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English 322

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Artist Report: P.G. Wodehouse

Overview:

Sir Pelham Gram Wodehouse was an English author and one of the most widely read humorists of the 20th century. He was known for his novels and short stories with elaborate plots, and for his writing style combining formal language and slang.

Biography:

He was born in Guildford England to a British official based in Hong Kong. He spent his teenage years at a boarding school in, and after leaving was employed at a bank. He disliked the work and started to write in his free time. He started by writing school stories but switched to comic fiction. He moved to France but was taken prisoner by the invading Germans and held prisoner for a year. When he was released he made comical and apolitical radio broadcasts from Berlin, but broadcasting them from Germany was controversial in Britain, and threats of persecution were made. He never returned to England. He moved to the United States, and in 1955 became an American citizen, living in the United States until his death in 1975. Over the course of his life he published more than ninety books, forty plays, two hundred short stories, and more.

His Writing:

Wodehouse was a prolific writer, specifically known for his novels and short stories. The two short stories of his that I read were *The Man Upstairs* and *Deep Waters*. *The Man Upstairs* is about a woman trying to compose a waltz, who is interrupted by a man knocking on her ceiling. She goes upstairs to yell at the man, but she ends being won over by his friendly attitude and gets to know the man. He is a painter working on a painting of a cat and a child. Over time, she gets to know him more, and he has another man over to discuss his work. The second man, Sellers, is an artist, but a struggling one, who's paintings sell for little. Suddenly, Sellers gets lucky with a painting and begins selling more and more, and becomes rich because of this, but still comes over to discuss Beverly's (the first man) art. Suddenly, Annette's songs begin to sell as well, and she also finds success. During this time, Beverly sends his painting off to a seller. One day, the building phone rings for Beverly, and Anette picks it up. On the phone is a man wondering what he should do with all these painting and sheet music that have arrived. When Beverly arrives back, she confronts him with his real name, the fact that he is a millionaire from Glasgow, and that he was the reason Anette's music and Seller's paintings have been selling so well. She becomes angry at him for lying to them, but he reveals that he did this to get to know her better and asks her to marry him. She is still angry at him, but he pulls out a letter, that proves that she has done the same thing with the painting that he sent off to be sold. She says that she needs some time to think, and they go their apartments. The story ends with her knocking on the ceiling of hers, the floor of his.

Deep Waters is about George, who is an actor, and an amazing swimmer, going to the ocean to escape his troubles with the production of the play he is currently practicing for. When he arrives, he sees a woman who is also an amazing swimmer, and his so enthralled that he falls

off the dock and into the water. Instead of simply swimming back to the shore as he normally would, the woman, whose name is Mary, rescues him and brings him to shore. She tells him that he should learn to swim, and she could teach him quickly, and he pretends to not know how to swim so she will "teach" him. George talks with Mary and meets her aunt later that evening and tells Mary about all of his troubles with the play. The next day, the rest of the play cast arrives at the resort, which is where they will be performing. George's friend Mifflin, who is the lead actor in the play, comes up with an idea to promote the play. Mifflin wants the lead actress Jane to fake that she is drowning in front of the people on the beach, and George will go save her. George objects, and Mifflin agrees that it would not be a good plan, and decides to overturn the boat that they are on so George will have to rescue her. George, worried about Mary seeing him rescue Mifflin, makes Mifflin "rescue" her. Mary becomes suspicious about George needing repeated rescuing and recalls that she has seen him swimming at another resort, so decides to confront him. He leaves to go for a walk, and Mifflin comes to talk to Mary to explain the situation. The story ends with George and Mary walking into a box at a theater in London on the two hundredth night of the play.

My Reactions:

I enjoyed both of these stories. I think that Wodehouse's general style could be worth stealing. The stories of some subterfuge in order to better get to know someone, whether it is accidental or intended. I also like his endings. In the stories I read, what happened in the end was not outright stated in full detail but is said in a roundabout way that still lets the reader know exactly how it ended. I think that Mifflin might be a character worth stealing. The self-proclaimed, genius playwright, with his scheming seems like an interesting character that could

be expanded upon more. Beverly/Bates seems like he could have potential as well. The secret millionaire heir, pretending to be someone else, secretly making his friends successful. I think that one could write stories about him traveling the world and doing things like this. I only read two of Wodehouse's short stories, but I assume that with such a large body of work, there are many other characters, situations, and other things that would be worth stealing in his writing. I also think that his life in general could be an interesting starting point for writing. Taken prisoner by the Germans, jailed for a year, rejected by his home because of his work in Germany. All these situations seem like they could go places. A secret spy story perhaps? Hiding stolen information in his broadcasts, and having to face rejection from his own country because he has to keep his spying a secret? His knighthood was blocked because officials didn't want the information he had uncovered to come to light? I think there are lots of places you could go with his work and his life.