snobbery

THE AMERICAN VERSION

JOSEPH EPSTEIN

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Snobbery

Also by Joseph Epstein

NARCISSUS LEAVES THE POOL

LIFE SENTENCES

WITH MY TROUSERS ROLLED

PERTINENT PLAYERS

THE GOLDIN BOYS

A LINE OUT FOR A WALK

PARTIAL PAYMENTS

ONCE MORE AROUND THE BLOCK

PLAUSIBLE PREJUDICES

THE MIDDLE OF MY TETHER

FAMILIAR TERRITORY

AMBITION

DIVORCED IN AMERICA

For Kathleen and Lily

MY CALIFORNIA GIRLS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Whatever gaiety this book has is largely owing to the charm and verve of the magical music of Fats Waller, which I listened to almost constantly over the past two years. Whatever melancholy and errors the book contains have been supplied by the author.

Preface

This is a book about snobbery, its perplexities and its perils, its complications and not least its comedy. Behind its composition lies the perpetual question—never, I hope, pressed too insistently but always looming in the background—of whether snobbery is a constituent part of human nature or instead an aberration brought about by particular social conditions. The book has been written for those who, after having looked into themselves and into the life around them, have acquired sufficient detachment to exclaim, rather unoriginally perhaps, but nonetheless with ever-fresh astonishment: "What a piece of work is man!"

Whenever I happened to mention that I was attempting to write a book on snobbery, someone was sure to respond by saying that he or she hoped I was going to cover this or that aspect of the subject—the snobbery of PBS television, of shades of skin color among African Americans, of health food, of contemporary art—that was, almost invariably, not included in my book. But snobbery, like bacteria, is found everywhere; this is part of its fascination and part of the difficulty it presents to its chronicler.

Snobbery also seems to have existed, in however attenuated a form, from the Tuesday of the week following that in which God created the universe. A brief illustration will reinforce my point. For more than a century after the Emperor Constantine moved the seat of the Roman Empire from

Rome to Constantinople, some people would say, with pride but more with snobbery, that their family had "come over with Constantine." Sound familiar?

Because snobbery is of such long standing and so very widespread, I early made a decision to concentrate my coverage of the subject to its role in America. In these pages, then, I have tried to make out the larger patterns of snobbery within the broad canvas of American life since the decline of what, later in the book, I call the Waspocracy. If your own favorite snobbery is missing, please accept my apology and take some (possibly snobbish) comfort that your awareness of snobbery exceeds that of the author of an entire book on the subject.

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Part One

We will drink a little
and philosophize a little
and perhaps we both
who are made of blood and illusion
will finally free ourselves
from the oppressive levity of appearance.

— Zbigniew Herbert, "A Parable of King Midas"

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It Takes One to Know One

RATHER THAN imply his superiority to his subject, the author of a book about snobbery ought to set out, fairly briefly, his own experience of snobbery. He ought to let his readers know if he has been a victim of snobbery, and of the sorts of snobbery to which he is susceptible, to allow them to judge his own relationship to the subject.

Perhaps the best way for me to begin, then, is to explain my social origins. These are a bit complicated. They seem to have been culturally lower middle class but with middle- and, later, upper-middle-class financial backing. Neither of my parents went to college. My father, growing up in Canada, in fact never finished high school; my mother took what was then known as "the commercial course" at John Marshall (public) High School in Chicago. They were both Jewish, but, against the positive stereotype of Jews loving culture and things of the mind, my parents had almost no cultural interests apart from occasionally going to musical comedies or, in later years, watching the Boston Pops on television. Magazines — *Life, Look,* later *Time* — and local newspapers came into our apartment, but no books. I don't recall our owning an English dictionary, though both my parents were well spoken, always grammatical and jargon-free.

Politics was not a great subject of family conversation. The

behavior of our extended family and neighbors, money, my father's relations with customers at his business, these made up the main conversational fare — unspeculative, nonhypothetical, all very specific. Education was another subject of little interest; no time was spent, say, discussing the differences between Amherst and Williams colleges, for the good reason that neither of my parents had ever heard of such places.

