

What Do I Know, by Paul Kent - a synopsis

Michel de Montaigne, the sixteenth-century civil servant from Bordeaux, was not the first person to set down his thoughts for present and future generations to ponder. But in his 107 Essays (*essais* in French, literally "attempts"), he single-handedly invented the concept of the essay as a speculative and open-minded form meant to encourage discussion and debate.

Unlike all the shouted opinions on today's TV, radio and newspapers, Montaigne's voice was always calm, questioning and self-doubting. He was never one for the knee-jerk reaction or the bigoted remark, and in homage to his hero, Paul Kent here adopts the great man's subtle curiosity in investigating some of the realities, both fortunate and not-so-fortunate, of the modern world. And PG Wodehouse, naturally, makes several guest appearances – here's one of them:

"What's always puzzled me is that in the critical pecking order, "happy" always scores way below "sad", and that somehow happiness is portrayed as shallow whereas misery is deep. Artists seem to find wallowing in *taedium vitae* easier than raising a laugh. Take Tolstoy – the opening line of *Anna Karenina* goes, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," as if happiness is rather bovine and boring, whereas there's countless more satisfying artistic possibilities lurking in the shadows. P.G. Wodehouse took the odd swipe at the classics of Russian literature through his fictional mouthpiece Vladimir Brusiloff, who "specialized in grey studies of hopeless misery, where nothing happened till page three hundred and eighty, when the moujik decided to commit suicide." So amid all the pain and despair, when a classic of comic narrative does emerge, it ought to be cherished – and, to be fair, it usually is. At the time of writing, the uniform edition of Mr Wodehouse's novels is 72 titles strong – all of which are still in print, which must be some kind of record. Yet for all his mastery of language and plotting, and the fact that he has brought happiness to hundreds of thousands of readers on several continents in many different languages, Wodehouse cannot be mentioned in the same breath as, say Kafka. Different order of creativity altogether, apparently. Which is why, in the old days at the Beeb, any radio comedy (including Wodehouse adaptations) was made by a department patronizingly called "Light Entertainment". On duller studio days, we used to fantasize about creating a "Heavy Entertainment" production unit that would specialize in the work of Ibsen, Lorca, Dostoievsky and Strindberg. But then a casual glimpse at the "Future Productions" schedule made us realize that such a department wasn't necessary. I guess comedy just isn't serious enough, in the same way that for the journalist, good news is no news. I wish I had an answer for this. But all we can do as individuals is cling to the belief, in the teeth of all the evidence we are fed to the contrary, that the world isn't such a vale of tears, and is simply the victim of a media hate campaign."

Whether poking into the dubious entrails of celebrity autobiography or wondering just how much alcohol is the right amount of booze; musing on the fine line between intelligence and stupidity; scratching his head over the attraction of modern jazz, or despairing of the standards of modern footballers, Paul Kent leads us on a merry philosophical dance to the heart of our daily lives.

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