

## P.G. Wodehouse

Heresy can mean doing obstinately what you do best, and doing it in the most improbable places. Jeeves, for example, was conceived and born in New York. At least P.G. Wodehouse was living there when he first thought of him.

That may sound like an odd place to do it, but the fact is not in doubt. After two discontented years in a London bank and a little journalism, Wodehouse settled in Greenwich Village (off and on) in 1909. He had first visited America in 1904, drawn by its boxing tradition, but he soon came to believe he could write for it; and it was there in the autumn of 1914 that he met and married a young English widow called Ethel, whose daughter he adopted. War was breaking out in Europe, but his poor eyesight made him unfit for active duty, so he wrote on. There was to be another world war in his lifetime, as unexpected to him as the first, and after than he settled again in America, dying in 1975 on Long Island in his nineties. So New York was as much home to him as anywhere, though you sometimes wonder if anywhere was. He casually inhabited the whole world. Born in Guildford in 1881, his first infant years had been in Hong Kong, where his father was a magistrate, and his middle years, after New York and Hollywood, were spent in France. Like many Englishmen down the centuries he had the carefree talent of being mostly somewhere else and yet never losing sense of who he was.

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It was in Greenwich Village that inspiration came. The first of the Jeeves stories, 'Extricating young Gussie,' appeared in *Saturday Evening Post* in September 1915, where the manservant was given two lines, to be collected in *The Man with Two Left Feet* (1917); the story is largely set in New York, and all the Jeeves stories in *My Man Jeeves* (1919) are set there too. So the most famous manservant of modern literature started life as an expatriate – the creation, what is more, of an expatriate mind.

Wodehouse spent much of his life pursuing ideas for serials, and he was to apologise one day, in the preface to the *Jeeves Omnibus* (1931), for the offhand way he had introduced the star of the best serial idea

he ever had. In ‘Extricating young Gussie’ Jeeves’s two lines are wholly commonplace: ‘Mrs Gregson to see you, sir,’ and ‘Very good, sir, which suit will you wear?’ Such was his unobtrusive entry into immortality, and the idea of an impossibly perfect valet grew only slowly over the years. The second Jeeves collection, *The Inimitable Jeeves* (1923), was a loosely built novel of eighteen chapters that eventually made ten stories for the omnibus, which contained thirty-one, all revised. Progress was slow. Wodehouse was not a natural writer in his early years, if there is such a thing, and his seemingly effortless and ebullient style was an effect of long rumination and revision, missed chances, many trials and much error. Materials were used and re-used, conceptions took time to mature, and success with stories did not come till his forties.

The pattern of recycling continues. The next collection was *Carry on, Jeeves* (1925), with ten stories, four revised from *My Man Jeeves*; then five years later *Very Good, Jeeves*, with eleven stories. So the saga flowered in the Twenties, though not at novel length. With the 1931 omnibus, however, and that ‘slight feeling of chestiness,’ as he put it in the preface – ‘just the faint beginning of that offensive conceit against which we authors have to guard so carefully’ – he moved Jeeves decisively, and at long last, into novels. After two disappointing years in Hollywood in 1929-31 he settled with his wife and daughter in Le Touquet, in his early fifties, on a part of the French coast where England is occasionally visible, and a great creative decade began. In 1934, when the musical *Anything Goes* opened to acclaim in New York, there appeared at last the first Jeeves novels that really count – *Thank You, Jeeves* and *Right Ho, Jeeves* – and both still look like enduring masterpieces. Both revel in quick-fire invention and an advanced technique, only slowly perfected, of conducting most of the action through dialogue often no more than a few words long; and it was in the second novel that an intoxicated Gussie Fink-Nottle, in a scene Wodehouse never excelled, presented the prizes at Market Snodsbury Grammar School. The year was plainly a good one for Plum, as his friends and relatives called him, since it was in 1934 that Hilaire Belloc hailed him as ‘the best writer in English now alive’ and ‘the head of my profession.’ Four years later he capped all that with *The Code of the Woosters* (1938), another triumph for Jeeves, and *Uncle Fred in the Springtime* (1939), the flagship of the Blandings series; and in 1939 Oxford University – mindful, and perhaps envious, of the creative achievements available to those of no advanced education – conferred on him an honorary doctorate. If the Twenties was his finest decade for stories, the Thirties surpassed it in novels. It is like watching a runner getting his second wind.

