

My First Wodehouse Experience
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One of the (many) boons of growing up in a far-flung cranny of Northumberland (five miles even from the nearest nook) was that every year your Christmas holidays stood a good chance of stretching on indefinitely into January, way beyond the bounds of what the school calendar ordained. This was especially true in the '70s and '80s, a period when (it must be remembered) the seasons took their work very seriously indeed. None more than Winter, which could be relied upon obligingly to dump colossal quantities of snow across the higher passes of the county from mid-December until well into February. It was on one of these blissful nights of sanctioned truant in early 1981 that my father decided the time had come for us to be introduced to the world of P G Wodehouse. In a scene I remember as if it were last night, my brother, sister, and I sat in rapt silence around the fire as holiday-prolonging snow dropped silently outside, and Dad, a glass of whisky at his side, read to us 'The Great Sermon Handicap'.

Occasionally in life one is lucky enough to meet an instant friend, some lovely person with an enthusiastic sparkle in their eye and a ready laugh, someone who'll embrace you warmly as a brother and welcome you immediately into their circle perhaps with an amiable hand on your arm. This is what I feel every time I read Wodehouse, and this is how he introduced himself to us that wintery night. Of course he is celebrated in richly-earned raptures for his immaculate use of language, garlanded for his deceptive ease of style behind which such solid erudition lies hidden, but what I adore him for, over and above all of that, is the simple warmth of his company. In it a reader of any generation and any background – even culture – can sit happily swathed in a golden beam of benign English sunshine.

As children we pounced on PGW and he became an overnight family institution. We even invented strange rules, like not allowing anyone to read P G Wodehouse on their own: he *had* to be read out loud. Possibly because that was how we'd first discovered him but also – the reasoning ran – why would you bother reading something to yourself that you were going to end up itching to read out to the assembled company anyway? And so Bertie Wooster and Jeeves, Bingo Little, Aunt Agatha, Catsmeat, Anatole, Oofy, et al became part of our family lore. They came with us everywhere. I can remember us all huddling around a table on a train up to London while my brother Dominic was so wracked with laughter at the *mise en scène* of Cora Bellinger that he couldn't get the words out, and we, in sympathetic convulsions of our own, had to wait minutes until the gales had subsided. And then the poor, encroached fourth person at our table, a lady in her sixties, laid aside her Logic Puzzle book and asked if she could listen in, too.

The important thing, though, was that from the age of ten onwards I was never really homesick again because I would never countenance leaving home without at least one book of PGW in a bag conveniently close to hand. Being my parents' vintage, these were always of the Penguin edition with the somewhat ascetic cover illustrations by Ionicus (surely a moonlighting crossword setter with a name like that), but thus armed I would stride out with barely a backwards glance. Boarding school, French exchange, lone train journeys across continents: mere trifles when in this glorious company.

On that winter's night a flame was lit that has warmed my whole life since and will continue to do so, I am quite certain, for as long as I can read. Indeed, when my eyes fail me I'll plug in Martin Jarvis's excellent audiobooks and round my little life with a Jeeves.