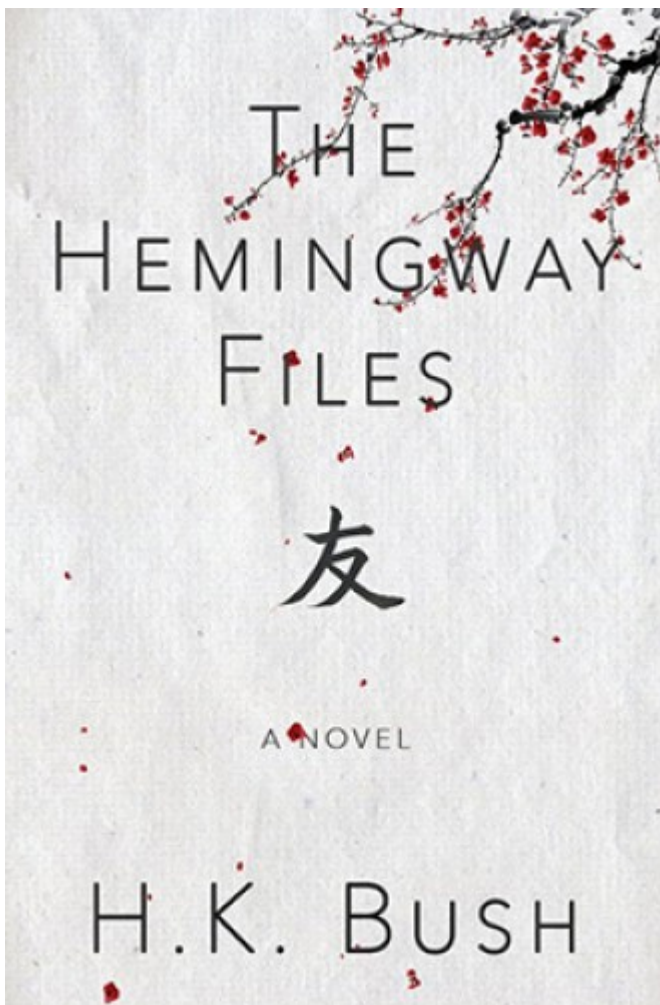


A novel that charts a spiritual transformation

H. K. Bush's tale revolves around the challenges of a Western academic's encounter with the East.

by [David Crowe](#) in the [December 20, 2017](#) issue

In Review



The Hemingway Files

A Novel

By H. K. Bush

Blank Slate

One blurb writer calls H. K. Bush's novel "layered," and it certainly is that. First, there is the framing story.

An aging, professionally discouraged English professor named Martin Dean receives a package from his protégé, Jack Springs, a former standout student who has gone on to earn a Ph.D. and a good position in the Gonzaga English department after experiencing a painful epiphany during a Japanese guest lectureship. Another layer: Jack has recently died of prostate cancer in early middle age, so the package is a gift and a message from the dead, forwarded by Jack's grieving father.

Some of the carefully wrapped parcels in Jack's package I won't describe, so as not to ruin the surprises Bush builds into the plot. The bulk of the package consists of a manuscript, Jack's tale of his visiting professorship in Kobe, Japan, some 15 years earlier, in the middle 1990s. This tale in Jack's voice becomes the novel's main action. Professor Dean's written reactions to Jack's chapters add another layer, one that is oddly tutorial. He tells us, for example, that certain "sacred temple items also became symbolic of Jack's subsequent quest," as if we hadn't deduced that for ourselves.

Dean's response to the entire story becomes the expected concluding frame element. Jack's story, a final installment of his "epistolary friendship" with his old professor, is a moving way of honoring Ralph Waldo Emerson's praise of friendship through correspondence. Both Jack and Dean love Emerson, who—along with Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and Ezra Pound—receives far more attention in the novel than Hemingway does.

Bush must have had his own experiences in Japan, because the most convincing passages in his tale involve the challenges of trying to retain a Western identity and American academic's sense of vocation in the inscrutable East.

Inscrutable isn't my word: Bush's characters continually argue that for Westerners like Jack (as well as Jack's literary heroes), Japan is the great other, a complex and desirable world largely veiled from Western understanding. Poor Jack spends two years receiving this lesson from some distinctly irritating Japanese hosts, mentors, and potential lovers. His department chair, Professor Aoyama, is demanding and curt. Aoyama and his colleague, a weasel named Miyamoto, are downright rude in

offering their cultural advice. “As chair of this faculty,” Aoyama tells Jack, “I also must watch over you, and be responsible for any, shall we say, indiscretions? Of course, I had thought that you would have known all of this already. I sometimes forget that Japan is a country full of mysteries for *gaijin* [foreigners].” It is impossible for me to imagine my Norwegian colleagues ever speaking to me that way during my teaching year abroad. It says a lot about Jack that he puts up with it.

Yet Jack is a somewhat callow fellow. His Ph.D. seems mainly to have deepened his knowledge of literary trivia. His misplaced love of trivia and artifact may be one reason he does not get an American position coming out of grad school, and why he instead reluctantly accepts a fellowship to teach and study in Kobe. It may also be why Professor Goto, a world-renowned Americanist, chooses Jack to learn about and admire his own impressive collection of papers, manuscripts, and rare first editions.

One such item is the “Hemingway file,” which involves Bush’s clever rereading of the actual history of Hemingway’s days in 1920s Paris. Eventually Goto puts Jack to work acquiring more manuscripts. Even before the Great Hanshin Earthquake of January 1995 enters the plot, Jack faces ethical and moral dilemmas. Readers must work to understand and judge his behavior.

In some ways, this novel charts a spiritual transformation. The American characters are rather nominal midwestern Christians who give little thought to the obligations of faith. Very late in the novel, they find themselves unconsciously drawn to Japanese Buddhist holy sites and, perhaps, to more profound choices than they had made before. The reasons Jack and Dean make their pilgrimages into the Japan Alps have very little to do with faith or spiritual searching. But the pilgrimages are made, and Bush allows us to understand the meaning of their spiritual ascents in our own ways. Surely it’s meaningful that in the final lines of the novel, the dying Jack urges his mentor to reread Ephesians 5:20: “always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.”