

Jaunts with jeeves

Business



Without a serious bone in their spines and well-stocked with adorably comical characters, Wodehouse's books have always given my happier moments the highest quality and lent to the more trying ones an unassailable 'sweetness and light'. It's rare to find in an author's work a world wholly alien and yet vividly imaginable. J. K. Rowling created one such place for us, where we played impossible airborne ball-games and navigated through schools and ministries of magic.

Rather than cloak-clad wizards, Wodehouse books abound in fat-headed young men who regularly get into terrible scrapes, immaculate and resourceful butlers, and earls and peers who range from the absent-minded to the dizzyingly vivacious. Characters and situations even more outlandish than those in a fantasy change the very definition of a scrape, just as they change (and ridiculously exaggerate) the implications of chivalry and lovers' tiffs, practical jokes and public speeches. The story's fateful course is determined by the terror of aunts and female novelists, the scramble for a spot of fortune, the impertinence of golden-haired children, the obtuseness of policemen who simply ask for having their helmets pinched, and, of course, by love's young dream. Certainly, love conquers all and triumphs in the end: "Jane, I'm delighted!" (Sir Buckstone Abbot, the girl's father) "I thought you would be. You like him, don't you?" (Jane, the girl) "Took to him at once. Capital chap.

Splendid fellow. And, er, rich. Not that that matters, of course." "It's lucky it doesn't, because he isn't. He hasn't a bean.

” “ What?” “ But, as you say, what does it matter? Love’s the thing, Buck. Makes the world go round.” The world was going round Sir Buckstone with an unpleasant jerky movement. (Summer Moonshine, 1937) The David Hitch covers of the older Wodehouse editions have odd, elongated, colorful pictures, rather like works of origami, thrown together in a sort of whimsical waltz. To me, they represent the Wodehouse world as well as it is possible to: a place where impressions are far removed from our regular perceptions, where conventions and crises are simpler, sweeter things. A Wodehouse story exemplifies what I like to think of as the superposition principle of storytelling.

We set up a good physics problem using the superposition principle- we arrange some interesting objects and forces in a certain way, and then watch how the natural laws governing each of them combine to determine their behavior. A book, similarly, is brought to life by the characters with their various volitions, and the way they are put together. And if we use the right words to tell it, as Wodehouse always did so impeccably and so delightfully, the story is beautiful. An earl with a penchant for practical jokes, his unimaginative young nephew (betrothed to an authoress, a crotchety ex-governor’s daughter), a vivacious sculptress, once engaged to the nephew, and her brother, a publisher who’s likely to be broke on account of the governor- with these characters put together, how can a story not be just delightful? Wodehouse once described his way of writing a novel as “ making a sort of musical comedy without music and ignoring real life altogether”. It’s probably because of how distant his books are from real life that they’ve helped me face many inescapably real setbacks. Bertie Wooster, famed

detester of work, is shaken to the core when his Aunt Agatha decides he must have a job as assistant to a famous brain surgeon.

We laugh at this- and the fact that poor Bertie's predicament is so funny to us allows us to consider the possibility that our own travails may be less bothersome, even slightly amusing, in a different frame of reference. This somehow makes it easier to look for a solution- and there's always a solution. Jeeves, the awe-inspiring gentleman's personal gentleman, can always be trusted to set things right.