

ARTS & LETTERS

WODEHOUSE:

A Life.

By Robert McCrum. Norton.

530 pp. \$27.95

Comedians have a hard time getting respect, as the late Rodney Dangerfield could attest, and literary humorists usually have the same problem of being dismissed by the intelligentsia. The shining exception is P. G. Wodehouse (1881–1975), the legendary writer's writer whose gloriously inconsequential tales of country-house high jinks in impossibly idyllic English locales left him treasured by a century-spanning range of contemporaries, from Rudyard Kipling and Arthur Conan Doyle to John le Carré and John Updike. A phenomenally prodigious font of fun, Wodehouse produced more than a hundred books and plays in a life that lasted well into his nineties. The lovable, moneyed moron Bertie Wooster and his magically capable butler Jeeves are only two of his delicious creations. He also contributed memo-

rable lyrics to many Broadway shows, including *Show Boat's* eccentric "Bill": "I love him because he's—I don't know, / Because he's just my Bill."

Onto a field that contains several previous biographies ventures Robert McCrum, literary editor of the London *Observer*. He admits that the eager-to-please gentleman-author (Alistair Cooke found Wodehouse's voice "tuned entirely in C major") is an elusive character. Neglected by his parents and raised by undemonstrative relatives, then denied a college education, the young Wodehouse seems to have codified the traditional British stiff upper lip into an absolute denial of personal feelings ("One has deliberately to school oneself to think of something else quick") and an inability to grasp world conflict ("this Belsen business"). His self-willed detachment from reality seems frustrating and disingenuous to modern sensibilities, and McCrum doesn't hesitate to critique it with a clear eye. He calls Wodehouse's epistolary memoir *Performing Flea* (1953) "a bravura demonstration of tact, evasion, and wishful thinking," and he appraises Wodehouse's underconceived decision to broadcast playful talks about his wartime civilian internment by the Nazis over their own radio network as "incredibly stupid, but . . . not treacherous."

Still, this book is a manifest and impressive labor of love. McCrum's research has been exhaustive, and he marshals his facts articulately and forcefully. He cites apt passages from the supposedly frivolous tales to parallel difficult turns in their author's life ("Fate lurks to sock you with the stuffed eelskin"), and though he makes no claims for the truth of these speculations, they are always thought-provoking and always plausible. As Bertie Wooster might say, that's exerting the old cerebellum, Mr. McCrum.



Winston Churchill chats with P. G. Wodehouse, a member of the House of Lords, during the 1923 general election campaign.

Current Books

Wodehouse's massive output and unforgettable characters have gotten him compared to Dickens and Shakespeare, but McCrum prefers the spirit of Jane Austen, calling P. G. a "miniaturist" whose language "danced on the page like poetry, marrying the English style of the academy with the English slang of the suburbs." Evelyn Waugh famously opined, "He will continue to release future generations from captivity that may be more irksome than our own. He has made a world for us to live in and delight in."

There are some surprises: Wodehouse disliked *South Pacific*, *My Fair Lady*, and the works of Graham Greene, yet he was a fan of the TV soap opera *Edge of Night*. His long marriage was affectionate but apparently asexual, though, unlike another glamorous Jazz Age husband, Cole Porter, he professed to dislike "homosexuality." There is also more here about publishing contracts, payments, taxes, old school rugby and cricket scores, little Pekingese dogs, and who ate what when—though to be fair, these are details that compose a real life rather than a novel—than any but a devoted Wodehouse fan would want to learn. And that, of course, will limit this biography's sales to thousands and thousands and thousands.

—MARK O'DONNELL

WHAT THE BEST COLLEGE TEACHERS DO.

By Ken Bain. Harvard Univ. Press.
207 pp. \$21.95

This school year, classes began on August 30. I hustled in from Nova Scotia at noon on the 30th and that evening taught a humdinger of a class, thoughts thrumming through my mind like the wheels of my Toyota rolling along the Mass. Pike.

What the Best College Teachers Do is sensible, literate, and well meaning. Bain notes, among many other things, that good teachers are humble, know their subjects, and believe teaching is a serious intellectual endeavor. They are also kind. Years ago, when I first started teaching, an old boy told me, "Sam, if you think the best of people, they will give you their best." The man was right. Once or twice, tricksters have asked me to throw them into briar patches, provoking

laughter rather than anger. But all in all, the kids have done well by me.

Bain's book is good. People who read it will stop and think. Perhaps some will become better teachers. Yet the book lacks poetry. Bain analyzes the mechanics of teaching well, but he doesn't probe the things that made so many of us teachers. The teaching life is wonderful for many reasons, not all of which occur in the classroom but most of which influence classes.

Bain studied 63 good teachers. Yet we know nothing about them, and, as a result, really don't care about what they do in the classroom. Did these people have pets and families? What flowers did they plant in their gardens, or did they plant only herbs? In Grace Paley's wonderful story "A Conversation with My Father," the narrator refuses to face the fact that her father is dying. The father asks her to tell him a story, and she shapes a clever tale, one so witty that it deflects attention from life as it is lived. When the narrator says that whether or not her heroine is married does not matter, the father replies in exasperation, "It is of great consequence." Life lived beyond the lecture hall is of great consequence and may influence teaching more than any pedagogical technique. A sick child, an alcoholic mother, daffodils suddenly bright in a green dell—such things determine the course of classes.

I studied *What the Best College Teachers Do* in bits and pieces, and between chapters read portions of *Prospero's Cell* (1945), by Lawrence Durrell, an account of his years in Corfu before World War II. Durrell's book raised my spirits and awakened my imagination. Quick with life, the book invigorated me, not simply perking me up enough to read more of Bain but so stirring me that I taught better the next day (of course, I teach English). Bain's book resembles a head with its chicken cut off, thoughtful but bloodless. Read Bain's study, but balance your diet by also reading *Masters: Portraits of Great Teachers* (1981), a collection of appreciative essays edited by Joseph Epstein.

When anyone writes about teaching, even when I write about teaching, my nose twitches and I become suspicious. Much of what we learn has little to do with the classroom. "Extreme busyness, whether at school or college, kirk or market," Robert Louis Stevenson wrote