

Peter Wodtke Profile

Peter Wodtke is a writer and financial advisor who is based in Connecticut, USA. He speaks to us from his 240-year-old home, where he lives with his wife Barbara. He has written and published two books, *Eiertanz* and *Dottie*, and is in the process of publishing a third and writing a fourth. Here he speaks to us about his successful financial career, sitting on 45 different boards over the years, and his natural progression into writing novels.

You're speaking to us from Connecticut today... Did you grow up there?

I was born in New York City with a very strange upbringing. We spoke German at home (this was before WWII), and then when my parents divorced during the war, I went to live in France from the age of 13. France is my second home – I feel very comfortable there. Most of my career has been in Asia, in the Arab world, and a bit in Switzerland and the United Kingdom – I lived over there for 17 years! I really have been all over the place. I'm completely trilingual in German, French and English – no German can tell I'm not German, and no Frenchman can tell I'm not French!

My father was in the German army in WWI, and then he emigrated to the United States. Unlike many immigrants, he never felt completely comfortable there. As a small child in school during World War II, I was very patriotic about the U.S. and its Allies, and that occasionally created odd moments at home, because he survived the whole thing! But I'm so grateful to my father for teaching me German when I was little, because later it proved to be very useful in my career.

How did you start your career in finance?

I started in banking. I was with Citibank in Hong Kong for eight years, and I ended up as the manager of the main branch. Eventually I was shifted to the Arab world where I ran the region for Citibank branches in the Arab World and Iran from my office in Beirut. After that I spent a year with an English bank in New York, and then became the CEO of a development bank in Japan and Singapore where I spent a number of years.

After that, I joined what today is called UBS AG, but at the time it was called Swiss Bank Corporation – I joined as the most senior foreigner they had ever hired; I became head of the bank for the U.S. and Canada.

Eventually I moved to London, because my first wife had always wanted to live there, so I started my own corporate finance business which I did for 18 years. In the meantime, I got divorced and remarried to my current wife Barbara. She works in the cosmetic industry in the U.S., so I moved back here in 2000 – and we've lived here ever since!

When you left university, had you discovered your love of writing yet, or was finance the only sole mission?

I didn't know what I wanted to do when I left university. I was thinking of going into the diplomatic service, but I never took the exam for it! Then, though a friend of my

stepfather's, I was introduced to Citibank – which was very successful for me. I did three jobs in finance, not including my own business later.

Since I've left full-time employment with the bank in 1982, I seem to have gotten further into industry! I've served on 45 different boards around the world, and in many, many different industries. My specialty is finance, but also corporate governance: how you share and run a company, and how you deal with many contradictions and still survive and make money – and remain ethical! Always being ethical and staying out of trouble. I'm not as sweet as I look! I'm quite tough in these business environments, although always appearing pleasant. People don't get away with things if they try to cut corners or do things that I think are unethical – I'll call them out right away. I'm a strict influence. On the other hand, I help them make money too, so it's not too bad.

How did you make the jump into writing? When did you discover your passion for the craft?

I've always enjoyed it. Even in business – I can write a contract; I can write a prospectus on blank paper. It's very easy for me to assemble thoughts. My real writing career started in the last few years with a book I never even wrote! It's called *The Swedish Tailor and Adventurer* by Rolf Johansson, and his grandmother happened to be a servant in our house in Connecticut in 1907. The local museum curator put me in touch with him, and I did the proofreading for his book! It got me extremely interested in the world of writing.

The next book I wrote was the story of my mother, called *Dottie*. She was a very, very interesting person – way ahead of her time! She's passed 28 years ago, but if she had been in her 50s and 60s now, she would have had far more traction than she did.

Finally, my life story, *Eiertanz*, which means “dancing on eggs” in German. That's something I've done a lot of, including at home in my early life with my father and mother, and then in business later.

I find writing very, very easy. Whenever I have two or three hours, I can produce two or three pages in that time – not in great condition, but enough to look at them and refine them another time.

Currently, I'm working on a different kind of book about Russia, China, and the United States, titled “Everything to Gain? China and the United States as future partners”. It is more difficult because it's not a matter of memorizing your own life – but about things that are going on in the world. My editor is currently reviewing the third draft, which should be in print within six weeks!

The next one I'm writing is about the principles of leadership, which is very easy because it's all from experience! If something hits me during the day, I can write a little vignette in an hour or so to return to later.

What is your writing process? Do you have a schedule, or do you write when the mood strikes?

I write for about two or three hours each week. That's about the most I can do because I still work as an advisor for three companies and I'm still on three boards, and they keep me very busy. When people own a finger, they feel entitled to a hand, and when they own a hand, they feel entitled to an arm! A lot of what I do is working for other people.

In my writing I'm very disciplined. If I realize I have two or three hours free, then I block out the outside world, keep to myself, and write something.

I'm a sequential thinker, so I'm very bad at multitasking. I can't work on the computer and then have a telephone call and be reading something on the side – that's not me.

What inspired you to write your autobiography?

I knew almost nothing about my father. We were together on Earth for 23 years, and I probably had only five or six hours of frank conversation with him – which is not very much. We didn't have an intimate relationship; it was very formal.

I did not want my children not to know everything about me – warts and all. I thought it was better for them to really know who I am, and I thought it might do some good for my grandchildren too (of which I have nine), that they can see I was ready to put myself on paper for them.

My three children have all read it, and they'll ask me about things and why I felt that way . It's created a further bond between us.

My adored Barbara and I have been married for 25 years. She encourages me so strongly in everything, and not least in writing. Anything she sees that I'm excited about, she's immediately behind it.

Could you tell me about the book you're currently writing?

"Everything to Gain? China and the United States as future partners" is about politics, culture, power, and military influence. I have written enough about myself! I'm 88 years old, and I've done what I have to do in life and in business, and all I can do now is use the experience that I have of nations, cultures, and especially people to write. I'm terribly concerned about the state of the world and I want to help peace and a good future for all of us, not only my family and friends but all six billion of us.

But what can I do at age 88? I can tell a few companies about governance, but I can maybe be influential in moving countries – including the United States – to a better position working together with countries that are seen as rivals but should really be friends. People want security; they want a decent way to live; they want a future for their children. They don't want to know that the world is going to end in the next generation! They want to know that there's something ahead that's decent. That's something that I can do, by using all my experience in life. I've made my own mistakes – I know where the landmines are!

1. Who were your roommates at Le Rosey?
Michael KORDA, Christian DELSOL and I roomed together, and we remain very close today. When I left after my last year, the DELSOL family had come down to pick up Christian, and they took me home in their car with them to Paris. When I left school, I started crying uncontrollably for an hour, and I have never cried since then! I'm not normally a crier, but I was sorry to leave Rosey.
2. What is something that you miss from Rosey?
Fortunately Harold de Wolff and Robert Ross are alive in addition to Michael Korda and Christian Delsol. Some of my friends have died. I do miss them! Other than that, the roundness of culture there was simply fantastic. And the personal touch: when we came out of lunch or dinner, we had to kiss the hand of Madame Johannot – and they knew something about everyone! They might say, "That was a good kick you made yesterday in soccer," or "I heard you need to improve your Latin," but everything was personal. It was marvellously run and managed in a human and listening way – but not intrusive.
3. If you could go back to school as teenager knowing who you are now would you?
No! It's much better to know nothing. You always have to be in learning mode. I think it's awfully dangerous to think that you know a lot. That's the beginning of hubris – and pride goeth before a fall. I would say I'm much, much more fortunate to have gone knowing nothing, because I still think there's an awful lot to learn now! I've had a lot of experience – that's inescapable – but I don't think of myself as knowing a lot.