The Lousy Racket: Hemingway, Scribners, and the Business of Literature

Robert W. Trogdon
THE LOUSY RACKET

Hemingway, Scribners, and the Business of Literature

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If they feel disappointed and still want my “literary Credo” in a book on bull fighting they can run an insert saying “F—ck the whole god-damned lousy racket”
—Hemingway to Perkins, 28 June 1932

Never trust a publisher,
Or you’ll sleep on straw.
—Hemingway, “Advice to a Son”

But Charles Scribners Sons are my publishers and I intend to publish with them the rest of my life.
—Hemingway to Charles Scribner III, 28 June 1947

I believe the writer anyway, should always be the final judge, and I meant you to be so. I have always held to that position and have sometimes seen books hurt thereby, but at least as often helped. “The book belongs to the author.”
—Perkins to Thomas Wolfe, 16 January 1937
Ernest Hemingway dominated American literature in the twentieth century. For most of his professional career, he was both a literary artist and a popular writer. Like Mark Twain in the previous century, Hemingway cultivated both sides of his career. This, he understood from the beginning, was his strength. As he explained to Horace Liveright in 1925 upon accepting Boni and Liveright’s offer to publish *In Our Time*, “My book will be praised by highbrows and can be read by lowbrows. There is no writing in it that anybody with a high-school education cannot read.” It was by publishing with Charles Scribner’s Sons that Hemingway was able to develop both aspects of his career, and an understanding of the nature of his relationship with the firm—the way he and the publisher’s employees edited his works and how his books were published and promoted by Scribners—broadens our understanding of Hemingway the writer.

While Hemingway saw himself foremost as an artist, he would not have been content to keep his works in his desk drawer. He wanted his works to be read by as many people as he could reach and thus
had to balance the demands of art with those of a popular audience for most of his career. Writing was his job, and Hemingway strove both for critical acclaim and for a large readership. William Charvet defined the profession of authorship in terms that apply well to Hemingway: “The terms of professional writing are these: that it provides a living for the author, like any other job; that it is a main and prolonged, rather than intermittent or sporadic, resource for the writer; that it is produced with the hope of extended sale in the open market, like any other article of commerce; and that is written with reference to buyers’ tastes and reading habits. The problem of the professional writer is not identical with that of the literary artist; but when a literary artist is also a professional writer, he cannot solve the problems of the one function without reference to the other.”

For most of his adult life, Hemingway did not need to write to make a living. His first wife, Hadley Richardson Hemingway, had several small trust funds that provided the couple with between two and five thousand dollars a year; because of the low cost of living and the favorable exchange rate for American money, this was a more than adequate income for a family living in France during the 1920s. Hemingway’s second wife, Pauline Pfeiffer Hemingway, was substantially wealthier, and Hemingway reaped the benefits. Her uncle, Gustavus Adolphus Pfeiffer (a major shareholder in Richard Hudnut’s cosmetics empire), was generous to the author and his niece. He gave Hemingway money after his separation from Hadley, paid the rent on Ernest and Pauline’s first Paris apartment, bought the couple a Model A Ford in 1928, financed their 1933–1934 African safari, and purchased a house for them in Key West. During their marriage, Pauline “shared her money . . . generously and discreetly” with her husband. He led an active life and needed large infusions of cash to support his travels and other leisure pursuits. But his income from writing, along with the contributions made by his first two wives, was usually sufficient to meet his expenses. He was never the starving artist in a garret (despite his portrayal of himself as such in A Moveable Feast), producing masterpieces that would be appreciated only after his death.

To understand how little Hemingway made from his writing during his early years as a professional writer, it is helpful to compare his magazine income with that of his friend and fellow professional F. Scott Fitzgerald. In 1926, Hemingway published four stories in
mainstream American magazines: “The Killers,” “In Another Country,” and “A Canary for One” in *Scribner’s Magazine*, and “Fifty Grand” in the *Atlantic Monthly*. For the serial rights, he received $850, which would equal $8,981.30 in 2005 dollars. That same year, Fitzgerald sold five stories to the *Saturday Evening Post*: “Jacob’s Ladder,” “The Love Boat,” “A Short Trip Home,” “The Bowl,” and “Magnetism.” Fitzgerald, after paying his agent 10 percent of these sales, netted $15,300, or $161,663.43 in 2005. Even in 1929, when Hemingway received $16,000 for the serial rights to *A Farewell to Arms*, Fitzgerald still made more money, selling eight stories for a net of $27,000. In 2005 terms, Hemingway would have received $172,875.25 to Fitzgerald’s $291,726.98. Hemingway might have made more money if he had wanted to do so. Early in his career he was averse to big money deals that might influence the way he wrote. But with the Pfeiffers supplementing his income, Hemingway could afford not to sell to the large-circulation magazines.

