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Redeeming the Serpentine Subtext: Dennis Covington's Appropriation of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* in *Salvation on Sand Mountain*

William Jolliff



Dennis Covington's *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* was a 1995 National Book Award finalist in nonfiction. Not surprisingly, it received some very positive notices. Lee K. Abbott, reviewing for the *New York Times*, is as fascinated with Covington's own psychology as with his literary accomplishment--though he does call the writing "brilliant, dire and full of grace." Christian Century reviewer Bill Leonard essentially overlooks the book's literary nature, but devotes several hundred words to recounting the compelling story. Typical of the complimentary but ironic tones of many reviewers is that of Malcolm Jones, who, writing in *Newsweek*, concludes that "Covington makes the story of [the snake-handlers'] struggle not only fascinating but almost comprehensible. And if that's not a miracle, nothing is." Other reviewers, however, were less complimentary, perhaps reflecting some confusion about how to understand the book's intention. Eloise R. Hitchcock in *Library Journal*, for example, was expecting something more like an anthropological study of snake handling, she concludes that although the author's "insights are interesting, this book is only marginally informative" (97-98). Given the isolation, rarity, and sheer strangeness of the snake-handling phenomenon, such confusion is not hard to understand. Part of the Pentecostal tradition, snake-handling arose less than a century ago and has never been widely practiced. The circle of handlers is small, limited to a few hundred active participants, most of whom practice in a handful of Southern Appalachian churches and are members of the same few core families. For social, practical, and legal reasons, snake-handlers, as Covington deftly and sympathetically portrays them, survive on the all-but-invisible economic and social margins of American culture, sometimes in rural isolation, but just as likely on the ragged edges of cities.

As fundamentalist Christians, the handlers take an almost magical approach to scriptural interpretation, discovering particular phrases that resonate with their own religious narratives and interpreting them with an idiosyncratic hermeneutic. Be that as it may, the Biblical basis for their practice is Mark 16: 17-18, in which the resurrected Jesus, immediately before his ascension, states,

"And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover."

This passage, though descriptive in its context, has been understood by handlers as prescriptive: they see themselves as responding to the last admonition of Jesus Christ on earth. So it's an act of obedience when, in religious fervor precipitated by emotional preaching, group prayer (often in tongues), and ear-splitting, repetitive music, they gather in the front of a church, reach into the screened boxes, and begin to handle, passing deadly rattlesnakes and copperheads from hand to hand. To a typical observer, this dangerous practice may not make much sense; for the participants, however, this act of obedient selflessness results in a kind of religious ecstasy and an authenticating sense of spiritual power.

If early reviewers were somewhat baffled by the strangeness of the cult, the innovative nature of Covington's text did not simplify interpretation: like the snakes themselves, Covington's tale keeps shedding skin after skin, transforming itself throughout into a new

kind of narrative. The book begins as an investigative newspaper feature apparently intended to give the story behind the murder trial of a snake-handling Christian minister. It then evolves into something more akin to participatory journalism as Covington, drawn by the dramatic spiritual intensity and friendship of the snake-handlers, takes up serpents himself. His personal and family histories then find important causal positions in the narrative progression. Eventually--and throughout, upon rereading--the book discloses itself as a very literary piece of nonfiction: the story of the author's own religious progression. As critics and readers come to terms with that most fully realized intention, the text finds its place among the most engaging spiritual autobiographies in 20th century American literature.

Covington's careful unfolding of his experience reveals his growing sense that he has somehow been a part of the snake-handling culture--or cult--before. This deeply felt sense goads him into researching his own family history, studying the settlement of the Sand Mountain region, and even into considering the existence of cellular memory. The last obsession becomes a dominant psychological motivator as he explores his own spirituality. As I have studied and, more particularly, as I have taught the book in my American literature classes, I have come to a related feeling: that I have read the plot, or at least certain motives of the plot, before. Increasingly I am convinced that Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* is in some way undergirding Covington's text.

The claim that an award-winning nonfiction book from the 1990s is modeled on a classic piece of modernist fiction from the 1920s seems a bit of a stretch. But the fact that the novel is a roman a clef and that the 1990s work is an intricately plotted piece of literary nonfiction makes the chasm a little less wide. Add the fact that the novel's protagonist, Jake Barnes, is a young journalist trying to make sense of his spiritual experience--and that Covington's nonfiction is participatory journalism written by another young journalist trying to make sense of his spiritual experience--and the possibility of influence seems less counterintuitive. After exploring the similarities on my own, I tested my assumption, informally, by making it an essay prompt for my 20th century American literature students: "Write about *Salvation on Sand Mountain* as a postmodern response to *The Sun Also Rises*." Their answers convinced me that I was not simply imagining the parallels and that, in fact, the similarities might be more than simple analogues.

