

THE PURSUIT OF PASSION

My obsession with a female matador revealed surprising parallels between bullfighting and the act of writing, says Elizabeth Ruth

It all began one Saturday morning six years ago when I was in my kitchen scribbling notes onto a pad of paper while eggs burned in a frying pan. The radio was on, and I heard the broadcaster mention a 16-year-old girl in Mexico who was fighting bulls.

Immediately intrigued, I stopped moving my pen. Why would a girl want to become a bullfighter? Why would anyone choose to do such a violent and dangerous thing? Having once been a vegetarian for 18 years, I could hardly bring myself to squash a bug (in what always felt, ridiculously, like self-defence) let alone imagine publicly killing an animal for entertainment.

All at once, a female matador became my next obsession.

The first thing I did was reread Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon*, his book on the subject of bullfighting. I'd always admired Hemingway's short, declarative sentences. Now we shared a literary passion.

I immersed myself in Hemingway's well-known reverence for bullfighters and, at the same time, was irritated by his casual asides about women, whom he felt could barely be spectators of the corrida, let alone participate. Why should a woman be more sensitive than a man to the killing that goes on in the ring? It struck me as absurd that bullfighters, in their tight pink stockings, pig-tails, ballet slippers, and glittering sequined "suits of lights," should be regarded as the epitome of masculinity. In Spain, as Hemingway described, no one is considered braver than a bullfighter, no one more macho or manly. But they always look to me to be in drag!

In the days and weeks that followed something strange and miraculous began to occur, the same miracle that happens for every fiction writer chasing his or her inspiration on the way to a new book. All of the ideas I'd been exploring – the films I'd been watching, the books I'd been reading – began to meld and merge and fit themselves together in new and interesting ways. Suddenly Ernest Hemingway and Emma Goldman were arguing class politics in Spain.



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George Orwell and A.L. Kennedy were swapping thoughts on mortality.

Before I knew it, *Matadora* was taking shape. I thought about Fascism and resistance during the Spanish Civil War, and about Norman Bethune's mobile blood-transfusion units. I thought about the thousands of Canadian volunteers who crossed the ocean to fight against Franco. I easily imagined that my bullfighter would struggle in

that time and place, that Fascism's obsession with rules and order would find an echo in the traditions of the corrida.

I spent six weeks in Spain, mostly driving throughout the southern province of Andalusia, where Flamenco and bullfighting originated. I visited a *ganaderia* (bull ranch), often returning to the beautiful city of Ronda for the festival at the Real Maestranza bullring. The festival is where Hemingway, Orson Welles, and others before me attended performances by some of the greatest bullfighters in history. In fact, in downtown Ronda there hung a huge photograph of Hemingway standing next to his idol, the legendary matador Ordóñez.

The more research I conducted, the deeper I fell into the technique and philosophy of *toreo*, and the more passionate I became about my protagonist. It is no exaggeration to say I fell in love with her. My book featuring a female bullfighter was going to be about ambition, art, passion, and politics. I kept asking myself the question that would eventually become the heartbeat of *Matadora*: if you were forced to choose between the thing about which you were most passionate and the person you most loved, what choice would you make?

A writer's ambition, like a bullfighter's, is profound. It requires risk-taking, faith, and dedication. Our ambition leads us into territory we never imagined entering. *Matadora* took me to many places literally and metaphorically, and taught me new lessons about the craft of writing, not the least of which was this: a writer is perpetually chasing his or her talent.

When we conceive of a project we do not have all the skills necessary to bring it to fruition. Only time and practise at writing gives us what we need. That is, for me, the beauty and magic of being a writer. We live years within the process of trying to capture our elusive souls and translate them onto the page. When we succeed we are rewarded with a book.

ELIZABETH RUTH's third novel, *Matadora*, will be published by Cormorant Books in March.