

# The lying bastard



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Set in post-WWI-era Europe among a seemingly rich and careless group of English and American expatriates, *The Sun Also Rises* was Ernest Hemingway's debut full-length novel. It is interesting that he chose to narrate the novel in the first person considering the fact that his previous work, mainly in short fiction, was written primarily in the third person. A third-person perspective allows and even encourages a cool, detached, reportorial style. The first-person perspective, on the other hand, is a much more personally emotional, subjective approach to storytelling. So it is a real feat that Hemingway's narrator in *The Sun Also Rises*, Jacob Barnes, is able to successfully sustain an attitude of ostensible nonchalance and world-weariness in the face of the intense personal anguish that he is slowly revealed to be experiencing. Barnes manages to convey his supposed detachment through a matter-of-fact tone; vocabulary that is literally ambiguous and stripped-down, though apparently precise in the world of the initiated characters; and a palpable effort to shroud any emotion. Yet, there remain windows into Barnes's inner workings, into the main tensions of an otherwise superficial and untroubled tale. His treatment of the character Robert Cohn reveals the subtle way in which Barnes's narrative techniques, such as oblique dialogical suggestion and displacement of feelings onto other characters, allow for his emotions to emerge from generally dry, emotionless prose. To the outside world, Jake Barnes is hard and unfeeling. He is jaded and disillusioned and from the second sentence of the novel he wants the reader to understand his detachment. He opens the narrative by explaining that "Robert Cohn was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton" (11), but he goes on to make it explicit that he, Barnes, is not "very much impressed by that as a boxing title" (11). From these simple

opening lines, it is apparent that beneath the straightforward aesthetic and veil of emotional distance and sneering indifference lies an inherent contradiction. If Barnes is not at all impressed by such an accomplishment of Cohn's, then why begin a novel by saying so? He tries to justify it by saying that "it meant a lot to Cohn" (11), but evidently it was something that stuck with Barnes as well. Still, Barnes's treatment of Cohn is most significantly defined by what he doesn't tell the reader about his Jewish friend. Even on that same first page, Barnes almost off-handedly lets it be known that he "never met any one of [Cohn's] class who remembered him" (11). And, like everything else in the novel, the reader first takes it at face value; it begins to characterize Cohn in a less than ideal light. But what Barnes very purposefully doesn't express is how many people he knows who graduated from Princeton with Cohn. Or, even if he knows dozens, if the reader is supposed to believe that he asked them all about Cohn and his boxing title. That sort of palpable concern about something as trite as the life of Robert Cohn would not seem to be an action consistent with the character of Jake Barnes. What it is really showing is that Barnes does not give misinformation. He is not an unreliable narrator. He just gives selective information that reflects his attitude and is often driven by his absented emotions. We, as attentive readers, begin to feel what Jake feels, even if he fails to tell us directly what those feelings are and instead relies on pure and simple facts to deliver his narrative. It is Barnes himself who makes the reader aware of the need to read between his lines. First, there is the moment on the second page when he is questioning the validity of Cohn's boxing history. Barnes says, quite frankly, "I mistrust all frank and simple people, especially when their stories hold together" (12). Frank and simple are two words that seem

to be quite appropriate adjectives for Barnes's own storytelling mode. So this sentence would seem to imply either that his story shouldn't hold together or that he isn't trustworthy. In both instances, it suggests to the reader that there is more to be gleaned from the tale than is immediately visible, effectively indicating Hemingway's famous "iceberg" approach to fiction. The subtleties of the narrative structure are again highlighted a few chapters later when Barnes says, in one particularly striking moment, that he is unsure about the accuracy of the portrait that he has given of Cohn or, in his typically laconic and vague way, that he somehow feels that he has "not shown Robert Cohn clearly" (52). This admission is seductive and makes the reader feel as if he or she had been brought deeper into the confidence of the narrator, Barnes. Nevertheless, the dozen or so sentences that follow that admittance do not exactly put Cohn in a new light. In fact, they tend to reinforce the image that Barnes had been formulating since the first page — the image of a malleable, weak-minded, unassuming man, though someone who he could still "rather [like]" (15). The new attempt to more "clearly" portray Cohn is little more than reiteration and serves only to confirm Harvey Stone's assessment of him one page earlier as "a case of arrested development" (51). Barnes more or less echoes this sentiment in his ensuing description of Cohn by emphasizing first the attractiveness of Cohn's physically fit body and then juxtaposing it with his "funny sort of undergraduate quality" (52). Yet, that moment of direct, mildly critical description of Cohn on page 52 is an atypical one to show up after the first chapter. The moment with Harvey Stone is a much more characteristic one for Jake Barnes's narrative style. It is clear to the reader that Barnes sees and understands Cohn essentially the same way for the entirety of the story,

but the attitude toward him moves from general acquiescence to rather forceful and spiteful rejection. Barnes manages this shift in characterization artfully and in such a way that he never has to directly tell the reader that he has grown to despise his rather dopey companion. He does this, like with Stone, by letting other people show their increasing contempt or dislike of Cohn for him. It seems as though every character in the book hates Cohn, especially as the story progresses and the group of friends distills, and it's a wonder that Cohn sticks around to bother them. Barnes's attitude toward him begins to change when he realizes that he has fallen in love with Brett. It is then that he describes Cohn's lady friend, Frances, heckling Cohn on page 56. Barnes, at this point, has yet to develop real animosity toward him, and he claims to "not know how people could say such terrible things to Robert Cohn" (56). But Barnes loses any semblance of kindness toward Cohn when he learns of his affair with Brett. He loses his cool so much that he uncharacteristically calls Cohn a "lying bastard" (107) when discussing it with Bill, the friend who joined him in Spain. From that point on, Cohn is the subject of extreme derision from every angle. Bill says Cohn "makes him sick" (108); Mike, Brett's fiancé, calls him a "steer" (146); and even Brett, who tends to be more sympathetic toward Cohn, admits that he has been behaving "quite badly" (147). By constantly showing Cohn in a bad light through the words of the other characters, Barnes is able to make the reader feel his deep dislike of the man — a dislike that grows slowly after Cohn sleeps with Brett — without needing to abandon his objective, journalistic style. We, the readers, get the facts, and the fact is, as Barnes says to Brett, that Cohn's steer-like presence has "been damned hard on Mike" (185).

What Jake Barnes doesn't need to say is that Cohn's presence has been damned hard on him, too.