

**Ross K. Tangedal**, *The Preface: American Authorship in the Twentieth Century*, New Directions in Book History. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. xviii + 220pp. €105.99.

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**Contributor biography:** William Gonch is the Cornerstone Fellow in English at the Catholic University of America. His dissertation, *Translating Grace: Postsecularity in Twentieth-Century American Literature*, explores the creative interactions among secular and religious discourses in American fiction from 1920 until the beginning of the 21st century.

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In *The Preface: American Authorship in the Twentieth Century*, Ross K. Tangedal examines how American writers constructed authorial identities and shaped the reading of their work by writing prefaces. Tangedal's book examines the autographic prefaces—prefaces that authors write for their own books—of six canonical American writers. His writers used their introductory writings to make claims for their artistic and professional authority, to answer critics, to resituate older works within a changed literary landscape, and, of course, to sell books. Gerard Genette's *Paratexts* is a central reference point for this study, but Tangedal distinguishes his project by specifying its historical framework: he is interested in how economic, artistic, ideological, and personal factors interact to give rise to the prefaces that introduce major twentieth-century American novels.

An extensive introductory chapter situates Tangedal's writers within two contexts: one economic, the other artistic and intellectual. At the end of the nineteenth century, American copyright protections were strengthened and the literary marketplace became more professional. The reprinting of a writer's older books became an increasingly lucrative source of income, and as publishers found that the words "with a new preface by the author" could drive sales, a demand for prefaces arose through the reprint market. At the same time, two influential writers provided models for the use of prefaces toward serious artistic ends: Henry James and Joseph Conrad. James's New York edition prefaces taught readers how to read his fiction, providing a model of the author as authoritative interpreter of his own work. Conrad's preface to "*Narcissus*" offers an alternative model: he narrates the act of writing as a struggle to put the object of representation faithfully before the reader. Conrad's approach becomes "a defining feature of the modern preface: by illuminating the process the authors illuminate the work, and by illuminating the work they illuminate their authority" (Tangedal 15). James's author-centered model of preface-writing, and Conrad's process-centered one, recur throughout Tangedal's study.

Each of the six chapters that follows addresses prefaces by a major American writer of the twentieth century, usually through in-depth studies of a few important prefaces. "A Proper Reading" addresses Willa Cather's two introductions to *My Ántonia*: the original 1918 opening and the 1926

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revisions. Unlike most of the prefaces that Tangedal considers, Cather's introductions are part of the fiction; they tell a story in which the novel's narrator, Jim Burden, gives her the manuscript that becomes *My Ántonia*. Tangedal offers a review of the extensive critical debate around these introductions, especially the complicated questions that they raise about power and narrative: as both narratives make clear, we are reading Jim's *Ántonia*, not *Ántonia's*. Tangedal contends that, by effacing her role as writer, Cather emphasizes the authority that comes with situating herself as *editor*, thus "illuminat[ing] her own authority" (48) in her control of Jim's story. He extends this principle into a defense of Cather's revised, pared-down 1926 introduction. Citing Cather's argument for the beauty of simple objects in which "every line...is designed for one purpose" (quoted in Tangedal 51), Tangedal argues that the new introduction "carries the essence of Cather's technique," (52) rooting the narrative in Jim's memories and desires while removing some of its narrative complexity and minimizing the "Cather" character's presence. These changes have been controversial among critics, and Tangedal criticizes the Cather Scholarly edition's preference for the 1918 introduction. For Tangedal, the 1926 introduction's simplicity buttresses Cather's authority: by getting out of the way, she encourages us to look more closely at what she has made.

