

Who do we think you are?

Joseph Epstein goes
beyond biographies
in his latest essays



ROBERT FULFORD
Notebook

It's likely that no other writer would try to produce as wide-ranging, audacious and personal a book as Joseph Epstein's recent *Essays in Biography* (Axios). That's just as well, since there's probably no other writer with enough style, wit and spirit to carry it off.

This is Epstein's 12th essay collection and his 23rd book. He's written excellent short stories but usually his work takes the form of suave, free-wheeling, opinion-charged essays. One of his books is about envy, another about snobbery, a third about ambition. His subjects, like the subjects of most great essayists, are spectacularly disparate: No one but Epstein has written books about both Alexis de Tocqueville and Fred Astaire.

All of his characteristic themes come together in *Essays in Biography* — his respect for tradition, his disrespect for the self-regard of standardbred left-wing intellectuals, his

special mixture of Anglophilia and American cultural nationalism, his affection for a literary culture that he suspects is dying. Many readers find him disturbing because he deploys an acute moral sense and a comic spirit in defence of cultural traditions that much of society has forgotten.

In this collection his subjects run from George Washington to Joe DiMaggio and from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn to W.C. Fields. His 40 essays fill 603 pages. Most of the subjects are figures of the 19th and 20th centuries. He turns his attention to antiquity only once, for a sketch of Xenophon (ca. 430–354 BCE), whom he defends against his academic critics.

Epstein is tough on Susan Sontag (“self-promotion was her true métier”) and even tougher on Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., a good historian until he fell in love with John Kennedy and all his relatives. “Schlesinger seems never to have met a Kennedy he did not adore.”

Epstein's technique is to read a book about his subject, or in many cases half a dozen books, then compare the biographical detail with what he knows or intuits from observation or personal experience. George Washington evokes his most wholehearted respect and enthusiasm. He suggests Washington's genius was perhaps the rarest kind: “A genius for discerning right action so strong that he was utterly incapable of knowingly doing anything wrong ... our politics has yet to turn up a better man.”

Epstein's pieces sometimes become deeply personal. As a Chicagoan, he nourishes intense feelings about Michael Jordan, recalling that when a Bulls game was scheduled, “The prospect of seeing him at night could lift my spirits during the day.” After watching him play 1,000 or so games, Epstein felt he knew Jordan's facial expressions and moods at least as well as he knew those of certain members of his own family.

The most personal chapter in the book is also the one that's likeliest to shock and even scandalize readers: Epstein's assessment of Saul Bellow. Once they were close. In the 1970s, they often played racquetball.

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“I was friendly with Bellow during the period in which he was writing *Humboldt's Gift*, sections of which he read to me aloud in his apartment, asking for corrections.” But Epstein discovered that “Saul had two valves on his emotional trumpet: intimacy and contempt.”

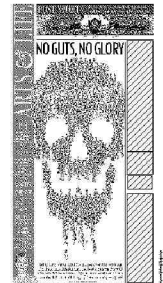
Epstein heard both sounds. He discovered that Bellow was extremely touchy: Someone who praised the wrong writer in conversation — or, worse, in print — might find himself cut off, then mocked ever after. He discovered that the private Bellow could harshly judge the work of certain writers while letting those same writers believe he was among their admirers. Reading Bellow's published letters, Epstein found him “writing intimate things to people whom I have heard him verbally maim in conversation.” Bellow sent admiring words to Philip Roth, then cut him to pieces in private.

Epstein came to dislike the way Bellow's books slanged his former intimates: “Bellow was a literary Bluebeard, killing off his ex-wives in devastating portraits in his novels.”

What annoys Epstein most in Bellow's published correspondence is the way he presents himself as a “large-hearted, sensitive, great-souled fellow ... he appears to have cornered the market on virtue.” Epstein has also

decided Bellow's aimlessly plotted novels aren't much good either. Bellow spoke condescendingly about Bernard Malamud but Epstein believes Malamud's *The Fixer* is a better novel than Bellow ever came close to writing.

Some of us have followed Epstein for decades, through his writings in *Commentary*, *The New Criterion* and other magazines. We remember that from 1974 to 1998 he



edited the best literary quarterly in the English language, *The American Scholar*. He made it look easy. A reader innocent of the labour involved in editing would have assumed that first-class writers automatically sent Epstein their most thoughtful and original articles. They weren't spectacular, sensation-creating articles; they were simply the best.

Among the most enjoyable pieces were those Epstein himself wrote at the front of the magazine, under the pen name Aristides. All good things must end, but we readers were nevertheless shocked when the owners of the magazine, the Phi Beta Kappa Society, fired him. They

did it in a relatively gentle way — as he said in a farewell note to readers, he was given a year to clean out his desk. But why? After all, there are thousands of editors who deserve to be fired. Why did it happen to one of the best?

A few years later Epstein told an interviewer that he was discharged not for what he published but for what he did not. "I believe I was fired from this lovely, cushy job for being insufficiently correct politically." He believed that scholarship in Afro-American, feminist and gay studies hadn't produced much that was worth publishing. "I never attacked it in the magazine, except by ignoring it." His crime was to show no enthusiasm for the tendencies that his board of directors considered up-to-date, admirable and socially relevant. When Houghton Mifflin published a collection of his Aristides pieces, Epstein titled it *In a Cardboard Belt!: Essays Personal, Literary and Savage*. He drew the title from Mel Brooks's *The Producers* in which Zero Mostel, as Max Bialystock,

pleads poverty: "I'm wearing a cardboard belt!"

Would any other serious writer on literature, philosophy and history go to Zero Mostel for a title? It was just one of the many agreeable ways that Epstein established his uniqueness. *Essays in Biography* demonstrates 40 other ways he does it.

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