Wodehouse was not one to worry about world events, or indeed anything, and even the rise of Hitler failed to upset him. He was Teflon Man. The year 1939, as it opened, found him rich, famous and happy, working and playing golf, with a commodious home on the coast of France. In April he wrote to his old school friend Bill Townend that ‘the world has never been farther from a war than it is at present,’ and that Hitler, if he thought there would be one, would have ‘nervous prostration.’ The rest of the letter is even more revealing. All these silly military alliances, he wrote, reminded him of school football, with teams arranged for the next game. ‘I think of Hitler and Mussolini as two halves, and Stalin as a useful wing forward.’ September, when Poland was invaded, must have surprised him, but he remained sunny – was there ever any other mood? – and by December he was convinced that the war against Germany would be won, of all places, at sea.

Then France fell, by land. In June 1940 he and his wife failed to escape from Le Touquet when their car would not start, and he was transported by the Nazis in a cattle-wagon from Belgium to Upper Silesia, aged fifty-eight, living contentedly enough in a lunatic asylum where he played cricket for the first time in years, listened to lectures and entertainments and received food-parcels from the Red Cross. That, though he cannot have known it, was in the neighbourhood of Auschwitz, a camp not yet fully operational. In June 1941 he was released because he was about to turn sixty, moved into the Adlon Hotel in Berlin and rashly consented to broadcast in humorous vein on Berlin radio, to the high indignation of British public opinion. Then Paris and the liberation, and talk of a treason trial that came to nothing. So even two world wars failed to bother him much. You begin to wonder, a little enviously, if anything ever could.

In Paris, newly liberated, he lunched with George Orwell, who wrote ‘In defence of P.G. Wodehouse,’ a paper promptly collected in his *Critical Essays* (1946). It may have helped to end talk of treason; and its point, at once subtle and sensible, was that anybody, Nazi or other, who supposed Wodehouse’s fiction was anti-English knew little about England, a land where affection is commonly veiled in mockery. The Berlin broadcasts, at all events, were soon forgotten by all but the very old and the very unforgiving, and by 1947 Wodehouse was back in New York, where he became an American citizen in 1955. His best work was already done. But when he died on Long Island in 1975, prosperous, knighted and seemingly hated by nobody, Belloc’s tribute of 1934 still did not look absurd, and it does not look absurd now, if duly pondered and qualified. Along with Evelyn Waugh, whose novels stunned him (as he once said) with their brilliance, Wodehouse still looks like the

supreme comic master of English in his century. His books still crowd the bookstores, he is still translated, and the young are said to read and reread him with no less zest than the old. There is even a handsome and erudite *Comprehensive Bibliography and Checklist* (1990) by Eileen McIlvaine, abundantly illustrated. It is published, aptly enough, in New York, where he spent about half his adult life – the fitting tribute of scholarship to one who never bothered with it himself.

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There are some unresolved puzzles about all this, and they mostly concern time and place.

For one thing, New York sounds like a funny place to think of Jeeves – it was not, and is not, a city noted for its silly expatriate bachelors with manservants – and 1915-17 sounds like a funny time to think of him. Evelyn Waugh, in a 1961 broadcast published in his *Essays, Articles and Reviews* (1983), claims Wodehouse inhabited a world as timeless as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Alice in Wonderland*, which is true in the sense that his world is essentially unchanging. But Alice is plainly a Victorian child, and Jeeves and Bertie just as plainly belong to somewhere specific in time. Wodehouse always made light of the matter, as of other matters; he had conceived them, he wrote from New York in 1951 in a letter, not in order to make a point about the England of his youth, as Orwell imagined, but because these 'exaggerated dudes' were what Americans wanted. 'It's a simple as that.' So it really was America that made Jeeves, along with Bertie Wooster and Lord Emsworth, and they were born of the famous show-business principle that you give the people what they want. They were what Americans expected the English to be like.

