BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

My Lucky Star

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A novel by

Joe Keenan

A conversation with Joe Keenan

Reviews of your work frequently compare you to P. G. Wodehouse. Were you attempting to update his special kind of farce? If so, what is it about the genre that appeals to you?

Reading Wodehouse was what first made me want to write fiction. Before I discovered him in my early twenties, my only ambition had been to write comedies for the stage. Reading his books, I saw for the first time that not only could a novel be as funny as a good stage farce, but it could be funny in ways that a play couldn't be. His writing brimmed over with wonderful jokes that could be made only in prose, jokes based on narrative tone, witty descriptions, and comic metaphors and similes. In Wodehouse's world butlers "shimmer" into rooms and an annoyingly hearty girl has a laugh "like a squadron of cavalry charging over a tin bridge." I loved his endearing characters and wonderfully twisty plots and wondered why no one bothered to write books like that anymore. A few years later I decided to try my hand at something in a Wodehousian vein and began *Blue Heaven*. In the book's first scene the narrator, Philip, attends a gallery opening of work by a talentless downtown poseur. A friend maliciously informs the pretentious sculptor that Philip's a great admirer of his. Philip reports that the artist then fixed him "with a hungry, expectant look, like a vampire watching a hemophiliac shave." A very Wodehousian joke and the first of many I would make in my books.

As much as I owe to Wodehouse, there are many other writers I read when I was young whose work had a great influence on my writing. Off the top of my head I'd cite Oscar Wilde, Saki, Noel Coward, Kaufman and Hart, Neil Simon, Alan Aykbourn, and Joe Orton.

When you created the characters of Philip, Gilbert, and Claire in Blue Heaven, *did you know then that you would be writing a sort of series about this trio? Did you have a model or plan for this, or did it just happen?*

When I began *Blue Heaven* I actually thought I was writing a short story, but I did imagine even then that—assuming I managed to finish and get it published—I'd write more stories about the same characters. The dynamic between them—the ambitious, insanely impetuous Gilbert, the wry, brainy and scrupulously ethical Claire, and the sweet, ever-seducible Philip—seemed like one that could inspire multiple adventures. And again, too, my model was Wodehouse, who repeatedly returned to his favorite characters (most famously Bertie and Jeeves) throughout his long and prolific career. As a reader I always found it cheering to know when I finished a book I'd especially enjoyed that I hadn't seen the last of its characters and there were further exploits still to be savored.

The Philip in Blue Heaven *and* Putting on the Ritz *is much the same age as the Philip in* My Lucky Star, *even though years have passed and his surroundings have changed. Why did you choose to make your main characters frozen in time?*

Again (yes, *again*) my model was Wodehouse, whose delightful Bertie Wooster remained a deliciously dim young man-about-town for more than half a century. There are plenty of other examples as well, particularly in detective fiction, where characters like Miss Marple and Nero Wolfe seemed to stay about the same age for quite a long time. My main reason, though, for not letting Philip and Gilbert age is that the things that make them funny, their naïveté and rashness, their knack

for self-delusion and occasional flat-out stupidity, are qualities one finds more endearing (or at least forgivable) in the young than in men who have reached an age by which they ought really to know better.

Who came first, Joe Keenan the novelist or Joe Keenan the TV script-writer? How have you managed to juggle these two personas? Do you find the writing to be similar in nature, or completely different?

The novelist came first, although curiously it was my fiction that led to my career in television. A wonderful TV writer named David Lloyd happened to read a *Boston Globe* review of *Blue Heaven* that cited its "Wodehousian merriment." David, an ardent Wodehouse devotee who owns first editions, both British and American, of his ninety-something books, read my book and gave copies to many of his friends, including Glen and Les Charles, the team behind *Cheers*. They liked it and asked me if I'd like to create a series for them, so I wrote a pilot called *Gloria Vane,* a comedy which, coincidentally, was also about a movie star, a temperamental actress in thirties Hollywood. The pilot was lavishly produced with a cast that included JoBeth Williams, Nina Foch, Emily Proctor, Jerry Adler, Mark Blum, Carole Cook, and *Frasier*'s Edward Hibbert and Harriet Sansom Harris. It was not ordered to series but it did lead to an offer to join *Frasier* in its second season.

As for how I juggle the two personas . . . well, clearly not all that well, as it took me nine years to write *My Lucky Star*. But the two disciplines do have a fair number of similarities. In each you're trying to come up with a story that's both amusing and at least somewhat unpredictable while crafting dialogue that's heightened and funny without being altogether implausible.

There are, of course, very significant differences between the two disciplines. One is that television writing's highly collaborative. On half-hour comedies the stories are crafted by committee and then, once in production, rewritten daily by the staff with the showrunner serving as final arbiter of both processes. On some shows every script is gang-written, with writing credit being assigned on a rotating basis

among the team. On *Frasier* we preferred to let the author (or authors) of record write the first draft alone and only then would it once more become the property of the room. The best and most conscientious writers (and I will not stoop to such patently false humility as to exclude myself from this group) took pride in producing drafts that required as little tweaking as possible to be camera-ready. Another key difference is that, unlike a book, a television or film script is not the final and finished product—the film or episode that will spring from it is. This is why, if forced to state a preference, I would have to come down on the side of fiction.

