

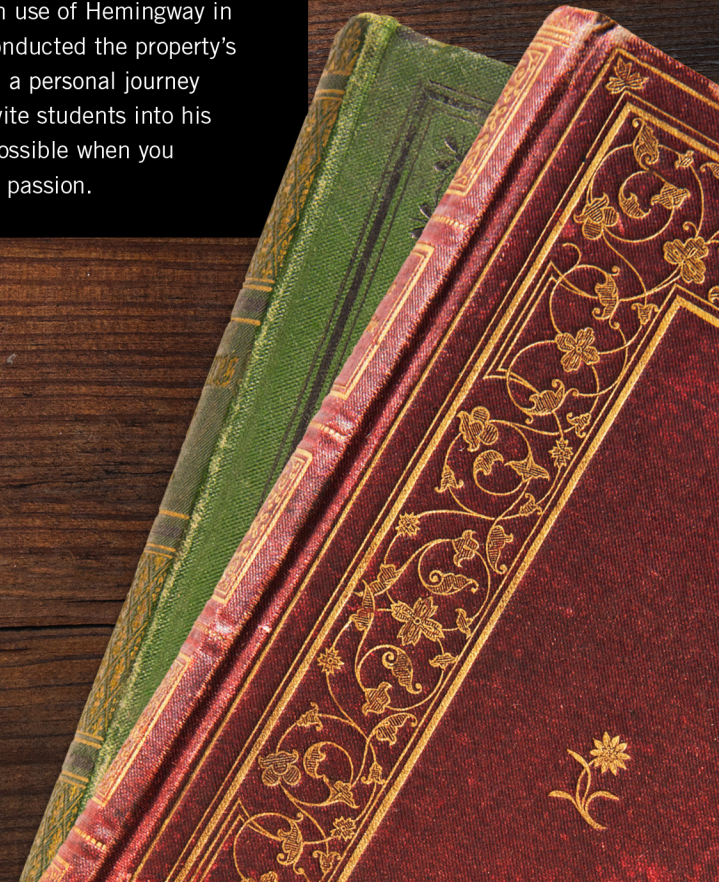
# House of Light

*A Teacher, a Renowned Literary Legacy,  
and the Reach of Inspired Learning*

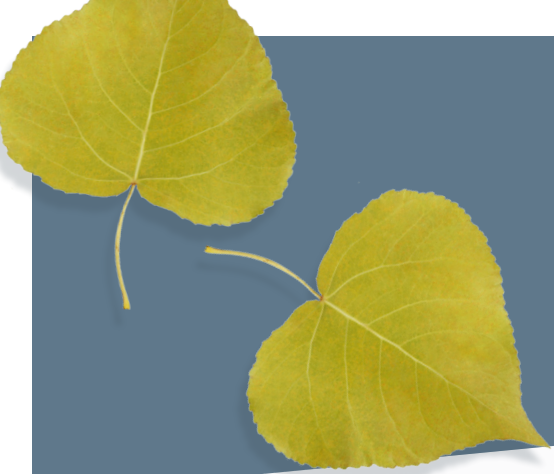
PROGRAM

In May, Upper School science teacher Rob Wilson embarked on an opportunity of a lifetime: a trip to Ketchum, Idaho, to reside in the home of Ernest and Mary Hemingway as a visiting scholar. There, he wrote teaching resources based on his own use of Hemingway in the science classroom, as well as conducted the property's first biological inventory. It was both a personal journey and a chance for the educator to invite students into his experience, showing them what is possible when you pursue and cultivate knowledge and passion.

By Ashley Atwood and Robert Wilson  
Original Watercolors by Annie Nash, Class of 2023







# Silkworms

*That night we lay on the floor in the room and I listened to the silkworms eating. The silkworms fed in racks of mulberry leaves and all night you could hear them eating and a dropping sound in the leaves. I myself did not want to sleep because I had been living for a long time with the knowledge that if I ever shut my eyes in the dark and let myself go, my soul would go out of my body.*

— Ernest Hemingway, “Now I Lay Me”

*For a long time I avoided seeing the house. When I went to Ketchum, I would visit the grave in the town cemetery or the monument on Trail Creek, but I did not want to see the house. It seemed like an invasion of privacy, and it was not until I was invited late last year that I laid my eyes upon it. When I was invited to stay there, I was both thrilled and frightened; I was afraid that I might not be able to sleep knowing what happened in the foyer.*

