

Joseph Epstein: Essayist Extraordinaire

By  
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I first became aware of Joseph Epstein on a warm, sunny morning in Florida two winters ago. My husband was reading the Wall Street Journal and noticed an article titled “The Long, Sad Descent of ‘Staircase Wit.’” He remarked, “Here’s something I think you’d enjoy; it’s pretty entertaining.” I noticed it was by Joseph Epstein and wasn’t familiar with him. Also I didn’t know what staircase wit was. After reading the article, I was just enchanted by Epstein’s style and humor and immediately went online and ordered two of his books: Charm: The Elusive Enchantment and Windsprints, a very long book of 143 of his short essays. Since then, of course, I have realized what an amazing and prolific writer Joseph Epstein is. In fact, I was so impressed that I suggested him for a Quest paper.

You might be interested in knowing what staircase wit is since it wasn’t chosen as a Quest topic even though I submitted it along with Joseph Epstein. It occurs “when you think of a perfect reply too late.” ([simplicable.com](http://simplicable.com), p. 1)) As Epstein states: “It denotes those missed opportunities for a dazzling riposte, a charming bit of repartee, that occurs too late—only, as it were, on the staircase as one is departing.” (Epstein, WSJ, A15) In the article he uses as an example the times that Elizabeth Warren was called Pocahontas by President Trump. Instead of having a DNA test, Epstein noted that she could have “offered a politically incorrect rejoinder: Mr. Trump, I wish I were Pocahontas, so that I might have your preposterous scalp on my belt.” (Epstein, WSJ, A15)

I refer to Joseph Epstein as an “essayist extraordinaire” because after reading what seems like thousands of his essays, I find him to be a remarkable writer whose style and humor are not only very readable and entertaining, but also because his observations on the commonplace are

so perceptive. Epstein's essays can be categorized as informal, or familiar, essays, which are "often humorous, valuing lightness of tone above all else. . . and filled with intimate personal observations." (Nordquist, p. 3).

The French philosopher Michel de Montaigne is considered the "father" of the familiar essay. (Nordquist, p. 1) In the last half of the 1500s, he developed this new literary form to explain his personal observations to his readers concerning the religious conflicts, violence, and corruption so prevalent during his life, but rather than criticize and moralize, he focused on his own views using a more conversational style and informal tone although humor was probably in short supply. (Sankovitch, article)

Epstein is often compared to Montaigne, which he admits boosts his ego but finds it hard to believe. He states: "Montaigne is broader, deeper, more acute than I; he had a better character, a subtler mind, a more complex and ripe philosophy. He also happens to have lived a more complex and richer life. Otherwise there is scarcely any difference between us." (Epstein, Author's Note. "Narcissus," p. ix)

How does a person become an extraordinary essayist? If you think Epstein grew up always reading and loving to write essays and being an excellent student, you would be wrong. He describes himself this way: "Brainy was the last thing I would ever have been called. A thoroughly uninterested high school student—I graduated 169 in a class of 211—my high-school years were spent playing basketball and tennis, pursuing girls, and establishing myself as a good guy, which is to say a genial screw-off." (Epstein, "University of Chicago Days." [claremont.org](http://claremont.org). p. 2) "I came to school each day not for learning but for laughter: riotous, raucous, unremitting laughter among friends." (Epstein, A Literary Education, p. 204)

In his 2015 book of essays titled Masters of the Game, Epstein describes the impact sports, all sports, have had on him. He loves not just basketball and tennis, but also football, baseball, hockey, and boxing. He admits that although he learned the skills to participate in sports, he wasn't very good at them, but that didn't diminish his passion for them. He didn't really care that much about winning. It was more important to him that he look good slamming a cross court backhand in tennis, even if he didn't win the point, than hitting a safe shot down the line. It is the craft of each sport that has fascinated him his whole life: the hook shot in basketball, catching a touchdown pass in the end zone, the perfect tackle, the winning overhead in tennis, and hitting a perfect drive down the fairway. (Epstein, Masters of the Game, p. 15)

As a child, he had no interest in fairy tales, such as "Jack and the Beanstalk," and "felt anyone dumb enough to trade a live cow for a mess of beans had whatever trouble he encountered coming to him." (Epstein, Masters of the Game, p. 16). The only magazines and books he read were about sports, and when he encountered author John R. Tunis, he was hooked. After devouring the novel All-American, he tracked down as many Tunis stories as he could and even began to imagine himself as a character in those books. (Epstein, Masters of the Game, pp. 16-17)

