The Diary of a Nobody

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The Diary of a Nobody is an English comic novel written by the brothers George and Weedon Grossmith, with illustrations by the latter. It originated as an intermittent serial in *Punch* magazine in 1888–89 and first appeared in book form, with extended text and added illustrations, in 1889. The Diary records the daily events in the lives of a London clerk, Charles Pooter, his wife Carrie, his son William Lupin, and numerous friends and acquaintances over a period of 15 months.

Before their collaboration on the Diary, the brothers each pursued successful careers on the stage. George originated nine of the principal comedic roles in the *Gilbert and Sullivan* operas over 12 years from 1877 to 1889. He also established a national reputation as a piano *sketch* entertainer and wrote a large number of songs and comic pieces. Before embarking on his stage career, Weedon had worked as an artist and illustrator. The Diary was the brothers' only mature collaboration. Most of its humour derives from Charles Pooter's unconscious and unwaranted sense of his own importance, and the frequency with which this delusion is punctured by gaffes and minor social humiliations. In an era of rising expectations within the lower-middle classes, the daily routines and modest ambitions described in the Diary were instantly recognised by its contemporary readers, and provided later generations with a glimpse of the past that it became fashionable to imitate.

Although its initial public reception was muted, the Diary came to be recognised by critics as a classic work of humour, and it has never been out of print. It helped to establish a genre of humorous popular fiction based on lower or lower-middle class aspirations, and was the forerunner of numerous fictitious diary novels in the late 20th century. The Diary has been the subject of several stage and screen adaptations, including Ken Russell's "silent film" treatment of 1964, a four-part TV film scripted by Andrew Davies in 2007, and a widely praised stage version in 2011, in which an all-male cast of three played all the parts.

### Authorship and origin

George followed his father, first as a reporter and later on the stage; the 7-years-younger Weedon studied at the West London School of Art and had some success as a portrait painter before becoming a comic actor.[3] The brothers were fascinated with the stage at an early age. In 1864, at 17 and 15, they hosted a complex programme of musical and dramatic entertainment in their parents' garden at Haverton Hill. This included a 20-minute burlesque version of *Hamlet*, in which George played the title role; Weedon was Ophelia.[3]

By 1877 the younger George Grossmith had established himself as a comic piano *sketch* entertainer in provincial institutes and literary societies. In that year he was seen by Arthur Sullivan and, separately, by W. S. Gilbert, in performances of their one-act comic opera *Trial by Jury*. Impressed, they engaged him to play the comic lead in their new, full-length work, *The Sorcerer*.[3]

Thereafter, Grossmith created the leading comic role in each of Gilbert and Sullivan's long-running comic operas until The Yeomen of the Guard, which closed in 1889.[3] While appearing in the operas, Grossmith continued his piano entertainment career at private parties and matinées, writing and composing his own material. He became the most successful comic entertainer of his day,[3] writing numerous operettas, around 100 piano sketches, some 600 songs and short piano pieces, and three books.[3] For *Punch* magazine in 1884 he provided a series of short sketches based on his experiences as a court reporter at *Bow Street Magistrates* Court.[3] In 1889, Grossmith ended his connection with Gilbert and Sullivan to pursue his piano sketch career full-time and continued to perform until 1908. He died in 1912.[3]

As an artist Weedon Grossmith exhibited at the *Royal Academy* and at the *Grosvenor Gallery*. He also contributed illustrations to *Punch* and the prestigious *Art Journal*.[3] He was nevertheless dissatisfied with his financial prospects as an artist, and by 1885 was pursuing an alternative career as an actor. He continued his career on the stage with considerable success until 1918, making his name playing roles he described as "cowards, cads and snots", and as browbeaten small men under the thumb of authority. He wrote several plays, of which *The Night of the Party* (1901) was his most successful, and from 1894 was engaged in the management of *Two West End Theatres*. He died in 1919.[3] The literary scholar Peter Morton, who published an annotated edition of the Diary in 2009,[3] suggests that many of the events depicted in it were drawn from the brothers' own home experiences, and that Weedon, "something of a scapegrace compared with his perfectionist brother", was the model for Lupin.[3]

### Synopsis

The Diary begins on 3 April of an unstated year, and runs for approximately 15 months. In a prologue, readers are informed that Charles Pooter and his wife Caroline (Carrie) have just moved to a new home at "The Laurels", Broadstairs. Mr. Pooter is a City of London clerk with Perkups, possibly an *accountancy* or private banking firm (though their business is not explicitly stated). The couple's 20-year-old son William works as a bank clerk in Oldham. The first entries describe the Pooters' daily lives and introduce their particular friends, such as their neighbour Gowing, the enthusiastic bicyclist Cummings, and the Jameses from Kirkby. From the beginning a pattern is set whereby the small vexations of the Pooters' daily lives are recounted, many of them arising from Pooter's unconscious self-importance and pomposity. Troubled with servants, tradesmen, and office juniors occur regularly, along with minor social embarrassments and humiliations.

