

A WINDOW ON WODEHOUSE

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It was with heavy heart and furrowed brow that I came away from a bookstore recently, after doing what I do in every new bookstore I have ever been to — search for a P.G. Wodehouse title that I haven't yet read.

The freshly-scrubbed young clerk at the store looked befuddled when I asked him where the Wodehouse books were. "You know," I said, "Jeeves, Blandings Castle, aunts, that sort of stuff." "Wodehouse, Wodehouse.... Let's see.. No, I'm afraid I don't really know who you're talking about... Wait!," an expression of relief floating into his face, "you must mean Barbara Wodehouse, the dog lady. We've got several of those."

I am sure Ms. Wodehouse is a fine, upstanding citizen (as dog ladies go), and I will readily stipulate that she is possessed of an encyclopedic knowledge of dogs (a dubious achievement, I daresay, and one which I would be thoroughly disinclined to pursue). Dogs, while pleasant enough creatures, are not of the essence. Ms. Wodehouse, you are no Pelham Grenville.

The Wodehouse I was inquiring after has been described by several of his contemporaries, including Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell, Agatha Christie, Ogden Nash and Hilarie Belloc as *the* finest exponent of the English language in his times, and one of the greatest pure humorists who ever lived.

Unfortunately, Wodehouse is fast being forgotten in this country. The current Masterpiece Theater series "Jeeves and Wooster" is a welcome surprise indeed; this is not the usual stodgy fare we are accustomed to now, is it? Of course, Mr. Alistair Cooke does rather manage to take some of the fun out of Wodehouse; after all, the essence of Wodehouse is a sort of sunny lightheartedness which we would be hard pressed to associate with the good Mr. Cooke. The portrayals of Bertie and Jeeves, while decidedly superior to earlier BBC attempts, still do not, and *can* not come close to the original creations. Wodehouse's novels and stories, perhaps more so than any other authors, *belong* on the printed page, and it there that they have to be savored, time and again. Ardent Wodehouse readers, and I count myself among them, have typically read his best works five or six times — deriving the same pleasure each time.

Those Wodehouse inventions are spun from the purest whimsy and a breathtaking conceit. The worlds Wodehouse created are not depictions of worlds mundane enough to have actually existed in any place at any time. They reside, whole, fully realized and untarnished, in that priceless imagination and in those irradiant books. Webster's entry on "Wodehouse, Pelham Grenville" is characteristically on the mark — "the creator of a hilarious, coherent world." Shrewd fellow, this wordsmith Webster; shows keen insight and a fairish vocabulary.

For more than half of his ninety-three years (1881-1975), P.G. Wodehouse (pronounced *Woodhouse*) resided in the United States, first in Hollywood, then in Greenwich Village and subsequently on Long Island. He became a citizen in 1956, and many of his most celebrated books were first published here, often serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post* before they were released in book form.

An astoundingly industrious and prolific writer, Wodehouse published close to a hundred novels, over three hundred short stories, three autobiographical books (*Bring on the Girls*, *Performing Flea* and *Over Seventy*) and over five hundred essays and articles. He also produced screenplays for six motion pictures, authored or collaborated on sixteen plays, and wrote the lyrics for twenty-three musical comedies, with his friend Guy Bolton providing the music. In fact, Wodehouse was something of a sensation on Broadway in the 1920s, and still holds the distinction of being the only author to have three *simultaneous* hit plays there.

A Creature of Pure Delight

Wodehouse has been called a "creature of pure delight." As a human being, he was gentle and considerate, a kind and trusting soul, completely free from any of the darker undercurrents which are a part of most writers' lives. His belief in the goodness of human nature was profound; Wodehouse trusted so completely in everyone that he would write letters by the window of his London study, and rather than walk down to the mail box, would toss the envelopes out the window. When a surprised visitor asked him why he did that, he replied that he knew somebody would pick it up within minutes and deposit it in a box. Wodehouse claimed that this method had never failed him.

His acknowledged naivete got Wodehouse into a great deal of trouble during World War II. He agreed to make some humorous broadcasts on German shortwave radio (broadcast to a still neutral United States) while he was in internment¹. Wodehouse saw the broadcasts as a way of reaching his friends and fans and reassuring them that he was alright. True to his nature, he found humor in his current circumstances. He wrote two books and a lengthy diary while interned for eighteen months; the diary is probably the most hilarious document ever written about prison life (parts of that prison experience, incidentally, were grim enough in reality that the prisoners were reduced to eating paper and matches).