To go back to the beginning, Epstein was born in Chicago in 1937 and has spent all but six years of his life there: "two in the Army, two in New York, two in Little Rock, Arkansas." (Epstein, A Literary Education, p. 99) He grew up on the West Side where many other Jewish families lived, but by the 1960s, his family migrated to the northern suburbs. "It was in West Rogers Park, in a predominantly Jewish, wholly middle class atmosphere that I grew up—without want, without fear," (Epstein, A Literary Education, p. 24) and living a comfortable life. (p. 24)

In his essay titled “Coming of Age in Chicago,” Epstein states there were many country clubs open to Jews in Chicago, but his father, who was a salesman, would have nothing to do with them. Money was what these clubs were all about and what Chicago was all about. In Joseph’s view, “Everywhere in the city money was the sole, the whole, measure of the man,” (Epstein, A Literary Education, p. 25) and he “never found (those clubs) anything but fascinating.” (p. 25) Indeed, he states, “. . . in my teenage years it was the wheelers, the hustlers, the smart-money types, who made the strongest impression on me.” (p. 25)

Parents in the 40s and 50s were traditional and did not pay a lot of attention to their children. They loved them, provided for them but had lives of their own. Epstein’s mother was an intelligent woman who kept busy socially, prepared abundant meals, kept a tidy house, and organized fundraisers. (Epstein, A Literary Education, p. 123) She was a realist who kept Joseph and his younger brother grounded. Once when Joseph remarked he was bored, his mother said, “Oh, why don’t you bang your head against that wall. That’ll take your mind off your boredom.” (p. 123) He never said he was bored again. (p. 123)

Once Epstein gained his driver’s license at 15, he and his friends were free to roam Chicago and get acquainted with all the corruption the city had to offer. With the Syndicate in full swing, Jews were extensively involved in the Mob as bookies and fight promoters with names like “Acey Feynman, Potsey Pearlstein, and Hawkface Bernie Greenburg,” (Epstein, A Literary Education, p. 27) and Epstein thought all the rumors about these characters were just “delicious.” (p. 27)

At the time of his high school graduation, he felt no pressure to go on to college. In fact, his father suggested he would make a good salesman, but Joseph and most of his friends decided to head “downstate” (Epstein, A Literary Education, p. 40) to the University of Illinois, but he

stayed only a year while still not having any sense of what he wanted to study or what he was passionate about. After transferring to the University of Chicago, he admits he was still not “capable of taking serious advantage of” (Epstein, A Literary Education, p. 8) any kind of education. “My body may have been in the classroom, but my mind frequently deserted it.” (Claremont, p. 4). His “plan... was to remain as inconspicuous as possible; I was sedulous only in the attempt to hide my ignorance, which was genuine and substantial.” (Epstein, A Literary Education, p. 8). As one of his professors stood before the class, “all I could think of was what induced him to buy that hopeless necktie he was wearing, and might that be a soup stain prominently in the middle of it, and if so, made by chicken noodle or minestrone?” (Epstein, A Literary Education, p. 8)

None of his professors recognized any talent in Joseph, and rightly so. As he states, “I made no A’s. I wrote no brilliant papers. I didn’t do especially well on exams. I was not quick in response in the classroom.” (Epstein, A Literary Education, p. 349)

All of this information is meant to emphasize that nothing in Joseph Epstein’s first 19 years contributed to the writer he would become, but the University of Chicago is where that spark was ignited. There was “a standard of seriousness” (claremont, p. 5) that required undergraduates to read Aristotle and Plato and Milton and to be examined at year end. “No trivial books were taught at the university during my time there.” (p. 5) “Looked upon now, I realize I owe the University of Chicago more than I can hope ever to repay.” (p. 6)

After graduating from the University of Chicago, Joseph served in the Army from 1958-1960 and has strong opinions about the draft vs. a volunteer military. In his essay “How I Learned to Love the Draft,” Epstein shares his views on why he feels reinstating the draft would be good for America. While at Fort Hood, he worked on the post newspaper, and later in Little

Rock as a clerk at a recruiting station, he typed up physicals, both jobs he admitted were “excruciatingly boring.” ([theatlantic.com/magazine](http://theatlantic.com/magazine), p. 7)