*My first night in the house I did not fall asleep for a long time, until I slept deeply in the wee hours of the morning and awoke with a start from a bad dream. There was a hint of light to the east, and I could hear a robin. Ecologist Aldo Leopold calculated that “the robin will give voice when the light intensity reaches 0.01 candlepower.” I’ll take his word for it. I got up and made coffee and went outside to watch the day emerge. Four geese came downstream and turned around right in front of me and landed in the channel. A house wren commenced to sing. Eventually, some pine siskins and a ruby-crowned kinglet started talking. The sun lit up the peaks of the Boulder Mountains. Like a flash, the sun came out from behind a layer of clouds on the eastern horizon, and the house lit up. Glorious! The place was alive, truly alive. I came in to make breakfast, and only then did I realize the hour had already passed of the event that I’d been afraid would haunt me too much. The life of the land and the house outshines the darkness of the foyer.*

— Rob Wilson, May 2022

In late 1939, riding the high of celebrity built as a bestselling author and international war correspondent, Ernest Hemingway traveled to the newly built Sun Valley resort in Idaho on a publicity trip. While the writer was familiar with opportunities like this, it’s almost certain he was unprepared for the impact this trip would have on his life. From that first visit, he saw the Wood River Valley—home to Sun Valley and the former mining town of Ketchum—as a refuge, an idyllic place in which to socialize, hunt, fish, and write. He returned often over the next 20 years, and in 1959 moved to Ketchum full time with his fourth wife, Mary, after their exile from Cuba. The home they bought would be their last together, a place in which they could recharge, write, and entertain, whispers of cottonwood leaves and the rumble of the Big Wood River their constant companions. It is also where, on the morning of July 2, 1961, Ernest’s life ended in the foyer.

Mary Hemingway kept the home after her husband’s death and continued to visit it until her own passing in 1986, when she bequeathed it to The Nature Conservancy with instructions that it be turned into a nature reference library. In 2017, ownership of the house passed to The Community Library of Ketchum, which today honors the Hemingways’ legacy in Idaho through preservation work and educational opportunities, including an annual seminar that attracts those captivated by the author’s life and work. In 2019, the library completed a renovation of the home’s ground-floor garage into an apartment for visiting writers and scholars—a space in which invited guests can take in the landscape that inspired one of the greatest writers of a generation, find sanctuary in which to create, and walk away changed by this **house of light**.

Rob Wilson fell in love with the writing of Ernest Hemingway in eighth grade.

To this day, he remembers the thrill of that first reading of *The Old Man and the Sea*: how the novella brought to mind his own fishing trips with his dad. His mind readily painted a picture of the story’s setting: the boat, the deck, the handlines so different from his own rod and reel.

He remembers, as a high schooler, discovering a hardbound copy of Hemingway’s short stories on his dad’s bookshelf late one Friday and spending hours flipping its yellowed pages, reading long into the night. He remembers bonding with college friends over Hemingway, as well as quiet evenings during his early

career as a field biologist, sitting on a cabin porch in southern Idaho and watching the sun set over the Pioneer Mountains above Sun Valley as he, again, made his way through Hemingway novels: *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

Hemingway’s writings were one of the first influential connections Rob had into the life of an artist, his stories and novels windows into worlds different from Rob’s in many ways, but also strikingly similar, with familiar streams of human experiences running through each tale. With each passing year, Rob began to see beyond the adventure stories that had first captivated him. Each new reading, supplemented by his accumulating life experience, became an opportunity to get lost in a





story's subtext. In Hemingway, Rob also found a kindred spirit—someone who, like him, respected the natural world. “Hemingway noticed the little things around him, and how they lived,” Rob said. The author’s writings are abundant with those observations: how trout hold in a clear river, for example, or the features of a wildfire-blackened mountainside, all described in such honest, sharp ways that it heightens the real-world experience of being outdoors.

In 2015, while re-reading Hemingway’s short story “A Pursuit Race,” Rob’s connection to Hemingway deepened in a new way when he realized how well its understated portrayal of alcoholism and heroin withdrawal could be applied to his health class lesson on substance abuse. He thought it would complement the textbook he usually used for the lesson, but more effectively invite students to contemplate the human impact of substance abuse in a way a textbook can’t.

