

P. G. Wodehouse

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P. G. Wodehouse




Wodehouse in 1904.

Born: October 15, 1881
Guildford, Surrey,
United Kingdom

Died: February 14, 1975 (aged 93)
Southampton, Suffolk County,
New York, USA

Occupation: Novelist

Nationality: English 

Writing period: 1902-1975

Genres: Comedy

Debut works: *The Pothunters* (1902)

Sir Pelham Grenville Wodehouse, KBE (October 15, 1881 – February 14, 1975) (IPA: [wɒd.haʊs]) was an English comic writer who has enjoyed enormous popular success for more than seventy years. Wodehouse was an acknowledged master of English prose, admired both by contemporaries like Hilaire Belloc, Evelyn Waugh and Rudyard Kipling and by modern writers like Douglas Adams, Salman Rushdie, Christopher Hitchens and Terry Pratchett. Sean O'Casey famously called him "English literature's performing flea", a description that Wodehouse said he believed was "meant to be complimentary", and which he used as the title of a collection of his letters to a friend, Bill Townend.

Best known today for the Jeeves and Blandings Castle novels and short stories, Wodehouse was also a talented playwright and lyricist who was part author and writer of fifteen plays and of 250 lyrics for some thirty musical comedies. He worked with Cole Porter on the musical *Anything Goes* and

frequently collaborated with Jerome Kern and Guy Bolton. He wrote the lyrics for the hit song "Bill" in *Show Boat*.

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Life

Wodehouse, called "Plum" by most family and friends, was born prematurely to Eleanor Wodehouse (née Deane) whilst she was visiting Guildford. His father Henry Ernest Wodehouse (1845-1929) was a British Judge in Hong Kong. The Wodehouse family had been settled in Norfolk for many centuries. Wodehouse's great-grandfather



P. G. Wodehouse in his last days.

Reverend Philip Wodehouse was the second son of Sir Armine Wodehouse, 5th Baronet, whose eldest son John Wodehouse, 1st Baron Wodehouse, was the ancestor of the Earls of Kimberley. He attended boarding school, where he saw his parents only once every six or seven

months. Wodehouse grew very close to his brother, who shared his love for art. Wodehouse filled the voids in his life by writing relentlessly. He spent quite a few of his school holidays with one aunt or another; it has been speculated that this gave him a healthy horror of the "gaggle of aunts", reflected in Bertie Wooster's formidable aunts Agatha and Dahlia, as well as Lady Constance Keeble's tyranny over her many nieces and nephews in the Blandings Castle series.

He was educated at Dulwich College, where the library is now named after him, but his anticipated progression to university was stymied by family

financial problems. Subsequently he worked for the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank in London (now known as HSBC) for two years, though he was never interested in banking as a career. He wrote part-time while working in the bank, eventually proving successful enough to take up writing as a full-time profession. He was a journalist with *The Globe* (a defunct English newspaper) for several years before eventually going to Hollywood, where he earned enormous amounts as a screenwriter. Many of his novels were also serialized in magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post* and *The Strand*, which also paid well.

He married Ethel Wayman in 1914, gaining a stepdaughter, Leonora. He had no natural children, perhaps owing to having contracted mumps as a young man.

Although Wodehouse and his novels are considered quintessentially English, from 1924 on he lived largely in France and the United States. He was also profoundly uninterested in politics and world affairs. When World War II broke out in 1939 he remained at his seaside home in Le Touquet, France, instead of returning to England, apparently failing to recognize the seriousness of

the conflict. He was subsequently taken prisoner by the Germans in 1940 and interned by them for a year, first in Belgium, then at Tost (now Toszek) in Upper Silesia (now in Poland). (He is recorded as saying, "If this is Upper Silesia, one must wonder what Lower Silesia must be like...".)

While at Tost, he entertained his fellow prisoners with witty dialogues. After being released from internment, a few months short of his 60th birthday, he used these dialogues as a basis for a series of radio broadcasts aimed at America (but not England) that the Germans persuaded him to make from Berlin. Wartime England was in no mood for light-hearted banter, however, and the broadcasts led to many accusations of collaboration with the Nazis and even treason. Some libraries banned his books. Foremost among his critics was A. A. Milne, author of the Winnie the Pooh books; Wodehouse got some revenge by creating a ridiculous character named Timothy Bobbin, who starred in parodies of some of Milne's children's poetry. Among Wodehouse's defenders were Evelyn Waugh and George Orwell (see article by Orwell[1]). An investigation by the British security service MI5 concluded that Wodehouse was naive and foolish but not a traitor [1].

