

MAGAZINE SECTION

By EDWARD ALEXANDER

SPECIAL TO THE CHICAGO JEWISH STAR

JOSEPH EPSTEIN is a prolific master of several genres, in all of which he is widely read with pleasure, profit, and admiration.

His familiar essays, concerned with everyday things rather than public affairs, and written in a relaxed, self-revealing, sometimes whimsical style, put him in a class with the great 19th Century originators of the form: CHARLES LAMB, THOMAS DE QUINCEY, and WILLIAM HAZLITT.

Like Hazlitt, he takes special relish in skewering "the ignorance of the learned," which in modern America means the disproportionate presence of PhDs among the stupidest people in the country. He edited Phi Beta Kappa's journal, *The American Scholar*, in its best years (1974-98), and had the distinction of being fired from the job for ignoring the pseudo-scholarship of Victimology Studies, especially its feminist branch.

He has also published many short stories dealing with Chicago Jewry, and several volumes of scintillating literary criticism.

His latest book, *Essays in Biography* (Axios Press, 603 pp., \$24), is a collection of 40 review-essays that deal with biographies of, or collections of letters by, many literary and academic figures, two athletes, one sex expert (Kinsey), one musician (Gershwin), one comedian (W. C. Fields), one president (Washington), and one presidential candidate from Illinois (Stevenson).

The section titles, not logically parallel, are: "Americans," "Englishmen," "Popular Culture," and "And Others." Bibliographical information is in short supply, consisting only of a list of seven publications in which "some of the essays" first appeared.

THE GOLD STANDARD for biography was established

in 1791 by JAMES BOSWELL'S *Life of Samuel Johnson*.

Historian THOMAS MACAULAY, writing in 1831, pronounced its author

"the first of biographers. He has no second. He has distanced all his competitors so decidedly that it is not worth while to place them."

But there was a catch: Boswell's triumph derived from a paradox:

"If he had not been a great fool, he would never have been a great writer... Without ... the officiousness, the inquisitiveness, the effrontery, the toad-eating ... he never could have produced so excellent a book."

Incensed by Macaulay's essay, historian and biographer THOMAS CARLYLE at once replied that although Boswell was indeed "a hunter after spiritual Notabilities, that he loved such, and longed, and even crept and crawled to be near them," discipleship and hero-worship were virtues in men and still more in biographers.

When Boswell saw greatness, he had the sense to bow or even kneel in its presence.

In the present volume, Epstein usually finds a moderate middle ground between the extremes of idolatrous hero-worship

and resentful, jealous iconoclasm. He is not reluctant to acknowledge and even bow down before superior intellect or great talent.

Of the Chicago Bulls' MICHAEL JORDAN, for exam-

ple, he writes: "In Michael we had the reincarnation of Achilles, but without the sulking and without the heel."

EPSTEIN can be severe in his scorn for self-fascinated biographers who fancy themselves superior to great athletes who did have Achilles heels, like JOE DIMAGGIO.

"One of the best reasons not to be an icon is that it brings out iconoclasts, often in the disguise of biographers."

DiMaggio, "a classic of quiet elegance," was depicted by biographer RICHARD BEN CRAMER as a misogynist, a bad father, very nearly a Mafia member.

For such low level iconoclasm Epstein has only contempt:

"If the biographer is the morally superior man, why does he seem so much less interesting than his subject and finally so unconvincing? The short answer is that his moral superiority exists only on paper."

Epstein, to be sure, does

not, in practice, always achieve the perfection of his own ideal. His essay on SAUL BELLOW, an ex-friend and former racquetball partner in Chicago and Evanston, has more than a taste of the iconoclasm displayed by Cramer.

He acknowledges Bellow's powers of description, his lyrical, intellectual, and metaphorical flights, but concludes that

"Despite all the prizes and critical praise ... Bellow wasn't truly a novelist." (In 1971, he had called Bellow "the premier American novelist.")

His critique of Bellow's character reminds one that among Epstein's books is a volume called *Gossip*. He uses the *lashon harah* of several enemies Bellow had acquired during his lifetime (of nearly 90 years) to paint the writer as "a veritable Jewish porcupine of touchiness," whose personal relations exhibited a gaping discrepancy "between the large moral claims made in his fiction and his own erratic personal behavior."

THE BELLOW ESSAY is one of 13 that deal with Jews, only three of whom are treated with unstinting affection and admiration: belles-letttrists ERICH HELLER (Epstein's colleague at

Northwestern), and JOHN GROSS, and New York intellectual IRVING KRISTOL.

(Epstein calls Kristol and his historian wife GERTRUDE HIMMELFARB "the Nick and Nora Charles of American intellectual life. They were always on the case together.")

Epstein: A place among the great essayists

A 14th essay deals with a figure (MAX BEERBOHM) often mistaken for a Jew; and three more, on HENRY ADAMS, GORE VIDAL and T. S. ELIOT, confront a problem of more than passing concern to Jews: antisemitism.

Since Epstein's generally warm heart harbors a very cold spot for political lunatics, Vidal (like SUSAN SONTAG) is dispatched with well-deserved mercilessness.

But Eliot is one of Epstein's own icons, and he hesitates to chip away.

He knows and presents nearly all the evidence against Eliot, including such verses as "Chicago Semite Viennese," whining about "Jew publishers," and banishing "freethinking Jews" from his ideal society for "reasons of race and religion."

Yet he (half-heartedly) suggests that "one can write or say antisemitic things without being an antisemite" and asserts that "everything antisemitic [Eliot] wrote was composed before the Holocaust."

But this is wrong. In 1948 Eliot published *Notes Toward the Definition of*

Culture, in which he proposed hegemony of a common religious culture. The enormity of this proposal has been described by novelist CYNTHIA OZICK in her essay in biography called "T. S. Eliot at 101":

"Here [Eliot] wrote — at a time when Hitler's ovens were just cooled and the shock of the Final Solution just dawning — that 'the scattering of Jews amongst people holding the Christian faith may have been unfortunate both for these peoples and for the Jews themselves,' because 'the effect may have been to strengthen the illusion that there can be culture without religion.' An extraordinary post-war comment. And in 'The Unity of European Culture,' a radio lecture broadcast to Germany in 1946, ... with the death camps exposed, and displaced persons everywhere, [Eliot] made no mention at all of the German atrocities.... So much for where high art and traditional culture landed Eliot."

I hasten to add that occasional disagreements with Epstein's opinions (or should we call them failures to share his prejudices?) do not lessen one's admiration for his stylistic brilliance, vast learning, nimble wit, prodigious memory for anecdote, ineffable charm, and (this above all) capacity for self-mockery.

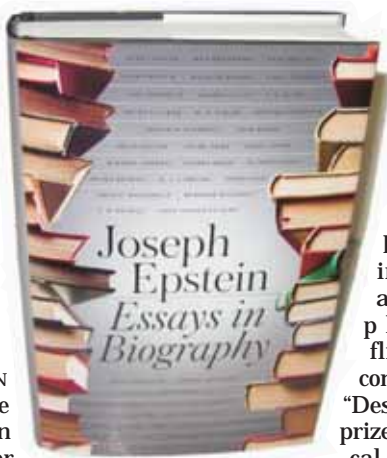
In evaluating a biography of Beerbohm, for example, he remarks:

"Hall's judgments of Beerbohm's works are sound. I know this is so because they agree with my own — always, of course, the best evidence for high intelligence in others." □


Edward Alexander is the author of *Irving Howe: Socialist, Critic, Jew*, one of the biographies discussed by Epstein. His most recent book is *The State of the Jews: A Critical Appraisal* (JEWISH STAR review, Aug. 17, 2012).



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