“What fiction is,” he explained of that choice, “is a way to invite you into examining life.”

It was a successful experiment, one that excited both Rob and then-Head of School Alan Sparrow. Over the years, Rob began adding more texts to his lesson plans, including Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* and Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass*, as well several Hemingway short stories: “Now I Lay Me” for its themes of metamorphosis, “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” for its tie to the climate, and “Big Two-Hearted River” for its portrayal of earth systems. Like the living creatures he brings to campus—pigeons for genetics, jellyfish to animate the history of life on Earth—Rob has found that Hemingway texts are an effective resource to enrich students’ understanding of science concepts. They’re also unexpected.

*Research continues to make it clear that interdisciplinary learning, combining two or more subjects into one activity, benefits students by broadening how they think and how they approach problem solving. Hemingway’s signature iceberg approach is an effective method for stretching young minds, allowing students space to lean on their own interpretations and observations.*

“Students can be strict about silos,” he said, referring to the kind of thinking that draws lines around areas of study: students should reference a textbook or case study in science class and read Hemingway in English class. But research continues to make it clear that interdisciplinary learning, combining two or more subjects into one activity, benefits students by broadening how they think and how they approach problem solving. Hemingway’s signature iceberg approach—the idea that an author should allow a story’s deeper meaning to be implicitly realized by the reader—is an effective method for stretching young minds, allowing students space to lean on their own interpretations and observations.

“This is a major component of my teaching strategy,” said Rob. “If I tell you something, you are more likely to forget it. If you discover it for yourself based on what I provide, you will remember it and be proud of yourself.”

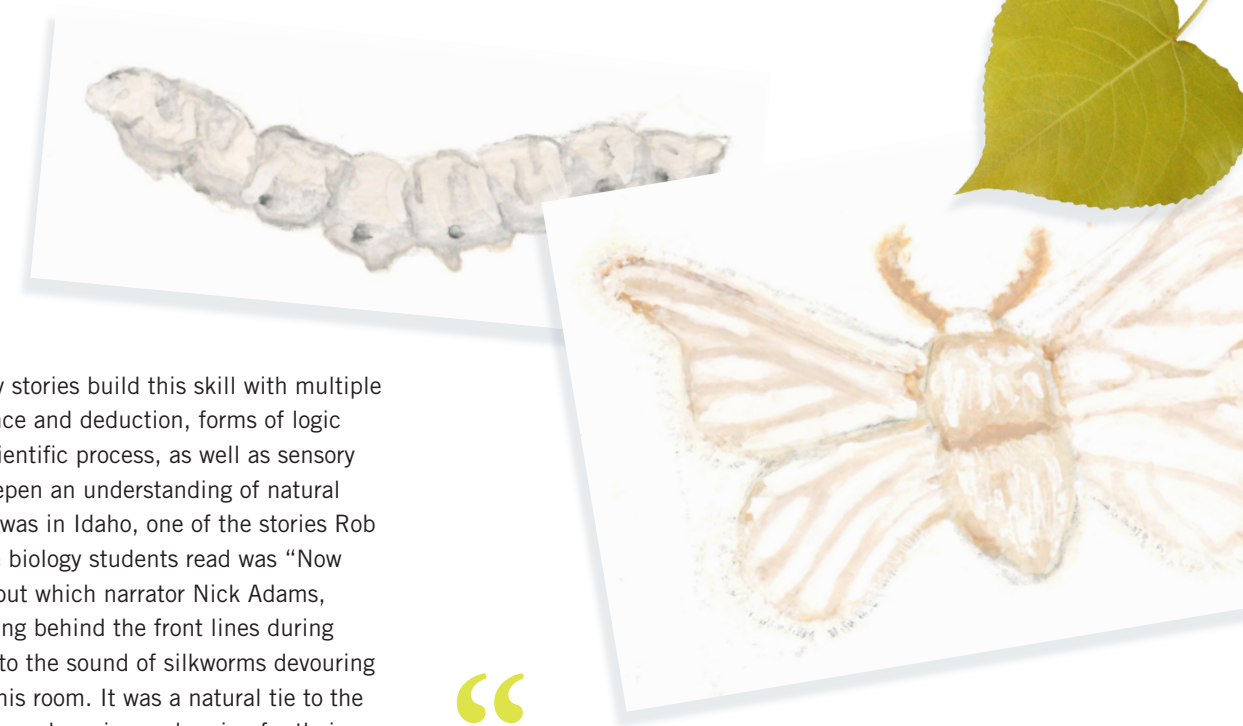
Many Hemingway stories build this skill with multiple examples of inference and deduction, forms of logic necessary to the scientific process, as well as sensory details that can deepen an understanding of natural sciences. While he was in Idaho, one of the stories Rob had his ninth-grade biology students read was “Now I Lay Me,” throughout which narrator Nick Adams, a soldier convalescing behind the front lines during World War I, refers to the sound of silkworms devouring mulberry leaves in his room. It was a natural tie to the class, which had been observing and caring for their own colony of silkworms that spring. Over the weeks, thanks to their worms’ diet of mulberry leaves, the class had watched the invertebrates grow from eyelash-sized hatchlings to fat, round, white worms. And as they read the story—for many, their introduction to Hemingway—that experience both provided a mental picture and enhanced the story’s subtext.