The criticism led Wodehouse and his wife to move permanently to New York. Apart from Leonora, who died during Wodehouse's internment in Germany, they had no children. He became an American citizen in 1955 and never returned to his homeland, spending the remainder of his life in Remsenburg, Long Island.

He was made a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire (KBE) shortly before his death at the age of 93. It is widely believed that the honour was not given earlier because of lingering resentment about the German broadcasts. In a BBC interview he said that he had no ambitions left now that he had been knighted and there was a waxwork of him in Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum.

Writing style

Wodehouse took a modest attitude to his own works. In *Over Seventy* (1957) he wrote:

"I go in for what is known in the trade as 'light writing' and those who do that – humorists they are sometimes called – are looked down upon by the

intelligentsia and sneered at."

In the same article, Wodehouse names some contemporary humorists whom he held in high regard. These include Frank Sullivan, A. P. Herbert and Alex Atkinson.

Characters

Many consider Wodehouse as second only to Charles Dickens in fecundity of character invention. His characters however were not always popular with the establishment, notably the foppish foolishness of Bertie Wooster. Papers released by the Public Record Office have disclosed that when P. G. Wodehouse was recommended in 1967 for a Companion of Honour, Sir Patrick Dean, the British ambassador in Washington, argued that it "would also give currency to a Bertie Wooster image of the British character which we are doing our best to eradicate."

Wodehouse's characters are often eccentric, with peculiar attachments, such as to pigs (Lord Emsworth), newts (Gussie Fink-Nottle) or socks (Archibald Mulliner). His "mentally negligible" good-natured characters invariably make their lot worse by their half-witted schemes to improve a

bad situation.

Wodehouse's aristocrats, however, embody many of the comic attributes that characterize buffoons created by a genius. In many cases the classic eccentricities of Wodehouse's upperclass give rise to plot complications.

Relatives, especially aunts and uncles, are commonly depicted with an exaggerated power to help or impede marriage or financial prospects, or simply to make life miserable. Friends are often more a trouble than a comfort in Wodehouse stories: the main character is typically being placed in a most painful situation just to please a friend. Antagonists (particularly rivals in love) are frequently terrifying and just as often get their come-uppance in a delicious fashion.

Policemen and magistrates are typically portrayed as threatening, yet easy to fool, often through the simple expedient of giving a false name. A recurring motif is the theft of policemen's helmets.

In a manner going back to the stock characters of Roman comedy (such as Plautus), Wodehouse's servants are frequently far cleverer than their masters. This is quintessentially true with Jeeves,

who always pulls Bertie Wooster out of the direst scrapes. It recurs elsewhere, such as the efficient (though despised) Baxter, secretary to the befogged Lord Emsworth.

Plots

Although his plots are on the surface formulaic, Wodehouse's genius lies in the tangled layers of comedic complications that the characters must endure to reach the invariable happy ending. Typically, a relative or friend makes some demand that forces a character into a bizarre situation that seems impossible to recover from, only to resolve itself in a clever and satisfying finale. The layers pile up thickly in the longer works, with a character getting into multiple dangerous situations by mid-story. An outstanding example of this is *Code of the Woosters* where most of the chapters have an essential plot point reversed in the last sentence, catapulting the characters forward into greater diplomatic disasters.

Engagements are a common theme in Wodehouse stories. A man may be unable to become engaged to the woman he loves due to some impediment. Just as often, he becomes unwillingly, or even

accidentally, engaged to a woman he does not love and needs to find some back-door way out other than breaking it off directly (which goes against a gentleman's code of honour).

Assumed identities and resulting confusion are particularly common in the Blandings books.

Gambling often plays a large role in Wodehouse plots, typically with someone manipulating the outcome of the wager.

Another subject which features strongly in Wodehouse's plots is alcohol, and many plots revolve around the tipsiness of a major character. It is clear that Wodehouse himself was fond of a tippie, and he enumerated what many people consider as the definitive list of hangovers: the Broken Compass, the Sewing Machine, the Comet, the Atomic, the Cement Mixer and, of course, the Gremlin Boogie. Furthermore, he makes several references to a drink whose nickname is May Queen. It is described by Uncle Fred as follows: *"Its full name is, 'Tomorrow'll be of all the year the maddest, merriest day, for I'm to be the Queen of the May, mother, the Queen of the May.' A clumsy title, generally shortened for purposes of ordinary conversation. Its foundation is any good dry*

champagne, to which is added liqueur brandy, armagnac, kummel, yellow chartreuse, and old stout, to taste."