"Stepping Back or Turning In: Ring Lardner and Authorial Resistance" considers Lardner's rejection of the expectation that he would "grow" as a writer by taking on projects seen in the 1920s and 1930s as "literary" and "serious"—in particular, by writing novels. In prefaces to his story collections, Lardner satirizes "literary pretension" (Tangedal 70) by writing mock-introductions that are comic sendups of the Jamesian tradition of authorial self-interpretation. For example, in his preface to *The Love Nest and Other Stories*, Lardner writes in the voice of his fictional "wolf-caretaker," invents a romantic rivalry between himself and F. Scott Fitzgerald, offers misguided (but sometimes unintentionally insightful) readings of the stories, and falsely reports the author's death. Underneath its buffoonery, the preface "satisfies the core requirements of an authorial preface: he provides the genesis of his stories, offers an outside perspective of the author, eulogizes his own work by faking death, and positions his work amidst the current standards of the day" (83-84). By parodying the expectations of preface-writers, Lardner fulfills the economic needs of his publisher while resisting dominant assumptions about literary value. Lardner emerges as the author of some of the most interesting prefaces in Tangedal's study, a writer who anticipates the zany play of postmodernism.

"Inhibiting Signposts" investigates the increasing "authorial anxiety" of F. Scott Fitzgerald's prefaces. Fitzgerald worked in the same literary marketplace as Lardner, but he internalized its values. In the short introductions he wrote to each story in *Tales of the Jazz Age*, the author offers a fascinating combination of "offhand remarks, flippant asides, and bald-faced lies" (94). In this preface, Fitzgerald appears as a slick young magazine writer who knows his talent. Often, he deprecates his own stories, which he claims were written for money—but in doing so he sets himself up as a "real" literary writer who can distinguish hack work from the real thing. However, as Fitzgerald grew older, his serious novels were not well received and he lost his flip confidence. His preface to the 1934 *Modern Library* edition of *The Great Gatsby* evinces anxiety about his place in a changed literary landscape. In justifying his work, he rejects Depression-era critics who judge a book by its politics and argues for a vision of art based on the integrity with which the writer worked. The measure of a book becomes "'the honesty of the imagination,' the clear conscience that comes with not showing off one's stylistic dexterity and expressing an experience so purely that the words recreate the emotion in the reader that the artist felt" (Tangedal 106). Fitzgerald defends his artistic

integrity by turning it into a personal virtue, one that can be sensed in the text but only truly known by the author who reveals it in his preface.

Chapter 5, “The Will to Control: Ernest Hemingway and the Action of Writing,” depicts Hemingway sharing Fitzgerald’s conviction that the authenticity of the act of writing measures the artistry of the work. Writing becomes an example of the “pure,” active, manly activities that Hemingway celebrated, such as bullfighting and fishing. Like Fitzgerald’s “honesty,” Hemingway’s commitment “never to write a phony line” and his distinctive style become ways of deriving authority from the act of writing. But Tangedal argues that, in articulating these ideas, Hemingway “develop[ed] beyond the young architect of omission into the combative man of letters who fought to protect the storyteller rather than the critic” (125). In arguing for a poetics of simplicity and avoidance of the fake, Hemingway ceased to be a writer who could simply *do* non-fake writing, and created instead the famous Hemingway persona of simple authenticity.

Chapter 6, “A Safe Distance,” argues that the four prefaces that Robert Penn Warren wrote for successive American editions of *All the King’s Men* (1946) show the increasing security that time and success provided him. “Distance” can protect an author from the rawness of a subject matter or from the intensity of the author’s artistic idea, but also from the critical reception of the book and the author’s anxieties about his or her place in the literary world. In his first preface in 1953, Warren is at pains to separate himself from the historical figure of Huey Long—partly to rebut charges that he is politically sympathetic to Long’s authoritarianism, and partly to establish the novel as something more timeless and universal than journalism. To do so, Warren narrates the development of his novel through widespread influences, including his observations of fascist Italy, his travels around the United States, and his reading of canonical literature. Warren “universalizes his novel, releasing it from the strict confines of the ‘Southern’ or ‘political’ novel. His novel came from Dante and Machiavelli, from Baton Rouge and Connecticut, from wheat fields and university libraries” (Tangedal 149). Widespread influences justify his argument, in 1953, that “Stark as Long is a misreading” (Tangedal 157).

