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The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature S. J. Perelman Collection of Papers 1924-1970 (bulk, 1928-1951)

Creator S. J. Perelman, 1904-1979.

Call number Berg Coll MSS Perelman

Physical description 3 linear feet (8 manuscript boxes)

Preferred Citation S. J. Perelman Collection of Papers, Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library

Repository Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature

Location Berg Coll MSS Perelman

Access to materials Restricted access. Request access to this collection.

S. J. Perelman, one of America's foremost humor writers of the 20th century, was born in Brooklyn, N.Y. in 1904, to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents. He grew up in near poverty on a chicken farm outside of Providence, R.I., and later attended Brown University (working as a cigar-store manager), where he edited the undergraduate humor magazine, *The Brown Jug*. (He left Brown without a degree, in 1925.) He began his literary career by publishing humorous pen-and-wash drawings in the magazine *Judge*, and his captions steadily lengthened until he realized he would rather write than draw. Among his most famous successes are the screenplays for the Marx Brothers films "Monkey Business" (1931) and "Horse Feathers" (1932), and for "Around the World in 80 Days," which won him an Academy Award, in 1956. Perelman is also renowned for his nearly 300 pieces published in *The New Yorker*, the first of which appeared in December 1930, and which he steadily submitted until the year of his death. Over the course of his career, Perelman wrote a novel, 560 short prose pieces, eight plays, eleven film scripts, and numerous television scripts. Many of these short pieces comprised the content of most of the 20 books he published.

His continuing identification with the Marx Brothers irritated him. In 1976, writing to his British agent, in response to a publisher's request that his Marx Brothers scripts be included in an anthology of his work, he wrote: "I am fucking sick and tired of my endless identification with these clowns. If it is not yet apparent after 50 years of writing for publication in the US, Britain, and elsewhere that my work is worth reading for its own sake; if illiterates and rock fans (synonymous) can only be led to purchase my work by dangling before them the fact that I once worked for the Marx brothers, then let us find some other publisher."

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Perelman met his wife-to-be, Lorraine (“Laura”) West (née Weinstein) through her brother, Perelman’s Brown University roommate and his closest friend, the novelist Nathanael West (1904-1940), in 1928, when she was 17 years old. They married in 1929. During their honeymoon they visited members of the American expatriate community in Paris, which inspired their collaboration on the play “All Good Americans,” which opened in 1933. In 1934, it was made into the film “Paris Interlude.” From 1931 to 1942, Perelman and his wife collaborated on two plays and numerous screenplays, establishing themselves as one of Hollywood’s most successful screenwriting husband-and-wife teams. Laura died of cancer in 1970, at age 58. That year, Perelman sold the 91-acre Eight Ball Farm outside the town of Erwinna (Bucks County, Penn.), which he had purchased with Nathanael West in 1932, and on which the Perelmans had lived ever since. The farm sold, Perelman moved to England, where he resided for three years, and then returned to the U.S. to reside in Manhattan.

After his death, *The New Yorker’s* editor, William Shawn, wrote: “Along with being funny, his allusions and wordplay could be as recondite as Joyce’s, Pound’s, or Nabokov’s. The English language was his element: he dwelled in it, was nourished by it, loved it—reveled in it. [...] When people suggested that he might have a higher calling than humor, he sensibly paid no attention to them.”

SCOPE AND ARRANGEMENT

SCOPE

TLS = Typed letter, signed TL = Typed letter APCS = Autograph postcard, signed

The collection features 56 lengthy, substantive letters from Perelman to his wife, Laura, many of which contain detailed observations about and accounts of the activities of Nathaniel West. Perelman and West roomed together at Brown University, and remained each other’s best friends; West would appoint Perelman to be the executor of his literary estate. Perelman’s letters to Laura written in Hollywood offer an insight into the source material for much of Perelman’s early and mid-career humor pieces, most of which he published in *The New Yorker*. Equally important are his letters to her from Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Singapore, which would

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lead to Perelman's Academy Award-winning script for "Around the World in Eighty Days," a copy of which is present. Topics of the Perelman correspondence include his accounts of daily events in his personal life, including, of course, his feelings toward Laura; his ideas about literature and politics; his reaction to his successes and travails during his first stay in Hollywood (1933-35), when he wrote for MGM, Paramount, and Universaleaf; and his travels through Asia (1947-52). Also present are 15 letters from Laura to her husband.

Also present in the collection are typescripts, scrapbooks, and personal documents, as well as incoming correspondence from family, friends, colleagues, and fans. Many of the fan letters pertain to the film "The Night Before Christmas" (1941), which was co-written by S. J. and Laura.