Writings

For a complete list, see List of books by P. G. Wodehouse.

Wodehouse was a prolific author, writing ninety-six books in a career spanning from 1902 to 1975. His works include novels, collections of short stories, and a musical comedy. Many characters and locations appear repeatedly throughout his short stories and novels, leading readers to classify his work by "series".

- The Blandings books are about the upper-class inhabitants of the fictional Blandings Castle, including the eccentric Lord Emsworth, obsessed by his prize-winning pig, the "Empress of Blandings", and at one point by his equally prize-winning pumpkin ("Blandings' Hope", but, mockingly, "Percy" to Emsworth's unappreciative second son Freddie Threepwood).
- The wealthy, scatterbrained Bertie Wooster

narrates a number of stories and novels that recount the improbable and unfortunate situations in which he and his friends find themselves and the manner in which his ingenious valet Jeeves is always able to extricate them. Collectively called "the Jeeves stories", or "Jeeves and Wooster", they are Wodehouse's most famous. The Jeeves stories are a valuable compendium of pre-World War II English slang in use, perhaps most closely mirrored in American literature by the work of Damon Runyon.

- Mr. Mulliner is a long-winded pub raconteur who tells outrageous stories about his family, all surnamed Mulliner. His sometimes unwilling listeners are always identified solely by their drinks, e.g., a "Hot Scotch and Lemon" or a "Double Whisky and Splash".
- Many stories were built around the sport of golf, which all characters involved consider the only important pursuit in life. The Oldest Member of the golf course clubhouse tells most of them.
- Psmith is an ingenious jack-of-all-trades with a charming, exaggeratedly refined

manner. The final Psmith story, *Leave it to Psmith*, overlaps the Blandings stories in that Psmith works for Lord Emsworth, lives for a time at Blandings, and becomes a friend of Freddie Threepwood.

- Stanley Featherstonehaugh Utridge is a charming but unprincipled character, always looking to enlarge his income through the reluctant assistance of his friend in his schemes.
- School stories, which launched Wodehouse's career with their comparative realism.
- Uncle Fred, the Earl of Ickenham, whenever he can escape his wife's chaperonage, likes to spread what he calls "sweetness and light" and others are likely to call chaos. His escapades are usually told from the viewpoint of his nephew and reluctant companion Reginald (Pongo) Twistleton.

Screen adaptations

A Damsel in Distress was adapted in the 1937 film starring Fred Astaire, George Burns, Gracie Allen and Joan Fontaine. A 1962 film adaptation of *The*

Girl On The Boat starred Norman Wisdom, Millicent Martin and Richard Briers.

Both the Blandings and Jeeves stories have been adapted as BBC television series: the Jeeves series has been adapted twice, once in the 1960s (for the BBC), with the title *World of Wooster*, starring Ian Carmichael as Bertie Wooster, and Dennis Price as Jeeves — and again in the 1990s (by Granada Television for ITV), with the title *Jeeves and Wooster*, starring Hugh Laurie as Bertie and Stephen Fry as Jeeves. David Niven and Arthur Treacher also starred as Bertie and Jeeves, respectively, in a short 1930s film that was a very loose adaptation of *Thank You, Jeeves*, and Treacher played Jeeves without Bertie in an original sequel, *Step Lively, Jeeves*.

A version of *Heavy Weather* was filmed by the BBC in 1995 starring Peter O'Toole as Lord Emsworth and Richard Briers, again, as Galahad Threepwood Lord Emsworths Brother.

In 2004, Julian Fellowes wrote a screen adaptation of *Piccadilly Jim* which starred Sam Rockwell. The film was not successful.

There was also a series of BBC adaptations of

various short works, mostly from the Mulliner series, under the title of *Wodehouse Playhouse* starring John Alderton and Pauline Collins, which aired starting in 1975. The first series was introduced by Wodehouse himself, which was extraordinary considering he was 93 at the time and died the year the TV series started.

Arthur, starring Dudley Moore and Sir John Gielgud, and its sequel *Arthur II: On the Rocks*, were also an adaptation of the characters of Bertie and Jeeves, although not officially acknowledged, and many of the lines and incidents from the movie, including the main plot involving an engagement, were directly influenced by Wodehouse's characters.