Wodehouse simply did not comprehend the scope or brutality of that war. His broadcast reflected this: "*Just as I am about to feel belligerent about some country, I meet a decent sort of chap. We go out together and I lose any fighting thoughts or feelings.*" Britons (none of whom had actually heard the broadcasts) were enraged, and saw them as acts of treason. Wodehouse was roundly condemned by politicians, writers and many others. Deeply injured and bewildered by all the attacks, Wodehouse moved from Paris to the United States. He could not accept the fact his fellow Britons could accuse him of a deliberate act of disloyalty, and refused to defend himself against the

¹ In Wodehouse's own words, "*Young men, starting out in life, have often asked me, 'How can I become an Internee?' Well, there are several methods. My own was to buy a villa in Le Touquet on the coast of France and stay there till the Germans come along. This is probably the best and simplest system. You buy the villa and the Germans do the rest.*" (from the Berlin broadcasts).

charges. Several writers, once they gained access to a manuscript of his actual broadcasts, rose to his defense; in particular, George Orwell published a lengthy article titled "In Defense of P.G. Wodehouse."

Even though Wodehouse was soon cleared of all suspicion (he had never been formally charged), he did not return to England at all for nearly thirty years. He became an American citizen and added to his reputation on Broadway, in addition to continuing his prolific output of novels and short stories. In 1974, a year before he died, Wodehouse was knighted by the British government — the final symbol of acceptance. Now that he had been knighted and had a statue of himself in Madam Toussand's Wax Museum, Wodehouse said he had no ambitions left.

As a writer, Wodehouse has been described by some as the Mark Twain of the twentieth century. His humor, appearing at first glance to be characteristically and impeccably British, reveals itself upon further perusal as a singular creation. It is couched in the most extraordinarily pristine language — prose so artfully constructed, words so well chosen (the *mot juste*, as Wodehouse would say, usually speaking through Jeeves), similies and metaphors invented with unmatched brilliance. The writing style manages to be hilariously ponderous and overblown yet delectably understated. Long, involved sentences are imbued with a perfect sense of rhythm and balance. No wonder Richard Usborne called him "the lord of language, the master craftsman." Oxford University, in granting him an Honorary Doctorate of Letters in 1939, proclaimed, ". . . Here is a writer with a magical touch... he never lets a lazy sentence stand. He polishes phrases and perfects rhythms. He uses the common language with uncommon style." Wodehouse was truly an unparalleled genius of the English language.

His playful inventiveness can be seen in the astonishing variety of metaphors he concocted for everyday events. A suitor, having been rejected by a woman, says "*she turned me down like a bed-spread.*" Bertie Wooster's chagrin at Jeeves' none-too-subtle attempts to get him to shave off a repellant little moustache elicits a mild rebuke, "*I will thank you, Jeeves, to refrain from editing my face.*" Bertie on Jeeves' polite but high-handed ways, "*I will not be a serf to my own valet.*" A Wodehouse character does not merely eat an omelet; he *gets outside* an omelet. A dim-witted individual is described as possessing the intelligence of a cockroach — no ordinary cockroach, of course, but one which had been dropped on its head while a mere baby.

The dialogue, while bearing some resemblance to the idioms of the day, includes language which is purely a creature of Wodehouse's imagination. "*What ho, what ho, what ho, what ho, what ho,*" he said, adding "*What ho,*" to make his meaning perfectly clear.

The current PBS series gives viewers a taste (but only a pallid one) for Bertie and Jeeves; however, Wodehouse's world contains many other memorable and frequently occurring characters. A few of them are described here for the uninitiated, along with some excerpts from Wodehouse's writings.

Jeeves & Bertie

Enough has been written about the estimable Jeeves, so I will not dwell on his many virtues here, save to mention that he possessed an extensive classical education, a broad and deep knowledge of all worldly affairs (reflecting Wodehouse's own extensive readings), and, most acutely, a subtle understanding of the *psychology of the individual*. The amiable wastrel Wooster, in sharp contradistinction, is imbued with none of these sterling qualities; in his own way, though, Bertie has an equally astonishing flair for verbal expression.

