

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

October 26th, 1950

Description: In this segment, ER interviews author P.J. Wodehouse.

Participants: Eleanor Roosevelt, Elliott Roosevelt, P.J. Wodehouse.

[ER:] There is one thing that my families always said about me. I don't like it all, but it runs this way: "Mother's a very nice person but she just has no sense of humor." But I really think I have some sense of humor, and so I'm very glad this evening that I'm going to have a chance to talk with someone who has written some of the most amusing stories that I imagine any of you have read, Mr. P.J. Wodehouse. Now, sir, I wonder if you would tell me a little bit about um how you came to write in this particular vein.

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Well, I long think that I've never in my whole life written anything different. I-I started writing out at about the age of fourteen, I think.

[ER:] Fourteen?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Fourteen, yeah.

[ER:] That is young!

[PJ Wodehouse:] And it was exactly the same sort of stuff that I'm doing now.

[ER:] Well, how did-- uh what was the first thing you wrote at fourteen? I think that's most important.

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Well, uh you know my school magazine, reports of football matches and cricket matches and occasional sets of verses, and so on.

[ER:] And you always wrote them in an-in an amusing vein, and held them as funny? [P.J. Wodehouse: Yes, always, yes.] That's amusing, and what-what was the first book you remember that had a great success?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Well, I think *Leave it to Smith* in about 1924 was about the best seller that I've ever had, that sold about forty thousand.

[ER:] Do you find that they sell in-in about-about the same proportion in Great Britain and here?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Yes, it's rather odd; they nearly all sell about the same, yes.

[ER:] In both countries? [P.J. Wodehouse: Yes.] Now that would belie the theory that we have a different kind of sense of humor in our countries.

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Well, in England, of course they had the cheap editions long before they had them in America, and so my English sales were quite a bit bigger than my American sales, but now of course with these pocket books and Bantam books and Dale books, and all these twenty-five cent books, uh you-you do get rather enormous sales over here. (2:28)

[ER:] Well, I-I suppose that is true the cheaper-the cheaper editions have made quite a difference [P.J. Wodehouse: Oh yes.] in-in the way that you sell.

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Oh yes, a book used to be dead after about the first year.

[ER:] And now that's not the case, [P.J. Wodehouse: Now, oh no, now it doesn't.] now it keeps on finding a new public, doesn't it? [P.J. Wodehouse: Yes.] Well now, you created characters, I remember in the days when I had more time for reading than I have now, uh one character: Jeeves.

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Oh yes, Jeeves actually started, I think it was 1916 in a short story in the *Saturday Evening Post*.

[ER:] And you went right on with him?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Well, not immediately, no. I um I suppose it was about another six months before I did another one. And gradually I began to realize that I'd got a series. And then I uh, well, I did about six I suppose, and then another six, and they were published as a book. And then I rather did settle down for writing them.

[ER:] Do you find that um everybody expects you to be funny when you meet them?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] No, I don't think so. I don't think people really do expect people who write humorous stuff to be humorous in conversation.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] You mean, uh Mr. Wodehouse, that when you go to a social gathering that they don't sort of gather around expecting you to uh give forth with some of the brighter remarks of some of your characters? [Elliott Roosevelt laughs]

[P.J. Wodehouse:] No, eh I must say people are really good about that. [P.J. Wodehouse and Elliott Roosevelt laugh] They don't seem to expect that.

[ER:] Now, do you draw your characters from people you really know or are -- do they-- are they all just fiction that you make up?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Well, more uh more or less made up. Occasionally, you get some little characteristic of some person which fits in, but uh it's very seldom I've drawn a character that had any connections to real life. [ER: I've always--] I mean, Jeeves, for instance, is simply well he's sort of the stage butler. He's been-- that type of character has been going for years.

[ER:] Yes, that is true. Um and there are certain things, but I-I should think it would be almost impossible to someone who has the sense of humor that you have and sees things in the light of how funny they are um, not to almost caricature the people that they're with very often.

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Yes of course, occasionally you find a character that fits into a story. But I don't know, I-I can't work that way. I mean I can't just get a character and build a story around him. I have to more or less think of a plot or think of some scene, and then work backwards and forwards from there. Of course, having a character helps enormously. I mean I can sit down and wonder what Jeeves and Bertie are going to do next and [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] you know, it works that way sometimes.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well now, you just uh mentioned Bertie. Uh-uh has Bertie no relationship to any uh people that you've ever known in your life? [P.J. Wodehouse: Well, he's an English type.] I-I can almost name people that I've known that were so like Bertie [Elliott Roosevelt laughs].

