

# Refusing the Serious: Authorial Resistance in Ring Lardner's Prefaces for Scribner's

ROSS K. TANGEDAL<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Though already famous, wealthy, and squarely established as a popular chronicler of the early twentieth century, humorist Ring Lardner's foray into a serious literary career with Charles Scribner's Sons Publishing Company is best characterized as an act of authorial resistance. Rather than evolve into the "serious" author the firm had hoped for, Lardner chose to lampoon himself, authorship, publishing, and serious writers with a series of prefaces written for his Scribner's titles. In the prefaces to *How to Write Short Stories (with Samples)* (1924) and *The Love Nest and Other Stories* (1926), Lardner resisted overtures to rebrand and remarket himself by reminding the public of his strengths: satire, comedy, and manipulation. The result: pieces as textually nonsensical and arbitrary as many of his writings on the surface, yet carefully constructed to expose the underside of socio-cultural mores, the publishing industry, and the fraternity of serious writers he never intended to join.

**Contributor Biography:** Ross K. Tangedal is an Assistant Professor of English and publisher-in-chief of the Cornerstone Press at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He specializes in twentieth century American print & publishing culture and book history, with emphases on Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, textual editing, and the profession of authorship in America. His work has been published in the *Hemingway Review*, the *F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, *MidAmerica*, and *Midwestern Miscellany*, and he has contributed essays to the *Teaching Hemingway* series (Kent State UP) and the *Midwestern Moment* series (Hastings College Press). He was recently named associate editor of *The Letters of Ernest Hemingway* Vol. 6 (Cambridge UP: projected 2022), and his current book-length project considers the role of authorial introductions in the works of several twentieth century American writers, including Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Willa Cather, James Gould Cozzens, and Ring Lardner.

---

*"I suppose you could call it a frame. But it wasn't like no frame that was ever pulled before."*

-Ring Lardner, "A Frame-Up"<sup>2</sup>

Little-remembered Ring Lardner, a baseball writer turned short story craftsman, produced some of the most popular magazine work of the early twentieth century during his editorship of "In the Wake of the News" (1913-1919), and his "Ring Lardner's Weekly Letter" (published by the Bell Syndicate from 1919 to 1927) reached a circulation of eight million by the mid-twenties (Yardley 225). Many of his short stories appeared in publications ranging from *The Saturday Evening Post* to *Cosmopolitan*, and his popular "Busher" baseball stories (eventually collected and published as *You Know Me Al* in 1916) set a new precedent for American vernacular championed by prominent critic H.L. Mencken, author of *The American Language* (1919).

---

<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank Wesley Raabe and Robert Trogdon for their suggestions on earlier drafts of this article.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the correspondence and/or works of Ring Lardner, Maxwell Perkins, and F. Scott Fitzgerald have been transcribed exactly as written. No emendations have been made. Lardner regularly utilized faulty syntax and spelling as part of his vernacular-centered approach, and Fitzgerald was a famously poor speller.

Tangedal, Ross. "Refusing the Serious: Authorial Resistance in Ring Lardner's Prefaces for Scribner's." *Authorship* 5.2 (2016): <http://dx.doi.org/10.21825/aj.v5i2.3877>

---

Copyright Ross Tangedal. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Lardner's influence was far-reaching, as his name became synonymous with literary celebrity from coast to coast due to his wide syndication. A young Ernest Hemingway wrote stories under the pseudonym "Ring Lardner, Jr." for his high school newspaper, and his work was championed by F. Scott Fitzgerald and Virginia Woolf.<sup>3</sup> His unique style, which oftentimes eschewed third-person omniscience in favor of a first-person account—usually in the guise of the "wise boob" character he created and popularized—allowed Lardner to present the elements of society from a wholly humorous and satiric perspective. As a "creative editor" rather than "author" of his works, Lardner put his finger on the pulse of the American reader, namely through separating his real voice from the voice of his characters and allowing each to describe themselves rather than be described (189-90). More complex than meets the eye, Lardner's fiction lost favor by the time he died in 1933, and his status now rests on his role as a humorist rather than a literary stylist. Though much has been done to resurrect Lardner's best work, his writing still lags behind the work of contemporaries (and fellow Scribner's authors) Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Thomas Wolfe, even though his income from short fiction pieces, his *You Know Me Al* comic strip, and his syndicated column, was approaching \$100,000 in yearly earnings by 1922 (254).