As Warren ages and the novel’s importance seems assured, he makes peace with Long’s influence by arguing that Long mattered to him more as a legend than as a man: “Huey Long was a story, in and of himself, and the myth surrounding his presence on the local and national scenes definitely contributed to Warren’s work, yet the contribution was one of many” (Tangedal 158). Treating Long as a “myth” elevates the novel; it also elevates Long, not politically, but as a particular Louisiana instantiation of “the old drama of power and ethics” (quoted in Tangedal 144), as Warren put it in his final preface to *All the King’s Men*, written in 1981. Describing Long as a “myth” enables him to meet the needs of art and commerce at once: to show that *All the King’s Men* was a “universal” drama worthy of a serious artist, and to justify the continued attention to the novel as Huey Long the man receded into history.

The final major chapter, “Ensuring Presence: Toni Morrison and the Language of Legacy,” addresses the forewords that Toni Morrison wrote to eight of her novels, starting with *The Bluest Eye* in 1999. Of all the prefaces in Tangedal’s study, Morrison’s are the most like Henry James’s New York edition: she “uses her forwards as vehicles of explanation and interpretation” (Tangedal 174). But a problem emerges for Morrison as an authoritative preface-writer because her novels aim to provoke her readers to a high degree of active imaginative cooperation. Sometimes, as in *The Bluest Eye*, she seeks what she calls a “conspiratorial” intimacy with readers (quoted in Tangedal 172); other times,

as in the opening to *Beloved*, she “want[s] the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book’s population” (quoted in Roynon 86). As slaves were thrown into slavery with no introduction, so “there would be no ‘introduction’... into the novel.” Either way, the reader is actively engaged with Morrison in making meaning. Tessa Roynon has charged that Morrison’s forewords betray the artistic radicalism of the novels: by offering authoritative answers to the novels’ difficulties, they reduce the reader to subservience. Indeed, she notes the paradox that Morrison tells us that *Beloved* would have no introduction in, of all places, her foreword to *Beloved*.

Tangedal organizes his chapter as a response to Roynon’s critique; he argues that Morrison’s forewords should not be seen as final or authoritative interpretations, but as interventions in a particular moment in her reception. He situates Morrison’s prefaces within the late stage in her career. In the early 2000s, as Morrison entered her seventies, several of her books were selected for Oprah’s Book Club, and Morrison appeared on Oprah’s program. Morrison was already one of America’s leading writers, but national television brings an audience of a different scale. At the same time, Morrison’s novels were used increasingly widely in schools—Morrison notes that “*The Bluest Eye* they read in junior high school” (quoted in Tangedal 7). The prefaces “make the effort to bring readers into her narrative project, with or without past experience with her work” (194). While Tangedal agrees with Roynon, for instance, that the foreword to *The Bluest Eye* is “sentimental,” the foreword becomes “a gift of reassurance that Morrison’s targeted readers, clearly young, inexperienced ones, will be able to give the novel a chance” (Tangedal 173).

In places, *The Preface* reflects the methodological limitations of a series of single-author readings, and parts of the book would benefit from deeper historicization. Three of its six core chapters address a tight literary nexus: Hemingway, Lardner, and Fitzgerald all worked with editor Max Perkins, published with Scribner’s, and brought out their main work in the 1920s and 1930s. Cather, too, was part of this New York-oriented literary world. Tangedal cites correspondence among the Perkins writers, but students of authorship are likely to want greater attention to formations of literary value and authorial identity, through prefaces, in the debates of New York and international modernism. That said, Tangedal declares that his aim is to “help readers see prefaces, actually see them, as part of the books written by writers” (25). He has undoubtedly done so, and *The Preface* demonstrates the value of attention to prefaces through the richness of the questions that it raises about its texts and the authors who wrote them.

### Works Cited

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