In his widely used handbook, *The Art of Literary Research*, Richard Altick posits the standard criteria for influence study, setting forth the necessity of external and internal evidence. For this essay I dispense with the former, for the simple reason that *The Sun Also Rises* is one of the most widely read and studied texts in the American canon. My assumption is that any undergraduate English major knows the details of *The Sun Also Rises*, either by dutiful reading and study, or by a less dutiful skimming of the Sparknotes; and Covington is, after all, not only a part-time stringer for *The New York Times* but an English professor. And he is also a writer with his own addiction to danger, so I suspect that even if he claimed not to have read Hemingway's masterpiece, few would believe him. It would seem more difficult to prove that Covington did not know *The Sun Also Rises* than that he did.

We turn, then, to the internal evidence, beginning with what may be the most general, yet the most significant: both books are the chronicles of lost generations, of troubled people placed in situations of severe cultural and ideological tension. Hemingway's characters find themselves in such a predicament for the very reasons that Gertrude Stein suggested the term "lost generation": after World War I, writers were forced to deal with the fragmentation and decadence of western culture. The relatively stable world they had known was gone, and they were left trying to make sense of their waste land. Albeit on a different place in the cultural and socio-economic continuum, Covington discovers his subjects in a parallel setting. He describes snake-handling Christian fundamentalism as having developed among people who "came down from the hills" in the post-World War II era "to discover they were surrounded by a hostile and spiritually dead culture" (xviii). They believed their way of life to be "under assault" an assault which forced them "to become even more peculiar than [they] were before" (xvii). They had lost their "sense of dignity" and their "traditional way of life" (23). Although they probably would not have read *The Sun Also Rises*, they would have known the disorientation, fragmentation, and spiritual aridity we associate with literary modernism. Both Hemingway's itinerants and Covington's snake-handlers are living in worlds in which their old systems of belief have disintegrated, leaving the characters to seek out something else to give their lives meaning--to prove to themselves, at least, that they can still feel.

Into this setting each author places a memorable cadre. Both books revolve around a small group of physically and spiritually displaced persons who nevertheless consider themselves a kind of elite: Hemingway's world-weary expatriates form a reference group apart from those uninitiated by war; and, similarly, Covington's snake-handling believers see themselves as beyond the spirituality of mainstream churches. They perceive themselves as having achieved a special status through their practice--and through the social ostracism and suffering that come with it. Covington includes an entire chapter comparing snake-handling stories and war stories: one can imagine Count Mippipopolous showing off his arrow wounds and the handlers, in turn, displaying the scars of their own fierce worship.

Both books delineate groups of insiders and outsiders: even within the small groups are sub-castes, with only the elite becoming "one of us." Early in *The Sun Also Rises*, readers are introduced to the "in-group" of the "wounded," those whose war experiences have changed their souls and often their bodies. Those without clear wounds, like Robert Cohn, are perceived as outsiders, even as interlopers. This distinction is highlighted when Hemingway introduces the concept of the aficionado, those who truly believe in bullfighting in a quasi-religious sense. People who place other life considerations above the sacred ritual of bull-fighting are beneath the contempt of these insiders--as exemplified in the passage where Jake must somehow be "forgiven" by Montoya, the high priest of aficion, for his English and American friends.

A hierarchy exists in *Salvation on Sand Mountain* as well, ranging from those who only attend the worship services to observe the snake-handling, to those who worship but do not handle, to those who occasionally handle, on up to those who handle regularly and with abandon. Covington moves up through the ranks, beginning as simply an observing journalist; only after he has a religious experience of musically and mystically accompanying Sister Aline, who is singing in the spirit, can the others begin to call him Brother Dennis. At that point he is on his way to becoming, in Brett's characteristic phrase, "one of us." Indeed, that event makes it seem inevitable that Covington will eventually take up serpents himself; he will become a full participant in the deadly ritual.