Perhaps the matter is a little less simple. Most readers today, if asked what era these characters belong to, would probably answer vaguely in terms of the interwar years, or more precisely the Jazz Age of the Twenties with Bright Young Things in cloche hats. Or so one might guess. The evidence, however, suggests that all that, though perhaps true of the body of the work, is too late for the origins. Wodehouse was not a precocious author. He was a Victorian who turned twenty some months after Queen Victoria died in January 1901, and he produced his first fiction in the reign of her son Edward VII, who died in 1910 – mostly school stories like *Mike* (1909), based on idyllic memories of Dulwich College in south London in the 1890s, where he had boarded. Dulwich was essentially a boys' day school with a few boarders, a place of modest social pretensions set like an idyll among rich leafy suburbs; and to a motherless thirteen-year-old who, half a century later, was to make light of Nazi internment, it seemed from 1894 till 1900 'like

heaven.’ Wodehouse was one of those the Fates cannot touch. Like a cat, he fell on his feet. Two years after him, in 1896, Dulwich admitted Raymond Chandler, a day-boy born in Chicago who stayed rather longer than Wodehouse, for nine years, though there is no reason to suppose they ever met.

To have produced two such authors in a generation is a striking tribute to the college – all the more so when you consider their careers, which in many ways were mirror-images. Like Wodehouse, Chandler first took an office job in London – at the Admiralty – hated it and soon left. Like Wodehouse he spent a hungry year and more trying to please editors, not in Greenwich Village but in Bloomsbury. And like Wodehouse he did not write a book of enduring merit until he was in his early fifties, *The Big Sleep* (1939), to spend his last years, like Plum, in affluence by the sea shore, at La Jolla in California. Both, what is more, finally triumphed with a good serial idea, like Jeeves and Philip Marlowe; and both were inimitable in their styles, which are masterful in being exaggeratedly national. Neither was nationalistic, but a sense of nationhood is insistent in the language of both. Marlowe takes American English about as far as it can go without falling over the edge – even further, for example, than Ernest Hemingway ever took it – and Jeeves and Bertie Wooster are British to the point of absurdity and beyond. Perhaps, as Kingsley Amis later discovered, south London is a good place to sharpen your sense of dialect.

For Wodehouse the serial idea came early. *Mike*, which remained his favourite novel, introduced his first comic creation, Psmith, and a lifelong fondness for recurring characters: not the same old characters under different names, as he once defiantly told an irreverent reviewer, but the same old characters under the same names. Then came New York, in his thirties, and the discovery after repeated failures that Americans love comic English dudes. That started with Lord Emsworth and the Blandings Castle saga in 1915, with Jeeves shortly after; then Ukridge in 1924. So Jeeves was already in full stream before the Treaty of Versailles was signed and sealed. The Mulliner stories, as he tells in the preface to *The Mulliner Omnibus* (1935), began with the sudden idea of a fisherman in a bar ‘whose veracity would be automatically suspect,’ and Mulliner used up stories he had accumulated in a notebook that were plainly too bizarre for Psmith or Jeeves. That freed him to move Jeeves from short stories to novels – the finest novels, in the event, of his life.

All that sounds early. In his post-war article in defence of Wodehouse Orwell remarked that people forgot how long ago some of his characters were created, imagining that they typify ‘the silliness of the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties.’ Most would plead guilty to that. But

spats, says Orwell penetratingly, went out of fashion in the mid-Twenties. Wodehouse kept them going because he knew Americans liked such things and went on liking them, in or out of fashion. His first stories concerned English (and occasionally American) characters in largely American settings, though before he went to Hollywood in 1929 he hardly ever wrote an all-American story. In December 1915 he had a share in a Broadway hit, Jerome Kern's *Miss Springtime*, before he had any notable success with fiction, and his fondness for spats is less likely to be nostalgia than a theatre-man's natural ambition to draw an audience. In 1917 he had five shows running concurrently on Broadway with music by Kern. Americans wanted dotty peers like Lord Emsworth and suave servitors like Jeeves, and Wodehouse obliged them. As Cyril Connolly would one day remark in *Enemies of Promise* (1938), he repeated himself with profitable resignation.

