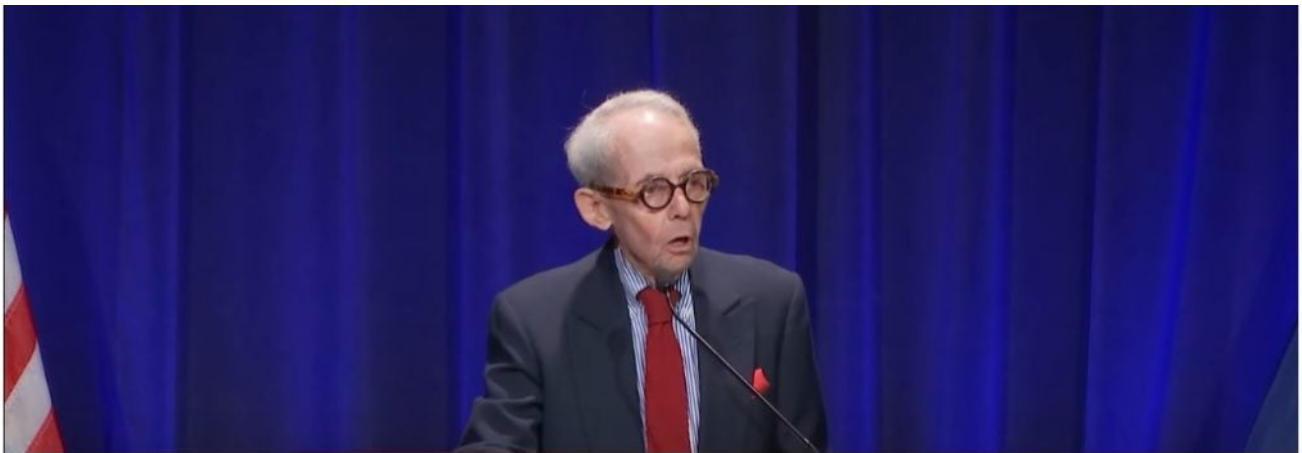


# The Surprising Life of Joseph Epstein

By Bruce Bawer

I learned that I'd had certain assumptions about him that were just plain wrong.



Before perusing the long and impressive list of Joseph Epstein's books that fills two pages of the front matter of his latest collection, *Familiarity Breeds Content: New and Selected Essays*, I would've described myself as very familiar with his work. I now realize that I was mistaken. Yes, I've read (and happily reread) several of his books; the first thing I always turned to in *The American Spectator*, back when he was its editor, was his opening essay, which he signed Aristides – a name borrowed from an ancient Greek statesman who wasn't using it anymore. But, for heaven's sake, there are books on that list that I wasn't even aware of. How, for instance, did I miss the fact that he'd published (in 2008) a book on Fred Astaire? At first the very combination of Epstein and Astaire sounds like a bit of a stretch; but after a moment's reflection, it makes perfect sense: Like Astaire, Epstein brings to his *métier* immense grace and wit, a consistently light touch, and makes every bit of what he does look effortless. (This is by contrast with the other great

Hollywood hooper, Gene Kelly, whom, because of the strenuous effort that is visible in his every move, one might describe as the Lionel Trilling of dancers.)

Full disclosure: I reviewed books for the *American Scholar* several times while Epstein was editor. It was always a delight. He had a fine knack for picking just the right books for me to praise or skewer. Once he even published a longish poem of mine. But since he was in the Windy City and I was in the Big Apple, we met only once in person, at a drinks party at some conservative New York magazine or other – probably the *New Criterion*, to which I was then a regular contributor. In any case, it was a crowded event. I recall that I was having a serious conversation, presumably about some burning issue of the day, with a circle of younger writers (of which, at the time, I was one), while a few yards away, Epstein was part of an older group, mostly editors, whom he was keeping in stitches with one hilarious joke after another. I remember desperately wishing to be over there, among these established figures who had nothing to prove to anyone and who were actually enjoying themselves – as one should, after all, at a party.

Anyway, back to his books. They exhibit an impressive catholicity: He's put out innumerable short-story collections, a handful of non-fiction volumes in which he ponders – without the slightest hint of ponderousness – some theme or another (*Ambition, Envy, Friendship, Gossip, Charm*), a treatise about the novel as genre, even two assemblages of his correspondence with the author Frederic Raphael. But he's probably best known, as he himself admits, as an essayist – one who meanders around his chosen topic with ease and panache and pizzazz, making savvy points in an almost invariably amusing fashion, always taking his ideas seriously while rarely taking himself very seriously at all. Suitably, then, *Familiarity Breeds Content* opens with a 1978 piece about jokes. One of his observations is that jokes about ethnic groups are better when

told by members of those groups. He certainly seems to live by this rule: Epstein is Jewish, and the jokes I remember overhearing at that long-ago party were all Jewish jokes. Similarly, when my father told ethnic jokes, they were invariably Polish jokes – because his parents had both been Polish.

