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Shut Up, He Explained

Ring Lardner covered baseball for Midwestern newspapers, got writing advice from Scott Fitzgerald and golfed with President Harding.

By Edward Kosner

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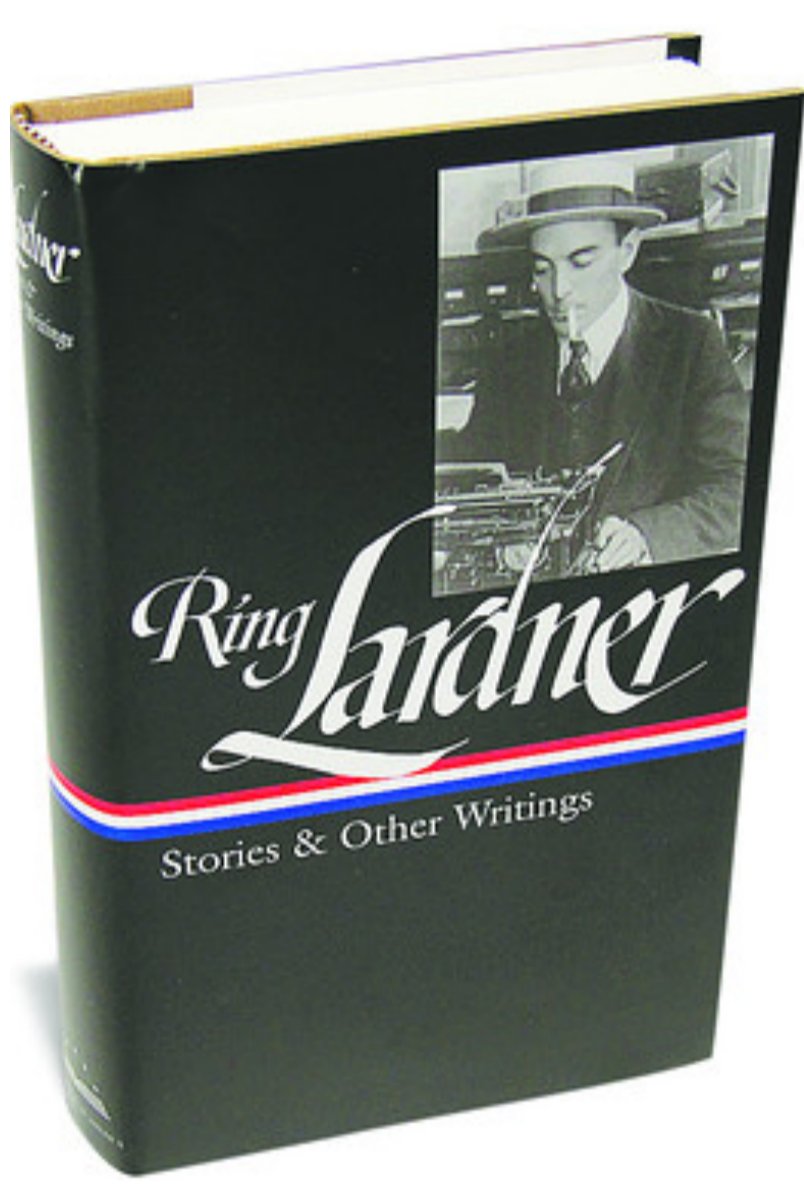
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Nothing ages less gracefully than American vernacular humor. Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn" is still read in American high schools resistant to political correctness, but George Ade, Will Rogers and even the later, more sophisticated S.J. Perelman are dusty relics. Ring Lardner, a luminary of the Jazz Age, lives on as a couple of titles—"Alibi Ike" and "You Know Me Al," and a deathless throwaway line, "Shut up he explained."

Starting out as an itinerant sportswriter in the Midwest, Lardner (1885-1933) wound up palling around in Paris with Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald and playing golf with President Harding. He wrote short stories, comic novels and plays and spawned sons who made their own names as magazine writers and left-wing firebrands. He died at 48 of a heart attack complicated by alcoholism and tuberculosis. Now the Library of America has put out a conscientious 961-page selection of Lardner's work that showcases both his distinct gifts and his flaws.

Prolific to a fault, Lardner is remembered today primarily for his baseball stories. These tales were set mostly in the days before the Black Sox scandal, when the Chicago White Sox of Shoeless Joe Jackson and Eddie Cicotte threw the 1919 World Series to the Cincinnati Reds (and cost Lardner, who had bet heavily on the Sox). "You Know Me Al" is a set of letters from Jack Keefe, a Sox pitcher prone to misadventures with women, managers and landlords. He writes to a buddy in an infectious blend of solecisms, malaprops and bumptious eloquence.

During a barnstorming trip to the West Coast: "I wisht you could of heard them yell when my name was announced to pitch. But Al I would not never of went in there but for the crowd. My arm felt like a wet rag or some thing . . . [but] all them giants could do against me was pop my fast ball up in the air and then the wind took a hold of it and dropped it in to the crowd the lucky stiff's."



STORIES AND OTHER WRITINGS

By Ring Lardner

(The Library of America, 961 pages, \$35)

Twentieth Century Limited thrumming up the line.

In "Some Like Them Cold," a songwriter en route to New York to make his fortune corresponds with a pretty girl he meets in the Chicago railroad station. She mirrors his enthusiasms, presenting herself as the kind of affectionate, home-loving girl he professes to want—only to be dumped when he becomes infatuated with a stylish, frosty Gotham "doll." In another story, a man and his wife move to a new town and fall into the clutches of a friendly couple—"Mr. and Mrs. Fixit"—who commandeer their lives, insisting that they upgrade their apartment, wardrobe, the man's razor, even their vacation railroad tickets.

Some stories are quite dark. "Champion," the tale of a ruthless prize fighter, was made into a gritty 1949 film noir starring Kirk Douglas. In "The Love Nest," a reporter writing a profile of a movie mogul is taken to his sumptuous estate on the Hudson, where he meets the great man's gorgeous wife and beautiful daughters. All is the picture of uxorious bliss until the writer finds himself alone with the wife, a desperate drunk who despises the great man.

Lardner's stories resurrect the America of nearly a century ago, when every dime was squeezed for all it was worth—about two bucks in today's money. Young couples lived in rented flats furnished from shops around the corner. Married women stayed home raising the kids. Couples entertained themselves by going to the movies or invited others over to dance to the Victrola or play rummy or bridge. At snooty resorts on Long Island or in Florida—reached by endless, rattling train rides—bored people sat on long porches fanning themselves, filled the card rooms, took every American Plan meal in the dining room and danced to the house band.

Expectations were low and often reached. In "Haircut," a barbershop habitué who has lost his job breaks the bad news to his pals: "I been sellin' canned goods and now I'm canned goods myself." Still, there was a calmness and simplicity to life that seems achingly appealing by the frantic standards of our sleek cyber-driven times.

A batch of letters tacked on to the Library of America collection reveals an unexpected treasure. On March 24, 1925, Lardner writes to the Fitzgeralds in Paris: "I read Mr. F's book (in page proofs) at one sitting and liked it enormously, particularly the description of Gatsby's home and his party, and the party in the apartment in New York. It sounds as if Mr. F must have attended a party or two during his metropolitan career. The plot held my interest, too, and I found no tedious moments. Altogether, I think it's the best thing you've done since Paradise."

Ever the reporter, Lardner couldn't resist pointing out four errors in the text, including: "On Page 82, you had the guy driving his car under the elevated in Astoria, which isn't Astoria, but Long Island City."

Alas, for Lardner himself, his slight, charming work endures only as an artifact of the age Fitzgerald made immortal.

Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.



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