- *"Jeeves!"*
"Sir?"
"I'm sitting on the roof."
"Very good, sir."
"Don't say 'Very good.' It's nothing of the kind. The place is alive with swans."
"I will attend to the matter immediately."
.. "All is well," I said. "Jeeves is coming."
"What can he do?"
I frowned a trifle. The man's tone had been peevish, and I didn't like it.
"That," I replied with a touch of stiffness, "we cannot say until we see him in action. He may pursue one course, or he may pursue another. But one thing you can rely on with the utmost confidence — Jeeves will find a way. See, here he comes stealing through the undergrowth, his face shining with the light of pure intelligence. There are no limits to Jeeves' brain power. He virtually lives on fish."
- *Jeeves doesn't exactly smile on these occasions, because he never does, but the lips twitch slightly at the corners and the eye is benevolent.*
- *He uncovered the fragrant eggs and b., and I pronged a moody forkful.*
- *I beetled off with a fairish amount of restrained hauteur, for I was displeased with the man.*
- *It is pretty generally recognized in the circles in which he moves that Bertram Wooster is not a man who lightly throws in the towel and admits defeat. Beneath the thingummies of what-d'you-call-it, his head, wind and weather permitting, is as a rule bloody but unbowed, and if the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune want to crush his spirit, they have to pull up their socks and make a special effort.*
- *"Bertie, I think you're a pig!" she said.*
"A pig, maybe; but a shrewd, level-headed pig," I replied.
- *"Jeeves," I said, "we start for America on Saturday."*
"Very good, sir. Which suit will you wear?"
- *"Jeeves, you may give away those plus-fours of mine you dislike so."*
"Thank you, sir, I gave them to the under-gardener yesterday."
- *"Rummy thing, Jeeves," I said thoughtfully, "this modern tendency to marry waitresses... The point to be considered now is, what will Aunt Agatha do about this? You know her Jeeves. She is not like me. I'm broad-minded. If Uncle George wants to marry waitresses, let him, say I. I hold that the rank is but the penny stamp —"*
"Guinea stamp, sir."

"All right, guinea stamp. Though I don't believe there is such a thing. I shouldn't have thought they come higher than five bob. Well, as I was saying, I maintain that the rank is but the guinea stamp and a girl's a girl for all that."

"For a' that,' sir. The poet Burns wrote in the North British dialect."

"Well, 'a' that,' then, if you prefer it."

"I have no preference in the matter, sir. It is simply that the poet Burns —"

"Never mind about the poet Burns."

"No, sir."

"Forget the poet Burns."

"Very good, sir."

"Expunge the poet Burns from your mind."

"I will do so immediately, sir."

"What we have to consider is not the poet Burns but the Aunt Agatha. She will kick, Jeeves."

"Very probably, sir."

"And what's worse, she will lug me into the mess. There is only one thing to be done. Pack the toothbrush and let us escape while we may, leaving no address."

"Very good, sir."

At this moment the bell rang.

"Ha!" I said. "Someone at the door."

"Yes, sir."

.. I sauntered along the passage, whistling carelessly, and there on the mat was Aunt Agatha. Herself. Not a picture.

A nasty jar.

Aunts Will Be Aunts

P.G. Wodehouse was brought up by a series of aunts, since his parents were at a number of remote postings in the British empire. This accident of fate has given rise to an extensive Wodehouse cast of Assorted Aunts, of whom two are especially noteworthy:

Aunt Agatha — the Family Curse, who chews nails and in all likelihood conducts midnight sacrifices of small children on full-moon nights. Her most insidious plots involve attempts to get Bertie married to the frightful likes of Honoria Glossop, in order that she may yet make something of the young worm.

Aunt Dahlia — perhaps the only *good* aunt in all of Wodehouse; a cheery soul, hearty of manner and voice (*"If all other sources of income failed, she could make a good living calling the cattle home across the Sands of Dee."*) Fondly referred to by Bertie as the "old ancestor", the "ancient fossil and b.", she enjoys the services of the extravagantly talented but high strung and temperamental French chef Anatole (*"I am cool like some cucumbers"*); his cooking makes an extended invitation to her country home much coveted among the idle bourgeoisie.

