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Epstein, Joseph. **Essays in biography.** Axios Press, 2012. 603p index
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Epstein (Northwestern Univ.), one of the best essayists in contemporary American letters, engages with an impressive array of subjects, for example, Malcolm Gladwell, George Washington, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and W. C. Fields. His book is divided into sections on Americans (the largest), Englishmen, popular culture, and "others." He could devote an entire section to critics, since he has pieces on Dwight Macdonald, Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, and James Wolcott. Epstein's ability to capture a subject in a memorable 3,000 words should be the envy of biographers, who write at greater length but sometimes with no greater effect. Epstein brings to biography an incisive grasp of person and prose: "Washington was famous even before he was great, monumental while still drawing breath, apotheosized while still very much alive." In these 19 words, he builds a biographical schema that does not have to be labored over for 300 pages. He concludes that Washington's greatness inheres in his moral character, in his "genius for discerning right action." Something similar might be said about Epstein, who brings to biography a genius of discernment expressed in the just and moral character of his prose. **Summing Up:** Highly recommended. ★★★ All readers.—C.
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