

The Big Town Short Guide

The Big Town by Ring Lardner

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Characters

Tom Finch is the epitome of the "wise boob" character which Lardner frequently employed in his social satires. Unlike the cruder, more self-absorbed "busher," Finch is a midwesterner with an awareness of his limitations, and he remains unimpressed by the socially ambitious, self-promoting people who surround him. Chief among these are his wife Ella and her sister Kate, who desire to escape what they perceive as the stifling confines of South Bend society and make their marks in the big city. Although Kate's role as the husband-hunting girl is stereotypical, Lardner employs the convention to develop a variety of humorous situations. Kate never seems to realize the folly of her pursuit, and Ella's realization that Life and New York City are not identical comes only at the end. Throughout, the plain-talking Tom Finch scores against the illusions of the fashionable and would-be fashionable that he encounters in his passage through the Big Town. Tom's own defects — his inattention to grammatical niceties and his affinities for drinking and gambling — are venial; his imperfect, honest voice embodies the standard against which the vanities of New York are measured.

Social Concerns/Themes

The subtitle of this collection of related stories defines Lardner's theme and plot: "How I and the Mrs. go to see New York to see life and get Katie a husband." Getting his sister-in-law a husband leads Tom Finch, the "wise boob" narrator of the five stories, to contrast life in South Bend, Indiana, with that of booming post-war New York City. The autobiographical element in the stories — the Lardners made the same migration and even stayed at the Long Island hotel featured in two of the stories — led Lardner to include a humorous disclaimer in the 1925 edition. But clearly Tom Finch's midwestern reservations about the spendthrift habits and dubious manners and morals of the big town reflect an aspect of Lardner's own response to New York City at the beginning of the Roaring Twenties. "I just want to be where they's Life and fun": Kate's equating "Life" and "fun" with New York City underlies the satire of *The Big Town*.

Before the move, Tom had worked as a cigar salesman; but an inheritance from his war-profiteering father-in-law liberates the family, and they join the euphoria that characterized America between World War I and the Depression. In pursuit of a husband for Kate, the Finches encounter three classes of New Yorkers. First, there are the established rich who are either accessible, but dull (Trumbull), disingenuous (Herbert Daly), or snobs (Lady Perkins). Second, there are the would-be rich — the ambitious young Wall Street broker who unfortunately prefers Ella to Kate, the ambitious young aviator whose airplane proves fatally imperfect, and the Ziegfield Follies comedian who has the ambition but not the talent to be a dramatic actor. Finally, there are the working men, Trumbull's chauffeur and Daly's jockey, who are more attractive than their employers, but who are handicapped by past marriages or past crimes. Having invested \$25,000 in the Follies comedian, Kate finally makes her none-too-promising match.

On the final page Tom summarizes the action: "Do you remember what we moved to the Big Town for? We done it to see Life and get Katie a husband.

Well, we got her a kind of a husband and I'll tell the world we seen Life."

They have, at least, seen enough of the "Big Town," and Ella readily agrees to his proposal that they "mosey" back to South Bend. The Big Town serves as Lardner's anatomy of American social life as he saw it in 1920. The satire is never bitter; Kate, the least wise of the boobs may be infatuated with the idea of a Lady Perkins, but she is at least not taken in by the condescending Herbert Daley. The worst that can be said of the sophisticates is that they are drones who take the game of bridge too seriously or that they make improper advances to the wrong women.

Adaptations

The Big Town was released as the movie So This Is New York in 1948. It was directed by Richard O. Fleischer and featured Henry Morgan, Rudy Vallee, and Virginia Grey.



Related Titles

Lardner had been mining this vein of social satire as early as *Gullible's Travels, Etc.* (1917). In the title story of that collection, the Gullibles, disdainful of the "riff and raff" of their Chicago neighborhood, embark on an expedition to join the "Elight" in Palm Beach, Florida. Like the Finches, the Gullibles find high society impenetrable and hurry back to Chicago: "Ain't it grand to be home." In the final story, the Gullibles attempt to climb the social ladder at home with equally unhappy results; they slip on the exotic game of bridge. As in *The Big Town*, the husband is the narrator; he is cruder, however, than Tom Finch and more his wife's accomplice.



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