Hemingway made money from the sale of his books during the 1920s and 1930s, but it was only after the publication of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in 1940 that he made enough to support himself from writing alone. Sales of the Scribners and Book-of-the-Month Club editions over five years brought in over $200,000. In addition, Paramount paid $100,000 for the film rights. By the late 1940s, he could name his price to magazines and usually get it. In 1950, *Cosmopolitan* paid $85,000 for the serial rights to *Across the River and Into the Trees*. Two years later, *Life* bought the serial rights for *The Old Man and the Sea* for $40,000. During the latter part of the 1940s and 1950s, his income, in addition to the royalties Scribners was paying for book sales, was further increased by the sales of movie, television, and paperback rights.

Hemingway’s sense of himself as a writer was shaped to a certain degree by his financial independence. Because of this freedom, he could more readily write about what he wanted. He did not necessarily have to write the type of works that most readers wanted. Thus, after the highly successful novel *A Farewell to Arms*, his next project was *Death in the Afternoon*, his exhaustive treatise on bullfighting, a subject of limited appeal to American readers. In 1935, despite advice from Maxwell Perkins, his editor at Scribners, that what his readers wanted was another novel, Hemingway published a nonfiction account of his safari, *Green Hills of Africa*. 

INTRODUCTION
Hemingway developed his aesthetic values early in his career in the first half of the 1920s, while he was under the tutelage of Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound in Paris. He was essentially a realist, but his sense of realism was different from the conception of it in the nineteenth century. Hemingway’s aim was not merely to produce an objective mirror of reality. There is always a subjective aspect to his writing—an attempt to depict and re-create in the reader the emotion of the situation. In the first chapter of *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway described what he was attempting in his writing:

I was trying to write then and I found the greatest difficulty, aside from knowing truly what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel, was to put down what really happened in action; what the actual things were which produced the emotion that you experienced. In writing for a newspaper you told what happened and, with one trick and another, you communicated the emotion aided by the element of timeliness which gives a certain emotion to any account of something that has happened on that day; but the real thing, the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion and which would be as valid in a year or in ten years or, with luck and if you stated it purely enough, always, was beyond me and I was working very hard to try and get it.9

Hemingway’s prose, when successful, makes the reader think that he has experienced what is depicted. The best writers transport the readers, as Hemingway said in *Green Hills of Africa*: “For we have been there in the books and out of the books—and where we go, if we are any good, there you can go as we have been.”10

Hemingway’s supposedly simple style belies a complex representation of reality. His most famous explanation of his method is his comparison of writing to an iceberg: “If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg [sic] is due to only one-eighth of it being about water.”11 Hemingway seldom used stream of consciousness to reflect his characters’ psychological states, as James Joyce and William Faulkner did, nor did he use lyrical de-
scriptions to capture the mood of a scene, as F. Scott Fitzgerald was able to do. Rather, reading Hemingway forces the reader to piece together what a character’s actions and other clues in the text show about the situation. An emotion may be evoked, but the reasons why are not always evident. A perfect example of this type of writing is in the story “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife.” The focus is apparently on Dr. Adams’s argument with Dick Bolton, but the real story is about the relationship between the doctor and his wife and is revealed indirectly to the reader. Mrs. Adams is a Christian Scientist, ironic for the spouse of a doctor. The Adamses maintain separate bedrooms. Mrs. Adams questions her husband about what happened between him and Bolton, which apparently shows that she does not know. But when Dr. Adams leaves the cottage, he speaks to his wife through an open window; this indicates that she has probably heard or witnessed the argument between the two men. If so, her inquiries afterward are merely a means to attack and belittle her husband. Thus, through indirection and subtle clues, Hemingway presents a story of an unhappy and destructive marriage, never once telling the reader how to feel or interpret the situation.