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Yes, he is an English type; not so much nowadays I'm afraid.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] No, that's true. He's more true of the-- right after the-- during the roaring twenties.

[P.J. Wodehouse:] That's right, yes. Well, he's the sort of character that George Grossmith used to play on the stage [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] and at one time, especially at the beginning of the century, every musical comedy and every comedy in England had that type of character.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, uh he's a kind of a character that's rather hard to portray. Uh I was talking to you the other day, and you said that nobody had very much success in portraying Bertie on-- in the movies, for instance.

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Oh, Bertie is the most awful washout uh from the printed page. [P.J. Wodehouse and Elliott Roosevelt laugh]

[ER:] Why is that? (6:45)

[P.J. Wodehouse:] I don't know. It's just that he doesn't seem funny. He just doesn't come off. We've tried him in the pictures and we've tried him in radio.

[ER:] But do you find that you have to write differently then, for radio or the pictures than in a book?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] I think so, yes. I mean I think that sort of rather languid character is very hard to make interesting on the stage.

[ER:] And yet there are quite a number of languid characters --

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Oh yes, oh I think they're all right as minor characters, but I don't think you can carry the whole story with one of them. [ER: Well--] You see the point about Bertie Wooster is that he's always getting engaged to some girl, and his anxiety is how he can get out of it. Well of course, that's all wrong for the stage. I mean you want your hero to get the girl at the end. [ER laughs]

[ER:] It must end well on the stage. It doesn't have to end well in the book! [P.J. Wodehouse: No!]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] The anxiety should also be the other way around. [Elliott Roosevelt laughs]

[ER:] Well, I don't know. I don't think that um of necessity that follows because I think part of the entertainment is um uh how the ladies pursue the gentleman isn't it? [P.J. Wodehouse: Yes, I suppose it is, yes.] And you can bring it out in subtle ways.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well now, just pursuing this subject of the transference of a book character into other media, has Jeeves ever been successfully transferred to the motion picture screen or the stage?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Well, uh about, when was it, uh twenty years ago I should think, nearly twenty years ago, they did do a couple of Jeeves stories on the-- on the pictures, and Arthur Treacher played Jeeves very well indeed, [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes] he was awfully good. But they weren't my stories. They just uh they

invented a couple of stories. [Elliott Roosevelt: Uh they sort of adapted from the--] No, just pure invention. I mean they-they didn't use a single thing from one of my stories. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm]

[ER: They didn't?] No, they just invented a sort of melodramatic.

[ER:] Well now, that you have had many years of writing for the theater, haven't you?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Oh yes, yes, I have written a great deal for the theater. (9:03)

[ER:] And uh do you like that? I mean does that give you a good outlet for you? [P.J. Wodehouse: Oh, I love it. Oh yes.] Do you know just what will bring a laugh, or do you have to test it differently?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Oh, that's the most awful thing. I mean the stuff you write down and you think it's going to be frightfully funny absolutely dies sometimes in the theater [ER: Well, I--] It's a horrible feeling, that. I mean I don't know why it is, that--but that's what happens. You get what you think is an excellent line and there's a dead silence in the theater. It's frightful.

[ER:] Well, I've-I've seen that, I mean I've-I've um I've seen people laugh in the wrong places, too, not when they really should be [ER coughs] feeling very solemn. And then, not laugh at all [P.J. Wodehouse: No.] when they're supposed to laugh.

[P.J. Wodehouse:] But Wolcott Gibbs was saying about uh you know his play, *Season in the Sun*. He said they had a preview of it, and there wasn't a laugh for twenty-five minutes in the first act, [ER and P.J. Wodehouse laugh] he said it was the most ghastly experience.

[ER:] Now I'm going to ask you something, sir, which is perhaps a little personal, but it's something that a great many artists, I find, are interested in. And that is um I imagine you have to pay taxes in both uh Great Britain and--

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Not in both, thank heaven, any longer. It used to be that. [ER: Not in both?] No, I only pay them in America now.

