Press Release

Death and the Sun
by Edward Lewine

About the Book

"Like . . . other fine nonfiction, Death and the Sun brings us deep into a world we may never know firsthand." — Susan Salter Reynolds, Los Angeles Times

"Few American writers have captured the beauty, tragedy, drama, and exhilaration of the bullfight as Edward Lewine has done in this first-rate account of the relationship of bullfighting to Spain's history and culture and to the Spanish psyche." — Penelope Casas, author of Discovering Spain: An Uncommon Guide and La Cocina de Mamá

About the Book

"The bullfighting business could be awful. [But] to be a torero was to carry with you the tragic spirit of your art, to study it, to live for it, and if called upon, to die for it. This was a way of life that Fran found beautiful."

Bullfighting, the most passionately Spanish of pastimes, is also the most intensely misunderstood, seen as alternately barbaric, cruel, sublime, and beautiful. In Death and the Sun (Houghton Mifflin, July), the journalist Edward Lewine gives the first true insider's look at this much-maligned, much-beloved tradition through his chronicle of a dramatic season in the life of one of Spain's most famed bullfighters. Part social history, part travelogue, and completely engrossing, it calls to mind the work of Adam Gopnik, Susan Orlean, and Calvin Trillin.

Francisco Rivera Ordóñez, known as Fran, comes from a long line of celebrated — and tragic — matadors. His great-grandfather was a star matador in the 1920s and the model for the bullfighter in Ernest Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises, and his grandfather also appeared in a Hemingway book, The Dangerous Summer. Fran's father, Francisco Rivera, became a legendary figure after being fatally gored in the ring.
In Spain, then, Fran is an *uber*-celebrity, followed by paparazzi and beloved by the masses for his dark good looks, talent with the bulls, and high-profile marriage to a beautiful duchess. But as *Death and the Sun* opens, at the beginning of Fran's eighth season as a matador, things are not good for the young torero. His marriage is on the rocks, his place in the rankings is slipping, and he must turn in the performances of his life to save his reputation and his dignity.

Living and traveling with the matador's inner circle, and given full access behind the scenes at bullrings, breeding ranches, and bullfighting hot spots throughout Spain, Lewine portrays a devoted, vibrant subculture steeped in the rich history of the country. From the aficionados who crowd the notorious Section Seven of Madrid's famed bullring to the assistant bullfighters whose risks — but not paychecks — are equal to the matadors', in the great bullrings from Sevilla to San Sebastián, *Death and the Sun* unveils the spirit of Spain and the ruthless, sun-baked beauty of the bullfight.

**About the Author**

*Edward Lewine* is a frequent contributor to the *New York Times*. Formerly an expert in old master drawings at Christie's, he graduated from the Columbia School of Journalism. This is his first book.

**A Conversation with Edward Lewine**

**How did a nice American boy like you get interested in this strange Spanish business of bullfighting?**

Before I was a writer, I worked for a company based in London, where I became friends with a Spanish colleague. He brought me to Madrid for the first time and took me to see my first bullfight. I went along with him to be polite, but I didn't really want to go. I'd heard they killed the bulls in bullfights, and I was both repulsed and morally offended by the whole idea. We went to the arena, and I sat in my seat prepared to hate the experience, but once the bullfight started, I loved it. I thought it was beautiful and terrible and sad and joyous all at once. It moved me, but most of all it intrigued me. I had to know more, and so this book was born. To put it another way, I wrote *Death and the Sun* because it was the book I most wanted to read.

**Okay, but why should the average reader be interested in your book?**

Like most Americans I'd always assumed that bullfighting was a simple and brutal blood sport. What I discovered was that far from being simple, or even a sport, bullfighting is an art form, and a complex one at that. Bullfighting has been around for thousands of years, yet most Americans — and, interestingly enough, most Spaniards — know little or nothing about it. As I began to explore the hidden world of the bullfight, I came to see that it was a great way to understand Spain, but also bigger topics, such as how ancient Roman civilization continues to influence the modern world, humankind's changing relationship to nature, and our unchanging need to ponder our own mortality.
Plus, *Death and the Sun* tells an exciting story, one that anyone can enjoy. It's the story of a young matador who must live up to the memory of his dead father, overcome his own shortcomings, and risk life and limb in the pursuit of glory. I didn't write this book just for bullfighting fans, or people who like Spain, or macho guys. I wrote it for anyone who wants to discover a hidden subculture, meet amazing people, and come away with a better understanding of the world.

*Death and the Sun* describes a year in the life of a twenty-eight-year-old Spanish matador, Francisco Rivera Ordóñez. Why, among all other matadors, did you choose to write about Fran?

I wanted to find a single matador who was representative of bullfighting as a whole, and Fran fit the bill. He has more famous matadors in his family tree than any matador in history. His great-grandfather was the bullfighter in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. His grandfather was one of the greatest bullfighters of all time and starred in the Hemingway book *The Dangerous Summer*. Fran's father was killed in the ring by a bull and is a legend in Spain. Yet as quintessentially Spanish as Fran is, he also has strong ties to America. He loves our country, and he speaks our language, having spent two years in an Indiana boarding school and a few summers in a camp in Maine.