Incidentally, in early 1924 Lardner reluctantly partnered with Charles Scribner's Sons, where editor Max Perkins wished to transform him into a serious writer. By "serious" the firm meant more literary, an author concerned with the literary and cultural influence his work has (and may have) on present and future readers/writers. Perkins's initial intention was to lure Lardner to the firm and convince him to produce a novel, the form the editor consistently pushed his writers to produce. Perkins knew that a "big" book would produce positive financial and critical results, more so than other genres. One need only look to his correspondence with F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway to ascertain the editor's preferred publication genre. Concerning the follow-up to *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Perkins wrote Fitzgerald on 3 January 1928 that "we feel no anxiety whatever about the novel," though he immediately reminded his author, "I have worried a little about the length of time elapsing between that and 'The Great Gatsby'" (Kuehl & Bryer 149). He likewise wrote Hemingway on 30 August 1935: "When you're ready to do a novel. That's what they all must want. That's what they all tell me they want + want me to tell you. I don't think I can tell you anything" (Brucoli 224). Perkins showed similar persistence with Lardner, who responded favorably to Perkins's luring but never wholly acquiesced to the editor's policies. At no point did Perkins or the firm wish to curtail Lardner's humor or satire. Lardner's early correspondence with Perkins shows his relative indifference to the firm's willingness to recast him as more than the writer he was. For instance, he wrote Perkins on 21 July 1924 that he would "come to one of those literary luncheons if you think it advisable, but it is my secret ambition not to" (*Letters* 163). He further distanced himself from novel writing later that year,<sup>4</sup> when he wrote Perkins: "Don Stewart's 'Mr. and Mrs. Haddock Abroad' was a blow to me. That is the kind of 'novel' I had intended to write, but if I do it now, the boys will yell stop thief" (168). In 1926 Perkins assured Lardner that "a continuous book always has an advantage" (*Ring Around Max* 97), and in 1928 he told Lardner that "I do not know of any publishing news that would be more interesting than that such a book by you was to come

<sup>3</sup> Woolf placed Lardner alongside major American authors Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, and Sherwood Anderson in her 1925 essay "American Fiction" for *The Saturday Review of Literature* (Woolf).

<sup>4</sup> RL to MP, 2 December 1924.

out” (125). The editor knew that with Lardner he had a sellable commodity with over a decade of considerable success and readership, but he never could convince Lardner to produce a long work.

Along with his editor, Lardner’s close friend and fellow Scribner’s author F. Scott Fitzgerald regularly wrote to Perkins (also Fitzgerald’s editor) about the prospect of a Lardner novel. By May 1926, Fitzgerald had become generally frustrated by his friend’s insistence on story writing. He wrote Perkins, “God, I wish he’s write a more or less personal novel. Couldn’t you persuade him? The real history of an American manager, say a Ziegfeld or a theatrical girl” (Kuehl & Bryer 141). The sentiment was repeated three years later: “*Why* won’t he write about Great Neck, a sort of Oddysee of man starting in theatre business” (156). Perkins responded in the negative, claiming, “I am sure if Ring made a lot of money [writing plays], he would do even less writing of the kind we can use, than even now. – And he is writing another play too, and once a man gets going at that, it is a question if he will ever do anything else, except by necessity” (157). The kind of writing Scribner’s could “use” was a novel, and since Lardner began his writing career in the short-form market, he had never needed to write another way. But the most scathing critique of Lardner’s refusal to enter into a serious writing career came from prominent critic Edmund Wilson. In a review of Lardner’s *How to Write Short Stories (with Samples)* for the *Dial*, Wilson wrote:

Will Ring Lardner, then, go on to his *Huckleberry Finn* or has he already told all he knows? [...] But you never know: here is a man who has had the freedom of the modern West no less than Mark Twain did of the old one, who approaches it, as Mark Twain did, with a perceptive interest in human beings instead of the naturalist’s formula—a man who lives at a time when if one be not sold irredeemably into bondage to the *Saturday Evening Post*, it is far easier for a serious writer to get published and find a hearing than it was in Mark Twain’s day. If Ring Lardner has anything more to give us, the time has now come to deliver it. (qtd. in Elder 217)

For Perkins, Fitzgerald, and Wilson, to write short stories was to postpone talent that should be spent on writing novels. Short stories were the means unto an end, namely precursors to the great event: the novel. Given the outside pressure to prepare a long work, Lardner’s foray into a serious literary career with Scribner’s is best characterized as an act of public authorial resistance, for he chose to lampoon himself, authorship, publishing, and serious writers rather than enter completely into their fraternity.