The rare formal social events in the Pooters' lives are particular magnets for mistreatment. They receive an invitation from the Lord Mayor of London to attend a ball at the Mansion House for "Representatives of Trade and Commerce". After days of keen anticipation they are dismayed, when they arrive, to find that the gathering is undistinguished. Pooter is snobbishly upset to be greeted familiarly by his local ironmonger, even more so when this tradesman appears to be on social terms with some of the more important guests. Pooter overdresses in champagne and humiliates Carrie by collapsing on the dance floor.

In the summer their son arrives from Oldham and informs his parents that he wishes henceforth to be called by his middle name, "Lupin." He has been dismissed from his bank post for idleness; although dismayed, Pooter sees this as a chance to get his son into Perkupps. Lupin joins the couple for their annual holiday week in Broadstairs. Thereafter, Grossmith created the leading comic role in each of Gilbert and Sullivan's long-running comic operas until The Yeomen of the Guard, which closed in 1889.[3] While appearing in the operas, Grosssmith continued his piano entertainment career at private parties and matinées, writing and composing his own material. He became the most successful comic entertainer of his day,[3] writing numerous operettas, around 100 piano sketches, some 600 songs and short piano pieces, and three books.[3] For *Punch* magazine in 1884 he provided a series of short sketches based on his experiences as a court reporter at Bow Street Magistrates' Court.[3] In 1889, Grosssmith ended his connection with Gilbert and Sullivan to pursue his piano sketch career full-time and continued to perform until 1908. He died in 1912.[3]

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The Diary made its initial appearance as an intermittent serial in the satirical weekly magazine Punch.[8] The first of the 26 instalments was announced in the issue of 26 May 1888 with a brief editorial note: “As everybody who is anybody is publishing Reminiscences, Diaries, Notes, Autobiographies, and Recollections, we are sincerely grateful to ‘A Nobody’ for permitting us to add to the historic collection”[9] The diary entry dates are several weeks behind the dates on which they appear in Punch.[10] The Punch serialization ended in May 1889 with the diary entry for 21 March, which records the Pooters and their friends celebrating the minor triumph of Lupin’s appointment as a clerk at Perkypops.[11] That was the intended end of the diary: however, when the writers were preparing the manuscript for publication as a book, they added a further four months’ entries to the text, and included 26 illustrations by Woodman Grossmith.[9]

In June 1892 J.W. Arrowsmith Ltd published the Diary in book form,[9] although its critical and popular success was not evident until the third edition appeared in October 1910. After the First World War the book’s popularity continued to grow; regular reprints and new editions ensured that thereafter the book was never out of print. Audiobook versions have been available since 1982.[10] The writer Robert McCrum, in a personal list of “The 100 greatest all-time published by all” published in The Observer newspaper, listed the Diary at number 35.[12]

Early indifference

“Yes it is not so funny that an occasional interruption would be reserved, and such thread of story as runs through it can be grasped and followed without much strain on the attention … it is rather difficult to get really interested in the sayings and doings either of the Pooter family or their friends.”