That puts it nicely. In the Greenwich Village of the 1910s, after all, Wodehouse had known what it is to go hungry and worry about the rent, and for the rest of a long life he was prepared to go on doing what the customers wanted. It is simply that he did it better and better, at least down to the fall of France in 1940, even if it meant inconsistencies of detail. Bertie's last name was not always Wooster, for example, and his forthright Aunt Dahlia seems to have begun as the sister of his mother and not of his father. Not that it matters. The Jeeves saga does not advance in time, as Galsworthy's Forsytes do. These are ageless beings who never grow up and never grow older: they merely perform better and better.

Success, when it came, must have delighted him, but less is known about his view of the critical acclaim he received in his middle years in overflowing measure. Perhaps he was largely indifferent to it. He was publicly praised by Belloc, Connolly, Orwell and Waugh; and his literary tradition is still active, with Kingsley Amis and his successors: a line of comic fiction marked by the prominence it gives to dialogue in storytelling, by sharply defined characters without much inner life, and by a breezy derision of nonconformity. This has been the trunk line of British fiction since the second world war, in a tradition more durable, for better or worse, than that of Virginia Woolf or Graham Greene, though so much has been added to the Wodehouse mixture since then – sex, religion, even political radicalism – that his inheritance lies largely buried underneath it all. There is no sex in Wodehouse, after all, only love and marriage. That may be because he lived the life of an eternal schoolboy: it may also be because his readers wanted it that way. As Waugh, who re-read him increasingly, once remarked, he wrote as if the Fall of Man had never happened.

So Jeeves was born in New York, though New York, to begin with, seems to have mattered to Wodehouse no more than anywhere else. As he explains in the first Jeeves story, 'Extricating young Gussie,' it is simply where the ship berths: 'a large city situated on the edge of America, so that you step off the liner right on to it without an effort.' Such studied insouciance is unlikely to have offended anyone, and it may fairly sum up his own state of mind in 1909, when he settled down in Greenwich Village, as he tells in the 1970 preface, with a typewriter, several ribbons and a good firm table – everything, in short, except 'the ability to write.' That could be a modest exaggeration, since he had already written *Mike*. But he may still have had a problem, since he was writing for people who, being American adults, were no longer children and who did not want to be reminded of school. Stories about cricket plainly would not do. Success of a sort finally came, though not as a novelist, with a serial in the *Saturday Evening Post* and the musicals he wrote with Guy Bolton and Jerome Kern for the Princess Theatre. All that may seem hard to believe. To discover it was New York that taught Wodehouse how to write is astounding – rather like learning that Bob Hope was born in London. Both, as it happens, are true.

New York, what is more, taught him to write in two ways. One was the comic serial with English characters; the other was the musical, which he revolutionised in its lyrics with a new sense of colloquialism – a world away from the swooning ballads that once ruled Broadway. In all he wrote fifteen plays, forty-four film scripts and over two hundred lyrics for some thirty musical comedies. So Wodehouse had two careers, one in theatre and one in print; his success in theatre narrowly came first; and the effects of his reforms are still with us, both in songs and in comic fiction. It is not given to many authors to change the world twice.

Both careers, what is more, were kept going in tandem for decades, in profitable resignation, and they were inter-connected. It was theatre, as he was fond of saying in later life, that had tightened his sense of fictional plots, since you do not bring a character on stage unless for a highly essential reason and you cannot (as in fiction) report what people think. In 1961 Waugh remarked that Wodehouse was 'obsessed by construction' and that his achievements were an effect of sheer hard work; he was 'an heroically diligent planner and reviser.' That is one comic professional writing about another, and both knew that to make it look easy you have to work hard. As the recycling of the early Jeeves stories illustrates, the young Wodehouse revised again and again; it took him a decade and more to perfect the style of his Jeeves stories, and longer still

to build whole novels around the immortal manservant. By the time he did, in 1934, he had been writing about Jeeves for nearly twenty years, and it was only then that his prose lost the flaccidity of his early fiction and achieved the relentless momentum of high farce.