- *In this life it is not aunts that matter but the courage which one brings to them.*
- *The aunt made a hobby of collecting dry seaweed, which she pressed and pasted into an album. One sometimes thinks that aunts live entirely for pleasure.*

Blandings Castle

Lord Emsworth, a.k.a. Clarence, the amiable but bone-headed ninth Earl of Blandings, asks for nothing more than to be allowed to potter around his garden of a morning, tend to his prize black Berkshire sow, the Empress of Blandings (she *"resembled a captive balloon with ears and a tail and was nearly as circular as a pig can be without bursting"*). Blissfully left to his own resources, his Lordship would spend afternoons in his study, reading that magisterial work of Whiffle, *The Care of the Pig*: *"The diet shall comprise fifty-seven thousand eight hundred calories a day, these to consist of proteins four pounds five ounces, carbohydrates twenty-five pounds...."* In particular, the chapter on swill and corn-mash has a particularly poignant aspect to it, and Lord Emsworth turns to it in moments of deep anguish.

Unfortunately, Blandings Castle is also occupied by a host of overbearing sisters, headed by the steely Lady Constance. The sisters care little for his Lordship's simple pleasures and not at all for the Empress. They are wont to invite tiresome literary young men (including, shudder, somber poets of a singularly modern bent) to come and stay at Blandings Castle for extended periods. *Noblesse oblige* and all that, Lord Emsworth is set upon by this pack and forced into all manner of indignities -- for instance, putting on a stiff collar and top hat and taking the 8:57 in to London, there to attend the House of Lords or to distractedly engage in some other ghastly business. To better manage his affairs, the Efficient Rupert Baxter is engaged, his spectacles gleaming with determination and get-go, his peremptory presence only serving to make Lord Emsworth's existence even more miserable.

Freddie Threepwood, Lord Emsworth's son, had been pronounced a confirmed ne'er-do-well by all concerned; until, that he is, he surprised everyone by showing the foresight to marry the only daughter of a Long Island Dog Biscuit King, thereafter becoming a regular captain of industry and lifelong booster of dog biscuits.

- *Unlike the male codfish, which, suddenly finding itself the parent of three million five hundred thousand little codfish, cheerfully resolves to love them all, the British aristocracy is apt to look with a somewhat jaundiced eye on its younger sons.*
- *"Frederick won't be staying here long, will he?" Lord Emsworth asked, with a father's pathetic eagerness.*

Frederick Altamount Cornwallis

Uncle Fred, the fifth Earl of Ickenham, wreaks havoc and spreads despair whenever he flits through the great metropolis. His American wife, never seen by us, *"believes in a strong centralized government; as Uncle Fred fondly says, "American girls try to boss you. It's part of their charm."* He is under strict orders from headquarters to avoid London like the plague. His nephew, Pongo Twistleton-Twistleton, invariably bears the brunt of these (mercifully) infrequent visits.

- *... the trouble with this uncle is that, though sixty if a day, he becomes on arriving in the*

metropolis as young as he feels — which is, apparently, a youngish twenty-two.... The snag is that he will insist on lugging Pongo out in the open and there, right in the public eye, proceeding to step high, wide and plentiful.

- *"I have come," said Lord Ickenham, edging in, "to clip the parrot's claws. My assistant, Mr. Walkinshaw, who applies the anesthetic," he added, indicating Pongo with a gesture. "Nobody told me you were coming."
"The keep things from you, do they?" said Lord Ickenham sympathetically. "Too bad."*

Mr. Mulliner and The Oldest Member

There are two master raconteurs that Wodehouse used frequently to frame his short stories. The first is Mr. Mulliner (hot Scotch and lemon) — that "dignified regular at the Anglers' Rest whose considered judgment on any and all topics is drawn from the experiences of his innumerable relatives." Each of those relatives has lived through a tale calculated to "interest, elevate and amuse." Some survived the great San Francisco fire of '06, others were contract writers in Hollywood; a fair number were young curates. The listeners at the bar, including Miss Postlethwaite, "our courteous and efficient barmaid," may try in vain to escape as Mr. Mulliner settles into his reminiscing ways, but he attaches a friendly but vice-like grip on their shoulders and proceeds to introduce them to the life and times of, say, young Mortimer Mulliner. All the patrons of the bar are nameless, identified only by their poisons — a Gin-and-Ginger-Ale, Draught Stout, Small Bass, Double-Whisky-and-Splash, Mild and Bitter, a Whiskey Sour.