Once signed by Scribner’s, Lardner used his considerable market position to maintain rather than evolve his public authority, and he successfully resisted overtures to rebrand and remarket himself by reminding the public of his strengths: satire, comedy, and manipulation. Two prefaces in particular operate on the same level of humor and satire that his texts do, with Lardner ably performing his persona. His prefaces to *How to Write Short Stories (with Samples)* (1924) and *The Love Nest and Other Stories* (1926) are pieces as textually nonsensical and arbitrary as many of his writings on the surface, yet they are carefully constructed to expose the underside of socio-cultural mores and the publishing industry. With these prefaces, Lardner effectively resisted an authorial persona he never intended to inhabit. Through correspondence

we can trace the development of these pieces, with Lardner's output predicated on a somewhat withdrawn and mostly indifferent desire to be repositioned. The design, style, and textual implications of these pieces offer another level of satire to Lardner's penchant for textual comedy. He was keenly aware of the textual and authorial functions of prefaces as they pertained to his fiction. Charles Holmes concludes that Lardner "was not a frustrated genius who turned out journalistic pieces with cynical indifference, but a scrupulous craftsman, a writer who was a master of his medium and who treated it with respect" (29). Lardner respected satire, abhorred fakery, skewered hypocrisy, and stuck to his writing persona. His prefaces become satires of prefaces, he the satirist of preface-writers. All along, Lardner certainly knew what the space was supposed to include, thanks in large part to Perkins. Consequently, he knew how best to lampoon that space as the writer who resisted the pressures of serious authorship.

By the end of the 1920s, Ring Lardner had realized his potential in the literary market of the early twentieth century. Douglas Robinson contends that Lardner "wrote for two audiences," and that "in a culture dedicated to ideals of egalitarianism and excellence, democracy and genius, pleasing both the masses and the elite spells success—a success only a few of our writers have attained" (265). Suggesting that Lardner intended for his work to satisfy both the popular and critical communities is uneven territory. Lardner did not need to produce new fiction for Scribner's nor cast himself as a "serious author" worthy of critical acclaim; he made more than enough money in various print markets. While some have argued for Lardner's possible desire—albeit miniscule—to become more than a humorist, the prefaces under examination show Lardner at his popular best, as he angles into a critical community on his own terms.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the vast majority of his Scribner's titles were reprint editions of previous books published by either Bobbs-Merrill or George H. Doran, and magazine work previously published in a variety of publications with very little new material written exclusively for Scribner's.<sup>6</sup> Unlike Fitzgerald, Hemingway, or Wolfe, Lardner's primary goals were always firmly established in the magazine market. He knew how to write to make money, and he did it with a knack for understanding readers. Lardner's authorial resistance is evident in his satiric prefaces, which furthers the notion that he cared little for literary pretension. His prefaces complicate the intended function of the preface—the most important of which, per narratologist Gerard Genette, "is to provide the author's interpretation of the text or, if you prefer, his statement of intent"—by indirectly commenting on the business of literature through comedic misdirection (221). Perkins may well have intended for the prefaces and reprints to reposition Lardner in hopes of attracting new readers. However, it seems likely that Lardner sought to reinforce an already established authorial persona to an already established set of consumers. He refused to fix what wasn't broken. Though difficult to position because of his relative indifference to the literati, his work for Maxwell Perkins at Charles Scribner's Sons provides a sterling example of authorial resistance in the face of expected evolution. Ring Lardner altered the preface from a place of serious textual positioning into a space of textual resistance to such positioning. He manipulated

---

<sup>5</sup> Yardley suggests that Lardner "came to understand that his work could have more than dollar value, and to be bothered more and more by a nagging worry: Can one write for the dollar *and* for 'art,' or does a choice have to be made?" (255).

<sup>6</sup> Even Lardner's "autobiography" – *The Story of a Wonder Man* – was initially serialized in *Cosmopolitan* from 11 July 1926 to 9 January 1927. The book was then published soon after in March 1927.

the spatial and textual elements of prefaces in order to comment on the “literary game” from the only perspective he could: his own.