My father, I believe, hadn't a speck of snobbery. It would not have occurred to him to want to rise socially in the world, and the only people he looked down upon — apart from crooks of one kind or another — were people who seemed to be without the ambition to take measured risks in business. We had a distant cousin who was a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army, and my father was baffled by the notion of a Jewish man settling for a career in the regular army. It pleased my father to give ample sums to charities (many of them Jewish charities) and, in later years, to travel to foreign countries — once, with my mother, to Paris on the *Concorde* and back from London on the *QE2*. Above all, it pleased him to have made enough money to help out his family and be able to establish his financial independence, which he did at the age of seventeen. But he barely acknowledged the social realm in which snobbery takes place. For him the world of status, where style, rank, and social climbing were central, was a mystery he felt no need to fathom.

My mother, though no snob either, had a greater awareness of snobbery. She was on the alert for snobberies used against her, and could be vulnerable to them. In her friendships she sought out women who were goodhearted, for she was goodhearted and generous herself. She also had an unashamed taste for what, by her standard, passed for *luxe,* which meant driving big cars (Cadillacs), owning lavish furniture, dressing well (furs, expensive dresses, Italian shoes, jewelry). She was made a bit nervous by people who had more money than she, and tended to arrange her social life among people who were her financial equals or inferiors. But I never saw my mother — or my father — commit a single socially mean act: I never saw them fawn over anyone better off than they, or put

down anyone beneath them for reasons one would think to call snobbish.

Why, then, did the eldest of their two sons, the author of this book, have so keen a sense, almost from the outset of his consciousness, of the various arrangements that make for snobbery: social class, money, taste, religion, admired attainments, status of all kinds. As a small boy, I sensed who was richer than whom, noted people who lived more grandly and more poorly than we, immediately grasped what excited the envy of others, felt stirrings of incipient envy of my own. Where this came from I cannot even now say, but it was, beyond argument, in place. Nor, to this day, has it ever left me.

When men gathered in my parents' apartment to talk about world affairs, I could not help noticing that the wealthier ones generally did most of the talking, or at least talked most authoritatively and were listened to most closely. A pleasant man named Sam Cowling, living in the apartment building next to ours, was a comedian on a popular radio show called *The Breakfast Club,* and this, clearly, lent him a certain allure. Money and celebrity, I early recognized, counted for quite a bit in the world. Some work in life carried greater prestige than other work — as in baseball, shortstop was a more admired position than second base, and in football, quarterback was more admired than interior lineman.

In grammar school I was able to arrange to play both shortstop and quarterback. I also became a fair tennis player, a sport with all sorts of interesting connections to snobbery, from its then country-club settings to its emphasis on stylishness, which tends to vaunt appearance over reality — a phenomenon at the heart of much snobbery.

I went to a high school where status was spelled out with a brute clarity I have not since encountered elsewhere. At Nicholas Senn High School on the North Side of Chicago, status was at least as carefully calibrated as at the court of the Sun King at Versailles, though the food was less good and the clothing nowhere near so elegant. The school had roughly fifty clubs, fraternities, and sororities for boys and for girls, each with its own colorful jackets. Some had Greek-letter

names — Alpha, Beta, Delta; some had the names of animals, real and mythological — Ravens, Condors, Gargoyles; some had names with aristocratic shadings — Dukes, Majestics, Imperials, Gentry; some had neologisms for names — Raynors, Chiquitas, Fidels, Iaetas. But each club, each fraternity and sorority had a social character that was distinct and apparent to the student body: this club represented the best athletes, this sorority the cutest girls, this fraternity the most fearsome thugs, this the dreariest nerds ("science bores," we called them).

It didn't take me long — perhaps a couple of months at the outside — to decode all these groups with their various social gradations. Because I had in those days a superficial charm that allowed me to make friends easily, I was soon invited to join the best of the clubs and fraternities, which meant those whose members were among the best athletes and most socially fluent of the school's male students. The ease with which I was able to do this may have left me a touch jaded. Sufficiently so, at any rate, so that during my senior year in high school I was invited to join a boys' honor society called Green & White and turned it down, perhaps the first boy in the history of the school to do so. I didn't want it, I didn't need it, and, besides, I understood that turning it down would confer greater status upon me than accepting it. From a fairly early age, then, I was a fairly cunning statustician.

Because I was not an uninterested student, and because my family had no knowledge of the social and financial implications of attending the better American colleges and universities — which for snobbish reasons remain, I believe, considerable — I went to the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, which in those days had, for residents of the state, an open-enrollment policy and low fees. Illinois turned out to be one of the most Greek — that is, most fraternity- and sorority-ridden — campuses in the United States. With my small talent for making myself acceptable, I arranged to be invited to join the best *Jewish* fraternity on campus. (And let me add that — with a feeling of slight shame