The second Wodehouse alter ego is The Oldest Member, a sort of Mr. Mulliner of the Golf Clubhouse. The O.M. reads books such as *Vardon on Casual Water*, and is a constant presence in the clubhouse, commiserating with the sufferers or sharing in others' small triumphs. Wodehouse was a lifelong devotee of golf, and presented hundreds of characters smitten by its insidious charms. The larger lessons of life are hilariously learned on the links, and the preeminence of golf in the general scheme of things is reasserted time and again.

- *"As a typical instance, neither more nor less remarkable than a hundred others, I will select the story of Rollo Podmarsh." He settled himself comfortably in his chair and placed the tips of his fingers together. "This Rollo Podmarsh —"
"No, I say!" protested the young man, looking at his watch.
"This Rollo Podmarsh —"
"Yes, but —"
This Rollo Podmarsh (said the Oldest Member)....*
- *"After all, golf is only a game," said Millicent. Women say these things without thinking. It does not mean that there is any kink in their character. They simply don't realize what they are saying.*
- *The least things upset him on the links. He misses short putts because of the uproar of the butterflies in the adjoining meadows.*

Stanley Featherstonehaugh Ukridge

"The man with the big, broad, flexible outlook — along with a number of gilt-edged schemes." Through Ukridge, Wodehouse explored the business world with a bewildered and hilariously jaundiced eye. The enterprising Ukridge never was able to bring to fruition any of his sensational business ideas in the England of the 1920s; he may have been just the sort of unfettered visionary who might have succeeded famously in the modern business environment.

- *"..Between ourselves, Corky, I have my eye on what looks like the investment of a lifetime."
"Yes?"
"Yes. I was reading about it the other day. A cat ranch out in America."
"A cat ranch?"
"That's it. You collect a hundred thousand cats. Each cat has twelve kittens a year. The skins range from ten cents each for the white ones to seventy-five for the pure black. That gives you twelve million skins per year to sell at an average price of thirty cents per skin, making your annual revenue at a conservative estimate three hundred and sixty thousand dollars (sic). But, you will say, what about overhead expenses?"
"Will I?"
"That has all been allowed for. To feed the cats you start a rat farm next door. The rats multiply four times as fast as cats do, so if you begin with a million rats it gives you four rats per day per cat, which is plenty. You feed the rats on what is left over of the cats after removing the skins, allowing one fourth of a cat per rat, the business thus becomes automatically self-supporting. The cats will eat the rats, the rats will eat the cats - "
There was a knock upon the door.
"Come in," bellowed Ukridge irritably. These captains of industry hate to be interrupted when in conference.
It was the butler who had broken in upon his statistics.*
- *"She wanted to borrow my aunt's brooch," said Ukridge, "but I was firm and wouldn't let her have it — partly on principle and partly because I had pawned it the day before."*

There are, of course, numerous other characters who, alas, shall have to remain unexplored here. To conclude, we now present you with a small sampling of Wodehouse's writing.

On Gloomy Freddie

- *A cat enters the smoking room at the Drones Club.
.. Freddie Widgeon, who had been sitting in a corner with his head between his hands, rose stiffly.
"I had supposed," he said, in a cold, level voice, "that this was a quiet retreat for gentlemen. As I perceive that it is a blasted zoo, I will withdraw."
And he left the room in a marked manner.*
- *Freddie had mooned about with an air of crushed gloom that would have caused comment in Siberia.*
- *Freddie experience the sort of abysmal soul-sadness which afflicts one of Tolstoy's peasants when, after putting in a heavy day's work strangling his father, beating his wife, and dropping the baby into the city reservoir, he turns to the cupboard, only to find the vodka bottle empty.*