### ***How to Write Short Stories (with Samples) (1924)***

Scribner’s attempted to recast Lardner by publishing *How to Write Short Stories (with Samples)*, an ambitious collection of the author’s best known stories, on 9 May 1924. Leading up to publication editor Max Perkins sent Lardner several letters outlining his intentions—as well as his reservations—with the firm’s new literary property. His introductory letter inquired about Lardner’s willingness to “form a volume” around “The Golden Honeymoon” (*Ring Around Max* 2-3).<sup>7</sup> While simple and straight forward, the editor mentions author F. Scott Fitzgerald at three different points: he claims Scott recommended “The Golden Honeymoon” to him; he alleges that Scott persuaded him to write to Lardner; and finally, he defers to Scott’s judgment concerning Lardner’s possible decision (2-3). In all, this introductory letter prefaces the relationship Lardner, Perkins, and Fitzgerald would forge for the remainder of the 1920s, with Lardner reluctantly—at times—acquiescing to Perkins’s requests. By 15 January 1924, Lardner had sent Perkins a preface to his first collection, which Perkins dubbed “excellent” (7). Perkins had taken the initiative and placed *How to Write Short Stories* on the Spring list, though he had never formally asked Lardner for permission. His 1 February letter points to the editor’s propensity for action, as he assured Lardner “we felt that the best thing to do was to act immediately and get out a volume” (9). Lardner agreed and told Perkins the next day that “the arrangement and terms are satisfactory to me” before inviting him out to his home in Great Neck (10).

Unlike the oftentimes contentious correspondence from Hemingway or Fitzgerald to Perkins, Lardner’s letters were understated, calm, and professional, akin to his reputation within the writing profession. This reputation made his relationship with Perkins rather simple; case in point, when Perkins recommended Lardner include short introductory notes between stories due to a “weakness in the title” (14), the author responded, “I think the preface idea is a good one” (17).<sup>8</sup> Lardner was always willing to hear Perkins’s requests, though often he would benignly disregard his editor. He allowed Perkins to collect and publish his stories, but the money earned never approached the sums reached from his magazine work, and his standard Scribner’s rate (15% royalty) rarely netted him significant profit. However, the new volumes did bring him significant publicity and critical attention. Beginning with a collection of already published stories, Perkins knew full well he had to create a different kind of book for readers. Lardner’s preface and commentaries featured a persona very much established within the writer’s canon and public reputation. So established was his authority that the preface was reworked from one of his “Weekly Letter” segments for the Bell Syndicate, which allowed Lardner to seamlessly transition his persona from magazine to trade publication with little interruption or effort. Even with his recycled preface, the most successful and innovative of Lardner’s volumes proved to be *How to Write Short Stories (with Samples)*, with its “new” preface and short introductory commentaries garnering much critical and popular attention.

---

<sup>7</sup> MP to RL, 2 July 1923.

<sup>8</sup> MP to RL, 17 March 1924; RL to MP, 22 March 1924.



The purpose of Lardner's preface was to send up the use of writing manuals in the writing profession, which had been in vogue since the nineteenth century. Knowing that his persona had garnered him a significant following, and that the same persona had brought him to the attention of Perkins and Scribner's, Lardner reinforced his intention to keep his readers—and himself—in as stable a state as possible. However, a Scribner's *New York Times* display advertisement from 1 June 1924 declared Lardner, "an extraordinary humorist, who, like Mark Twain, puts far more than fun into his stories. Compassion follows laughter; amusement gives way to a sense of infinite pathos. Authenticity and veracity are the first qualities of the stories in this volume" (Display Ad 51). With Twain front and center as Lardner's literary companion, the ad places him in a different category, since Twain was equally known for short stories *and* for novels. Further, by insisting that Lardner's stories exhibited as much compassion and pathos as they did laughter and amusement, it was clear Scribner's wanted Lardner to evolve. The ad continues with quotes from Burton Rascoe, who compares Lardner to Sherwood Anderson, Katherine Mansfield, and Willa Cather. Max Perkins wanted Lardner to become the next Mark Twain, and early advertisements made this point clear to the reading public. As both a new *and* established author, Lardner had to attract readers in order to make Scribner's investment worthwhile, and he used prefatory manipulation as a means to amplify and maintain an established authorial persona.