Apropos of which, Epstein raises the question of why, as he puts it, “the Poles have indisputably taken the brunt of ethnic humor in America.” His answer: “[T]he Poles, unlike other once-besieged minority groups in America, have no bank of social sympathy to draw upon. People will tell Polish jokes that they would not dare tell about the Negroes, or the Jews, or the Irish, or the Italians, or Catholics.” That was definitely true in 1978. What happened after that? Well, two years later, Solidarity and Lech Walesa came along, and soon enough Poles were viewed not as people who got married in bowling shirts but as anti-Communist heroes, and one day during the final years of Communism in Europe I realized I hadn’t heard a Polish joke in quite a long time.

Also included in *Familiarity* is a 1979 tribute to letters – not the letters of the alphabet, or the kinds of letters referred to in the phrase *belle lettres*, but those epistolary works, usually brief, that used to involve writing words on one or more pieces of paper, stuffing that paper into an envelope to which one affixed a postage stamp or two, and then dispatching this item via the U.S. mails to some recipient, near or far. In these days of instant online contact, this piece about a now all-but-dead genre that has such a glorious history (imagine doing without the correspondence of John and Abigail Adams?) has a melancholy ring to it. “Who,” writes Epstein, “has not carried a gratifying letter around with him for days after he has received it—to read it again at free moments and feel once more something of the pleasure it gave on first reading?” Ah, how long ago that seems. Yes, we do have email, but with few exceptions it just ain’t the same.

The other reprinted essays here cover subjects ranging from juggling and gluttony to men's hats and prohibitions on smoking. But to focus too much on the topics is to miss the point: You don't go to lunch with a world-class raconteur hoping he'll talk about envy or vanity or his love of sports; the point is to be in his presence while he holds forth on whatever happens to be on his mind. So it is with Epstein's essays. Whatever the topic, he delivers – big time. In a piece about having reached an age at which it seems not only acceptable but altogether seemly and proper to be ignorant of (or at least indifferent to) many of the current cultural, social, and sartorial trends, Epstein wisely pronounces, "A man in his sixties ought not to write a book about Michael Jackson; a woman of seventy ought not to dress like Janet Jackson." In an essay on fame, he recalls being interviewed on TV: "I gazed deep into the blue eyes of Phil Donahue to discover that they resembled the city of Oakland in Gertrude Stein's youth in that there was 'no there there.'" (On one of my own early media appearances, I had precisely the same chilling experience with an anchorwoman on MSNBC. Are they trained to blank out like this?)

As for Epstein's new essays, one is on the joys of reading – or, more specifically, the joys of reading stuff that's worth reading. He calls Willa Cather "the greatest twentieth-century American novelist." Agreed. I also share his preference of Wallace Stevens over John Ashbery and of Marcel Proust over Jonathan Franzen. And it's not just our literary tastes that overlap considerably. I consider his verdict on Bob Dylan, delivered in another essay (on the subject of taste), to be right on the money: "None of his songs seem to me authentic." He goes on to say, "I prefer Mozart over Beethoven, Raphael over Michelangelo, Hazlitt over Emerson, Tennyson over Walt Whitman, Paul Klee over Pablo Picasso, Marcel Proust over James Joyce." Ditto times six. When he names some of his favorite singers – Nat King Cole, Rosemary Clooney, Ella Fitzgerald, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Sarah Vaughan – it's

almost creepy: I could have drawn up the very same list myself. (Plus Tony Bennett.) He mentions with admiration Oscar Levant, a hero of mine whom nobody today remembers. In one essay he writes, “Unrequited love may be a bore” – a riff on the relatively obscure 1936 Rodgers & Hart tune “Glad to Be Unhappy.” Fortunately, my mind is a storehouse of such dusty lyrics. But how many of Epstein’s other readers will get the reference?

Like Epstein, moreover, I’m an ailurophile. He cites the distinction usually made between felines and Fidos: “Dog owners expect, and generally receive, pleasing affection from them. Unalterable devotion is the last thing one is likely to receive from a cat.” A reasonable generalization, although I had a cat named Henry who was as devoted to me as any dog, and whose loss I still feel 13 years after his death. Epstein, similarly, has a “regard, bordering on reverence,” for his cat Dolly, whose indifference to the passing parade of fake news and sundry folderol over which we humans fruitlessly fret makes Epstein “wonder whether she, Dolly, a mere creature, and not we, despite calling ourselves *Homo sapiens*, hasn’t got it right.” Amen.

The essay on cats is followed by one about grief – which is not inappropriate, because if you’ve owned and loved cats, you’ve probably known a species of grief that may entirely baffle non-animal lovers. Epstein, for his part, has known the most dreadful kind of grief – the loss of a child – and he has little use for concepts like “closure.” And with good reason. Real grief doesn’t end in anything you could call closure: Instead it rewires your mind, transforms you into someone different, darker, and (I would argue) realer, and makes your irrecoverable loss an indelible part of who you are – a part that, however heart-rending, you wouldn’t ever want to part with, because it’s all you have left, other than memory itself, of some person or creature you’ve loved.

