

Title page of *Hiroshima* with a quotation from the report of Father Johannes Siemes, SJ, and autographed by John Hersey. Photo by Susan E. Swanberg.

## Crux of the Matter: Renewing an Acquaintance with John Hersey

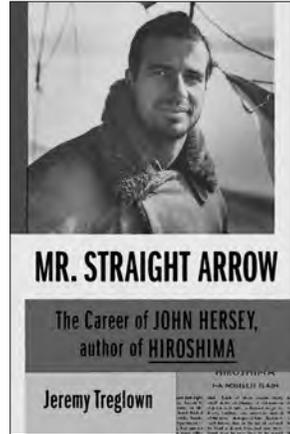
*Mr. Straight Arrow: The Career of John Hersey, Author of Hiroshima* by Jeremy Treglown. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019. Hardcover, 384 pp., USD\$28.

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*Mr. Straight Arrow: The Career of John Hersey, Author of Hiroshima* is “a study of John Hersey’s career, not a full biography,” notes author Jeremy Treglown (343). In spite of this disclaimer, Treglown’s affectionate, sprawling take on Hersey’s literary achievements (and pivotal events in Hersey’s life) is much more than a curriculum vitae. The book is replete with carefully-documented, noteworthy particulars—as well as gossipy minutiae that would likely have irritated the reserved Hersey. Because Hersey disliked giving interviews and refused to “flog his wares,” as his son has been quoted as saying (Russell Shorto, “John Hersey, the Writer Who Let ‘Hiroshima’ Speak for Itself,” August 31, 2016), fans and scholars alike will appreciate Treglown’s wide-ranging book, whether they think its revelations are gossipy, over-solicitous of Hersey’s reputation, or spot-on.

“Mr. Straight Arrow” is the not-so-affectionate nickname bestowed on Hersey by an unnamed “*New Yorker* staffer” (196). Treglown describes the nickname as an unkind comparison of Hersey with his second wife’s eccentric former husband and *Addams Family* cartoonist, Charles Addams. In his review of *Mr. Straight Arrow*, Ben Yagoda identifies the late Gardner Botsford, a *New Yorker* editor (not a “staffer”) as the party who gave Hersey the nickname (“‘*Mr. Straight Arrow*’ Review: The Good Example,” 2019; Linda H. Davis, *Chas Addams: A Cartoonist’s Life*, 106). But Treglown uses the moniker without irony, portraying Hersey as a model of civic virtue for an era when civic virtue is fast becoming an anomaly. By most accounts, Hersey *was* in fact the modest, honest, decent neighbor with whom you might have enjoyed a sailing excursion up the Eastern seaboard.

At its best, *Mr. Straight Arrow* delivers perceptive insights into Hersey’s journey from “mishkid” to war correspondent, author, public intellectual, dedicated educator, and civic activist. (“Mishkid,” a term Hersey used to describe himself, refers to the fact that he was the child of missionary parents.) At times, however, Treglown’s appreciation of Hersey’s virtues leads him to soft-pedal Hersey’s literary shortcomings.



In the book's introductory chapter, "A Sentimental Journey," Treglown recounts a 1982 visit Hersey made to Tianjin (Tientsin), China, to explore his childhood haunts, reconnect with friends of his family, and research a novel to be based upon his parents' experiences as missionaries with the YMCA. When Hersey made the trip, more than forty years had passed since his first book, *Men on Bataan*, was published.

Less than a page into "A Sentimental Journey," Treglown confides that "For reasons we'll come to, Hersey would be embarrassed by *Men on Bataan* . . .," a book that "used journalistic sources to give a ringside view of the United States' earliest efforts to fight back against Japan . . ." (3–4). Hersey's embarrassment is not explained until Chapter 3, where, under the subhead, "Grand Larceny," Treglown reveals that Hersey had not, in fact, had a "ringside view" of events on Bataan.

In fairness, Treglown acknowledges that "Little of Hersey's [*Men on Bataan*] material was his own" (63). The journalists who'd had a ringside view of events on Bataan sent their dispatches to *Time* and *Life* magazines. Hersey relied upon these dispatches to write *Men on Bataan*. Many years later, author Ann Fadiman, in *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader* (110–11) complained of Hersey's alleged appropriations of her mother Annalee Jacoby's work.

Hersey's bemused dedication to *Time* correspondents Melville and Annalee Jacoby and *Life* correspondents Carl and Shelley Mydans suggests that Hersey, the neophyte writer, had a rather casual attitude toward his use of their dispatches:

As for the sections on the Philippines, I have used dispatches which appeared in the press, in *Time*, and in *Life*. I have drawn heavily on the magnificent cables to Time Inc. from Melville Jacoby, *much of whose material has not previously been published* [emphasis added]. And I have also used the early cables of Carl and Shelly Mydans, the *Life* team who were captured by the Japanese in Manila. By their work on Luzon, Melville Jacoby, his wife Annalee, and the Mydanses have put themselves on par with the bravest and rightest reporters of the war. This book is dedicated to them partly so they won't charge me with grand larceny, but mostly out of sincere admiration (Hersey, "Thanks and a Dedication," *Men on Bataan*, 1942. Following the dedication, the publisher noted that in April 1942 Melville Jacoby was killed in an airplane accident near Darwin, Australia).