“It was easier to visualize the things described in the reading,” remembered Loc Ossana-Aoki, while classmate Rachel Brague added, “Having silkworms in the classroom helped emphasize the story, showed the bigger picture. Knowing about silkworms, I understood the emphasis on the man’s experience.”

It was an experience that helped drive home the ideas that science isn’t static and that interdisciplinary connections enhance learning in exciting ways. Much like a Hemingway story, the students realized, there is always another layer to discover, something new to take away, to enrich overall understanding.

“Without any knowledge or experience, you can read these stories and understand what is happening,” explained Rachel, “but once you know more, the simple writing suddenly seems like the story is much longer and filled with more information than before.”

In past years, Rob has had students share Hemingway discoveries like these in class, but this year’s trip to Idaho gave them an opportunity to make even more connections among the stories, their studies, and his experience when he invited them to ask questions



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*He was trying to include us in the experience. It was like we had been there too, almost.*

— Winston Hoffman, class of 2025

about his time away. “They were really curious,” said Rob. “All I did was say, ‘What would you like to know?’ and they asked questions for the entire period.” Discussion flowed around the Hemingway property’s major geographic features and how they change over time, natural selection, and the landscape itself: mature cottonwoods and blue spruces the Hemingways may have looked upon, a house wren whose call Rob imitated, and pileated woodpeckers whose strikes Rob demonstrated by knocking on the whiteboard. Rob also shared how he placed the class silkworms on the writing desk as he composed his own work, a metamorphosing muse, and his own feelings of fear, peace, and reverence for the sacred space.

“It was really personal for him,” said student Winston Hoffman, “but I think all of us appreciated what he had to say because he was trying to include us in the experience. It was like we had been there too, almost.”



# Grasshoppers

*“As he had walked along the road, climbing, he had started many grasshoppers from the dust. These were just ordinary hoppers, but all a sooty black in color. Nick had wondered about them as he walked, without really thinking about them. Now, as he watched the black hopper that was nibbling at the wool of his sock with its fourway lip, he realized that they had all turned black from living in the burned-over land. He realized that the fire must have come the year before, but the grasshoppers were all black now. He wondered how long they would stay that way.”*

— Ernest Hemingway, “Big Two-Hearted River, Part One”

*I headed north on Highway 93 around 1 pm. It was cool and windy, and I could see flurries of snow in the mountains ahead of me. I always feel such great anticipation during this part of the drive, and I remembered making the drive at other times of the year, doing other things with other people, and always having the sense that I am gravitating toward Ketchum. It’s funny to think of the warm summer nights on Big Cottonwood Creek, when I sat on the porch and looked across the Magic Valley to the Pioneer Mountains and wondered who had watched them fill with snow and returned to see that the snow had melted. Nothing about the drive reminded me of my dad except loading the car, driving past the duck club on the Jordan River and the other one on the Bear River, looking for ducks when I passed canals, geese in fields, bridges over rivers, and birds circling; the exit at Tremonton that we used to take to hunt and fish in Swan Valley (in the winter, the ducks would circle over the cottonwoods and disappear and reappear over the channel under the branches, closer than you were ever used to seeing them); looking out into the sagebrush, wondering if it held sage grouse; and the drive to Magic Valley where we took our last hunting trip that winter, when I broke through the ice on the Big Wood River, and I didn’t know if it would be 10 inches deep or 10 feet.*