Yardley refers to the preface and notes to *How to Write Short Stories* as both "offhand" and "self-mockery" (275-76), with each piece providing a satiric slant on established literariness and training. Early on in his preface Lardner attacks "correspondence schools that learns you the art of short-story writing" and the ineffectiveness of such schools (*HTWSS* v). He claims that "the most of the successful authors of the short fiction of to-day never went to no kind of a college, or if they did, they studied piano tuning or the barber trade," concluding "they could of got just as far in what I call the literary game if they had of stayed home those four years and helped mother carry out the empty bottles" (v). Lardner separates the mind from the act, with his ideal writer making the most out of realistic experience and judgment rather than engaging in an intellectual exercise. Lardner recognized his immense readership's response to a non-intellectual, non-literary writer would be positive rather than negative. He plays to the sensibility of a simpler reader, calling the trade a "game" and referring to intellectual novice writers as "boys or gals who had win their phi beta skeleton keys at this or that story-writing college" (v). Rather than spend money and time being taught how to write, Lardner insists that "you can't find no operation up to date, whether it be a general institution of learning or a school that specializes in story writing, which can make a great author out of a born druggist" (v-vi) If taken seriously Lardner's preface would lose all effectiveness, but this comment rings true even today. His critique of authorship centers on talent and output. Lardner possessed both the talent to create a unique perspective and the work ethic to regularly produce printable copy. Talent and work are required to successfully write for the public, and his satire of this duality makes the point even clearer.

Lardner's first three paragraphs display a simple authority on the surface, but beneath that surface is the hard-working efficiency of a professional writer. More effective is its appearance in a Scribner's book rather than a periodical for mass publication. If he was to refine his authority and grant a serious introduction to the art of the short story, readers would justifiably respond with either dismissal or puzzlement. Inversely, Edmund Wilson was puzzled

at the authorial reversal; as referenced earlier, the critic expected an evolution in Lardner's persona. Wilson inquired, "is all this an idea of the publishers, who do not want to forfeit the prestige of Lardner's reputation as a humorist, or is it due to Mr. Lardner, who is timid about coming forward in the role of serious writer?" (qtd. in Yardley 276). The Scribner's label altered Lardner's ability to completely get away with his satiric sentiments, though he continued to mine them for the remainder of his association with the firm. Lardner maintained a persona consistent with his magazine work, playing for laughs more so than enlightenment. At no point could he be categorized as timid, though complications were bound to arise because he chose Scribner's. Becoming a "serious" writer meant dealing with serious criticism, something Lardner understood and continued to resist.

Suffice it to say, Lardner's preface does enlighten readers on the machinations of artistic creation, editing, and publication, though the enlightenment is engulfed in the patina of ridicule. He notes that "the first thing I generally always do is try and get hold of a catchy title, like for instance, 'Basil Hargrave's Vermifuge,' or 'Fun at the Incinerating Plant,' " before looking "cock-eyed" at colored pencils and blank paper prior to selecting his materials (*HTWSS* vi). The humor of his titles obviates the authority of a serious author, for the catchiness of those titles outweighs their art. "Vermifuge" sounds better than its definition,<sup>9</sup> and Basil's use of vermifuge on himself or others offers readers an initial conceit. Likewise, one generally does not have fun at incinerating plants, though the curiosity of what fun could be had promotes the title's main goal: catch the reader. Similarly, he utilizes double speak to poke fun at the writing professional: "How to begin—or, as we professionals would say, 'how to commence'—is the next question. It must be admitted that the method of approach ('L'approchement') differs even among first class fictionists" (vi-vii). Lardner recognizes the duality of authority (personal and public), and he shows how his work differs from others while maintaining a link to a similar professional mindset. He would never have signed with Scribner's if he had not understood the possibility of professional gain, but because his preface was written prior to the publication of the text in an altogether different medium Lardner can again position himself between literary and popular, serious and silly. His explanation and example of beginning a story continues this duality, for he offers both helpful commentary and self-effacing posturing in equal measure.

When Lardner observes that "the reading public prefers short dialogues to any other kind of writing," he means it (vii). His circulation and prosperity rested on such dialogues, and by reminding readers of his own comfort with those pieces he promotes an authority based on condensation rather than expansion. The less we know about the "real" Ring Lardner the better, and his preface maintained his vigil against over-emphasizing anything other than the writer his readers would surely recognize. At this point in the preface one expects Lardner to get on with the specifics of writing and promote a semi-serious tutoring service for his volume's readers. His initial fabricated sample plot makes sense, with two girls at a resort looking for famous autographs and narrowly escaping a forger's autograph, which would certainly have embarrassed them. He then begins writing "with haphazard dialogue" to see where his plot might go (viii). Of course it goes nowhere, which leads Lardner to scrap his plot and "take up the life of a mule in the Grand Canyon" who watches trains go by and "keeps wondering who is going to ride him" (ix). Lardner then writes of strangers on a train who end up playing and listening to the same composer (Chopin) outlined in the original plot. Both musical pieces mentioned do not

---

<sup>9</sup> Vermifuge: "An agent used to expel parasitic worms" (Merriam Webster).

exist; the first is the 121<sup>st</sup> fugue for bass drum, while the other is the 12<sup>th</sup> sonata for flute and cuspidor (spittoon). Aware of his readers' expectations, Lardner plays up the farce, and it is this comedy that drives the piece and the collection.

