
Rodger L. Tarr, ed. *As Ever Yours: The Letters of Max Perkins and Elizabeth Lemmon*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003. 290p.

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The study of 20th-century literature in the United States has been enriched by the publication of letters written by Scribner's editor Maxwell Perkins. *Editor to Author* (1950), a collection that appeared just three years after his death, both illustrated the issues preoccupying modern writers and their publishers and revealed the significant literary influence of Perkins himself. Subsequent volumes, such as *Dear Scott*, *Dear Max* (1971), *Ring Around Max* (1973), *The Only Thing that Counts* (1996), *Max and Marjorie* (1999), *To Loot My Life Clean* (2000), and *The Sons of Maxwell Perkins* (2004), made particularly important contributions to scholarship on F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Ring Lardner, Marjorie Rawlings, and Thomas Wolfe. On the other hand, *Father to Daughter* (1995) sought to reveal something more about Perkins the man, and Rodger Tarr's latest collection, *As Ever Yours*, attempts to rediscover a balance between the professional and the personal in its depiction of Perkins. To do so, this volume sketches out his relationship with Virginia socialite Elizabeth Lemmon. Perkins met Lemmon, a friend of his wife Louise, in 1922, and he used a package of cigarettes she left in his home as a pretense to initiate their correspondence. "This brief reprieve will make you think of me with extraordinary gratitude," he teases, haltingly. "Maybe thats [sic] too much to hope; but short of that, these cigarettes have given me a chance to say something too trivial to say without an excuse" (25). Tarr implies that we might read such words as evidence of a chaste, epistolary love affair, but little heat burns beneath the surface of his declarations. While readers familiar with Perkins' letters will find little new here, the context in which familiar opinions are expressed may, in fact, reveal something more about the personality of an enigmatic figure central to American modernism.

A decade into his friendship with Lemmon, he observes, "It's an ancient trouble of a woman's not understanding how things are with man" (122). While he seldom takes a patronizing tone with her, Perkins is always careful to contextualize fully his dealings with writers, and in those places where he takes pains not to offend her sensibilities in his discussion of business and society, he reveals a quaint decorum in writing to a southern belle. He betrays a measure of discomfort around women with which Fitzgerald, his most celebrated charge, would be familiar. In fact, Perkins claims on many occasions to have destroyed drafts of earlier, ineffectual letters, and concerned that perhaps Lemmon would be "bored" by the letters he does send, he

writes, “That would be only natural because, by a provision of nature, people lose interest in other people unless they see them more or less frequently” (57).

The retiring Perkins, as out of place in social contexts as he is insecure in his letters here, opens up when discussing literature, however. He sends Lemmon countless books, and he is not shy in discussing contemporary writers and their efforts. William Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* is “a horrible book by a writer of great talent,” as he judges it, harshly. Otherwise, his impeccable judgment and generosity shine through. “Scott’s is better than anything that he’s done,” he writes of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, for example, “a combination of satire [and] romance that no one else can give” (51). On *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: “I know you will love the Hemingway. It really is, I believe, a book that will always be read” (181). He frets, continually, over writers. “If Ring [Lardner] only would not drink!” he exclaims, exasperated, at one point (31). His even greater frustration is in his mentoring of near misses. After meeting the Catholic writer Henry Longan Stuart, for example, he writes, “I had lunch today with a writer in order to give him an idea; [and] if he will only carry it out it will make his fame [and] perhaps his fortune;—perhaps it will give him the Nobel Peace Prize” (54). But after the death of his most prized writers, it is Perkins’ heartbreak that shows through. Reflecting, for example, on how Thomas Wolfe would have been tortured by a world dragged into a second global war, Perkins admits, “It was in him to do more than he ever did, but he would have suffered all the time” (170).

Not surprisingly, he took even harder the death of F. Scott Fitzgerald. “The tragedy is that this book which might have vindicated him,” he writes of *The Last Tycoon*, “was far from finished.” He laments that Fitzgerald was “unfairly identified” with the Jazz Age, but Perkins argues that “many of his stories have a right to live in any time” (185). It is as if, for the editor, the world has let down the great talents with which he has surrounded himself. It was Maxwell Perkins’ own sudden death in 1947, in fact, that brought to an abrupt end his lengthy correspondence with Elizabeth Lemmon. His last letter to her discusses familiar themes: his children, global politics, the anxiety of working at Scribner’s, and the enduring shadow cast by the writers he had known. Writing to his widow, Lemmon subsequently provides a fine summary of what he had meant to those around him. “I have known people who were considered pillars of strength, and loved to be leaned on,” she observes, “but Max poured strength into people and made them stand on their own feet” (253).

As Ever Yours would, perhaps, make a weightier contribution to American letters if Lemmon had greater literary significance herself. Bette Weaver, the protagonist in Fitzgerald’s “Her Last Case,” is said to be modeled on her, and Wolfe began work on “The House at Malbourne,” a drama set at the Lemmon family estate near

Middleberg, Virginia. But try as he might, Tarr can reveal her to us only through implication. There are merely twenty letters from Lemmon to Perkins, written in the last decade of his life, while there are six times as many from him to her, covering the whole length of their friendship. As Tarr explains, Lemmon preserved Perkins' letters in their original envelopes and in chronological order, and almost all of these are now at the Princeton University Library. He speculates that, except for more personal material she may have decided to destroy, this is all that Perkins wrote to her. Almost all of what she wrote does not survive. The crippling implication for Tarr is that he cannot arrange material to recreate conversations effectively. So, while he handles judiciously the use of explanatory footnotes, and he provides a generous introduction to the text, Tarr can never fully illuminate the character of the woman at the center of these letters, a woman who outlived Perkins by almost fifty years, dying only after seeing almost all the century that so preoccupied the novelists Perkins nurtured. ✱