*What I did not know going north is how much better I would understand this way when I took it, just a few days later, going south. I drove on knowing that I could share this experience and return to it.*

— Rob Wilson, May 2022

Rob’s journey to his Hemingway House residency began in September 2016, when he received an invitation to that year’s Ernest Hemingway Seminar from his best friend from graduate school, Jeff Motychak. Titled Hemingway and Nature, the seminar was to feature discussions on “Big Two-Hearted River” and aimed to, in the words of The Community Library, “stimulate deep thinking about the role of nature in Hemingway’s works.” It was a perfect opportunity for two natural scientists fascinated by Hemingway and would play a transformative role in Rob’s life. “I was so deeply inspired,” Rob remembered. “I came back different.”

Rob has participated in the seminar each fall since, and in 2019 joined the planning committee to assist in its arrangement. His annual journey north is a pilgrimage of sorts, where he observes the landscape, reflects, and recharges. It’s also a chance for him to connect with Hemingway enthusiasts—literary scholars, scientists, art curators, educators, writers, and the curious public—who gather to examine a Hemingway novel, topic, or even passage. It was through these discussions that Rob built a relationship with the library, which in September 2021 extended a writer-in-residence invitation, initially hoping Rob would use the time to write the Hemingway lessons he had developed into teaching resources for other educators, a goal that would expand in the intervening months. And though he knew the experience would be deeply personal, he and Upper School Principal Ingrid Gustavson also knew it was a valuable opportunity, a chance to further help students perceive, seek, and discover connections in their learning, and they decided he would schedule the trip during the school year.

“So much of what we’re doing with kids in education is modeling lifelong learning,” explained Ingrid. “This opportunity allowed Rob to explore, through his biologist lens, his observer lens, the home of a literary giant and give a new perspective on it.”

It’s this kind of thinking that can change students’ lives. For upper schooler Annie Nash, who was first introduced to Hemingway in 2020 as one of Rob’s ninth-grade biology students, and who identifies as both a scientist and an artist, the confluence of subjects in Rob’s classroom felt natural, freeing her to think about how she can apply both sides of herself to her life’s work.

“I never really imagined art separate from the sciences,” she explained. “Science is artistic, nature is artistic, math is artistic—we can’t separate them.” And the older she gets, Annie said, the more she realizes an interdisciplinary approach to education is preparing her for a dynamic world that needs creative-minded and collaborative thinkers to take on its big challenges. “So many scientists know the quantitative evidence of what they’re looking at,” she said, “but the quantitative evidence doesn’t matter unless you know who you’re impacting.”

An aspiring pharmaceutical scientist, Annie knows her personal definition of success depends on more than an understanding of analytical chemistry and biostatistics. One area she’s especially concerned about is the historically negative impact of medicine on marginalized communities. She worries that the traditional approach to science education, one that focuses strictly on data, leaves scientists removed from the real-world impact of their work, and she believes applying topics like English, art, and history to her science studies helps her recognize worrying trends in her desired field so she can do her part to interrupt them. Novels and short stories are especially powerful ways to frame this history, she’s learned. More than other media, they effectively invite readers to reflect on humanity’s shared history and paint an understanding of how the human journey—what we’ve believed, what we’ve valued, how we’ve lived—has shaped the current world so readers can take away lessons for their own lives.

“You understand the time period but also separate the good and the bad—and then further the good in your own studies,” said Annie. “Scientists are sometimes viewed as being antisocial hermits who are detached from real-world issues. I want to break this stereotype so that I can encourage others to be empathetic in their research, to always strive to better the world.”







# Cottonwoods

*Best of all, he loved the fall. The leaves yellow on the cottonwoods, leaves floating on the trout streams, and above the hills the high, blue, windless skies.*

— Ernest Hemingway, eulogy for Gene Van Guilder

*I can track with my eye the flow through the deepest part of the channel that would have ruptured the beaver dam. The flow is deflected off of the bedrock wall. Parts of the channel are visible from the east-facing windows, and it is easy to imagine that residents of the house would have watched the river shape this bend over the years. They would have seen cottonwoods bloom with beet-colored catkins, fill in with lush green leaves, and fill the air with a distinct perfume; leaves yellow on the cottonwoods; and the transformation to black and white skeletons against the winter land. From here, they could watch the plumes of snow raised by the wind from the highest peaks. They would have heard the gossip of geese and had a view into the nests of hawks and private lives of kinglets, and been witness to the comings and goings of myriad birds throughout the year. It saddens me to know how much Ernest would have enjoyed this setting over the decades he could have lived here and did not. He has left us his gifts of perception so that we may enjoy it ourselves and teach others to experience the sublime and to protect it.*