Success had come slowly in fiction, as he tells in the 1970 preface, because his first desperate attempts in New York to pay the rent had turned him into a slanter – a writer who ‘studies what editors want’ and then slants his writings to suit it, avoiding (if he can) outright plagiarism. Wodehouse calls it a deadly practice, though it must have been useful training.

It seemed to me obvious that if you are planning to contribute to American magazines, you must write the sort of thing American magazines like,

which in those days meant stories with trick-endings as in O. Henry, who had died as recently as 1910. Wodehouse instances his own story ‘At Geisenheimer’s,’ which is shaped like that. The trouble was, however, that ‘American magazines didn’t like the sort of thing that American magazines liked,’ which can only be a rueful way of admitting that he could not do it well enough. It was in that tight corner that he realised Jeeves had the makings of immortality in him. ‘I find it curious,’ he remarked with notable understatement in the preface to the *Jeeves Omnibus*, ‘now that I have written so much about him, to recall how softly and undramatically Jeeves first entered my little world.’

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The idea, surely among the most momentous ever to occur to anyone in Greenwich Village, has no accompanying mythology like the apple that fell on Isaac Newton’s head. Conjectures have, however, been made. In *Wodehouse at Work* (1961) Richard Usborne suggested that the Jeeves-Bertie relationship was an extended school-memory, less servant-to-master than junior-to-prefect. In English boarding schools of that remote age a junior boy in the charge of a senior was called a fag – a term and practice now happily obsolete – and it is thought-provoking, if little more, to suppose that Jeeves is fagging for Bertie, though Jeeves seems to be the older of the two. But then so much lies outside the text. In fact it was only in the last years of Wodehouse’s life that he condescended to reveal that Jeeves’s first name was Reginald. It is certainly true that the total atmosphere of these stories is schoolboyish in a way the great classics of master-servant literature like *Don Quixote* and *The Pickwick Papers* are not: all sunny afternoons, famous poems flippantly quoted out of context, as boys do, practical jokes and late-night tuck. Boarding



school may not be just like that, but there are those who choose to remember it as if it were, and there are those for whom a school ethos is all there is, even beyond boyhood. It was an ethos that gave old friends infinite claims on you. ‘Have you forgotten,’ as Bingo Little asks Bertie with bottomless effrontery, ‘that we were at school together?’

The point may be thought to have national significance, and it is certain that Wodehouse traded heavily and unashamedly on American stereotypes of English life. It is laborious, perhaps, at this late date to question them. Most Englishmen, it is hardly necessary to say, do not (and did not) go to boarding school. Many who did, like C.S. Lewis, loathed it, while some like Rudyard Kipling found the memory compelling even if they failed to enjoy it at the time. On the other side of things, Raymond Chandler does not seem to have disliked Dulwich as an American boy, granted that he was only a day-boy, and in his letters he sometimes spoke gratefully of the classical education he had received there, which had protected him in later life from literary pretensions. There are no convincing national types here. Wodehouse loved Dulwich, a boarder among day-boys, not because he was English but because he was Wodehouse. In fact the memory of adolescence was so exciting to him that he could be creatively inspired even by listening to talk about schools he did not know. In a late preface to *The World of Psmith* (1974), for example, written in the last months of his life, he tells how he got the idea for Psmith by listening to someone recalling a foppish boy with an affected accent years before at Winchester, a school where Wodehouse never was.