And yet, Epstein states he is “grateful” (p. 7) for the two years he spent in the military. As a middle class, Jewish man from Chicago, it “gave me a vivid sense of the social breadth of my country. I slept in barracks and shared all my meals with American Indians, African Americans from Detroit, white Appalachians, Christian scientists from Kansas, and discovered myself befriending and being befriended by young men I would not otherwise have met. I have never felt more American than when I was in the Army.” (p. 8)

Those two years in the military gave Epstein a chance to think about what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. If it hadn’t been for the draft, he states he probably would have gone to law school “simply out of the need to appear serious, and today would have been a perhaps wealthier but undoubtedly much less contented man.” (p. 11). By the time his two years in the military were over, he knew he wanted he wanted to be a writer. (pp. 7-11)

Epstein had discovered intellectual magazines while at the University of Chicago, journals that expanded his mind and made him aware of writers who had something important to say and who said it with intelligence, sophistication, and wit. Those journals, along with his literary education at the university, awakened in him an appreciation for the complexity of human nature and his desire to write about the realities of life. ([A Literary Education](#), pp. 13-18)

While Epstein was still in Little Rock typing up physicals for the draft, he wrote his first published essay. It was 1959 during integration, and President Eisenhower had sent troops to protect the black students required to attend Little Rock High School. The tension in the city led Epstein to write “A Stillness in Little Rock.” While at a tobacco store one day, he spotted the rather unknown [New Leader](#) magazine and sent his Little Rock essay off to New York, hoping

he would be paid at least \$100 for his contribution. The essay was published, and he was told by the editor to keep writing but that the New Leader “does not pay its contributors.” (“New Leader Days,” pp. 1-5)

That was the beginning of Epstein’s career as a writer, and he was thrilled to have had his essay published. He ended up working as a sub-editor for the New Leader in New York in 1962-63 and found his job there to be invaluable to him even though in many ways he found the magazine wanting. (pp. 1-2).

In 1964-65 he was back in Little Rock as the director of the antipoverty program for Pulaski County. He had published an article on urban renewal and appeared to have knowledge and experience in tackling inner city problems. Years later in 2014, he recalled that time in an essay in the Wall Street Journal titled “What I Learned Fighting Poverty in Little Rock.” Looking back, he realized he had been an idealistic 27 year old, “confident that society could be greatly improved with the help of large infusions of money and the serious thinking of people like myself.” (Epstein, “What I Learned Fighting Poverty,” p. 1) He was wrong. He realized he did not fully understand poverty, but he did work hard to set up programs he believed would help: “Head Start, preschool for poor children, legal aid; and birth control counseling.” (p. 2) After returning to Chicago, he learned the antipoverty programs in Little Rock were dying out even though a great deal of money had been spent and many dedicated people tried their best. (p. 3).

That was when Epstein noticed his left-wing, political views were beginning to change. Being Jewish, living through the Civil Rights Movement, the upheavals of the 1960s, and the Vietnam War contributed to his becoming more conservative in his opinions and ideas. Also becoming an intellectual and a writer, and being a part of liberal university campuses while he



was teaching added to this change. Epstein does not feel the need to criticize people or liberal ideas, but instead he wants to understand what is happening around him by writing about it, and he finds that a lot more interesting. (pp. 94-95)

Besides working at the New Leader and in Little Rock, Epstein found the time to get married and have two sons, all by the time he was 25. (Epstein, A Literary Education, p. 203) He also admitted he made “a grave mistake” and “married the wrong woman” (p. 204) and was divorced 10 years later but kept custody of his sons. (p. 204). In 1974 he wrote Divorced in America: Marriage in an Age of Possibility, a book which analyzes the causes of divorce, the legal proceedings, and the effect it has on those involved. He views his own divorce as “a personal failure.” (Authors online, p. 4) And yet in that same year he married Barbara Maher, an editor, that he describes as “(my current, my final, my dear and irreplaceable wife).” (Epstein, With My Trousers Rolled, p. 22)

While already established in his writing career, Epstein was a visiting lecturer in writing and literature at Northwestern University from 1974-2002. Several of his essays focus on his thoughts about teaching and his students. In “The Death of Liberal Arts,” he states, “Teaching remains a mysterious, magical art .... No one tells you how to do it.” (Epstein, A Literary life, p. 351) He feels it is through a liberal arts education that students learn about those mysteries of life, but he senses that fewer colleges are offering courses in Western literature, philosophy, and history and focusing more on multicultural studies. (pp. 350-354)