The Sun Also Rises is the story of a deadly religious ritual as well. The bulls don't simply die--they are sacrificed as the central event at a religious festival. And, as Jake keeps reminding his friends, the danger works in two directions. The best matadors risk death with each pass; nothing is faked. The truer the aficion of the matador, the greater the danger. But the potential for religious ecstasy is also greater, not only for the matador but for those engaged as spectators in the ritual. Hemingway details this religious experience most clearly in *Death in the Afternoon*, relating it to the perfectly executed faena that

takes a man out of himself and makes him feel immortal while it is proceeding, that gives him an ecstasy, that is, while momentary, as profound as any religious ecstasy; moving all the people in the ring together and increasing in emotional

intensity as it proceeds, carrying the bullfighter with it, he playing on the crowd through the bull and being moved as it responds in a growing ecstasy of ordered, formal, passionate, increasing disregard for death that leaves you, when it is over, and the death administered to the animal that has made it possible, as empty, as changed and as sad as any major emotion will leave you. (206-207)

Just as Jake gives his fellow expatriates background on bullfights and matadors, relating their injuries, their strengths and weaknesses; Covington relates anecdotes and statistics about handlers bitten and killed, particularly those who, in faithfulness to their convictions, refused medical attention. But, as in bullfighting, the potential for religious ecstasy that accompanies snake-handling overshadows the fear of death. In fact, those handlers who risk being bitten with the most ecstatic--yet skillful--abandon are those most admired by their fellow believers. Covington reflects upon religious ecstasy throughout his text, perhaps most fully when he relates his own first experience of handling:

I just gave in. I stepped forward and took the snake with both hands. Carl released it to me. I turned to face the congregation and lifted the rattlesnake up toward the light. It was moving like it wanted to get up even higher, to climb out of that church and into the air. And it was exactly as the handlers had told me. I felt no fear. The snake seemed to be an extension of myself. And suddenly there seemed to be nothing in the room but me and the snake. Everything else had disappeared. Carl, the congregation, Jim--all gone, all faded to white. And I could not hear the earsplitting music. The air was silent and still and filled with that strong, even light. And I realized that I, too, was fading into the white. I was losing myself by degrees, like the incredible shrinking man. The snake would be the last to go, and all I could see was the way its scales shimmered one last time in the light, and the way its head moved from side to side, searching for a way out. I knew then why the handlers took up serpents. (169)

Both books, then, are built around a religious experience of ecstasy. But both feature far less spiritual reveries as well.

The role of substance abuse suggests another similarity between *Salvation on Sand Mountain* and *The Sun Also Rises*. The most important "drug" in both books may be adrenaline, released in response to direct or vicarious experience; but alcohol use, abuse, and addiction are common central themes. *The Sun Also Rises* may hold the ounces-per-page record in modernist literature, culminating in the drunken carnival of San Fermin, which Hemingway reminds us is "also a religious festival." The narration is sometimes given, questionably, through faithful Jake's drunken haze. Readers may even wonder if Jake would have acted the pimp for Brett with Romero, thereby sacrificing his place among the aficionados, had there been fewer open bottles on the table. In *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, many of the snake-handlers are alcoholics. The trial that instigates the book was precipitated by a backsliding minister's attempt to murder his wife by snakebite, an action which takes place while he is drunk. And like Hemingway's novel, Covington's journalism also has an alcoholic narrator. This we learn as Covington develops his plot by relating more and more of his own spiritual pilgrimage, a story in which his alcoholism has played an important role.

Not surprisingly, given the level of substance abuse, sexual promiscuity (as it would have been judged in both settings) also plays a central role in furthering both plots. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Lady Brett Ashley's sexual need for a series of lovers, culminating in her obsession with the young bullfighter, Pedro Romero, precipitates the most excruciating degradation. Her random passion is partly a response to her losses during the war and partly a response to the impossibility of consummation with Jake (their relationship must be forsaken due to his emasculating war injury). In fact, Brett's role as an object of generalized sexual desire--and as one who desires--seems to be the major catalyst in creating and destroying the small group. In *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, Pastor Glenn's infidelities are apparently legion, and infidelity is also his grievance against his wife and victim. The eventual splitting of Glenn's storefront church, too, is due to financial disagreements made more complex by speculation about who might be sexually involved with whom.