With his farcical approach, Lardner pummels his readers into satiric submission and uses the form to resist, rather than promote, authorial posturing. Lardner's stories were his own, and when he finished them he gave them to the public for their entertainment. He neither edited a story nor revised an existing piece for Perkins and Scribner's; instead Lardner let his stories exist on their own. When offering concluding advice to writers he explains, "personally I have found it a good scheme to not even sign my name to the story, and when I have got it sealed up in its envelope and stamped and addressed, I take it to some town where I don't live and mail it from there. The editor has no idea who wrote the story, so how can he send it back? He is in a quandary" (x). Putting one's name on a story grants that writer authority over the material, and authority was never Lardner's game. To this point, it is evident that Lardner never required all of Perkins's attention. He dealt with Lardner as he was and encouraged his writing throughout their relationship, while Lardner's reading public provided a buffer between the writer's sensibilities and his new firm's more serious literary intentions.

His final call in the preface mentions how his collected stories "will illustrate in a half-hearted way what I am trying to get at" (x). The preface forms one singular conclusion: literary pretension in the form of writing manuals and prefaces has no place in Lardner's aesthetic. Pretension leads to false representation, and falsehood further separates writers from readers. Lardner's preface and notes lead readers down back alleys and rabbit holes for no other reason than to express the sheer joy of humorous structure and punch lines. He knew his readers would laugh rather than engage in thought-provoking critical dialogue, and by refusing to put a square peg in a round hole the writer maintained his carefully constructed magazine persona throughout the preface and its accompanying text. Like his preface, the short commentaries introducing each story in-text relinquish any serviceable authorial function in favor of humor. Each selection engages in a level of humorous dialogue with the reader. "The Facts" was "written on top of a Fifth Avenue bus, and some of the sheets blew away, which may account for the apparent scarcity of interesting situations" (1); "Some Like Them Cold" was "a story written from a title, the title being a line from Tennyson's immortal 'Hot Cross Buns' " (45); Lardner thanks Chief Justice William Howard Taft for the "slang employed" in "Alibi Ike" (79). "The Golden Honeymoon" is preceded by a single-phrase preface—"a story with 'sex appeal' "—hilarious in that it is a story about two septuagenarians who dislike each other (113); "Champion" is "an example of the mystery story. The mystery is how it came to get printed" (143); and "Horseshoes," Lardner writes, "is the kind of story which the reader can take up at any point and lay down as soon as he feels like it" (317). These notes are one-liners, punch lines signifying nothing other than the author's ability to structure a laugh. Lardner chose to do away completely with traditional notions of prefacing, which results in pieces as true to their writer as any other. For Perkins, adding a preface and notes meant expanding Lardner's loosely connected stories into a serviceable volume, since prefaces typically provide authors with a forum for explanation, conversation, and reader engagement. However, since Lardner maintained an air of



post-composition negligence with his own work, one can assume that his prefaces and notes meant about as much to him and his texts as if they were written by someone else.<sup>10</sup>

### ***The Love Nest and Other Stories (1926)***

Lardner's preface for his next collection provided an ample framework for the author to fuse his satiric functions in a preface. In an uncharacteristic move, Lardner wrote an original piece for *The Love Nest and Other Stories*. How it was written proves important for two reasons. One, Lardner wrote the piece as a space-filler at the behest of Perkins, who was concerned the book lacked size compared to other collections.<sup>11</sup> He asked Lardner, "will you write the preface –And the longer you make it, the better. Please do make it long if you can without forcing it. Say anything you want to. The stories add up to 46,200 words. I suppose the preface could easily make it 50,000, but even that is much shorter than the book. It will do, however. —" (*Ring Around Max* 85). Two, Lardner may have written it as a response to Perkins's persistence regarding novel writing. Again, Lardner resists authorial refashioning and offers a unique and cynical approach to the publishing industry, which proves that he recognized the effect of his material on a readership already dedicated to his writing. Comprised of recently published short stories, the collection was published at Lardner's peak with Scribner's, which begs a question about his preface. Why not choose a straight-forward model to present newer work and maintain momentum within the firm? Lardner was never one to tarry to demands or conventions, and because of the duality inherent in his preface—he writes from the fictional Sarah E. Spooldripper's perspective, a maid and wolf-caretaker for Lardner—we can trace a noticeable authoritative move. He literally removes himself from his own preface, choosing instead to write from a fake maid's point-of-view. Lardner actively refuses serious authority in the Spooldripper preface, and he creates a work especially timely considering his position moving forward with Scribner's.