*Teaching is a service of paying forward knowledge, skills, and values that enable another to cope and thrive in an ever-changing world. You can't be a beacon if your light doesn't shine. Mary could have walked away, and she chose to stay and have the house protected in perpetuity. The house on the hill of bedrock above the sea of cottonwoods is a beacon that both signals danger and radiates hope.*

— Rob Wilson, May 2022

The house on the hill is designed to maximize its view. From its wide patios, large windows, or broad lawn, visitors gaze upon a landscape of colors and textures: snow-capped peaks of the Boulder and Pioneer mountains, the Big Wood River flowing over gray stones, the dark trunks and lush foliage of black cottonwoods that, in late spring as they burst into new life, fill the warming air with a honey scent.

Cottonwood forests, or galleries, tell a story of resilience: their survival depends upon the ability of seedlings to keep their roots in contact with capillary fringe, the area of soil that draws moisture from the water table. When flood conditions are met, the trees grow in cohorts, but most years, due to weather or human disruption, those conditions are not met. As a result, one cohort of cottonwoods matures to nurture the next, a process that strengthens the entire gallery.

There are times, though, when a cottonwood forest stops regenerating altogether, a process that happens so gradually the untrained eye misses the first signs. For the caregivers of the Hemingway House and its estate, a loss like this—of Mary's desire for how the property would continue on—would especially hurt, and so Rob volunteered to conduct the first biological inventory, a task necessary to fully realize Mary's vision.

"It's the library's mission, as stewards, to protect that little bit of land," he explained. "The biggest thing I could offer was to describe the living landscape for them."

In addition to writing teaching resources, Rob spent hours of his residency walking the property's 13.9 acres looking for cottonwood saplings as evidence of regeneration and documenting the landscape, from the bedrock on which the house stands to the kinglets and house wrens calling into early spring mornings, all of which he included in a reference document for the land's ongoing protection and conservation—his personal contribution to its stewardship. "This idea of stewardship is: if you're here, it's your job to take care of things," said Rob. "That's maintaining a landscape, if that's what you have the opportunity to do, or a place, or a relationship."

As a scientist, Rob has too often seen how our time in history is marked by a collective lack of stewardship,

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*A recurrent theme at Rowland Hall is: be the change you want to see in the world. That's stewardship.*

— Rob Wilson

from climate change to the imperiled animals he studies, and he believes each individual plays a role in stewarding our world. He knows that if in his classroom he can tap into our shared humanity by breaking down learning silos and showing students how their passions, whatever those are, connect to something bigger, he can better prepare them to be the people the world needs.

"A recurrent theme at Rowland Hall is: be the change you want to see in the world. That's stewardship," said Rob. "My message to students is they can be interested in something and cultivate it and watch it become bigger and better than they ever imagined."

It's a perspective that can be found in hundreds of ways across Rowland Hall classrooms, from cross-disciplinary teaching partnerships in the Upper School to experiential learning in the Beginning School. "Adults at Rowland Hall model so well how to see connections in the world, to get excited about learning across disciplines," said Ingrid. "No one is too young or too old to discover things we really care about, then go deep and figure out how to teach them to others, support a cause, or further someone else's learning."

This sharing of knowledge is often viewed as a pinnacle of education, a way of students continuing the journey their teachers set them on. Just as a younger cohort of cottonwoods benefits from the stability and nourishment provided by an older cohort, students benefit from their teachers' examples, then go on to



share what they know. “The true test of a student’s learning is not the answer they write on an exam,” said Rob. “It is how they share what they learned with the people around them.”

Ingrid remembered seeing evidence of this truth in May when she stopped by Rob’s classroom to find him and three earth science students caring for tanks of betta fish and the class jellyfish, Calypso. Rob encouraged the students to tell Ingrid about the creatures, which they excitedly did, showing her how they harvest brine shrimp for jellyfish food and test the water, and sharing who was caring for the animals over the summer. In that moment, Ingrid said, she realized the students had fully taken ownership of their learning. “This is theirs now,” she thought.