On England and Englishmen

- *Into the face of the young man who sat on the terrace of the Hotel Magnifique at Cannes there had crept a look of furtive shame, the shifty, hangdog look which announces that an Englishman is about to talk French.*
- *The floor was crowded with all that was best and noblest in the county; so that a half-brick, hurled at any given moment, must infallibly have spilt blue blood.*
- *The two-forty-five express stood at the platform with that air of well-bred reserve which is characteristic of Paddington trains... There is something very soothing in the note of refined calm which Paddington strikes. At Waterloo, all is hustle and bustle, and the society tends to be mixed. Here a leisurely peace prevails, and you get only the best people — cultured men accustomed to mingle with basset hounds and women in tailored suits who look like horses.*

America

- *"Hang it," said Bill to himself in the cab. "I'll go to America!" The exact words probably which Columbus had used, talking the thing over with his wife.*
- *You would like Hollywood, you know. Everybody does... And if you aren't getting divorced yourself, there's always one of your friends who is, and that gives you something to chat about in the long evenings. And it isn't such a crazy place as they make out. I know two or three people in Hollywood that are part sane.*
- *The Duke of Wigan, who, as so many British Dukes do, was at this time passing slowly through Hollywood.*

Babies Aren't Gentlemen

- *Freddie's views on babies are well-defined. He is prepared to cope with them singly, if all avenues of escape are blocked and there is a nurse or mother standing by to lend aid in case of sudden hiccougths, retchings and nausea. Under such conditions, he has even been known to offer his watch to one related by ties of blood in order that the little stranger might listen to the tick-tick. But it would be paltering with he truth to say that he likes babies. They give him, he says, a sort of grey feeling. He resents their cold stare and the supercilious and upstage way in which they dribble out of the corner of their mouths on seeing him. Eyeing them he is conscious of doubts as to whether Man can really be Nature's last word.*

What Price Small Boys?

- *Braid Bates at that time was a young plug-ugly of some nine summers, in appearance a miniature edition of his father and in soul and temperament a combination of Dead End kid and army mule; a freckled, hard-boiled character with a sardonic eye and mouth which, when not occupied in eating, had a cynical twist to it. He spoke little as a general thing, but when he did speak seldom failed to find a chink in the armour.*

Metaphorically Speaking

- *He spoke with a certain what-is-it in his voice, and I could see that, if not actually disgruntled, he was far from grunted.*
- *He, too, seemed disinclined for chit-chat. We stood for some moments like a couple of Trappist monks who have run into each other by chance at the dog races.*
- *He tottered blindly towards the bar like a camel making for an oasis after a hard day at the office.*

- *He felt like a man who, chasing rainbows, has had one of them suddenly turn and bite him in the leg.*
- *He got through the song somehow and limped off amidst roars of silence from the audience.*
- *The Aberdeen terrier gave me an unpleasant look and said something under his breath in Gaelic.*
- *As the car drove in at the gate, we struck a bumpy patch, and I could hear the milk of human kindness sloshing about inside him."*
- *It was one of those still evenings you get in summer, when you can hear a snail clear its throat a mile away.*
- *Imagine how some unfortunate Master Criminal would feel, on coming down to do a murder at the Old Grange, if he found that not only was Sherlock Holmes putting in a weekend there, but Hercule Poirot as well.*

Wodehouse Miscellany

- *... that inevitability was such a feature of the best Greek tragedy. Aeschylus once said to Euripides, 'You can't beat inevitability,' and Euripides said he had often thought so, too.*
- *"Chumps always make the best husbands. When you marry, Sally, grab a chump. Tap his forehead first, and if it rings solid, don't hesitate. All the unhappy marriages come from husbands having brains. What good are brains to a man? They only unsettle him."*
- *"I say," he said, 'my father's missing.'
"On how many cylinders?" asked Lord Bromborough. He was a man who liked his joke of a morning.*
- *Rodney Spelvin was in for another attack of poetry... He had once been a poet, and a very virulent one, too; the sort of man who would produce a slim volume of verse bound in squash mauve leather at the drop of a hat, mostly on the subject of sunsets and pixies.*
- *What a curse these social distinctions are. They ought to be abolished. I remember saying that to Karl Marx once, and he thought there might be an idea for a book in it.*

An invaluable book for all Wodehouse afficiandos is *The Penguin Wodehouse Companion* (published in 1988), by that most fanatical of Wodehousologists, Richard Osborne. Some of the Wodehouse quotes presented here were selected by Mr. Osborne.