Ring W. Lardner, Humorist, Who Makes Fiction Out of Life of Baseball Players, Thinks Fewer and Better Short Stories Needed

Three Stories a Year Are Enough for a Writer


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HI is the greatest living humorist? Chicago, the city of the world's litera
ty judgments, the city whose courts readily solve all problems as that the
Bacon-Shakespeare dispute, has an answer to the question. The city's
er say that the greatest living humorist is Elzire Glyn.

Mr. Lardner was not delivering Chicago's verdict when he paid
tribute to the unpretentious tale. He was giving his own judgment in the
matter, and he explained that the humor of the great American novelists
was the unconscious variety—that its charm
was the fact that it was intended to be
taken seriously. To Mr. Lardner, Elzire Glyn is funny when she is most in
terrust.

Perhaps Chicago would refuse to sup-
port Mr. Lardner's decision, on the
ground that he is not a native Chicago.
His home is in Chicago, and for The
Chicago Tribune he writes every day.
But he was born not in Illinois but in
Michigan—in the town of Niles.

Ring W. Lardner is not the boisterous,
slumpy person one might imagine, he
be in his "You Know Me, Al," stories. He is a very tall, thin young
man, with black hair, high on his fore-
head, and a scholarly, rather melancholy
air. He has a low voice, and speaks with
some hesitancy, seldom using any slang or
heterodox English.

To a Times reporter, Mr. Lardner
talked about his boyhood and his
literary apprenticeship, and said some
interesting things about books and
authors.

"I used to read," he said, "in Niles, Mr.
I wanted to be a civil engi-
neer, so I came to Chicago to study.

I studied civil engineering for a year, and
at the end of the year I found that I had
failed in rhetoric. So I went back to
Niles."

"For a while I hustled freight in
Niles. Then I was bookkeeper in
the gas office. My brother worked
on a local paper. One day the editor of
The Times of South Bend, Ind.,
came to Niles to get my brother to go
to South Bend and work for him. By
mistake he saw me instead of my
brother. I knew that my brother was
lined up with a contract to the
Niles paper and could not go to South
Bend, so I took the job.

So I became police reporter, society
reporter, baseball reporter, and dramatic
critic (reviewing fourth company shows)
for the South Bend Times. My hours
were from 8 o'clock in the morning until
midnight.

"Later I came to Chicago and worked
or a paper, as football, basketball, and
baseball reporter. I was a baseball re-
porter for a year. My stuff was signed,
but it wasn't signed with my name. The
paper for which I reported baseball
signed all work that I had
for many years. A great
people think that the writer of that
name must be the greatest living
expert on baseball because that signature has
been appearing for so long a time. It
wouldn't be ethical for me to tell
the name under which I wrote, for that
name is still in use. The first fiction
I ever sold was taken by The Saturday
Evening Post."

Mr. Lardner, said The Times re-
porter, "most successful writers seem to
want to do a sort of work different from
paper's assignment. They are not e-
cited. They seem to grow tired of the
sort of writing that brings them fame.
Does it fit you? Do you still enjoy
writing about baseball players?"

Mr. Lardner, said, "No, it is fun,
"You know, he said, "I'm tired of this sort
of writing. I'd give anything to be able
to write a novel. I'm tired of writing
different pieces. And I'm tired of
tired of writing in the first person. I'd
like to write of an entirely different

"Do you think," the reporter asked,
"that it is good for a fiction writer to
work for a newspaper, even as your
newspaper work? Or do you think he
would do better work if he had nothing
else to do?"

"Writers ought to do anything but
write," said Mr. Lardner. "The nec-
essity of working for a living at
something besides writing inevitably
robs a writer of much of his energy,
and this is a great detriment."

"But you," said the reporter, "get
material for your stories out of your
writings."

"Well," said Mr. Lardner, thogh-
tfully, "I get the material for my base-
ball stories by traveling with a team.
But I'd like to do nothing but write.
There is much more material in a
very short sort from that which I write
now.