Because he always wanted to present things as they were, Hemingway fought against the confining conventions of his day. He always sought to reproduce in writing language as it was spoken. To do this, he often needed to use obscene language. When writing of soldiers in battle, Hemingway felt that it was important to use the words that soldiers would have used, words such as shit, fuck, and cocksucker. He made his opinion clear to Perkins: “I hate to add any worry to you with my attitude on the publishable or unpublishable word business—But that is only official worry remember—you know what I want—all we can possibly get. It’s a fight with me for the return of the full use of the language and what we accomplish in that direction may be of more value in the end than anything I write. I never use a word if I can avoid it—but if I must have it I know it—Then if you decide it is unpublishable really unpublishable I suppose I must leave it blank. But I want the blank to indicate what the word is.” Hemingway’s sense of artistic integrity demanded that he use all the tools at his disposal to mirror experience. For him, being a writer was defined (as he explained to Perkins) as follows: “But I am a careerist, as you can read in the papers, and my idea of a career is never to write a phony line, never fake, never cheat,
never be sucked in by the y.m.c.a. movements of the moment, and
to give them as much literature in a book as any son of a bitch has
ever gotten in the same number of words. . . . The story is there but
I dont tell it to them in so many words.”

The curious thing about Hemingway was that, even with the ade-
quate financial support he had, he still desired acceptance by a
large readership and strove to get it. He knew that his experimenta-
tion was lost on most readers and that the so-called common reader
wanted something different. In the same paragraph to Perkins quot-
ed above, Hemingway went on to define what he tried to give this
type of reader: “But that isn’t enough. If you want to make a living
out of it you have to, in addition every so often, without faking,
cheating or deviating from the above to give them something they
understand and that has a story—not a plot—just a story that they
can follow instead of simply feel, the way most of the stories are.”

Hemingway knew that his popular, as opposed to his critical, reputa-
tion rested on stories of action, as he explained to Perkins when they
were establishing the contents of Winner Take Nothing: “At present
I know that the book needs one more simple story of action to bal-
ance some of the difficult stories it contains. I thought I had it with
the last story I wrote, one I just finished about the war, but that
turned out to be a hell of a difficult one [“A Way You’ll Never Be”].
Stories like Fifty Grand, My Old Man and that sort are no where
near as good stories, in the end, as a story like Hills Like White
Elephants, or Sea Change. But a book needs them because people
understand them easily and it gives them the necessary confidence
in the stories that are hard for them.”

The challenge was to find
a way to reconcile the demands of art with the desire to satisfy the
perceived needs of the majority of his readers.

Hemingway seems to have eventually achieved a balance between
the two. By the mid-1950s, he had received the Nobel Prize for Lit-
erature, and his work was the subject of four scholarly books. At
the same time, he was the most recognized writer in America and
perhaps the world. As John Raeburn writes,

Hemingway’s face was a familiar sight on magazine covers in the
years after The Old Man and the Sea. Although occasionally ap-
ppearing on the covers of periodicals with a continuing interest in
literature—the Atlantic, Saturday Review, Wisdom—he was more
frequently featured by magazines with only a minimal interest in high culture. These included *True*, *Look*, the Luce magazines *Time* and *Life*, *Fisherman*, *Popular Boating*, the Sunday supplements *Parade* and *This Week*, and the gossip magazine *See*. What this signified, beyond the obvious fact that he was the best-known writer of his time, was that he had transcended his literary calling and become a figure of importance to his entire culture.\(^{17}\)

Hemingway, in the last two decades of his life, had been embraced by both highbrows and lowbrows.

Hemingway’s capture of the American public owed much to his publisher, Charles Scribner’s Sons. He would have produced great literature for whatever publisher he worked with, but without Scribners, the course of his career would have been vastly different. Scribners was a respectable mainstream publisher who gave Hemingway the freedom to write what he wanted and at the same time offered him wide, usually tasteful, exposure. For Hemingway, Maxwell Perkins was Scribners. The legendary editor was the best collaborator the legendary writer would ever have. During his thirty-seven years with the firm, Perkins helped launch and shape the careers of some of the twentieth century’s most famous and important writers, among them F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. Perkins had started in the firm’s advertising department in 1910 before his move to the editorial department in 1914. At that time, Charles Scribner’s Sons (which had been founded in 1846) was still grounded in the nineteenth century, as described by Perkins’s biographer, A. Scott Berg: “The Scribner list was a backwater of literary tastes and values. Its books never transgressed the bounds of ‘decency.’ Indeed, they seldom went beyond merely diverting the reader.”\(^{18}\) This situation changed when Perkins successfully fought for the acceptance of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s first novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920). The novel was a best seller and launched both the author and the editor into prominence. Scribners granted Perkins more control in the selection of writers and books to be published, and he began to bring in younger, more experimental authors: “In what seemed a personal crusade, he gradually replaced the hackneyed works in the Scribners catalog with new books he hoped might be more enduring. Beginning with Fitzgerald and continuing with each new writer he took on, he slowly altered the traditional
notion of the editor’s role. He sought out authors who were not just ‘safe,’ conventional in style and bland in content, but who spoke in a new voice about the new values of the postwar world. In this way, as an editor he did more than reflect the standards of his age; he consciously influenced and changed them by the new talents he published.”