As the book builds to a climax--as Covington begins to sense the end of his own involvement with the cult--he holds a pivotal conversation with the unforgettable snake-handling outsider, Elvis Presley Saylor. Covington picks up Elvis, who has found himself ostracized from the handlers, as he is hitchhiking away from a service. The reason for his ostracism is ostensibly because he has been divorced before marrying his current wife, thereby making her, by the handlers' theological understanding, an adulterer. But the truth eventually revealed is that Punkin Brown, one of the foremost handlers, and a married man, is sexually pursuing Saylor's wife--and Punkin wants Elvis out of the picture.

The importance of travel in both books also creates a parallel narrative texture. The characters' continual motion is a metaphor, one might suggest, for the spiritual seeking at their disoriented core. H.R. Stoneback has argued convincingly that pilgrimage is not only central to much of Hemingway's work, but is the dominant force motivating Jake in *The Sun Also Rises*. Whether one accepts Stoneback's argument in full or not, the expatriates are clearly always on the move, and much of their travel seems to have at least quasi-religious significance, if not intention. For example, on their way to Bayonne, Jake and his friend Bill take a train filled with Catholic pilgrims; significantly, because they are not a part of the group, they cannot get seats in the dining car (in spite of the fact that Jake is also a Catholic). Their destination is a village where the two men experience a kind of religious retreat in the form of a fishing trip, complete with the wounded "fisher king" Jake easing his pain by fishing in the stream. After visiting a monastery, they're off to the festival of San Fermin, the religious holiday that is the group's culminating experience together.

The handlers of *Salvation on Sand Mountain* move continually as well, because their neighbors do not want snake-handling churches in the area. They are most at home on the margins of their society. But more practically for the handlers, whose religious circle is small, worshipping with others who share their rare convictions demands extensive travel, from Sand Mountain at the far southern end of the Appalachians, at least as far north as Jolo, West Virginia. Covington's story of his time with the handlers involves driving week after week, often hundreds of miles, to worship and fellowship with other handlers. Significantly, the worship meetings are called homecomings--an American fundamentalist version of a religious festival.

There are a good many more similarities of setting and plot, but perhaps the shared attributes of the two protagonist/narrators suggest the closest correspondences. *The Sun Also Rises* is not only a roman a clef, "a novel in which actual persons are presented under the guise of fiction" (Harmon 454), but may be the modernist novel most often trotted out to exemplify the term. *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, on the other hand, is literary nonfiction. Bracketing any questions about the veracity of Covington's details, his intricate plotting becomes increasingly evident. For instance, we don't know that Covington has had a lifelong fascination with catching and holding snakes until we're halfway through the text--certainly a fact that might have colored our reading. As a result of this and other temporal discontinuities, plotting techniques that leverage the sequence of telling against sequence of occurrence, *Salvation on Sand Mountain* maintains all the rising action, the climax, the falling action, the character revelation, and so on, of a well-crafted novel. As surely as Jake Barnes, the Dennis Covington of *Salvation on Sand Mountain* is a constructed narrator delivering his story. But our discussion of narration is complicated by the related question of how best to compare the narrator of a real-life story

that claims to be a fiction written as fiction, with the narrator of a real-life story that claims to be nonfiction but is written as fiction.

In fact, the two narrators seem uncannily similar on several levels. To begin, Jake Barnes is not simply an alienated American, hiding out in Europe, awaiting the end of Prohibition. He is a newspaper writer, covering Europe for an American paper to which he sends dispatches. Similarly, Covington's journey with the snake-handlers begins as an assignment for The New York Times. He takes up a kind of residence in another culture, and sends his coverage of that culture to the Times. As the plot unfolds, he relates as well something of his other assignments, assignments he has sought due to his fascination with danger. This should sound familiar not only in relation to Jake, but to his creator as well. A second similarity is that Jake portrays himself as a Christian believer or would-be believer, frustrated with his faith or the lack of it; he refers to himself as a "lousy Catholic" and as he visits various cities goes to the cathedrals to pray, even asking forgiveness for his lousiness. Similarly Covington gradually integrates details of his own history of frustrated religious experience: his conservative Methodist upbringing and his current frustration with his mainstream church, a frustration that grows as he partakes in the heightened spiritual awareness of the snake-handling fellowship. Both narrators enter their most gratifying religious experience outdoors. While Jake's cathedral worship gives him little satisfaction and, instead, seems to highlight his spiritual frustration, he finds full relief when, as anti type to the fisher king, he makes his fishing trip on the Irati River. There he is reminded that "the woods were God's first temples" [127]) and finds close fellowship with Bill and their wounded British acquaintance, Harris. When the three visit the Roncesvalles monastery after their days of fishing, Jake's friends state that it was good but then quickly agree, "It isn't the same as fishing" (133). In a similar vein, Covington speaks of his snake-handling friends who would "lead services under muscadine vines, honeysuckle, and starlight, like believers used to do in the old days" (63). The snake-handling tradition is associated with churches on the very edges of urban centers, often in the country, and often featuring outdoor worship. Covington traces the cult's history to the outdoor camp meetings once common in the rural South, meetings which, he suggests, "set the stage for the dramatic events" that formed the beginning of modern Pentecostalism (68). Covington's first personal spiritual manifestation with the snake-handlers is at a "brush arbor" meeting:

The sun had set and the electric lights were not yet turned on, but the arbor seemed filled with a golden light. We were swaying with it, transfixed, with Aline silhouetted against the dog wire and the morning glory vines. All but her trembling voice was silent, or so it seemed, until I realized with horror that my tambourine was still going, vibrating against my leg, almost apart from me, as if it had a motive and direct will of its own. (79)

Throughout the story, the snake-handlers' most nourishing worship, like Jake's, is held in distinct contradiction to institutional Christianity. As Covington states on the page following this experience, "By late summer I was feeling comfortable among the handlers. In fact, I was getting restless in my home church in Birmingham ..." (81, italics mine).

If we expand our reading of Jake Barnes to include something of Hemingway himself, which seems at least tentatively justifiable in a roman a clef, further similarities emerge. For example, Hemingway wanted to enlist to fight in World War I but was forced by bad eyesight to serve as a medical volunteer instead (Baker 52). Throughout his life, Hemingway intentionally placed himself in danger around the globe. In *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, Covington recounts his experience as a freelance journalist in El Salvador. He was drafted, he states, but didn't get sent to Vietnam. He attributes his fascination with life and death struggles to this perceived deficiency:

Maybe I felt like I hadn't proven myself as a man. My education as a writer wasn't complete. In 1983, I decided I wanted to go to a war, and the nearest one was in El Salvador.... In El Salvador, I found the antidote for a conventional life: I got the shit scared out of me. I haven't been the same since. (52)

Both writers were apparently plagued by a sense that something was missing and tried to find it. That is not, of course, their only shared dangerous compulsion: Hemingway's alcohol addiction is well known, and Covington's is related in the text as well. But these were likely no more dangerous than their shared addiction to adrenalin, an addiction which, naturally enough, intertwines itself with their religious expression. Hemingway's passion for bullfighting and Covington's for snake-handling as religious expression complement their need for danger, and both men, in a sense, become aficionados.

This list of similarities could continue, but these may be sufficient to suggest the possibility that somewhere working in Covington's unconscious was one of the most important and arguably one of the most influential of modernist novels, a novel written by an artist with whom he shared many close and dangerous tendencies. So it is at least arguable that the internal evidence of influence could meet the rigors of Professor Altick's criteria, enough to call *Salvation on Sand Mountain* a post-modern response to *The Sun Also Rises*. But is it likely that Covington's writerly mind would really be using a work about the literary intellectuals of high modernism as an informing foundation for a story about barely literate snake-handlers? In one way, it still seems too long a stretch. But Covington admits to being psychologically open to, and even dependent on, some rather unconventional stretching.

Covington relates *Salvation on Sand Mountain* to a short story he wrote as a student which was also called "Salvation on Sand Mountain" When he arrives at Old Rock House Holiness Church for a snake-handling service, he states that this church building he has never seen before is the very church in his story written a quarter-century ago. He writes, "I don't mean it resembled the church in the story. What I mean is that this was the church itself" (174). He then continues with his theory of the writer's unconscious, the inner eye,

the eye with which the writer beholds the connectedness of things, of past, present, and future. The writer's literal eyes are like vestigial organs, useless except to record physical details. The only eye worth talking about is the eye in the middle of the writer's head, the one that casts its pale, sorrowful light backward over the past and forward into the future, taking everything in at once, the whole story, from beginning to end. (175)

As critics, then, we are asked to entertain a certain amount of mystery in Covington's text, he asks us to accompany him into some unconventional literary spaces. And if he is responding, in a similarly mystical way, to an earlier text, one might ask, what could be more characteristically post-modern than that?