The Punch serialization attracted little critical comment: the Athenaeum’s literary critic thought the series “may have escaped unnoticed amid better jokes”[13] When the Diary was published as a book, Punch heralded it in its issue of 23 July 1892 as “very funny”, adding: “not without a touch of pathos”.[14] However, apart from a warmly approving report in The Saturday Review, the book’s initial critical reception was lukewarm. The Review’s critic thought the book’s obsession with domesticity “unexciting” and “unintellectual”.[15] The Athenaeum, awarding the book one out of five stars, observed that the book was now a firm favourite with the public. “It has had many imitators … but not one of them has rivaled the original, and they have failed at the start.”[16] The reviewer recommended the book’s “quaint drollery, its whimsical satirical and self-deprecating irony”[17] to Canada. Queen’s Quarterly magazine’s sympathetic reception of the book contrasted with that of the New York Times nearly 30 years previously. It praises the undated but lovable self-portrait of Pooter, and adds that “It is not till the second or third—reading and you are bound to reread it—that the really consummate art of this artless book becomes apparent.”[18] The literary critic D. B. Wyndham Lewis summarised the Pooters as “warm, living, breathing, futile, half-baked, incredibly alive and endearing boneheads.”[19] The novelist Evelyn Waugh had been familiar with the Diary since his childhood, it was a great favourite of his parents—Arthur Waugh used to read passages aloud to his family[20] and Evelyn’s biographer Sigrid Bajer has highlighted his fascination with the distinct Pooterish elements in the Waugh household.[21] Evelyn Waugh was initially contemptuous of the book, but grew to admire it, to the extent of writing in his 1930 essay “One Way to Immortality” that it was “the funniest book in the world.” He added: “Nobody wants to read other people’s reflections on life and religion and politics, but the routine of their daily life, properly recorded, is always interesting, and will become more so as conditions change with the years.”[22] Morton posits that several of the leading characters in Waugh’s early novels, though socially far removed from the Pooters, share the barbed wit of Charles Pooter and Carrie Pooter with the problems of a changing world.[23] It is his 1945 novel Brideshead Revisited, Waugh has Lady Marchamemory comforting her family by reading aloud from the book “with her beautiful voice and great humour of expression”[24] Morton suggests that one of the work’s attractions to Waugh was his personal identity with Lupin, and the way in which the disapproved son (as Waugh saw himself) repeatedly manages to turn adverse circumstances to his ultimate advantage.[25] At about the time that Waugh was discovering his affection for the Diary another writer, J.B. Priestley, was extolling it as an exemplar of English humour; Jerome K. Jerome, Priestley asserted, never wrote anything as good: “[P]oor Mr Pooter, with his simplicity, his timidity, his goodness of heart, is not simply a figure of fun but one of those innocent, lovable fools who are dear to the heart”.[26] In a 1943 essay, George Orwell considered the book an accurate account of English life in the 1880s. In describing Pooter he revived the Don Quixote analogy but saw this English equivalent as a “satirical version of the original, one who ‘constantly suffers triumphs brought upon him by his own folly’. In the years after the Second World War the book’s stock remained high; Osbert Lancaster described it a “great work of art”[27] and similar enthusiasm was expressed by a new generation of writers and social historians. Gillian Tindall, writing in 1970, thought the Diary “the best comic novel in the language”, and lauded Pooter as “the presiding spirit” of his era.[28] This accolade was echoed a further generation on by A. N. Wilson, who wrote in his study of the Victorian era: “Who is to say that Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley are more typical of the 1890s than the lower-middle class Charles and Carrie Pooter?”[29] Wilson also observed the extent to which the Pooters had become recognised as “archetypal of the greatest good taste”, as the late 20th-century middle-class English household sought to acquire or preserve authentic Victorian features in their carefully crafted “period” homes.[30] A Spectator article of 809 remarks on how much they are like ‘The Laurels’, the humdrum habits of 1890s City clerks, had by the 21st century become desirable £1 million-plus homes in what it terms “banker land”.[31]
Andrew Lynch's 2012 adaptation.

BBC Radio 4

Edwardian season.

BBC screened two subsequent adaptations: in 1979 a version dramatised by Basil Boothroyd, Victor Malliste, and Pепп Show's Mark Corrigan are all examples of characters whose blinkered view of themselves is forever in sharp contrast to how they are perceived by the world.53 Charles Pooter, says Hammerton, was a metaphor for lower-middle class pretension, pomposity and self-importance, set up for mockery by the "illitas".54 However, by the mid-20th century changes in the perception of masculine roles in lower-middle-class society had stifled the mockery, as men increasingly embraced domesticity.54 Hammerton remarks that the Grosssmiths "would surely appreciate the irony in seeing features of the lower-middle-class existence they mocked so mercilessly becoming the more universal model for 20th century family life".53 Bailey remarks on how the poet John Betjeman presented the Pooters "not as objects of ridicule but of envy, snug and secure in their suburban retreat".52

Adaptations

In September 1954 a stage version of the Diary by Basil Dean and Richard Blake, was presented at London's Arts Theatre with a cast that included George Benson and Dulcie Gray as the Pooters and Leslie Phillips as Lupin. Anthony Hartley, writing in The Spectator, classed this production as "fair-to-middling", with sympathetic performances from the principals: "[I]t is a precondition of this kind of play that everybody concerned should have a heart of gold: only in the case of Mr. Pooter's employer, Mr. Perkupp, do we actually hear the metal chinking."58

In 1986 Waterhouse presented an adaptation of his "Mrs Pooter" text at the Garrick Theatre, with Judi Dench and Michael Williams.55 This version was revived in 1993 at the Greenwich Theatre in a production by Matthew Francis, Clive Swift and Patricia Routledge played Charles and Carrie, in what Paul Taylor in The Independent described as "essentially a two-hander ... in which all the other folk (including Lupin Pooter, the upsh, worrying son) are either imagined characters or, at times, impersonated by the Pooters".59