Also, Fran was a former superstar whose career had fallen on lean times. I don't really enjoy writing about success. Failure, or the struggle to attain success, or to recapture it, is much more interesting to me.

**Fran is a huge media celebrity in Spain. Was it hard getting close to him and maintaining that relationship?**

Fran is one of the most famous people in Spain, and because of this he is always on the run from the tabloid press. I was lucky that he and I have a mutual friend who introduced us, and when I proposed the book to him, he agreed right away. Not to speak for him, but I think he understood that I was serious about the subject and interested in representing it and him fairly, which I hope I have done.

The first day I arrived in Spain to begin our collaboration, March 3, Fran and his wife separated. The story exploded in the tabloid press, and Fran disappeared. It took me a whole week of phone calls to reach him, but when I did, he agreed to go on with the book. Yet even after we began traveling together, Fran remained hard to keep track of. He had no fixed home during the time I spent with him, and he changed his cell phone number once a month to avoid stalkers and paparazzi. If I lost touch with him even for a day, it could take many days to find him again.

**But *Death and the Sun* isn't really a book about Fran, is it?**

No. I use Fran, his family history, his experiences, and his day-to-day lifestyle as a way to burrow into the amazing subculture of bullfighting. Along the way I introduce the reader to a slew of fascinating characters, from the mad Welshman who follows Fran around Spain's bullrings, to the wily manager who controls his career, to the assistant bullfighters who share his risks but not his large paydays, to the aristocratic breeder who raises the bulls that will die in the ring.
You say that Fran is related to matadors who have been written about by Hemingway and other authors. How does your book on bullfighting differ from those that have come before?

I'm the only reporter to have been allowed to travel inside the entourage of a top matador and write about it openly. Most authors who've written about this subject were total outsiders. They paid for their ticket, sat in the bleachers, and wrote from a press-box perspective. Hemingway knew bullfighters well, but while his writing is brilliant as literature, it fails somewhat as journalism. In his nonfiction Hemingway neither tried nor cared to depict the lifestyle of a working bullfighter and his associates in any detail. By contrast, I traveled and lived and worked with bullfighters and have tried hard to explain what their lives are all about. *Death and the Sun* is written from their perspective—inside their vans as they travel, at their ranches as they practice, in their homes and their heads. It is the most intimate view of bullfighting ever given and is a depiction of the contemporary bullfighting scene, more than forty years after Hemingway's death.

What was it like living with bullfighters?

Exhausting. Bullfighters travel by car at night, and during the high season in late summer they perform day after day, sleeping on the road. In the book I recount one brutal week in August when we drove six nights to get to seven bullfights. Our shortest overnight journey was 240 miles; the longest was 620 miles. This was from the Atlantic coast of Spain at Gijón to the Mediterranean coast at Málaga, from border to border, across the length of the country. Overall we drove some 2,200 miles that week, about the distance from New York to Los Angeles. It's no wonder that Fran's grandfather once said the most important talent a bullfighter needs is the ability to sleep in cars.

What surprised you the most about Spain?

I could answer that question in a thousand ways. I've visited places all over the world and lived in a few, but I've never been to as complex or paradoxical a country as Spain. I was amazed by the range of landscape in such a small country, from the lush green north to the desert interior to the semitropical south. I was impressed by the Spanish ability to reconcile ancient tradition with modernity, at how solemn religiosity and contemplation of death is always mixed with high frivolity and joy in their festivals.

Mostly I was surprised at how peaceful, loving, and kind the Spanish are. For a nation that suffered through a horrible civil war in the last century, a nation that is associated with bullfights, autos-da-fé, the Inquisition, and the bombs of Basque separatists, Spain is a remarkably kind and peaceful place. I find the Spanish to be much gentler than Americans, and the relative rates of homicide in the two countries would bear this out.

**Finally, what's your position on bullfighting? How can anyone justify enjoying a spectacle that is so cruel?**

In a formal Spanish bullfight six bulls are killed for the entertainment of a paying crowd. This raises an important moral question: Should people kill animals for pleasure? It's an excellent question, but it isn't the topic of this book. This isn't a book of moral philosophy; it doesn't tell the reader how the world ought to be. This is a book of journalism; it tells the reader
how the world is. My goal was to explain bullfighting without taking sides and to let readers form their own opinions.

For my part, I have decided that the cruelty in bullfighting is balanced by its beauty and its cultural significance. The money generated by the bullfighting business helps to preserve the culture of the Spanish countryside and the bloodlines of the special type of bull used in bullfights. But I have no problem with people who find bullfighting reprehensible. That's a reasonable point of view. What I dislike are people who dismiss bullfighting without taking the time to understand it.