[ER:] You only pay them in America now? [P.J. Wodehouse: Yes.] Well now, paying them in America you um must have the same experience that I find a good many artists are up against. They will write, or they will um paint, or they will sing, or they will produce a play and uh sometimes they will get only very moderate returns for quite a little while. And then they will have one great success [P.J. Wodehouse: Yes.] that brings them in a great deal of money, but it will all be in one year and it goes in one tremendous tax which leaves them a very moderate uh amount. [P.J. Wodehouse laughs] And I find that they are very much upset that they can't spread that tax over the years when they don't make anywhere near the same amount. Now, I would like to ask you um how you feel about that, because so many artists--

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Well, I feel very very strongly about it. I think it's monstrous, but I don't know what there is to be done about it.

[ER:] Well, you feel the way the other artists do. That they should be allowed to spread it--

[P.J. Wodehouse:] I think I certainly should, over at least three years. (11:50)

[ER:] Well, that's interesting because that's exactly what a number -- Gloria Swanson, spoke about it, and a number of people, because she said that she had been a very long time without being on the stage at all

and um then suddenly come back and practically paid the greatest part of her-of her first earnings [P.J. Wodehouse: Oh yes!] in taxes. Well--

[P.J. Wodehouse:] But I think authors are very badly treated by uh by the authorities. I mean, for instance, amortization. I mean after all if you use an idea for a novel or a play, you can't use that idea again so that your plant has deteriorated to that extent.

[ER:] Well, it really ought to be considered on a capital gains basis [P.J. Wodehouse: Yes.], because it's practically an investment, isn't it, [P.J. Wodehouse: Yes.] of uh of brains. And you can't um divide it up into two or three or four or five years, it's got to be all that at once. [P.J. Wodehouse: Yes.]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] You see what the government does is they look at uh gentlemen like uh-uh, well, for instance Mr. Lindsay Crouse and Irving Berlin, and people like that, and they see what they make over a period of years and they say my goodness, if they keep everything but twenty-five percent of those earnings they'll own the world! [PJ and Elliott laugh]

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Yes.

[ER:] Well, I suppose that it's different for different people, but I have heard so much about that. Do you find it fairly easy to keep writing on um steady basis so you turn out just so much, regularly?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Yes, I generally turn out about the same amount every year. [ER: Well, what--] And of course I never had one of those terrific best-sellers which-- or terrific successful plays all come into one year.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, but over a--

[ER:] Well, what does your average day-- I'd love to know how you divide your-- how you plan your work?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Well, I work all the morning, as early as I can make it. It's never much before half-past ten; I go on for about two and a half hours. Then I go for a walk, get some exercise of some kind, and then uh write as long as I can in the evening. I never write after dinner.

[ER:] You never write at night? [P.J. Wodehouse: No, never at night.] You write in the afternoon again, [P.J. Wodehouse: Yes] uh another couple of hours?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Years ago I used to try writing at night. I was living with a man who was on the *New York World* and he used to go off to work and he didn't come back until about two in the morning, so I used to sit up until about two in the morning, and I felt such a wreck the next day. I absolutely couldn't stand it any longer. So now I just uh work in the daytime.

[ER:] And you find that planning it that way that you always are able when you sit down to-to do the writing; it just comes, as you said?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Well, provided I've got the uh the scenario out, the story. (15:14)

[ER:] Otherwise you'd have to have it planned beforehand-- I mean you-you--

[P.J. Wodehouse:] I couldn't-- I mean that's the difficult part of writing, I think. I don't think the actual writing is difficult, once you've got the actual story in your head it's pretty easy to sit down and write it.

[ER: Yes, and how do you get the story, that's what interests me.]

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Ah, that's the agony of course.

[ER:] Do you get it as you go for your walk or--

[P.J. Wodehouse] Bits of it and then bits of it in the middle of the night or when one wakes up in the morning. It gradually comes. But it generally-- I generally take-- it generally takes me about four-hundred pages of notes to uh-- before I get a novel straightened out.

[ER:] Oh that's very interesting.

[P.J. Wodehouse:] And of course um some of the notes, most of them, have absolutely nothing to do with the story as it finally comes out. You know, you put down everything that comes into your head.