Perkins himself was a rather reserved New Englander who never said anything stronger than “my God”—and that only when very upset. One story has it that when Perkins reported to Charles Scribner II that there were three words in Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* that could not be printed, Perkins could not bring himself to say them, so Scribner told him to write them down. Perkins wrote the first two down as requested but had to be forced by Scribner to write the third. When Scribner saw the word, he supposedly said, “Max . . . what would Hemingway think of you if he heard that you couldn’t even write that word?”

Perkins has the erroneous reputation of having been a hands-on editor, of having actively worked with his authors to create their books. He did so when it was necessary, as it was in the case of Thomas Wolfe’s second novel, *Of Time and the River* (1935). In 1934, Perkins helped Wolfe cut and reshape the manuscript into publishable form. But he did not think such a collaboration should be standard for an editor. In 1946, he defined the role of an editor as he saw it for the members of a publishing seminar conducted by Kenneth McCormick, editor in chief at Doubleday: “An editor does not add to a book. At best he serves as a handmaiden to an author. Don’t ever get to feeling important about yourself, because an editor at most releases energy. He creates nothing. . . . The process is so simple. . . . If you have a Mark Twain, don’t try to make him a Shakespeare or make a Shakespeare into a Mark Twain. Because in the end an editor can get only as much out of an author as the author has in him.”

When Fitzgerald, who was revising *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922) at the time, disagreed with one of Perkins’s suggestions, Perkins responded, “Don’t ever defer to my judgment. You won’t on any vital point, I know, and I should be ashamed, if it were possible to have made you; for a writer on any account must speak solely for himself.” When he sent Hemingway his first suggestions for revisions to *A Farewell to Arms*, Perkins prefaced his ideas by writing, “I have thought and talked about it for some three months now, and beyond the few slight comments on the margin of the proof I have one or
two more serious ideas on it which I dare give you because I know you will know easily whether to reject them, and won’t mind doing it;—and if you do it I’ll believe you’re right: I see plainly that you go down to the very bottom at any cost to test the truth of everything. Only you can do that—not many writers, even, have the strength to—and that brings the right decision.”

Even with Wolfe, Perkins saw that his role was that of an assistant rather than a partner. In 1937, after Wolfe had claimed that Perkins had forced him to cut *Of Time and the River,* the editor wrote Wolfe:

If it were not true that you, for instance, should write as you see, feel, and think, then a writer would be of no importance, and books merely things for amusement. And since I have always thought that there could be nothing so important as a book can be, and some are, I could not help but think as you do. . . . But my impression was that you asked my help, that you wanted it. And it is my impression too that changes were not forced on you (you’re not very forceable, Tom, nor I very forceful), but were argued over, often for hours. But I agree with you about this too, fully, and unless you want help it will certainly not be thrust upon you. . . . I believe the writer, anyway, should always be the final judge, and I meant you to be so. I have always held to that position and have sometimes seen books hurt thereby, but at least as often helped. “The book belongs to the author.”

Perkins did not attempt to force his writers to write in the same ways. Rather, he encouraged the natural growth of their talents, helping them to write as they had to write. Perkins did make suggestions, most of which concerned matters of structure and characterization. But he made it clear to his authors that the final decisions on such matters would be left to them.

Perkins left the routine editorial tasks to others. He did not himself line edit or check his authors’ works for errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. His handwritten letters show that he was as poor a speller as Fitzgerald and Hemingway, and that his punctuation was idiosyncratic. He relied on his secretary, Irma Wyckoff, to catch his errors in his correspondence. Others at the firm also edited Hemingway’s books. For *For Whom the Bell Tolls,* the copyediting was handled by Wallace Meyer. Charles Scribner III (who had
become president of the firm in 1932) also made suggestions for revision. Meyer, like Perkins, had moved from the advertising department to editorial. (Meyer had planned the advertising campaign for *The Sun Also Rises.*) After Perkins’s death in 1947, Meyer and Scribner became Hemingway’s main editorial contacts at the firm and were active in the editing and launching of *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950).