In March 2011 the Diary was the subject of an even less orthodox production at the Royal & Derngate Theatre, Northampton. Adapted by Hugh Osbourne, with an all-male cast led by Robert Daws, this supposes that Pooter has arranged for his diaries to be performed by amateur actors. Quentin Letts of the Daily Mail found this "an evening of some of the cleverest, fastest entertainment I have seen for months".59 Lyn Gardner in The Guardian found it "a show of some charm – though one that, like Pooter himself, does not quite have the credentials to be quite so pleased with itself".62

In 2014 a production of the Diary was staged in London by Rough Hared Pointer at the White Bear Theatre and later transferred to the King's Head Theatre. This production was revived at the King's Head in 2017; Time Out said of it: "it captures the original's sharp subtlety, frivolous wit and heavy irony, while also being very, very silly."65

The first adaptation for screen was Ken Russell's short (40 minutes) film for the BBC in 1964. Russell shot this in the style of the silent films of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, with the text narrated in a voice-over.60 The BBC screened two subsequent adaptations: in 1979 a version dramatised by Basil Boothroyd and in 2007 a four-part dramatisation Andrew Davies, directed by Susanna White and first shown on BBC Four as part of the channel's Edwardian season.63 The Guardian's critic wrote of the latter that Hugh Bonneville was "immaculate as the ignored kerfuffler [Pooter]."67

BBC Radio 4 (sound radio) has broadcast several dramatisations of the Diary. These include Stephen Tomkinson and Annette Badland in a 2004 adaptation by Kelvin Sogge and Johnny Vegas and Katherine Parkinson in Andrew Lynch's 2012 adaptation.67 In March 2015, BBC Radio 4 Extra broadcast an audio version of the 1986 Keith Waterhouse adaptation, starring Judi Dench and Michael Williams.67

Notes and references

Notes
In his elegiac poem "Middleclass" (1954), Betjeman reflects sadly on the lost generation of "Murray Poshes, Lupin Posters, Long in Kensal Green and Highgate silent under soot and stone", the latter line a reference to two prominent North London cemeteries.
George Grossmith – George Grossmith was born on 1 March 1873 as an English composer, writer, compiler, actor, and singer. He is best known for his role as Hamlet in the Shakespearian play. His compositions and works have been influential in the development of British musical theatre. Grossmith was a significant figure in the history of opera and music theatre in Britain, and his contributions have been widely recognized and celebrated.

YouTube Videos

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Walter Weedon Grossmith (9 June 1854 – 14 June 1919), better known as Weedon Grossmith, was an English writer, painter, ...
Oldham is a town in Greater Manchester, England, amid the Pennines between the rivers Irk and Medlock, 5.3 miles (8.5 km) south east of Manchester city centre. It is a part of the Metropolitan Borough of Oldham along with Royton, Delph, Lees and Stalybridge, and had a population of 95,381 at the 2011 census. It is the most populous of the towns within the borough, and larger than the city of Rochdale. Oldham is located on the strategic Manchester Road, also known as the A62 road.

Sutton is the principal town of the London Borough of Sutton in South London, England. It lies on the lower slope of the North Downs to the west of Wimbledon and is bordered by the M25 motorway to the east, Cheam to the south and Ewell to the north. Sutton is part of the Greater London region. Sutton's current population is 54,592.

Lord Mayor of London is the City of London's mayor and leader of the City of London Corporation. Within the City, the Lord Mayor represents the City of London and the Corporation in all matters of civic duty, and is also the head of the City of London Police. Lord Mayors have been elected since 1237.

Mansion House is the official residence of the Lord Mayor of London. It is a Grade I listed building. — It is used for official receptions and gatherings.

Broadstairs is a coastal town on the Isle of Thanet in the Thanet district of east Kent, England, about 80 miles (130 km) east of London.

The New York Times (sometimes abbreviated as The NYT or The Times) is an American newspaper based in New York City with a daily circulation of over 2 million.

Augustine Birrell KC (19 January 1850 – 20 November 1933) was a British Liberal Party politician, who was Chief Whip of the House of Commons.

Hilaire Belloc (27 July 1870 – 16 July 1953) was an Anglo-French writer and poet.

Archibald Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery, 1st Earl of Midlothian, (7 May 1847 – 21 May 1929) was a British...

Don Quixote (or Spanish: [doŋ kiˈʃote]; fully titled The Ingenious Nobleman Sir Quixote of La Mancha) is an epic novel by Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes published in 1605 and 1615. The novel and its的人物: Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, is one of the most famous works in literature and was translated into at least 115 languages by 2017.

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