At the same time Epstein was teaching students at Northwestern, he was also the editor of The American Scholar, the quarterly journal of Phi Beta Kappa, which had always been a highly regarded intellectual magazine. While he was editor, he wrote 91 essays in his “Life and Letters” column under the pseudonym Aristides, referring to the ancient Athenian statesman. He

remarked: “No writing, ... has come as easily to me. I never wanted for a subject, and—capacious gasbag that I am—I always had the 6,500 words needed to cover that subject.” (Gale, p. 11). In 1998 Epstein was fired in a controversial decision by the Phi Beta Kappa Senate. Epstein remarked he was removed “for being insufficiently correct politically.” His 92nd essay in the magazine was titled “I’m history,” and Michael Pakenham of the Baltimore Sun wrote that it was the end of an era at a great intellectual journal—a victory for the mindless.” (Packinham, p. 1)

With his teaching career and editorship in his past, Epstein was now free to read and write as much as he wanted to. As to how he became so extraordinary as an essayist, several factors are involved. One is having had a literary education although Epstein himself states that he would call his own literary education “slapdash, wildly uneven, and chiefly autodidactical.” (p. 13) As I mentioned earlier, what the University of Chicago did right was to require its students to read serious, classic novels and the great ancient writers. (p. 11-12). He states, “From the study of literature we learn that life is sad, comic, heroic, vicious, dignified, ridiculous, and endlessly amusing. . . .” (p. 17).

Reading widely also contributes to becoming an excellent essayist. In his 60-year career as a writer, Epstein states that he sometimes reads up to four-five hours a day, (Epstein, Narcissus Leaves the Pool, p. 206) anything that interests him. While reading, he “makes notes recalling anecdotes, facts, oddities...that I wish to include in an essay, but where precisely in the essay they will be used. . . I cannot say in advance.” (p. 381) He calls the personal or familiar essay a “form of discovery.” (p. 381)

Once he has decided on a subject for an essay, Epstein lets it “take off on any track it wishes, building its own structure as it moves along, rebuilding and making itself—and its

author—each time out.” (p. 377) By the end of the essay, the reader discovers where the author “stands on complex issues, problems, questions, subjects. . . . (but) the true subject is the author of the essay.” (pp. 381 and 383)

The essays that appear in Wind Sprints are good examples of the way Epstein begins with a subject and then lets it take off and build its own structure. These short essays appeared mostly in the Weekly Standard magazine and are about a variety of subjects. In the essay “Hats Off,” for example, Epstein knew he wanted to write about hats but didn’t know exactly how it would come together. He first mentions how casual American clothing has become, and then cites how baseball caps are worn everywhere, outdoors and indoors. As an anecdote, he tells about the time he was teaching a class at Northwestern on irony, explaining that it means the opposite of what you say. He remarked to the hat-wearing students: “I find nothing so invigorating as teaching about the meaning of evil in the novels of Joseph Conrad to a group of students wearing their baseball caps backwards.” (Epstein, Wind Sprints, p. 98).

As is often the case with writers, one can see how Epstein changes over the years in his choice of subject matter and his opinions about those subjects. In 1979 Epstein published his first book of essays titled Familiar Territory: Observations on American Life, which includes 14 essays from The American Scholar, the Phi Beta Kappa journal. He “tackles homely rather than earthshaking subjects: food, exercise and language, not nuclear war or the welfare state.” (Gale, p. 8)

In 1983 Epstein’s second book of familiar essays also from The American Scholar was published. The title of the book, In the Middle of My Tether, “refers to being at the extreme limits of one’s abilities or endurance,” (Matherne) and his subjects show he is beginning to look back to a time he preferred. In a review of the book, Mary Sibley points out that one selection

titled “The End of Moviegoing” highlights Epstein’s love of old movies. Because he grew up before TV became popular, he spent a lot of time going to movies and still prefers them to what is on television. (Mary Sibley, review of In the Middle of My Tether)

In 1995 Norton and Company published Epstein’s fifth book of essays titled With My Trousers Rolled in reference to T. S. Eliot’s poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” in which the main character states: “I grow old . . . I grow old . . . I shall wear the bottom of my trousers rolled.” (Epstein, With My Trousers Rolled, Book jacket and Quote explanation page) In one of the essays “The Bonfire of My Vanities,” Epstein admits his own vanity not only about having his shoes shined and getting a haircut, but also about the seventy dollar French bow ties he wears. (Epstein, With My Trousers Rolled, p. 56) He clarifies: “But my vanity about my appearance is small-time stuff next to my vanity as an author. . . . My vanity is the vanity of, above all, wishing not to seem vain.” (p. 61 and p. 62). Epstein doesn’t do book promotions, doesn’t like to be photographed, or ask other writers to supply blurbs for his books. (pp. 62-63) And yet he enjoys seeing his name “in print” (p. 55), and he “desire(s) to be accepted as . . . an elegant writer.” (p. 55).

