



P. G. Wodehouse: A Biography

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Who has not come to know and love Jeeves and Wooster, Lord Emsworth, Ukridge and Psmith and the chorus of Wooster aunts? Their creator, Sir Pelham Greville Wodehouse, with nearly 100 tomes to his name, is one of the best-loved and famous writers of comedy in the English language. But what of the man himself? Donaldson's biography, the first to have the complete cooperation of the Wodehouse estate, paints an in-depth and affectionate picture of the man known to his friends as Plum. It covers his life from school at Dulwich; life in the City; early years writing for magazines; his love affair with Broadway and Hollywood; his time as a prisoner of war and his wartime broadcast from Berlin that had him branded a traitor for many years; and his final years in America.

P. G. Wodehouse: A Biography Details

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Caroline says

I found this to be a very interesting, even-handed biography. Of course, it was first published in 1982 and felt to be a little old-fashioned. Sometimes, it's kind of stuffy and scholarly. At other times, it is also very personal, as the author had personally known her subject (being a friend of his daughter's). Kind of a weird mixture, but it mostly works. (I have to admit that I did skip a lot of the "literary analysis.")

The best part were the quotations from his own letters and diaries, especially those to his beloved wife and daughter. It includes a very balanced account of his controversial wartime broadcasts. The author, while clearly in his corner, also manages an fair-minded evaluation of the whole sorry mess.

Sometimes, Donaldson makes references and does not explain them, assuming her audience is as savvy as she is. For instance she makes a statement and says "Kipling was an obvious example" in support of it. Or she says "they are not the aunts of Saki Munro," imagining her audience nodding along going "of course!" In fact, across the pond and 30-odd years later, I know little about Kipling and less about Saki, so the comparisons are not as striking as she meant them to be. But I'll take her word for it.

But that said, it paints a very clear and affectionate picture of a beloved author, with all his eccentricities and foibles, and it doesn't shy away from his mistakes. Although slow-going at times, I enjoyed it in the end.

Michael says

Fantastic!

"He was not a saintly man because he could not love the human race. But he had many of the qualities of a saint. Kind, modest and simple, he was without malice or aggression. He gave happiness to others as few people are privileged to do, and he was happy himself."

The "interlude," between chapter 7 and 8 is worth far more than the price of admission. A shooting star amid an epic spectacle.

Lizzy says

Hideously outdated, and probably not great even in 1982. I know the author was a personal acquaintance, but she is an entirely inappropriate biographer. Wodehouse is a favorite, so I'll be trying the 2004 biography next. Glad I only paid 50 cents for this book.

Richard Subber says

I happened on this 1982 review of a biography of P. G. Wodehouse, and I can't resist believing the reviewer is a hatefully well-bred person.

Prof. Samuel Hynes very incautiously permits himself to label old P. G. as " . . . the greatest trivial novelist in literary history . . ."

Egad.

Is he talking about Sir Pelham Grenville Wodehouse (1881-1975), the remarkably gabby genius who created Bertie Wooster and Jeeves?

Is he talking about the guy who makes us love the incurably erratic Wooster? who makes us worshipfully respect the very properly domineering Jeeves who can't hurt a fly, knows nearly everything and saves Bertie's bacon every time? who makes us stiffen, suppressing cries of delight, as we absorb the adjectival artistry of the whole bloody Wooster/Jeeves madhouse?

Hynes goes so far as to declare that Wodehouse "created a world without real problems and without human depths." If you've read any of Wodehouse's work, you know that ain't true. There's a bit of Bertie's passion and despair in all of us, and Jeeves divinely makes it possible for everyone around him to be human.

There's just one word too many in Hynes' summary of Sir P. G. Wodehouse: "the greatest trivial novelist."

Now you know which one it is.

If you want to, click here to read all of Hynes' comments about Frances Donaldson's 1982 biography, P. G. Wodehouse.

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Kate says

The author evidently knew the family but still produced a balanced and detached picture of an enigmatic man.

A fascinating read, not only into the character of Wodehouse himself but also a view of the times.

Douglas Wilson says

Very good.

Spiros says

This is a very odd bit of Wodehouseana, written by a friend of Wodehouse's adopted daughter, Leonora. Mrs. Donaldson confesses not to have come around to reading Plum's output with any sense of enjoyment until her seventies: this she attributes to the "fact" that Wodehouse's humor is not suited to the feminine temperament. This is not the only example of her questionable critical judgment, but it is rather startling, and certainly begs the question whether women grow less feminine with age. Like every other commentator on Wodehouse, she stresses his essential remoteness, coupled with his kindness; she stresses it to the point of otioseness.

The book is redeemed somewhat by having the most in depth account of Plum's internment during WWII that I have come across, but Robert McCrum's stellar biography laps it when it comes to Wodehouse's sojourn in Nazi Germany, and the forces at work behind his infamous wartime broadcasts from Berlin. All in all, a rather disappointing account of the life (admittedly, mostly quiet) of a great comic writer.

Morgan says

This is a rather fascinating biography for several reasons. From the introduction on, the reader is slightly confused at the authors' apparent dislike of much of P.G. Wodehouse's works and abjectly outdated views on gender roles and tastes... Much more interesting and relevant is the section on Wodehouse's internment during WWII, his subsequent release, and the international backlash which may have contributed to his low-key place in the English canon. The author's personal relationship is apt to make her biased, but I am inclined to follow her fairly thorough dissection of the discussion surrounding Wodehouse's German broadcasts -- she, and others, largely chalk the broadcasts up to ignorance, naiveté, and a certain level of self-aggrandizement on Wodehouse's part.

Frederick says

This is the best biography of P. G. Wodehouse. Frances Donaldson does not mistake Wodehouse for a satirist. She doesn't mind the fact that he is a light humorist. It's why she likes him. This is a thorough life story, but it is not one of those clinical analyses, such have been done about another humorist, James Thurber, several times.