And there, as the saying goes, is where minds divide. There are those who love to think about their childhood and youth and those who cannot wait to grow up and forget all about it. The school C.S. Lewis loathed was a school his brother loved. Orwell, who was at Eton with Cyril Connolly, once derided his old friend in ‘Inside the Whale’ (1940) for his Theory of Permanent Adolescence which (it must be admitted) fits Wodehouse like a glove. For some writers, Connolly had written, school experiences are ‘so intense as to dominate their lives and to arrest their development.’ That made Orwell’s lip curl. When you read that, he remarked scathingly, you begin to wonder if there is a misprint – perhaps a ‘not’ left out. No old school loyalty, evidently, between Orwell and Connolly. ‘Then you realise he means it.’ In other words, middle-class life can be so soft that ‘five years in a lukewarm bath of snobbery can stay with you for the rest of your days.’ Such writers, says Orwell, who by then had been down-and-out in Paris and London and a soldier in the Spanish Civil War, utterly failed every existential test. ‘Hunger, hardship, solitude, exile, war, prison, manual labour – hardly even words.’ It all helped, he thought, to explain

the Intellectual Left. No wonder such writers glibly condoned the Soviet purges. They were 'gloriously incapable of understanding what it all meant.'

The claim is perhaps rash. A school boarder might easily experience hunger, hardship and solitude; and the charge (as Orwell would be the first to agree) is in any case weightless when applied to Wodehouse, since no one would have dreamed of seeking his opinion of Stalin's purges. In *Performing Flea* he makes even a year's internment in a Nazi camp in Upper Silesia sound amusing. It is rather that men like Auden, Isherwood and Spender were Wodehouses without knowing it, their devotion to a worker-revolution being 'a kind of playing with fire by people who don't even know that fire is hot.' Wodehouse, who did not want to know, escapes all censure here. He was more like Noël Coward, who also had a hungry time in Greenwich Village in his young days and triumphed by demonstrating that triviality, though endlessly difficult to achieve, is endlessly worth cultivating. Anyone, in that view, can sign up and join a cause. It is a talent to amuse that is as rare as rubies.

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Coward was an adult sophisticate. Wodehouse, by contrast, remained an adolescent in everything but technique. He refused, so to speak, to grow up. It is a choice we are all allowed to make, but it is highly unusual to make enduring works of art out of it. There was a brief age at the beginning of the century, however, when it happened again and again. The most famous instance is James Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1904), in which children refuse to age. Four years later another Scotsman, Kenneth Grahame, who was nothing less than secretary to the Bank of England, published *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), which opens with Mole spring-cleaning his underground home; but hearing the sounds of spring above him, he flings down his brush and goes out to find Rat in his boat and a world of adventure. A few years later, in *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919), Somerset Maugham told the story of a London stockbroker who, Gauguin-like, abandoned a desk-job to paint in the South Seas, leaving his wife with nothing more than a curt note of farewell; and the theme of walking out or riding away was a favourite of D.H. Lawrence, as in *Aaron's Rod* (1922). Work and family can suddenly look a total bore, and all over the Western industrial world in the early years of the century, in an age before daily toil acquired the immutable dignity it now possesses, grey-suited men moving reluctantly in the rain between home and office were longing not to have to do it. Joy meant not having to go to work.

Wodehouse, starting with *Mike* in 1909, had been among the first to write about such joy. Seven years before he had achieved it himself, leaving his dull little job in a London bank in the certain knowledge

that the only way he wanted to earn a living was by writing endlessly about people who did not want to earn a living. His fictional Nirvana has nothing to do with self-fulfilment, as it would now, or Doing Your Thing. What he adored, and what his readers seem to have adored, was the prospect of endless leisure with a private income acquired through inheritance, like Bertie Wooster, or a rich wife, like Bingo Little, or (what his time in California had encouraged him to think was much the same thing) a Hollywood contract. Wodehouse wrote endlessly for sixty years and more about doing nothing with loads of money and doing it in style. Odd to think it was in New York – that busy, workaholic place – that he succeeded at it, first in theatre and then in books; odder still when you reflect that he was a workaholic himself. Wodehouse was the supreme heretic. He adored work and gloried, when he wrote, in despising it. Art, as somebody said, is anti-destiny. It is as improbable a birth for Jeeves as any you can think of.

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