Wodehouse's involvement with film and television from around the world is chronicled in Brian Taves, *P.G. Wodehouse and Hollywood: Screenwriting, Satires, and Adaptations* (McFarland, 2006).

Major characters

Major

Lists of P. G. Wodehouse characters
Characters in all Wodehouse stories

Characters in the Blandings stories Characters in the Drones Club stories Characters in the Jeeves stories Characters in the Mulliner stories Characters in the Ukridge stories Characters in other stories
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characters of primary importance

Wodehouse's work contains a number of recurring protagonists, narrators and principal characters, including:

- Bertie Wooster and his valet Jeeves; his Aunt Dahlia and Aunt Agatha
- Lord Emsworth of Blandings Castle, and his large family
- Mr. Mulliner, irrepressible pub raconteur of family stories
- The Oldest Member, irrepressible nineteenth hole raconteur of golf stories
- Psmith, monocled dandy and socialist
- Ukridge, irrepressible entrepreneur and cheerful opportunist
- Uncle Fred, spreading "sweetness and light" through impersonation

Major characters of secondary importance

Certain Wodehouse's less central characters are particularly well-known, despite being less critical elements of his works as a whole.

- Anatole, chef extraordinaire
- Sebastian Beach, Lord Emsworth's butler
- Rupert Baxter, Lord Emsworth's efficient secretary
- Major Brabazon-Plank, Amazon explorer afraid of bonnie babies
- Tuppy Glossop, Sir Roderick's nephew
- Roderick Spode, 8th Earl of Sidcup, amateur dictator
- Pongo Twistleton, Uncle Fred's nephew
- Oofy Prosser, millionaire member of the Drones Club
- Monty Bodkin, second richest member of the Drones Club (second to Oofy Prosser)
- Bingo Little, friend of Bertie Wooster
- Freddie Widgeon, member of the Drones Club
- Gussie Fink-Nottle, noted newt fancier
- Sir Watkyn Bassett, owner of Tottleigh Towers
- Madeline Bassett, daughter of Sir Watkyn
- Florence Craye, Bertie Wooster's cousin and author of the novel *Spindrift*
- Lord Uffenham, owner and butler of Shipley

Hall

- Mike Jackson, Psmith's steadfast, cricket-playing friend

Trivia

- Author Kyril Bonfiglioli appears to have modeled his series of crime novels on Wodehouse's style. Bonfiglioli's major characters (Mortdecai and Jock) bear a fun-house mirror relation to Wodehouse's Wooster and Jeeves.^[2]
- Hugh Laurie, the actor who portrayed Wooster in the TV series *Jeeves and Wooster*, has said that Wodehouse's novels saved him from depression.^[3] It has been remarked that Laurie's novel *The Gun Seller* bears much resemblance to Jeeves and Wooster.
- Author Lawrence Sanders based his character Archie McNally, the bonvivant sleuth and head of Discreet Inquiries for his patrician father's Palm Beach law firm, on an amalgam of Wodehouse's characters *Jeeves and Wooster*.
- Wodehouse made use of the Paint-on-the-Shoe scene in both Mike, chapter 49 and the Blandings book Something Fresh, chapter 9.

Apart from character names and a few changes to fit the different plots, the scenes are practically identical.

References

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3. ^ pgwodehousebooks.com: Wodehouse saved my life
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3. Davis, Lee (1993). *Bolton & Wodehouse & Kern: The Men Who Made Musical Comedy*. James H. Heineman Incorporated. ISBN 0-87008-131-4.
4. Day, Barry (2004). *The Complete Lyrics of P. G. Wodehouse*. The Scarecrow Press, Inc. ISBN 0-8108-4994-1.

External links

- The P.G. Wodehouse Society (UK)
- The Wodehouse Society

- Yahoo group discussion on Wodehouse
- A Celebration of P. G. Wodehouse
- Biblia Wodehousiana (Biblical references in Wodehouse)
- The Poems of P.G. Wodehouse
- In Defence of P.G. Wodehouse -- George Orwell
- Why A.A. had it in for P.G.
- Stephen Fry on Wodehouse
- Blandings Castle located!
- P.G. Wodehouse Website
- Transcripts of the five controversial Berlin broadcasts
- Works by P. G. Wodehouse at Project Gutenberg
- Psmith in the City LibriVox Recording
- Something New LibriVox Recording
- 1975 *The Paris Review* interview
- www.thepeerage.com - Contains information on the Wodehouse family
- Profile for P.G. Wodehouse at Find A Grave

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