In addition, the collection features Laura's undated diary written, probably, when she was in her early twenties, and a carbon typescript of a film treatment by the novelist Nathanael West. The Brown yearbook of 1924 shows West's senior photo and biographical statement (his name then was "Nathaniel von Wallenstein Weinstein") on page 142. It immediately precedes the photograph and biographical statement of a classmate named Nathanael West, whose name Nathaniel Weinstein would soon adopt. A biographical statement on Perelman (with photograph), who would graduate with the class of 1925, appears on pages 242-243, with those of illustrators for the *Brown Jug*, and on page 287 as an assistant art editor and member of the *Liber Brunensis* editorial board.

The collection also contains an original lithograph by Ben Shahn.

ARRANGEMENT

Arranged in 6 series: 1. Works by S. J. Perelman; 2. Works by Others; 3. Correspondence; 4. Scrapbooks; 5. Personal Documents; 6. Printed Material on S. J. Perelman and Nathaniel West.

ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

CUSTODIAL HISTORY

On September 25, 1970, after the sale of Perelman's Eight Ball Farm in Erwinna, Penn., the contents of the house were auctioned off. Gloria Scoboria, a neighbor and acquaintance,

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purchased these papers, and retained them until May 2005, when she gifted them to Nathanael West biographer Marion Meade, who sold them to Glenn Horowitz Bookseller (NYC).

SOURCE OF ACQUISITION

Glenn Horowitz Bookseller sold them to the Berg Collection, in 2011.

PROCESSING INFORMATION

Processed by Joan Sherman, assisted by Isaac Gewirtz.

KEY TERMS

NAMES

Collins, Alan

Kober, Arthur, 1900-1975

Perelman, Abby

Perlman, Adam

Perelman, Laura

West, Nathanael, 1903-1940

SUBJECTS

Motion picture authorship

Motion pictures—20th century

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The New Yorker

PLACES

Hollywood

Hong Kong

New York

Paris

Shanghai

Singapore

MATERIAL TYPES

Clippings

Diaries

Lithographs

Photographs

Scrapbooks

Scripts

USING THE COLLECTION

LOCATION

Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, Stephen A. Schwarzman Building

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S. J. Perelman Collection of Papers 1924-1970 (bulk, 1928-1951)

Fifth Avenue at 42nd Street, New York, NY 10018-2788

Third Floor, Room 320

ACCESS TO MATERIALS

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SERIES 1: Works by S. J. Perelman

- 1.1 Around the World in Eighty Days, with James Poe and John Farrow (1956); carbon copy of screenplay, in black, single-sheet card-stock wrappers, with title gold-stamped on front wrapper, and bound with two brass brackets, pp. 1-150 (several leaves missing).
- 1.2 Forty-Five Plus (a.k.a. Sweet Bye and Bye), libretto co-authored by Albert Hirschfeld (1945); carbon copy of 3 drafts of screenplay, in green, single-sheet card-stock wrappers, with title typed on front wrapper, unbound, approx. 480 leaves.
- 1.3 The Night Before Christmas (comic play by Laura and S. J. Perelman), 1941 Playbill for the Morosco Theatre (made into a film, Larceny, Inc., in 1942, starring Edward G. Robinson); McCarter Theatre (Princeton, N.J.) hand-out; with congratulatory cables; penciled, undated "get-well" letter from daughter, Abby, on verso of "Backstage" phone number penciled in an adult hand; and photocopy of NY Times Review of the play at the Plymouth Theatre (236 West 45th St.)
- 1.4 Photocopies and clippings of magazine articles and essays: "Hail to the Chief, at Two-Thirds Off," 3 leaves clippings, 3 leaves photocopies; "I'd Send My Son to Brown," 2 leaves clippings, 2 leaves photocopies; and photocopy of autograph annotated typescript "Mad About the Girl" (published in Holiday magazine, Sept./Oct. 1970), 6 leaves.

SERIES 2: Works by Others

Subseries 2.1: Periodical Clippings and Original Art

- 2.1 No Art and No Box Office, 2 leaves.
- 2.2 Photocopies of 3 newspaper articles (1962), 3 leaves.
- 2.3 Ben Shahn, "Silent Night," signed lithograph and sale sheet; 2 New Yorker magazine covers (Aug. 8, 1953; Mar. 20, 1954).

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Subseries 2.2: Reviews of S. J. Perelman Works

- 2.4 The Ill-Tempered Clavichord (1954), 1 leaf.
- 2.5 The Rising Gorge (1962): 29 photocopied reviews, mainly U.K. Press, Sept. 23 – Nov. 22, 1962.
- 2.6 The Beauty Part (1962): 14 reviews and articles (photocopies, clippings, and newspapers) (U.S.A.), Sept. 9-Dec. 15, 1962.

Subseries 2.3: Writings

- 3.1 Perelman, Laura (née Lorraine Weinstein/West): brown notebook with holograph draft; TS poem, "The Comb," 1 leaf; business card; railway receipt.
- 3.2 West, Nathaniel: Osceola (1935), carbon copy, "An Outline of an Idea," film treatment, 16 l (p. 11 missing).