In another essay in that same book titled “Nicely Out of It,” Epstein wonders if he was “ever truly in it?” (Epstein, With My Trousers Rolled, p. 242) There was a time years earlier when he felt the need to know popular songs, books, movies, and clothing in order to have opinions on them, but in his 40s he began not to care if he was with-it because the changes he witnessed in culture were not to his liking. He is again looking back in time, but he emphasizes: “I prefer being out in the cold with my own well-worn but comfortably out-of-it notions” (p. 259) and find that some ideas are “worth fighting for” (p. 259): “honor,” “dignity,” “integrity,” “loyalty,” and “decency.” (pp. 259-60)

In 1999 Epstein's sixth collection of familiar essays titled Narcissus Leaves the Pool was published. The book again comprises essays he wrote for The American Scholar when he was editor there. The one that shows his progression of ideas the most is "Narcissus Leaves the Pool," in which he realizes at age 60, he is no longer young and maybe he should get serious. But he admits that he cannot "resist a joke, a witty formulation, a piece of well-made frivolity" for very long. He has stated: "I should prefer to die laughing, and, on more than one occasion, thought I might." ([goodreads.com/quotes](http://goodreads.com/quotes))

In the essay "Narcissus Leaves the Pool," the aging Epstein describes his body this way: "Emerging from the shower, I stand naked in front of my bathroom mirror. This, let the truth be told, is not an altogether enrapturing sight. (Had he grown well into middle age, Narcissus himself would surely have spent a lot less time gazing into the pool.)" (Narcissus Leaves the Pool, p. 20)

He states that even with clean living and a lot of luck, "Beyond a certain point one ceases to grow stronger, more beautiful, more desirable. . . and the body reminds us that we are in the swim only for a short, however glorious while. . . . Then the whistle blows and it's everybody but everybody out of the pool, and that includes you—Narcissus—which is to say me." (p. 20)

But until he leaves the pool, Epstein intends to share his views and opinions about advancing age with all the crankiness and seriousness a 70 year old is allowed. In his essay "Old Age and Other Laughs," he complains about how much better life was when he was young—when men carried handkerchiefs, when Congress was much more distinguished, and when universities seemed more serious and intellectual." (Epstein, A Literary Education, p. 111).

He states he no longer feels the need to be up-to-date on celebrities, such as Madonna and Lady Gaga; (p. 116) nor does he care to read books he is not interested in.

Mostly, Epstein hopes to avoid serious illness and caregivers in his remaining years and to continue to look at life with a sense of humor. When his insurance agent asked him if he and his wife have assisted-living insurance, he replied: “Thanks all the same, Jack, but we have no need for assisted-living insurance. . . . We have pistols.”

“Great,” he replied nicely on beat. “I just hope when the time comes to use them you are able to find them.” (p. 107).

Why, at 83 years of age, does Epstein continue to write his familiar essays when he could easily just sit and read all day long? He has stated: “Once I decided. . . that I was a modestly talented fellow. . . , I began to feel rather justified in my own selfish need to exercise that talent, and I have remained so.” (p. 190) Over the years readers have informed him that he is indeed talented, and he reveals: “Praise, for which I have an appalling appetite—(is) the one appetite that hasn’t seemed to diminish as I grow older.” (p. 190) “Work is for me the antidote, not for any of the world’s ills, but for all of my own. Work keeps the black dog from the door, the blue funk on the other side of the window. I needn’t search for life’s meaning but seem to temporarily to have found it, . . . . I am as close to happiness as I’m likely to get.” (pp. 192-93)

Epstein sums up his extraordinary life this way: “I have been one of the world’s luckiest people: paid for doing what I like most to do, rich in friends, in good health, lucid, still laughing. I have had a very good roll of the dice.” (pp. 233)

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