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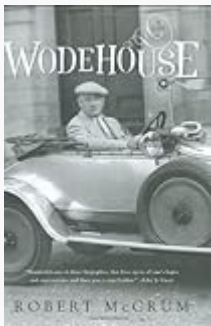
Shorter notices

by James Panero

A review of *Wodehouse: A Life* by Robert McCrum

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BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Robert McCrum

Wodehouse: A Life

W. W. Norton & Company, 530 pages, \$27.95

Robert McCrum

Wodehouse: A Life.

Norton, 530 pages, \$27.95

Do we need another biography of P. G. Wodehouse? Probably not. Richard Usborne, David Jasen, and Frances Donaldson have already done the heavy lifting, and Norman Murphy, Barry Phelps, and Lee Davis put in their own nine-to-fives. But as King Lear says to Goneril and Regan, "O, reason not the need." Robert McCrum has written an eminently enjoyable, readable biography of that singular creator of Jeeves and Wooster, Lord Emsworth, Aunt Agatha, and Psmith. The author of nearly one hundred books (which added 1,600 quotations to the *Oxford English Dictionary*), Wodehouse exported a mad Englishness to the world at a time when England

was going insane at home. Like Jane Austen, who famously worked on a little bit (two inches wide) of ivory, Wodehouse created a universe in miniature and placed his characters in a recently vanished society.

McCrum's *Wodehouse* occasionally falls prey to the biographer's follies of Freudian couch-trip and pedantic laundry list. Yet I must say that this biography had the rare effect of encouraging me to read and re-read the literature of its subject. McCrum's task, as he puts it, has been to take Wodehouse back from the medley of ill-informed stories recycling aspects of his wartime disgrace; and secondly, some equally uncritical celebrations of his silly ass heroes and the charmed, lost world of upper-class Edwardian England. Amen. Usborne's *Hum Sauce* can, for example, leave you with that slight taste of English phlegm in your gullet, as the English are at their least funny when they point out their own humor.

Fortunately, McCrum approaches his subject with high seriousness. In particular, he treats Wodehouse's wartime experiences to an intense scrutiny that further exonerates the writer from moral culpability in broadcasting innocuous, stiff-upper-lip statements "destined for America but rerouted to England" over the CBS radio network from wartime Berlin, where he was interned. In the rules of war, contributing to an enemy's broadcast system is a treasonable offense, no matter what the message. His ill-treatment by perfidious Albion over this incident, as Malcolm Muggeridge put it, was "one of those nauseating outbursts of public wrath, when the ecclesiastical, literary and administrative performing seals find an occasion to outdo the monkey house in the grimaces they put on and the yells they admit." Wodehouse was as ill-suited for encountering modern England as he was for dealing with Nazi Germany. Instead, he escaped into a world that "transformed comic prose into a kind of poetry, with a profound instinct for the music of English." This biography makes a good case for why.

James Panero is the Executive Editor of *The New Criterion*.

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