Perkins’s taste in reading was grounded in the nineteenth century; his favorite book was Tolstoy’s *War and Peace,* and he often sent a copy to new authors. Like Hemingway, Perkins most admired realistic fiction. Before publication of *Green Hills of Africa,* he wrote Hemingway, “Even at worst I still believe—+ its written in all the past—that the utterly real thing in writing is the only thing that counts, + and the whole racket melts down before it.” Perkins understood what Hemingway was trying to accomplish in his prose. He did not make many suggestions about the structure of Hemingway’s work. He understood that Hemingway was in many ways his own best editor and did not readily accept advice. Hemingway rejected Perkins’s suggestions about including a preface to *The Sun Also Rises* and revising the ending of *A Farewell to Arms.* He did, however, sometimes solicit Perkins’s advice, as he did when he was troubled about the ending of *For Whom the Bell Tolls.*

This is not to say that Perkins was merely a conduit from Hemingway to the reading public. Perkins did serve an important role in Hemingway’s career by protecting his author from suppression and libel. The correspondence from Perkins to Hemingway is filled with requests to emend obscene words and to change characters to make them less recognizable to the people on whom they were based. The only editorial change Perkins requested for *Green Hills of Africa* was for Hemingway to delete the reference to Gertrude Stein as a “bitch.” Perkins had to fight to get Hemingway to remove the three obscene words from *A Farewell to Arms,* but in the end these actions protected the author from many potential libel suits and large-scale suppressions.

For Hemingway, Perkins was his liaison with other members of the firm. When Hemingway had a story to submit to *Scribner’s Magazine,* he sent it directly to Perkins, preferring not to correspond directly with editors Robert Bridges and Alfred Dashiell except when forced to do so by circumstances (as when the magazine was serial-
izing *A Farewell to Arms* and *Green Hills of Africa*). He liked Meyer and Charles Scribner III and wrote frequently to them, but there is no evidence of any correspondence with Charles Scribner II (who was president when Hemingway signed with the firm in 1926) or with his brother Arthur Hawley Scribner (president from 1929 to 1932); it is doubtful whether Hemingway even met these two men. Hemingway viewed most of the publisher’s staff with contempt; he loathed the head of the sales department, Whitney Darrow, because he thought Darrow did not work hard enough to sell his books and was too quick to place them with cheap reprint houses. He never liked the way the advertising department promoted his works, with the single exception of the campaign for *The Sun Also Rises*. Perkins had to mediate between the demands of Hemingway and those of the firm. It was he who handled Hemingway’s complaints about advertising budgets and justified the reprint arrangements Darrow made. Perkins had the corrections charges for *Death in the Afternoon*.
cancelled after Hemingway complained that they were excessive, and he got his author a $6,000 advance on *Winner Take Nothing*—an advance that the book’s initial sales did not cover. Perkins even acted as agent for Hemingway. After *Scribner’s Magazine* rejected “Fifty Grand,” Perkins attempted to place it with another magazine, and until Hemingway hired lawyer Maurice Speiser in 1933 to handle sales of foreign and film rights, Perkins handled inquiries about sales of these rights for Hemingway.

*The Lousy Racket* is an explication of the working relationship between Ernest Hemingway and Charles Scribner’s Sons. The most important aspect of this relationship is the way in which Hemingway and Perkins (and, later, Hemingway, Meyer, and Scribner) edited the author’s works for publication. The members of the House of Scribner served as collaborators with Hemingway and significantly influenced the final form of his works. The following chapters also examine the way the publisher promoted Hemingway and his books, since how Scribners advertised the works affected Hemingway’s reputation and sales. Hemingway’s business relationship with the firm is also examined. Hemingway did not write primarily for money, but he was a shrewd businessman who insisted on the maximum reward for his works; money earned was a tangible gauge of his success as an author, proof that he was being read and that the firm valued him. This description of how Hemingway and Charles Scribner’s Sons published thirteen books between 1926 and 1952 details the evolution of Hemingway both as a literary artist and as a professional writer and helps to show how his reputation was shaped for the public. Hemingway’s longest and most enduring relationship, lasting from 1926 to 1961, was with Charles Scribner’s Sons. The following chapters document the nature of that relationship.