One remarkable thing about Epstein is that despite the genuine

personal tragedies he's endured, he's maintained a "sunny disposish" and even assures us, in the title of his new autobiography – which has been issued alongside *Familiarity Breeds Content* – that his life has been one of great good fortune. The title: *Never Say You've Had a Lucky Life: Especially if You've Had a Lucky Life*. Epstein's luck began early: he has nothing negative to say about his parents. He writes about coming of age "B.P., or Before the Pill," owing to which sex was rare and risky – an observation that many a memoirist might make; but to whom other than Epstein would it occur that this fact of life led his generation of novelists – he name-checks Mailer and Roth in particular – "to overemphasize the drama and excitement of sex." (And, hey, don't forget Updike.)

As noted, Epstein is Jewish, and he writes that this has always made him feel "somehow different, somehow maybe not quite fully American." But once, in Jerusalem, attending a performance by that city's symphony orchestra, he had something of an epiphany: Realizing that for once he was in a place full of Jews (he's not big on synagogues), he came to the awareness that he "preferred being in a minority." I suspect many writers – who by profession are observers of life, not participants – feel this way. I know I do. I live in Norway, and my outsiderhood here is a part of my self-identity that is of some value to me, even though I'm not quite sure why; all I know is that whenever I return to the U.S., there's always something – how to put it? weird? unsettling? – about being surrounded by people who are speaking my native tongue.

Reading Epstein's autobiography, I learned that I'd had certain assumptions about him that were just plain wrong. For example, this buttoned-up former Northwestern University prof proffers tales here of whorehouses, gangsters (well, he *is* from Chicago), and even a nymphomaniac. It's also rather shocking to learn that it wasn't until college that Epstein even began to think about being a writer. How could such a

top-notch stylist not have been plugging away at this gig since the cradle? Still, as with his essays, there are passages here that bestowed upon this reader more than a tingle of recognition – such as his recollection of “the first time [he] noticed the periodical racks” at the college library, weighed down by copies of “little magazines,” previously unknown to him, like *Partisan Review*, the *Hudson Review*, and the *Paris Review*. “The result,” he writes, “was the intellectual equivalent of love at first sight.” I had exactly the same experience at college. I already knew I wanted to write, but write what? Not until then did images begin to take shape in my mind of a future career as a contributor to these small-circulation – and low-paying – monthlies and quarterlies. (A few years later, examining the selection of periodicals at the late lamented Gotham Book Mart on West 47th Street in Manhattan, I discovered with delight the first couple of issues of the newly launched *New Criterion*, which would end up launching me as a practitioner of this most curious of professions. I guess in those pre-internet days, that kind of experience was pretty common among aspiring scribes. I can’t imagine how these things work now.)

What else? Epstein serves up a couple of humorous bits about people whom we happened to know in common. On John Simon: “On one occasion John told me that Pauline Kael told him that he was quite wrong about one of his movie reviews, but that she nonetheless admired its style. ‘Dear me,’ John replied to her, ‘I had no notion you had the least interest in style.’” (It’s especially funny if you imagine hearing it in Simon’s wonderful Serbian accent.) As for Hilton Kramer, my longtime editor at the *New Criterion* and Epstein’s close friend, he “used such words as ‘lavish,’ ‘shameless,’ ‘oeuvre’ with a comic emphasis.” Funny: I remember Hilton telling me once that, when he was an art writer at the *New York Times*, his editor had asked him whether it was entirely necessary for him to use the word *oeuvre* in every single article he wrote. Hilton’s succinct reply: “Yes.” A dutiful student, I must

admit that whenever I've written a long article about some novelist's body of work, I've found the word *oeuvre* to be not only unavoidable but splendidly useful: Injecting the occasional italicized foreign word into a text is a neat way to sizzle up the prose a bit.

As for Epstein's wife, Barbara Maher, he describes her as, on first sight, "a combination of the young Audrey Hepburn and Jean Simmons." Nowadays, alas, it seems to me that nobody remembers Jean Simmons, the beautiful, brilliantly gifted star of *Spartacus*, *Elmer Gantry*, and *Guys and Dolls*; if you mention her name, almost everyone thinks you're referring to the repulsive hard rocker who spells his first name Gene. As it happens, I spent my teenage years with a massive crush on Jean Simmons (Audrey Hepburn was no slouch either) that I've never really shaken off, and anybody who flips for a woman who looks like Jean Simmons is, in my estimation, a man of the most exquisite taste imaginable. But of course, the one thing we know most certainly about Joseph Epstein, who at age 87 is still adding to an *oeuvre* of truly remarkable dimensions and consistently high merit, is that taste is the guy's middle name.

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