

Snobbery, by Joseph Epstein

reviewed by [David R. Stewart](#) in the [February 8, 2003](#) issue

We can be thankful that a book on this delicate subject was written by somebody other than an academic. Or a comedian. I intend no slight or criticism of academics or comedians per se, of course--that would be snobbish--yet here is a topic that cannot afford either too serious or too whimsical a treatment.

What the subject requires is somebody who can write extremely well (in the sense of being a pleasure to read) and who is also a keen and sympathetic observer of human nature, beginning with her or his own. Joseph Epstein, who teaches writing at Northwestern, is at least as unsparing in considering his own snobberies as those of others. Example: "Why, when I learn of a colleague who is teaching Jack Kerouac, do I think about inciting his students to begin a malpractice suit against him?" Epstein has the terrific advantage of working with a topic that is "in the bloodstream" of everyone who picks up the book, and of this he takes full advantage.

Snobbery is such a widespread and pernicious disposition--affecting equally those who are self-confessed snobs and those who despise such snobs for their snobbery--that the last thing we need is to be reminded of how very wrong, foolish and counterproductive it is. "The problem of snobbery in its contemporary manifestation," says Epstein, "lies not in some small number of pure snobs in the world, but in the multitudinous little snobberies that infect us all."

Epstein begins by mapping out the meaning of snobbery ("Every act of snobbery is at bottom an act of weakness. Often it is weakness striking out, showing its cruel side"). He then illustrates the varieties of snobbish experience (everything from kids to colleges, food to fashion, intellectual to political life), and concludes with a kind-hearted reflection on how best to manage (if not master) one's own snobberies. "I should be surprised if there is anyone outside a Trappist monastery who has gone through this book who hasn't at one point--and perhaps at several--met up with his or her own snobberies, some congruent with my own, some perhaps the reverse of mine," he writes.

For such a tricky assignment, Epstein is just the man: funny, honest about his own susceptibilities, mostly patient with the foibles of others (Susan Sontag and Gore Vidal are notable exceptions), prodded by an intrepidly friendly curiosity in exploring our often absurd compulsion to measure ourselves against others. Epstein concludes that "snobbery will die on the day when none of us needs reassurance of his or her worth, when society is so well balanced as to eliminate every variety of injustice, when fairness rules, and kindness and generosity, courage and honor are all rightly revered." Not soon enough, in other words. While hardly a volume of self-help (not that there's anything wrong, I hasten to add, with self-help books), Epstein's book is a delightful and enjoyable means of seeing snobbery in all its silliness.