Your fiction must be successful," said
the reporter, "as it made it pos-
sible for you to go to Palm Beach."

"I went to Palm Beach," said Mr.
Lardner, "as an investment. The
investment paid dividends, but I'm not
sure how Florida would welcome me if
I went back. Palm Beach would be all
right, but I don't know about the rest
of the State."

"I saw an interesting clipping from
The Palm Beach Dispatch. The
Dispatch's Fort Pierce correspondent
said that Fort Pierce was building a new
hotel. The present hotel at Fort Pierce,
said the correspondent, was savage-
ly criticized in a story by Harry Larder.

"But at any rate," said Mr. Lardner,
"Harry Lardner's story wasn't in Scotch
dialect."

Mr. Lardner is not one of those who
pay unthinking homage to the memory of
Mark Twain. To a question as to the
name of the greatest humorist that
America had produced, he said:

"Well, I wouldn't consider Mark
Twain our greatest humorist. I guess
that George Ade is. Certainly he appeals
to us more than Mark Twain does be-
cause he belongs to our own time. He
writes of the life we are living, and
Mark Twain's books deal with the life
which we know only by hearsay. I
suppose my forefathers would say that
Mark Twain was a much greater humor-
ist than George Ade."

"But I never saw one of Mark Twain's
characters, while I feel that I know
one about George Ade. Ade writes
you see, I didn't travel along the
Mississippi in Mark Twain's youth, so
I don't know his people. Harry Leon
Wilson is a great humorist, and Finley
Peter Dunne is another. But I bet
Finley Peter Dunne is sick of writing
Irish dialect."

"But as to Mark Twain," said the
reporter, "you admire his 'Huckleberry
Finn' books?"

"Yes," said Mr. Lardner, "but I like
Both Tarkington's 'Penrod' stories bet-
ter. I've known both Tarkington's
boys and I've not known those of
Mark Twain. Mark Twain's boys are
tough and poverty-stricken and they belong to a period very different from
that of our own boys. But we all knew
Penrod and his friends.

"No, I certainly don't believe that
Mark Twain is our greatest American
humorist. Some of his fun is
spontaneous, but a great deal of it is in
not."

Do you think," asked the reporter,
"that short stories of our time are better
than those of bygone years?"

"No," said Mr. Lardner, "I don't think
that they are. The trouble is that our
magazine writers are doing too much
work. I think that if the magazines
would give more time to big writers,
they would do better work. The
magazines pay such big prices that the
authors are coerced to write in order
to pile up money. Our fiction would
be better if we writers had more time
production to three stories a year. It
would greatly benefit American fic-
tion if we gave up our Kiplingism.

I suggest that our short stories
would be better if there were fewer
magazines competing for the work of
popular writers. New the demand is

greater than the supply, and so the
writers get all the money they can
and send out inferior work."

"Henry Sudney Harrison is a good
example of a short-story writer who
never does better than he writes
pains with his writing, and I doubt if
the output is more than two stories a
year. I think that I would call him our
best short-story writer."

"I greatly enjoy the stories of W. L.
George, and some of these of H. G.
Wells. And I've read all the books of
St. L. Ern. They are humorous in a dif-
ferent sense of the word than what I
intended when I called Elizire Glyn
the greatest living humorist. Elizire Glyn's
humor is unconscious—like the humor of
Conan Doyle and the humor of Harold
Bell Wright."

"I think that American humor in
the theaters has improved. We wouldn't
laugh at the things that amused our
mothers and fathers. But the improve-
ment is in more than the material that
in the material itself.

And in speaking of the real humor-
ists, it's distinct from the unconscious
humorists—I mustn't forget Edward
Lear. I think he is as good as any of
the humorists who have written in
English. I have to read books to my
children, and I find that the same I
ever enjoy reading are those of Edward
Lear and those of Lewis Carroll."