That's not to say that I don't enjoy writing scripts. It's just that every time I complete one, I'm keenly aware that the job is far from done and that my work won't reach its intended audience until the actors, director, designer, director of photography, and film editor have all had a good whack at it. Most often these are marvelously gifted people who greatly enhance my work and bring it to glorious fruition. There are times, though, when things go less auspiciously and, at close of day, the dear little offspring I nurtured so tenderly lays cold on a gurney and can only be identified through dental records.

When I finish a book, the job's pretty much done. Yes, my editor might have a civilized suggestion or two and a suitable artist must be found to slap an eye-catching cover on the thing, but once these small matters are attended to, my book is ready for its audience. There are no further middlemen, no long casting sessions where my cheeks ache from attentive smiling, no run-throughs attended by studio and network executives bursting with insights, and no fretful debates about whether or not to recast the sexy ingénue whose performance suggests that she's learned the role phonetically. Just my story, my words, and an attentive reader. Heaven.

What, to you, is the biggest challenge of writing a novel? What's the most enjoyable part?

The biggest challenge of writing the sort of novels I write—i.e., farces—is working out the damn plots. How will Gilbert drag Philip

into yet another ghastly mess (or, as Philip says in *Putting on the Ritz*, "Disaster, brilliantly disguised as Opportunity")? Who do they become entangled with and why? What complications ensue? How do you keep the situation escalating and make sure that, as in all good farces, the characters' efforts to extricate themselves from an increasingly perilous situation only dig them in deeper? How do you finally bring them to a place where disaster and ruin seem utterly inescapable, then how do you save them?

The hardest part, of course, is making sure that however wild and absurd the plot gets (and you want things to get as outrageous as possible) that it doesn't do so at the expense of logic or credibility. The plot twists, relying at times on unhappy coincidence, may be mildly improbable, but they can never be flat-out unbelievable. (Peter Stone, author of musicals such as *1776* and movies such as *Charade,* was a teacher of mine at NYU and he passed along this sage dictum of storytelling: "You can use coincidence to get your characters into trouble, but never to get them out of it.") Likewise, your characters must always behave in a manner consistent with both their essential natures and best interests. In plotting *My Lucky Star* I was faced with several conundrums of character logic and had to carefully devise credible solutions for each.

The first and perhaps thorniest was that I wanted Claire to be along for the ride, helping Philip and Gilbert write the screenplay. If she weren't, she'd be sidelined for the whole story and then who would save them? My problem, of course, was that the unshakably principled Claire would never agree to accept the job once she learned that it had been secured through plagiarism, and there was no way to prevent her knowing this as she'd never sign on without first demanding to read the spec script to which Gilbert had signed her name. I got around this by using Claire's own ethics to entrap her. Convinced, once Stephen and Diana are on board, that there's no possible way they can keep the assignment, she gives Gilbert her oath that she'll stay if they win the job in exchange for his promise to have Max find her another job in the event, inevitable to her, that they don't. She may bitterly repent having given her oath, but to Claire a promise, however foolish, cannot be reneged on.

Another tricky part was getting our boys involved with Moira

again. When Gilbert decided to marry her for the gifts in *Blue Heaven* he knew she was a bit shifty but was blind to the full scope of her cunning and malevolence. By that story's end, though, both he and Philip knew only too well how diabolical a fiend she was. Readers of that book would never have forgiven them for being so brainless as to trust her again, yet my story dictated that she somehow worm her way back into their lives. I decided to use Gilbert's loathing of her and desire to rub his success in her face as a means to get her in their door. Once inside, Moira, being Moira, required no more than an unguarded moment in their office to ferret out the proof of their plagiarism and have them once more at her mercy.

If there's a scene in the book where I feel I may have cheated logic just a tad it's the scene at Vici where Philip reports first to Stephen and then to Diana. In reality Diana (and certainly Sonia) would most likely have preferred to hold so sensitive a meeting in a more private location—her home, say, or Sonia's office. My problem was that I was determined that Philip and Gilbert should first encounter Moira when in the company of their famous new friends. If this did not happen at Vici then I'd have had to invent a whole new scene just for this encounter—and how often would Diana and Stephen socialize publicly with these two nonentities (whose screenplay, lest we forget, they had no intention of ever using)? I massaged the issue as best I could by having Diana own the restaurant and by putting them in a private dining room, but I still felt I was bending things just a bit. (Though I recently read Kurt Wenzel's highly enjoyable *Gotham Tragic* in which one top-secret conversation after another is held in the private dining room of a hot restaurant, in front of waitstaff yet, and this made me feel a little better.)