Both of Lardner's biographers define the preface in a similar fashion. Elder sees the piece as "a burlesque of all introductions, of intimate memoirs, of literary scholarship" (235), and Yardley adds that Lardner "outdid himself in self-mockery" and wrote a "charmingly nonsensical" piece (294). While Yardley sees the humor in the piece, Elder correctly categorizes the overarching targets of Lardner's exercise: authorship, criticism, and the publishing industry. Lardner tells readers in a footnote that Spooldripper "knew all there was to know about Lardner, and her mind was virtually blank. It was part of her charm," and she characterizes Lardner as "perhaps not loveable, but certainly irresistible. There was an impishness in him that fascinated. It was part of his charm" (*Love Nest* v). She goes on to describe literary rivalries, with Lardner, Fitzgerald, and "Opie Reade"<sup>12</sup> [sic] pining over "the love of Lily Langtry" (vi). When Lily is asked to rise and toast her favorite, "the muscles of Fitzgerald and Reade were taut; Lardner's were

---

<sup>10</sup> Lardner famously refused to keep copies of his own stories, which forced Perkins and Fitzgerald to attain stories and pieces from magazines and periodicals directly, a considerable task given the author's significant output.

<sup>11</sup> MP to RL, 23 December 1925.

<sup>12</sup> Opie Read (not "Reade") was a popular comic writer and founder of the *Arkansas Traveler* magazine.

very flabby” (vii). Accordingly, each “swain” was affected by Lily’s toast: “Reade arose and told the story of the two half-breeds, Seminole and Deminole. Lardner and Fitzgerald took up rotation pool, and weighed themselves once a week. Every so often they became maudlin, or, better still, inaudible” (vii). Choosing between hearing the authors’ self-pitying and drunken sentimentality or silence shows Lardner’s comedic spirit regarding his close friend Fitzgerald.

Spooldripper then takes readers on “a preposterous introductory tour” of the collection’s stories (Yardley 295). The doctor in “Haircut” was “Lardner’s favorite among all his fictional characters, or as he called them, ‘my puppets’ ” (*Love Nest* ix). Lardner had used “puppets” to describe manipulation of character in the preface to *How to Write Short Stories*, though using the term for “Haircut” takes on greater meaning due to the complex perspective in the story. For “Reunion,” Spooldripper recalls a golf anecdote featuring the mayor of New York, in which “Lardner could not remember whose turn it was to drive first. ‘Your honor?’ he said to the Mayor. ‘Yes?’ the Mayor replied. ‘What can I do for you?’ It is incidents like this that paint the man in his true colors. He was forever blowing bubbles. It amounted to a whim” (xii). Though populated with a relatively cheap joke (“Your honor”), this episode adequately sums up much of Lardner’s artistic temperament and reminds readers of his lexical tomfoolery.<sup>13</sup> “Zone of Quiet” came to *Cosmopolitan* editor Ray Long during the “equinoctial gales” after “every other sheet of copy was blown away or destroyed by stray dogs” (xii). No matter, for “Mr. Long thought this all for the best as he was crowded that month” (xiv). Lardner’s straight-forward reduction of magazine publishing and editing practices characterizes Ray Long as an editor looking for printable copy rather than a thoughtful artistic expression, which adequately sums up the magazine market of the early twentieth century. These short explications provide each story a nonsense history while critiquing various publishing standards, and Lardner’s ability to play with both farce and criticism simultaneously marks a considerable advancement in his preface writing.

Spooldripper eventually concludes that “the Master is gone and the next question is who will succeed him? Perhaps some writer still unborn. Perhaps one who will never be born. That is what I hope” (xvi).<sup>14</sup> Veiled references to Lardner’s own death throughout the piece finally reach their zenith, and some critics and readers believed Spooldripper’s account.<sup>15</sup> Lardner even kills off Spooldripper and notes “the joke is on Miss Spooldripper, for she is gone too. Two months ago she was found dead in the garage, her body covered with wolf bites left there by her former ward, who has probably forgotten where he left them” (xvi). By killing off not one but two preface writers, Lardner takes a significant jab at the various functions of publishing and performs the ultimate act of authorial resistance: he kills himself in print. Though he wrote another Spooldripper piece for his fake autobiography the following year (*The Story of a Wonder Man*), his work for *The Love Nest* shows a keen eye for prefaces of all kinds. His work satisfies the core requirements of an authorial preface: he provides the genesis for his stories, offers another’s perspective of the author, eulogizes his own work by faking death, and positions his work amidst the current standards of the day.<sup>16</sup> The moment where these ideas collide occurs

<sup>13</sup> Lardner reworked “I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles” during the 1919 World Series (the Black Sox Scandal) to read instead: “I’m forever blowing ball games / Pretty ball games in the air” (Yardley 214).

