

26 QUOTATIONS



S. J. Perelman

(1904-1979)

Sidney Joseph Perelman was a humorist and screenwriter, best known for short pieces in the *New Yorker* and for co-writing the movies *Monkey Business* (1931) and *Horse Feathers* (1932) with the Marx Brothers. Perelman actually looked like a Marx Brother. He became friends with Nathanael West while they were classmates at Brown University in the 1920s and eventually married West's sister Laura. West's novel *Miss Lonelyhearts* was based on some pathetic letters shown to him by Perelman and his depiction of Hollywood writers as inevitably corrupted and trivialized in his novel *The Day of the Locust* (1939) pertains in some degree to both Perelman and himself. Perelman also turned *Catch-22* (1961) by Joseph Heller into a bestseller by recommending it in a magazine interview and wrote the megahit movie *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1956). He loved his MG sportscar and his mynah bird, but he was frequently unfaithful to his wife and treated his children as a bother:

PERSONALITY

The main obligation is to amuse yourself.

To err is human; to forgive, supine.

Before they made S. J. Perelman they broke the mold.

The fact is that all of us have only one personality, and we wring it out like a dishtowel.

SELF-PORTRAIT

Under a forehead roughly comparable to that of the Javanese or the Piltdown man are visible a pair of tiny pig eyes, lit up alternately by greed and concupiscence. His nose, broken in childhood by a self-inflicted blow with a hockey stick, has a prehensile tip, ever quick to smell out an insult; at the least suspicion of an affront, Perelman, who has the pride of a Spanish grandee, has been known to whip out his sword-cane and hide in the nearest closet.

OTHER WRITERS

In addition to Ade, Leacock, and Lardner, I was also an earnest student of Benchley, Donald Ogden Stewart, and Frank Sullivan—and we mustn't forget Mencken.

Joyce was probably one of the most careful writers who ever lived. I have been studying the work...for nigh on thirty-five years, and I still choke up with respect.

[Fitzgerald] didn't succeed [as a screenwriter], and I don't believe he ever would have. He was pathetically innocent about the kind of hypocrisy and the infighting one had to practice to exist in the industry.

LOVE

He bit his lip in a manner which immediately awakened my maternal sympathy, and I helped him bite it.

Love is not the dying moan of a distant violin, it's the triumphant twang of a bedspring.

URBANITY

[Upon being stalked by a prostitute]: A case of the tail dogging the wag.

[Upon being honored by a National Book Award]: This medal, together with my American Express Card, will identify me worldwide—except at Bloomingdale's.

English life, while very pleasant, is rather bland. I expected kindness and gentility and I found it, but there is such a thing as too much couth.

Ayet Itam temple in Penang...is possibly the largest, and unquestionably the dullest, Buddhist temple in Malaya, and no wastebasket is complete without a snapshot of this historic shrine.

A farm is an irregular patch of nettles bounded by short-term notes, containing a fool and his wife who didn't know enough to stay in the city. [Perelman himself attempted farming in Pennsylvania.]

HEALTH

I've got Bright's Disease and he's got mine.

For years I have let dentists ride roughshod over my teeth. I have been sawed, hacked, chopped, whittled, bewitched, bewildered, tattooed, and signed on again but this is cupid's last stand.

WRITING

I started off living on gruel, and by God, I can always go back to it again.

The dubious privilege of a freelance writer is he's given the freedom to starve anywhere.

Writers who pontificate about their own use of language drive me right up the wall.... Vaporizing about one's own stylistic intricacies strikes me as being visceral, and, to be blunt, inexcusable.

HOLLYWOOD

I guess I'm just an old mad scientist at bottom. Give me an underground laboratory, half a dozen atom-smashers, and a beautiful girl in a diaphanous veil waiting to be turned into a chimpanzee, and I care not who writes the nation's laws.

Word arrived from Miss Garbo that Western civilization would collapse unless Thalberg hastened on the double to Stage 9.

They've let the place go down nowadays—Hollywood proper is cracked and crazed, the gilt's peeling, and the whole thing has a depressing bargain-basement air.

STATUS

In my more pompous moments I like to think of myself as a writer rather than a humorist, but I suppose that's merely the vanity of advancing age.

At my most euphoric, I don't expect to outlast Mount Rushmore.

DEATH

Fate was dealing from the bottom of the deck.

Some of these quotations are excerpted from
"S. J. Perelman," *Writers at Work*
The *Paris Review* Interviews, Second Series
(Viking Compass 1965)