[ER:] That's-- that's interesting, you don't have it come like that. Well, I interrupted you, Elliott, [Elliott Roosevelt: Mother--] so you ask what you want.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] You know--you know I think it's very amusing because uh Mr. Wodehouse has been very self-deprecating about the fact that he never had one of those rip-roaring best-sellers so to speak, and yet uh when I talked to him the other day, I said, "How many books do you suppose that have come out from your pen have been sold?" and he happened to have a few figures. Just how many books have been sold of yours?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Well, I suppose about three million in America [ER: Oh!] and about six million in England. [Elliott Roosevelt: Nine million books!] And perhaps a million in other countries. [Elliott Roosevelt and P.J. Wodehouse laugh] [Elliott Roosevelt: Ten million books!]

[ER:] Of course, you--you have turned out a tremendous number of books.

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Of course, I've been writing for about a million years! [All laugh]

[ER:] That's a slight exaggeration. You sound--you sound as though you were me all of a sudden! [ER coughs] Well, how--how many of any one book do you think you've sold?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Well counting um you know a pocket book, twenty-five edition, the first Jeeves book must have sold about two million, I should think.

[ER:] Two million? [Elliott Roosevelt whistles] Oh, I think that's--

[P.J. Wodehouse:] But apparently that's not considered anything very exciting in the--in the twenty-five cent edition. I mean a man like Erle Stanley Gardner must have sold like twenty-five million, I think.

[Elliott Roosevelt: What, of one book?] Oh, not of one book, no. No. But of his uh reprints. [ER: Twenty-five million?] Well, of course, he uh seems to have a terrific output; I mean you see nothing but Erle Stanley Gardner about in the drug stores. (17:56)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] How many books a-- what do you average, one a year, sir? [P.J. Wodehouse: Yes.] One book a year?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] I've written I think it's sixty, [ER: Sixty books?] sixty books.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Ah well that's slightly more than one a year [P.J. Wodehouse: Yes. Yes.], because uh-
- [Elliott Roosevelt laughs]

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Well, of course, some of those are books of short stories. And when I was young and energetic I used to be able to do about ten short stories and a novel a year. But I- [ER: Ten short stories and a novel.] But I can't do that any longer.

[ER:] And still keep the-the schedule that you outlined for me? [P.J. Wodehouse: Yes] Now, what-- how do you arrange your-your year? Do you go-- do you write better in the country, or better in the city?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Um yes, I suppose I do really though um I find I'm writing very well now in New York, it's a -- I've got a very quiet apartment, you know a penthouse apartment, and um I find I get through a lot of work there.

[ER:] Well do you try and travel so as to be in certain places at certain times?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Oh no, no. Matter of fact, I don't like travelling very much.

[ER:] You like to stay home?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Whenever I was-- if I was living in Europe I always used to come over to the Americas as much as possible.

[ER:] Well, now are you living here really?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] I'm living here permanently now, yes.

[ER:] This-this is your headquarters, now, [P.J. Wodehouse: Yes.] so that you have a-- [P.J. Wodehouse: Yes] Well that's um-- and so you have uh an apartment in New York, now do you try and go south in the winter or do you just uh--?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Well, we always talk about it and then something crops up like a play or something; we find we can't do it. [All laugh]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] You did the adaptation of um Molnár's *The Play's the Thing*, did you not?

[P.J. Wodehouse: Yes.] And are you doing anything of that nature anymore? (19:44)

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Well, I've adapted another of Molnár's um-- very good comedy, I think it is. And I don't know when that's going to be produced. It wants a big, a very big, male star. [ER: Well--] But of course, I loved working with Molnár, I mean he is-- [ER: You do love working with him.] Oh yes.

[ER:] Well of course, just-- [P.J. Wodehouse: *The Play's the Thing* was such a treat to do.] just before we stop, I want to ask you one more question: Everywhere you go you must run into people who like your books?

[P.J. Wodehouse:] Oh yes! Only the other night I sat next to an intelligent old lady at dinner, and she said she'd read them all and loved them. Said she, her sons loved them, and also her grandchildren. "They

know your work by heart," she told me. "And what they will say," she added, "when I go home and tell them I have actually been sitting at dinner next to Evelyn Waugh, I cannot imagine." [ER laugh]

[ER:] That must've been a shock! [P.J. Wodehouse and ER laughs] Thank you so much, we have to go off the air.

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