In defense of Hersey, Treglown suggests that journalism tradition encouraged pooling, rewriting, and "authorial anonymity" (65). In addition, according to Treglown, Hersey paid some of his sources, the *Men on Bataan* narrative was Hersey's, and Hersey had "put a fair amount of work" into the book (66). *Men on Bataan* (along with *Into the Valley: A Skirmish of the Marines*) made Hersey's name as a war writer. *Into the Valley* was based upon Hersey's personal experiences as a war correspondent, which is perhaps why the masterfully written account of a skirmish on Guadalcanal rings so true.

During the course of the battle, Hersey's deeply inculcated humanitarian impulses led him to put aside his pen to assist several wounded marines, acts for which he was commended by the Navy Department (73–74). Years later, the mature writer added a foreword to *Into the Valley* in which he explained why he had chosen not to revise a number of minor "untruths," such as his self-censoring of strong language used by the battle-weary marines (1989, xxvi–vii). He also considered and

rejected revising his references to the Japanese as “animals,” writing that retaining his “shameful words” might “help to show what warfare could do to a young mind that thought it was in pursuit of truth” (xxviii–xxx).

Throughout *Mr. Straight Arrow*, Treglown’s narrative consists primarily of an entertaining stream of events from Hersey’s life punctuated with mini-reviews of books or articles published at each stage of Hersey’s career, including: *A Bell for Adano*, a fictionalized version of the American occupation of Sicily, which was made into a popular movie released in the summer of 1945; Hersey’s later attempts at writing fiction, some of which succeeded and others that fell flat; the articles Hersey wrote for *Time* and *Life* until his relationship with Henry Luce broke down; and Hersey’s long, productive career as a writer for the *New Yorker*. It was, of course, the *New Yorker* that published “Hiroshima” in its entirety on August 31, 1946.

In what is regarded as his crowning literary achievement, Hersey described the aftermath of the August 6, 1945, atomic bombing in a detached tone that “let ‘Hiroshima’ speak for itself.” In passing, Treglown mentions Father Johannes Siemes, a German Jesuit priest whose eyewitness report of the aftermath of Hiroshima was one of Hersey’s sources (127–28). Later, Treglown compares a paragraph from *Hiroshima* to a paragraph written by the priest—ostensibly to illustrate how much better Hersey’s writing was (129).

What Treglown misses is the overall importance of Siemes’s eyewitness report and the way in which some of the events recounted in *Hiroshima* were arguably derivative of Siemes’s report in tone, tenor, reportage, and chronology of the narrative, not to mention the cast of characters. Siemes’s eyewitness account was so important to Hersey that he frequently included an excerpt from Siemes’s account when he (Hersey) autographed copies of *Hiroshima*. The quotation from which the excerpt is drawn reads, in part, as follows:

Some of us consider the bomb in the same category as poison gas and were against its use on a civilian population. Others were of the opinion that in total war, as carried on in Japan, there was no difference between civilians and soldiers, and that the bomb itself was an effective force tending to end the bloodshed . . . The crux of the matter is whether total war in its present form is justifiable, even when it serves a just purpose. Does it not have material and spiritual evil as its consequences which far exceed whatever good might result? (*Hiroshima*, 1946, 117–18)

Hersey’s complex relationships with fact and fiction, war and warriors, morality and amorality cannot easily be summarized, nor can Treglown’s book, which readers will call a biography, notwithstanding the author’s assertions to the contrary.

The ambiguously provenanced nickname that Treglown chose as part of his book’s title is a tantalizing embodiment of the Hersey mythos. While Hersey, the son of missionaries and a civic-minded humanitarian himself, might indeed have made an excellent neighbor, he was a much more nuanced individual than his respectable image intimated. Was Hersey merely following the journalistic conventions of the day when he committed his “larcenies” and was his behavior, therefore, excusable? Is it true, as Treglown suggests, that during Hersey’s era things were better than they are now, or is Treglown’s view of Hersey’s world—and Hersey—overly rosy?

To form a well-founded opinion of the matter one must not only read and reread Treglown's substantial account one must also acquaint (or reacquaint) oneself with the *Hiroshima* author's many works. Hersey's fiction and his nonfiction; his chameleon-like shifts of genre and style; his proximity or lack of proximity to the events about which he wrote; his commitment to social justice; as well as the highs and lows of his abundant output—are all well worth revisiting.