As I try to categorize the nature of the influence I have been suggesting, the term that seems most appropriate is "unconscious subtext." In an *Atlantis* interview, literary theorist Terry Eagleton states,

I think one can speak of the "unconscious" subtext of the conscious text, as long as one is alive to the perils of "anthropomorphising" the work in this way. And I don't think the unconscious subtext is that of the author, which isn't to say that authors don't have unconscious as well as conscious intentions. Intentionality for Freud is by no means always conscious. The text "has" an unconscious because, like any piece of language or any human subject, it is inevitably, by virtue of its performative statements, caught up in a network of significations which exceeds and

sometimes subverts that performance, and which it can't control. And this "unconscious" is not just some more-than-text which is beyond the work's control, but a lack of control, a way in which the text evades itself and is non-identical with itself, which is inscribed within the text itself, and without which it would be able to say nothing at all. (176-177)

Eagleton's definition is pertinent to our current discussion at least in part. Few novels would be more prevalent in the "network of significations" which makes up 20th century literature than *The Sun Also Rises*. In the case of *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, I might suggest an exception to Eagleton's definition: with Covington ostensibly writing a first-person account of true events and relating them as such, we may be justified in more closely identifying the text's unconscious with Covington's own unconscious as the one who has lived--as well as written--the text.

However, if we grant this possibility, and if we agree, at least tentatively, that *The Sun Also Rises* is a plausible unconscious subtext for *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, we have still not responded to the most significant question demanded of an influence study: What does it matter?

Unless a source study is able to "illuminate meaning" and "deepen feeling" (Altick 92), it may be less than worthwhile. So let me suggest one starting point for understanding the significance. Both *The Sun Also Rises* and *Salvation on Sand Mountain* treat a key philosophical question, the answer to which separates the modernist from the post-modernist literary sensibility: How does one handle cultural fragmentation and the inevitably ensuing existential despair?

Many modernists, and preeminently Hemingway, presented readers with a post-World War I sensibility in which the center cannot hold, where traditional systems of making meaning cannot withstand the scrutiny of personal experience. Some writers tried to rise above the fractured particulars with intricate artistic forms, elaborate interweavings (Harmon 407) that would suggest an ordered universe within their texts that no longer existed outside their texts; or they responded by portraying a despair with their world that left them defiantly beyond consolation. In Jake and Brett's final cab ride through Madrid, Brett laments, "Oh Jake ... we could have had such a damned good time together"; to which Jake responds with a hard-boiled acceptance of reality, "Yes. Isn't it pretty to think so?" (251).

The post-modern Covington finds a parallel chaos, but--significantly--does not react in the same way. He does not despair over his inability to make logical sense of his experience of the world. Neither does he despair over the impossibility of making the world he finds fit into some over-arching, culture-supporting system. Instead, he throws himself physically and emotionally, even perilously, into the fragments. In a characteristically post-modernist move, Covington the writer, Covington the man, gives himself over to the particulars. If the Christianity of the snake-handlers is incompatible with his other concurrently held religious expression, his conventional mainstream Christianity, so be it: he resolves to accept both, holding them simultaneously in all their contradiction. To the degree that they account for his own experience and meet his needs, he is able to embrace the contraries with a rigorous post-modern negative capability.

But let's say, too, that Covington's unconscious wanted to signal readers about what he's doing in this text. Just how might Covington the narrator let us know that his literary father was Hemingway's narrator, Jake Barnes--especially given Jake's strategic impediment in fathering anything?

Here's one possibility. *Salvation on Sand Mountain* is ultimately not a book about handling snakes. It's a chapter in Covington's spiritual autobiography, and his bond to the snake-handlers feels right to him in a way that he suggests is or is like cellular memory. Driven by that intuition, he looks for a connection between the history of snake-handling as a religious practice and his own personal history. When he does so, he discovers that one of his great-great-grandfathers was a circuit-riding minister in the movement that gave rise to snake-handling. A half-century forward on the family timeline, he discovers a line of Covingtons who had definitely handled snakes--and two of those ancestors are still alive.

When he interviews Edna, an 80-year-old sister in the last generation of snake-handling Covingtons, she presents information the author had not anticipated, information that seems to resonate with little else in the text. In reference to the two most notorious Covington snake-handlers, she states flatly, "Mansel and William were both eunuchs" (130). Might this be the unconscious--of the text or its author--suggesting yet another potential link between Covington's religious forefathers and his literary forefather, the emasculated Jake Barnes?

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