The most enjoyable part of writing my books is, well, *writing* them—the part after I've figured out the story and can finally start telling it. I love writing sentences and especially love rewriting them, polishing, honing, searching ceaselessly for the wry turn of phrase and *le mot juste* (or at least *le mot* I haven't already used six times.) A big part of the fun is writing in the first person, in Philip's voice. There's a certain fantasy or wish-fulfillment element to it. I get to pretend that I've personally lived through all these fantastic and glamorous events and

then relate them to the reader as amusingly as possible. (I've always felt that Philip strives so clearly to amuse because he's embarrassingly aware that his own behavior in the story is pretty boneheaded and he hopes that, by at least telling it well, he'll redeem himself somewhat in the mind of the reader.) And, of course, there are all the other characters I get to give voice to, many of whom I feel enormous affection for. Readers often speak of getting "lost" in a good book, luxuriating in a world far different from their own, one they're sad to leave when the story finally ends. I've often had that feeling while reading a favorite book, but feel it all the more acutely when I'm writing the book.

How do you go about mapping out your elaborate plots? Do you know before you even put pen to paper what's going to happen, or do you let it all unfold as you write?

I tend to outline pretty heavily. I can't imagine how else you'd go about writing such a complicated plot. For the first two years I spent on the book, working only during my vacations from *Frasier,* I concentrated solely on figuring out the plot. (My notes ultimately weighed in at 26,000 words on 84 single-spaced pages.) When I'd reached the point where I had a detailed map of the first half and a somewhat sketchier one of the second, I began chapter one. I wrote seven or eight chapters, then started feeling nervous because I hadn't figured out the ending, so I stopped and concentrated on that. It was a very happy day when it occurred to me that Claire could allege that "Oscar" (whose identity I'd not even thought about) was, in fact, the DA's son and that he'd been having an affair with Stephen. Thus was Billy born and I went back over the outline, finding ways to thread him through so that he'd be there at the end, securely nestled in Claire's top hat at the precise moment that she needed to produce a rabbit.

Are there more adventures ahead for Philip and Gilbert?

I certainly hope so. I already have some preliminary notions of what Gilbert might be up to in a fourth book and, given my druthers, would

devote almost all my time to writing novels and the occasional play or musical. We live, alas, in a nation where there's no shorter route to insolvency than a career dedicated primarily to penning Light Comic Fiction Heavily Populated by Homosexuals. And while I'm flattered that many in my small but loyal following have voiced their desire that I write more novels, I fear that, till the day comes when one of them nobly steps forward, checkbook in hand, and says, "You do another book, Joe, I'll handle the mortgage," I'll be forced to toil primarily in the more lucrative field of television.

OK, indulge us: does Stephen Donato have a real-life counterpart?

From what one hears, yes, plenty, and, in creating Stephen, I thought about all of them. I was keen to avoid him seeming like a thinly veiled portrait of any particular actor, mainly because I feared that in many people's minds the book would cease to be a comedy about Hollywood and become a comedy about [famous name here]. Stephen and his behavior are equal parts composite, conjecture, and invention. I took care to introduce aspects into his life (like his equally famous diva mother) that did not dovetail with any of the real-life stars whose sexuality has inspired much fevered speculation. That said, there are several among that notorious bunch whose exploits, if even half the stories I've heard are true, lend credibility to what I'd initially feared might seem an unrealistically reckless streak in Stephen.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. Who is your favorite character in *My Lucky Star*? Do you find yourself drawn to the more conventional characters or the more outlandish ones? Are there any characters in whom you see qualities of your own, however exaggerated?

2. What roles do Philip, Claire, and Gilbert play in their friendship? What does each one add to the trio? Does the way they interact remind you of any of your own friendships?

3. *My Lucky Star* is great fun to read, but it's also a biting social satire. What vices/people/habits is the author commenting on? Which situations or characters did you find the most successful in this respect?

4. When Philip volunteers to write Lily's memoirs, he infiltrates her scheme through the use of his own. When else does this sort of backstabbing happen in the book? What do these situations say about each of the characters involved? Is one motive better or more moral than the other?

5. As the novel's heroes make their way through the maze that is Hollywood, Gilbert manages to get them into one sticky situation after another. Why are Claire and Philip always unable to put their

foot down, no matter how hard they may try? Do you have a friend like this, who always creates trouble and yet whom you can't resist having around?

6. From a faded film star to a backstabbing ex-wife, *My Lucky Star*'s Hollywood is filled with characters out for blood. But how else is one to act in such a dog-eat-dog city? Are there any characters you sympathize with, despite their seemingly evil intentions? Discuss the motives behind each of the key players.

7. Have you been to Hollywood? Do you think Keenan's depiction of the city is accurate?

8. Do you like Keenan's swift and witty voice? What do you think comic novels offer us as readers, besides enjoyment? Do you find comedy to be even more telling than drama, or less?