“I always thought science was supposed to be very straightforward—not bringing your own opinion, your own feelings into it,” said Hope Thomas, one of the students in the classroom that day, and Calypso’s summer caretaker. “For a while, it made it a hard subject for me because I’m a very creative person.” But being in Rob’s classes, where she’s encouraged to see connections among areas of study that another science teacher may never approach, Hope realized that making science personal wasn’t just okay, it was necessary to understanding, and taking on, the challenges of today.

“It makes it more applicable to us when we can think about science in a more personal way,” she said.



“When you care about it more, you are more willing to take action.”

And ultimately, this is the goal of education: to help students make meaningful connections about what matters to them and take action to leave the world a better place than they found it. It’s a lesson, Rob has found, that means more to him with each passing year and is especially clear when he returns to *The Old Man and the Sea*, the book that started his journey, and the one Hemingway himself called “an epilogue to all my writing and what I have learned, or tried to learn, while writing and trying to live.” With the benefit of time, study, and lived experience, said Rob, it’s now more than just a fishing story—it’s a reminder of what is most precious in the time he has.

“What gets me now,” he said, “is the poignancy of how brief a moment is going to be.”

## Further Reading

Interested in learning more about the Hemingways or their connection to Idaho? Rob recommends starting with *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* by Ernest Hemingway, *How It Was* by Mary Welsh Hemingway, and *Hemingway’s Sun Valley: Local Stories behind His Code, Characters, and Crisis* by Phil Huss.

## Visiting Ketchum

Visitors to Ketchum, Idaho, are encouraged to explore the Hemingways’ connection to the town. A Hemingway Memorial is at Sun Valley Resort, located off Trail Creek Road and Golf Lane, and Ernest Hemingway’s gravesite can be found in the Ketchum Cemetery, located at 1026 North Main Street. In addition, The Community Library, located at 415 Spruce Avenue North, maintains a Hemingway collection of artifacts and books in the library, as well as at its Regional History Museum at 180 1st Street East. An audio walking tour of Ketchum is linked at [comlib.org/hemingway](http://comlib.org/hemingway).

**Please remember that the Hemingway House is a private residence. Help protect its sanctity by visiting only the sites open to the public.**

## Student Reflections

Reading Hemingway stories in the science classroom helps build students’ inference and deduction skills. Below are three responses to the Hemingway short story “Big Two-Hearted River” that demonstrate how students are connecting the reading to their own studies and experiences.

Some responses have been lightly edited for length or clarity.

*The story includes descriptions of landscape changes. What major Earth processes are evident?* “Fires, which are necessary for the long-term survival of forests. They contribute greatly to the healthy life cycle of trees and the creatures that depend on them. Even after the fire has gone, the effect leaves behind soil rich in nutrients and perfect for regrowth. In ‘Big Two-Hearted River,’ the aftereffects of a fire are ultimately negative. In this creative fiction, an imaginary forest fire had swept through the logging town of Seney and burned so long and so violently that ‘even the surface had been burned off the ground.’ This kind of wild forest fire produced destruction without the immediate following of regrowth. Nick’s observation that the earth itself had been scorched indicates that the soil doesn’t have the same fertile nature as the aftermath of other quick-burning fires.”

— Isabel Hill, class of 2022

*Do you see evidence of natural selection in the story’s grasshoppers?*

“The grasshoppers have evolved to match the color of their environment like the mice we studied. The soot will likely stay there for a while, so the grasshoppers evolved to camouflage in with it. Because they are harder to spot on a dark background, they will be less likely to be eaten by predators, which gives them a reproductive advantage.”

— Rebecca Miles, class of 2025

“We could possibly see natural selection with the grasshoppers turning black. Over time, the grasshoppers, through reproductive advantage, could have turned black to blend in with their surroundings to survive longer to reproduce, which is some evidence for natural selection. There is another component of natural selection, which is variation. We know this because in the quote he talks about how the black grasshoppers are much different than the big ones with yellow and black or black and red wings. There isn’t any evidence for the last component in natural selection, which is heritability, but it is quite possible that the grasshoppers evolved through natural selection.”

— Thea DeBellis, class of 2025

*Special thanks to The Community Library for their partnership on this story.*

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