



Reading Group Guide

THE
CROOK
FACTORY

A novel by

DAN SIMMONS

A note from Dan Simmons on *The Crook Factory*

The incredible story of Ernest Hemingway's Cuban spy-catching, submarine-chasing, World War II adventures in my new novel, *The Crook Factory*, is — I think — all the more incredible for being 95 percent true.

Some years ago I decided to write a fictional version of Hemingway's Cuban spy adventures when I noticed just how cursorily that year, from May 1942 to April 1943, was covered by his many biographers. Usually the explanation went something like this — “In the first year of America's involvement in the war, Hemingway stayed home in Cuba even while his wife and friends went off to fight or cover the fighting. During that time, Hemingway set up a counterespionage group which he called the Crook Factory and which was composed of old friends from the Spanish Civil War, bartenders, prostitutes, rumrunners, fishermen, priests, and other cronies. He also convinced the U.S. ambassador to arm his boat, the *Pilar*, in an attempt to lure a German submarine to the surface and sink it with grenades and small arms. He did not succeed in sinking a German submarine, and his spy organization was terminated in April 1943.”

What the biographies did NOT say was that Hemingway's adventures are still classified in the voluminous dossier which the FBI has kept on him since the 1930s. What we DO know about those months during which the writer ran the Crook Factory and his seaborne Operation Friendless is that the FBI was very upset about what Hemingway was discovering about espionage activity in and around Cuba, and, more precisely, what secrets his agents had discovered about corruption in the Cuban

government and national police. What all but the most recent biographies also do NOT explain about this period is that it appears to be the basis for the raging paranoia in the last years of Hemingway's life—a period when the writer was certain that he was being followed by the FBI. The truth is that Hemingway *was* being followed by the FBI.

In *The Crook Factory* there is a fictional extension into the dark core of what we do not know about those months, but what we do know is amazing enough. Here are a few of the details in *The Crook Factory* that are based on confirmed fact:

J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI had warning of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor but failed to follow up on it because of infighting with rival intelligence agencies.

Hemingway's Crook Factory uncovered a nest of intrigue and corruption in Cuba.

Young Ian Fleming, later the creator of James Bond, was actively involved in espionage in the United States and Canada at that time.

Hemingway's lifelong friendships with the likes of Gary Cooper, Marlene Dietrich, and Ingrid Bergman all stemmed from this period.

Almost all of the spies and intelligence operations detailed in *The Crook Factory* were real people and real operations—as melodramatic and absurd as some appear.

All of the FBI memos in *The Crook Factory* are factual and reprinted verbatim.

The FBI surveillance of the sexual encounters between young naval lieutenant John F. Kennedy and a presumed German spy, Inga Arvad, was as depicted.

The secret transcripts of electronic and telephone surveillance on Kennedy and Arvad are reprinted exactly as the FBI recorded them.

The FBI's illegal surveillance of the vice president of the United States and the first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, were exactly as depicted.

The New York-based Viking Fund—a philanthropic organization investigating Incan ruins—was real, and the FBI investigation into its Nazi connections is true.

The 300-foot yacht, the *Southern Cross*, outfitted by a German spy and given to the Viking Fund, was real, and it was suspected by the FBI of serving German subs.

The vicious infighting between J. Edgar Hoover and rival organizations such as the OSS and the British BSC—often at the expense of the war effort—was real, including one incident where Hoover arrested OSS agents breaking into the Spanish Embassy in New York.

The plots by Himmler and Heydrich of the Nazi SS intelligence organizations to trap and discredit Admiral Canaris and his Abwehr spy group were real and resulted in Hitler disbanding the respected Abwehr. Canaris was eventually tortured and executed.

The BSC's plot to kill Heydrich of the SS was real and planned in Canada's Camp X.

Camp X was real.

The details of Hemingway's Operation Friendless attempt to catch and sink a German submarine by posing as a Museum of Natural History research ship are real.

The South American German spies in *The Crook Factory* were actual agents, and their fates were as depicted.

The Marx brothers absurdity of the landing of Nazi agents on Long Island and the FBI's refusal to believe them even when they were trying to turn themselves in was real and as insane as depicted in *The Crook Factory*.

Hemingway's logs from the *Pilar*'s antisub patrols are given verbatim.

The vast majority of dialogue between Hemingway and other historical characters is based on real descriptions, and *all* of his comments to the fictional Joe Lucas about writing, the war, fiction versus fact, and so forth are based closely in Ernest Hemingway's comments and writings.

Hemingway's chase of the German submarine occurred exactly as depicted in the novel.

The depiction of Hemingway's Crook Factory spy operation is accurate.

Hemingway's real fear of the FBI in his last years and the details of his suicide are factual—as is the largely undisclosed

actual interest the FBI still had in the aging writer. These newly revealed facts are confirmed through later interviews, new biographical information, and newly declassified FBI documents released through the Freedom of Information Act.

While the thrust of *The Crook Factory* is fictional, the vast majority of details, characters, incidents, dialogues, and wartime events are true. It was fun melding these almost fictional-sounding facts with the “truer than true” soul of fiction to create this book, and I hope it will be enjoyable for the reader to experience it.

—Dan Simmons

Questions and topics for discussion

1. How would you characterize Simmons's portrayal of 1940s Cuba—both the expat community there in which Hemingway played a central role, and the local population? How does his portrayal align or differ from what you know or pictured about the region during World War II?
2. When we meet Lucas, the news of Hemingway's suicide rocks him to his core. But when Lucas first meets Hemingway he knows nothing about him and isn't quite sure what to make of the author's larger-than-life persona. How would you characterize Lucas's relationship with Hemingway as he first gets to know him?
3. Lucas's at times fractious relationship with Hemingway changes over the course of the events depicted in *The Crook Factory*. What causes his feelings to evolve? Did your assessment of Hemingway, as depicted by Simmons, align with Lucas's assessment of the novelist, or were there moments when your opinion of Hemingway differed from Lucas's?
4. Were you surprised by Simmons's portrayal of Hemingway? How did the Hemingway in *The Crook Factory* differ from your image of Hemingway?
5. Hemingway, both as a writer and a person, is frequently linked with depictions of masculinity in American

society. How does machismo play a part in the story of *The Crook Factory*—not only in regards to Hemingway, but war and espionage as well?

6. How would you describe Hemingway's relationship with his two sons in *The Crook Factory*—and what might the novel be said to say about the father-and-son relationship through the prism of their interactions? Do you see a similar dynamic in effect anywhere else in the novel?
7. Marriage and romance play key roles in *The Crook Factory*—not only in the number of attractive women that cross Lucas's path, but in Hemingway's relationship with his wife, and with the other women who frequent his estate. What do you think Dan Simmons says about love and intimacy in *The Crook Factory*?
8. Lucas is frequently caught off guard by the number of high-profile guests that visit Hemingway socially at the *finca*, and historical figures like J. Edgar Hoover and Ian Fleming make guest appearances in Simmons's narrative outside of Hemingway's immediate purview. Which famous person's visit did you most enjoy reading about? Were they portrayed as you might have expected from reading about them, or your experience with their work?
9. In the report Lucas composes but does not send, Lucas writes: "A man who reportedly glorifies action in his writing in life, Hemingway often confuses action with mere impulse, reality with self-inflicted melodrama." Do you agree with Lucas's assessment of Hemingway's writing? Where do you see this characterization reflected in the events of *The Crook Factory*—or do you consider Lucas's description unjust?



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