<sup>14</sup> This is a possible allusion to novelist Henry James, known as “The Master” during his prolific career.

<sup>15</sup> Both Yardley (295) and Elder (234) reference various examples in regards to the initial publication of *The Love Nest*.

<sup>16</sup> Consult Gerard Genette’s *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* for a full discussion.

immediately before his conclusion, when Spooldripper references “the invention and perfection of the radio” as the leading cause of Lardner’s penchant for short stories (xiv). After Lardner builds his own and installs it “in the suit of pajamas which he habitually wore nights” (xiv), Spooldripper describes his final days:

He was always trying to tune in on Glens Falls, N.Y., and it was only in his last illness that he found out there was no broadcasting station at that place. His sense of humor came to his rescue in this dilemma. ‘Junior,’ he said to his wife, ‘they tell me there is no broadcasting station at Glens Falls.’ ‘Am I to blame for that?’ retorted the little Nordic, quick to take umbrage. ‘No,’ he answered. ‘It’s Glens Falls.’” (xiv-xv)

Somewhat sad, these lines give the introduction an added authorial narrative, for Lardner’s tuberculosis had hit prior to the publication of *The Love Nest*, and during that period Yardley notes: “as the twenties moved on and the thirties neared, as Ring’s health declined and his work became routine and repetitive, he must have looked at his life’s work, and in doing so, he may well have reached a stern judgment” (Yardley 284). This judgment makes an appearance in the preface, for by separating his perspective and adding the fictional Spooldripper, Lardner doubly controls his own authority. Instead of speaking for himself, he indirectly creates a mixed reaction to his supposed death, calling more for continued indifference than a eulogy. However, Lardner offers a possible judgment of his skills by creating the dialogue between himself and his beloved wife Ellis. His sense of humor had driven him his entire creative life, and through that humor even he can’t find blame outside of the simplest of answers: “It’s Glens Falls” (*Love Nest* xv). Perhaps he assumes a slight defeat, or maybe he knows his preface was written solely for space. Either way, the Spooldripper preface provides a fitting conclusion to the authorial resistance Lardner undertook throughout his time with Charles Scribner’s Sons. In the end, Ring Lardner refused to become an author of serious fiction, and his prefaces for Scribner’s were windows into a refusal few understood, except for Ring Lardner.

### Works Cited

- Brucoli, Matthew J., ed., with the assistance of Robert W. Trogon. *The Only Thing That Counts: The Ernest Hemingway-Maxwell Perkins Correspondence*. University of South Carolina Press, 1996.
- Caruthers, Clifford M., ed. *Letters of Ring Lardner*. Orchises Press, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Ring Around Max: The Correspondence of Ring Lardner & Max Perkins*. Northern Illinois University Press, 1973.
- Display Ad 51. No Title. *New York Times*. 1 June 1924. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2010)*, BR 27.
- Elder, Donald. *Ring Lardner: A Biography*. Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1956.
- Genette, Gerard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. 1982. Translated by Jane E. Lewin, Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Holmes, Charles S. “Ring Lardner: Reluctant Artist.” *A Question of Quality: Popularity and Value in Modern Creative Writing*. Edited by Louis Filler, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1976, pp. 26-39.
- Kuehl, John, and Jackson Bryer, eds. *Dear Scott/Dear Max: The F. Scott Fitzgerald-Maxwell Perkins Correspondence*. Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971.
- Lardner, Ring W. *How to Write Short Stories (with Samples)*. Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1924.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Love Nest and Other Stories*. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926.
- Robinson, Douglas. "Ring Lardner's Dual Audience and the Capitalist Double Bind." *American Literary History*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1992, pp. 264-87.
- Woolf, Virginia. "American Fiction." *The Saturday Review of Literature*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1925.
- Yardley, Jonathan. *Ring: A Biography of Ring Lardner*. Random House, 1977.