SERIES 3: Correspondence

Scope note: Throughout the correspondence are found numerous references to Nathanael West ("Pep") and his work. Finances are a common topic, with Perelman and West asking to borrow money from the other, and using Laura as the intermediary.

Subseries 3.1: Incoming Correspondence

- 4.1 From Laura Perelman (aka Lorraine Weinstein, Laura West) to S. J. Perelman:
ALS [1928], 2 leaf; ALS [1928], 2 leaves.
- 4.2 From Laura Perelman to S. J. Perelman: 13 TLS, 1/1947-6/3/1947, 18 leaves.
- 4.3 From Abby and Adam Perelman to S.J. and Laura Perelman: AL and TS story, nd 1 leaf; TS story, 1/23/47 1 leaf; 7 ALS, 1/27/47 – 5/5/47, 7 leaf; 3 drawings; 1 birthday card.
- 4.4 MGM memo, 6/8/34, 1 leaf; Cable from George Frank, 7/8/35, 1 leaf; 3 cables, 1/31/41, 3 leaf; TLS from Halloran General Hospital, 1/21/44, 1 leaf; TLS from Irving Hoffman, 1/20/47; TLS from New Yorker, 10/19/49, 1 leaf; carbon copy of letter to Jack Goodman, 12/14/51, 1 leaf.
- 4.5 TLS to the Perelmans from Lovet Kessep (?) 11/26/?, 1 leaf.

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- 4.6 2 TLS to Laura Perelman from Kay (maid), [Feb. 1947], 3 leaf; ALS to Laura Perelman from Kay, [May/June 1947], 1 leaf; TLS to Laura Perelman from Paul, 7/15/47, 1 leaf.

Subseries 3.2: Incoming Condolence Correspondence on Death of Laura Perelman (died April, 1970)

- 5.1 Letters of Condolence, April 1970, 85 leaves (unsorted).
5.2 Cards of Condolence, April 1970, 38 cards (unsorted).
5.3 Telegrams of Condolence, April 1970, 11 telegrams (unsorted).
5.4 Envelopes

Subseries 3.3: Outgoing Correspondence

Scope note: A recipient of a lengthy letter is the humorist Arthur Kober, a New Yorker writer and a successful dramatist and screenplay writer.

- 6.1 S. J. Perelman to Lorraine ("Laura") Weinstein/West: 1 TL, 2 leaves; 9 TLS, n.d./1928, 25 leaves.
6.2 S. J. Perelman to Lorraine/Laura Weinstein/West: 9 TLS, n.d./April-June, 1928, 20 leaves.
6.3 S. J. Perelman to Laura Perelman: 1 TL, 1 leaf; 18 TLS, 1933-34, 20 leaves.
6.4 S. J. Perelman to Laura Perelman: 17 TLS, July 1934 – Jan. 7, 1935, 26 leaves.
6.5 S. J. Perelman to Laura Perelman: 14 TLS, 1/1947 – 8/21/47, 27 leaves.
6.6 S. J. Perelman to Laura Perelman: 5 TLS, 11/8/51 – 2/5/52, 10 leaves.
6.7 S. J. Perelman to Arthur Kober, TLS 5/27/33, 1 leaf; to Alan Collins, TL 11/18/46, 2 leaves; to Doris and Harry Hatcher, 4/3/27, APC.

Subseries 3.3: Outgoing Correspondence by Others

Scope note: A 1946 angry letter from Random House (by co-owner Bennett Cerf?) to Alan Collins, Perelman's agent (and soon afterwards the owner of the New York branch of Curtis, Brown) expresses the writer's sense of betrayal at Perelman's withdrawing from Collins's commitment to Random House for Perelman's next book, which would be

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published in 1951 as *The Swiss Family Perelman* (based on the round-the-world journey that Perelman took with Al Hirshfeld). Perelman signed instead with Simon and Schuster.

- 6.8 [Bennett Cerf?]. TL carbon copy, to Alan Collins (S. J. Perelman's literary agent), Nov. 18, 1946, 2 leaves (3 p.)

SERIES 4: Scrapbooks

- 7.1 Green scrapbook of clippings (reviews of Perelman books, 1929-1930). Photocopied reviews of books, 1931-1952, 17 leaves.
- 7.2 Dark brown scrapbook: photographs and clippings.

SERIES 5: Personal Documents

- 8.1 Marriage invitation; certificate; ketubah (1929).
- 8.2 Miscellaneous receipts, etc. (1929-1949).

SERIES 6: Printed Material on S. J. Perelman and Nathaniel West

- 8.3 *Liber Brunensis* (Brown University yearbook), 1924: references to Perelman and/or West on pages 142, 242, 243, 272, 287.
- 8.4 Photocopies and clippings of articles on Perelman in UK Press and in Yale Daily News. October, 1962.
- 8.5 Magazine articles (clippings) and photocopied essays about Perelman, 1950-1962.