It's full of historical background about the Spanish Civil War which is one of the most fascinating parts of modern history. It's written like a novel and reads like a thriller. I picked this book up after reading Dos Passos' *The 42nd Paralell*. I had researched the author and was disappointed that he became a bit of a conservative in later life, when he one of the most

important radical writers of his time. I feel like I got some answers, but even more so, I read a fascinating book.

Coleen Dailey says

At first glance the title makes you think Hemingway was involved in the murder of someone but of course that it not true. This is the story of two authors during the Spanish Civil War and the death of a friend and perhaps the death of their friendship. It also tells the story of Hemingway's end of his second marriage as well delving into some of his mental health issues. I haven't read anything by Dos Passos and am just not sure I will be at this point but may be later. I find it hard to believe that many of the authors listed were sympathetic to the communist cause but then it was the thirties and life was hard for many all the way around.

Bettie? says

Film only: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0042281/>

Timothy says

THE BREAKING POINT is a fascinating multilayered narrative that explores Russian scheming and influence in Spanish Civil War, the presence of Stalinist agents in America's cultural scene in the 1930s, the creative and personal turmoil of Hemingway, and the fading career Dos Passos. Hem appears as a bully, careerist, and macho kiss-up. Highly recommended.

Carole says

This non-fiction account covered a couple of aspects that intrigue me very much, namely the Spanish Civil War and the literary figures who played some role in it. Also, I know so little about Dos Passos that this seemed to be an interesting way to become a little more familiar with this notable author of the early 20 century.

Koch is a good story teller, who did a lot of research in this small drama between Hem" and "Dos." He paints a vivid, none too flattering portrait of the protagonists, and delves into some of the surrounding family issues, such as Hemingway's serial wives and blatant affair while in Spain. A surprising aspect is the degree on communist influence on the Civil War players. The co opting and outright duping of American figures, such as Hem and Dos is spelled out in detail. The book also depicts Stalin's motivation in first supporting then taking over and then abandoning the Republican effort in Spain. There is also the mystery of the fate of Jose Robles, which obsesses Dos Passos and is flipped off by Hemingway.

So there is a lot to like in this tale: history, spies, communists, murder, sex, and literature, all captured in a writing style that is agreeable reading.

Richard says

Part gossip, part fabrication and too tendentious. Koch claims that Josephine Herbst was an agent of the Comintern but cites no primary evidence. Herbst made one single radio broadcast "from a cellar deep underground in Madrid." There is also no evidence that Alvarez del Vayo told Herbst that Robles was shot as a spy. Nor does Koch present evidence to back up his account that Hemingway and Herbst planned to publicly humiliate Dos Passos by showing him to be the friend of a fascist spy. Paul Preston give a far more judicious account in his *We Saw Spain Die*.

Aurelie says

The story itself of the break between dos Passos and Hemingway is great - better than most novels - but how does someone who has taught creative writing at Columbia and Princeton for 20 years end up ruining a great story like this with a style worse than that of most undergraduate students? The style is very repetitive, full of short sentences and often colloquial. The story would also be more powerful if the author's very clear opinions on the good guys and the bad guys did not shine through. Hemingway's and Gellhorn's actions are bad enough on their own. There is no need to add a layer of strident moral outrage. The proper reaction to have is obvious.

When I read the book, I kept thinking that the author came across as if he was struggling to reach his word count, filling pages with repetitions while a shorter scene would have been more effective, and perhaps relying too much on research by an undergraduate assistant, although perhaps the author was so outraged during the entire time it took him to write the book that he kept writing in short repetitive sentences in shock and anger at the fate of Robles and, in a way, dos Passos (I've read "The Modern Library Writer's Workshop: A Guide to the Craft of Fiction" by the same author and that style is much more appropriate).

Again, the story itself is great but I find the book a missed opportunity. It's not a bad book, though, so if you're interested in learning more about the end of the friendship between Hemingway and dos Passos it is still an informative read.

James says

* The Spanish Civil War and the leftist learnings of many 1930s artists are central to the story of the disintegration of the friendship of Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos.

A test: Which of these men have you heard of?

* Ernest Hemingway? You kidding? Of course. Read his books and many of his short stories. About the best writer the 20th century produced.

* John Dos Passos? Well, yeah, sort of. A writer, sure. Never read any of his stuff.

* Jose Robles? Sorry. Never heard of him.

Those three come together, sort of, in an odd but interesting story of the 1930s' major literary lights by

Stephen Koch titled The Breaking Point: Hemingway, Dos Passos, and the Murder of Jose Robles.

Hemingway and Dos Passos in the middle of the 1930 were America's two leading novelists. They were close friends and supporters of the left-wing Popular Front, a Soviet-backed organization of writers and artists. The major battle of the forces of the left against the fascists came during the Spanish Civil War, but with the mix of internal Spanish politics and Soviet meddling, nothing in this tale is simple. The story revolves around the dissipation of the friendship between Hemingway and Dos Passos. That occurred for a number of reasons, including Hemingway's paranoia and his role in spreading the rumor that Jose Robles -- Dos Passos' friend -- was executed by the Spanish government because he was a fascist spy.

Koch has carefully researched this tale of Depression era radical chic. He includes many interesting sidelights, such as the development of the relationship between Hemingway and Martha Gellhorn, the noted journalist who would become Hemingway's third wife. (Gellhorn is about to be honored by the U.S. Postal Service.) Hemingway is clearly the villain, and Dos Passos is the good guy in Koch's view, and it's hard to disagree with him.

One of the over-arching lessons of this book is how extensively the Communist and leftist movement gripped many of the nation's leading authors and artists in the 1930. This hold led many of them to ignore Stalin's atrocities until it was too late, and they too had blood on their hands as Uncle Joe's apologists.

If you are interested in any of these issues, this is an excellent book.

Highly recommended.

Alphawoman says

I have read a lot of Hem nonfiction for the past six weeks. this book, besides educating me on the Spanish Civil war, also introduced me to several other meaningful authors /journalists from Hems salad days.

it read more like a novel than a work of nonfiction. poor Jose, though he was the main thrust of this book, he was just a back drop, much like a stage prop, to dissect the relationship of Dos and Hem and it's ultimate collapse. To me the most telling occurrence was the get well concerned letter Dos sent Hem after his stint in the Mayo Clinic.

At the end Hem had so few friends left that he had not run off with his belligerent attitudes and mental illness run amuck.

Martha Gellhorn so easy to dislike. wonder if Hem regarded her as his female reflection? she made no attempt to conceal her intentions to use him.

everything I read about Ernest Hemingway makes me want more. I like so many other people male and female alike have come under his spell.

Jack Terry says

Man, Hemingway is a prick! I mean, I've heard all sorts of stories, and I knew he wasn't really right in the

head (plus the whole machismo thing) but this book lets you see just how dumb, how vain, how shallow and how egocentric he was. As the largest personality (by far) of the three people in the title, the book delves much deeper into him than it does the other two - I still don't know who Jose Robles really was or why he was so important, and Dos Passos comes across as slightly two dimensional - but it's a great historical read and an eye-opening introduction not only to Hemingway's personality but also what inspired him to write certain books and stories and how he viewed those in his world.

Guy says

In The Breaking Point, Stephen Koch takes the reader into 1936 Spain where the coup and subsequent revolution had torn the country in two. He brilliantly cuts through the political complexity of the era to deliver a concise a compelling story of two newly established writers whose friendship and integrity will be sorely tested. This is non-fiction at its best.
