

# A proper Epicurean

P. J. O'ROURKE

JUDITH MARTIN INTRODUCES politeness and mirth to a society where "have a nice day" passes for courtesy and a film like *Porky's* is thought to represent humor.

*Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior* is based on the syndicated "Miss Manners" newspaper column written by Ms. Martin, and it is a delightful book. I am no fan of weddings, anniversaries, funerals, or celebrations thereof, but I read this instruction on formal etiquette from cover to cover without any temptation to jam a three-and-an-eighth-inch by two-and-a-half-inch engraved card down someone's throat or throw pork fried rice at newlywed couples.

This is partly the result of Ms. Martin's excellent wit. When asked if there is any preferred date for weddings in modern life, Miss Manners replies, "It is preferable to hold them after the divorce and before the birth of the baby." And on the subject of publicity she says, "The old rule . . . was that a lady should allow her name to appear in the newspapers only three times: when she is born, when she marries, and when she dies. This is no longer workable. . . . A modern rule might be: A lady never gets married, gives birth, or, if possible, dies, on television—even if she is offered a free refrigerator for doing so."

But to call this volume "a funny etiquette book" would be something like calling *Ulysses* "a cockeyed look at the Micks." Lighthearted though it is, *Miss Manners' Guide* is a sophisticated and well-reasoned paean to self-control. Unrestraint, particularly emotional unrestraint, is condemned: "Contrary to the credo of this society, Miss Manners firmly believes that there are certain honest, understandable, deeply felt emotions that ought never to be expressed by anyone." And all intemperate behavior is reproached: "Miss Manners does not

want people to act naturally; she wants them to act civilly."

Miss Manners brings us the message that the difference between civilization and the lack of it is mastery of self. How did we happen to forget this? How did we come to be a nation full of grown men and women who cry constantly at the top of our lungs, immediately break all our toys, and soil ourselves in public without embarrassment?

It is an irony of the twentieth century that the worst threat to our way of life is totalitarianism while the second worst threat is everyone doing as he merry well pleases.

The careless, selfish, unthinking anarchy of daily social existence beggars description let alone response. Who has not wanted to take a yammering cab driver, sew him up in a sack full of cats, and place-kick him into the East River? Or grab a moron teenager with Voice-of-America-sized broadcasting equipment on his shoulder and pour Drano in his car? Or slice open an old friend with a new diet/religion/therapy/wife and tie a clove hitch in his entrails? One knows these actions would only add to the sum total of rudeness in modern life. But, though we have such august institutions as Alexander Haig and the \$1.6 trillion defense budget to protect us from totalitarianism, what will protect us from shovers, whiners, fondlers, and shirt collars that extend past sportcoat lapels? Perhaps Miss Manners will.

Armed only with kindly jest and thoroughgoing knowledge of tradition, Miss Manners does combat with all the world's ill breeding. And she is so clever, so firm, and yet so sympathetic that she might just win. (Although an occasional dose of ear Drano or sack of courtesy cats would probably help her cause—not that she'd approve.)

*Miss Manners' Guide* is the first really valid and forceful reply to the modern assault on etiquette. For sixty years manners have been under attack as hypocritical and unnatural. Finally someone has the nerve to say that of course they are. "The world needs more

false cheer," says Miss Manners, "and less honest crabbiness."

Disguised as a source of amusement and practical advice, *Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior* is actually a book of Epicurian philosophy in the proper sense of the term. It may be the most important work in that genre since Titus Lucretius Carus wrote *De Rerum Natura* around 60 B.C.

Ms. Martin shows manners to be a set of conventions by means of which humans may conduct their lives with the maximum amount of mental and physical comfort while providing complete opportunity for others to do the same. This is precisely the "ataraxia," or serenity, of Epicurus.

Ms. Martin denies that her rules of etiquette have any moral, political, or religious implications. But the reader will politely dismiss this modesty. Morals, politics, and religion are tawdry things compared to the kind of manners Ms. Martin advocates. Morals are nothing but an attempt to make human courtesy abstract and consistent. Politics is worse. It is the enforcement of some form of that courtesy with guns. And religion is just a last-ditch attempt to make people behave when, for instance, they aren't intellectual enough to understand morals and are nearly as well-armed as the government. Failing all else, religion tells people to act nice or great horned things will get them.

Ms. Martin indulges in no such threats or any sophistry or gunplay. She postulates that everyone would like to be as mentally and physically comfortable as possible. From that given, she deduces that the only way for such a thing to be achieved is for everyone to act civil and courteous. She then shows us the traditional Western European conventions of courtesy and civility, gives the reasons for their existence, suggests modifications in those conventions which contemporary circumstances have rendered awkward, and urges us to preserve the rest for the sake of symbolism as well as practical value.

The result of this meditation on life is an attitude and a pattern of behavior as logical as plane geometry, as polished as the Japanese tea ceremony, and as merciful as Christianity before it spread to more than twelve people and got confused with going to church.

This is good medicine for a nation with 200 million people in a position to enjoy material and intellectual

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pleasures but lacking any notion of what those pleasures are.

I think Ms. Martin should be made President of the World even if I am seventeen years behind in writing thank-you notes for my high school graduation presents and even if I do have to make polite small talk with Alexander Haig instead of busting an end table over his head at the next White House reception I attend. ■

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1900, by Rebecca West. Viking, 190 pp., \$19.95.

**The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West, 1911–1917,**  
selected and introduced by Jane Marcus. Viking, 402 pp., \$25.00.

# Unsentimental witness

PETER STANSKY

**F**IVE YEARS AGO, TO mark Rebecca West's eighty-fifth birthday, her British and American publishers brought out *Rebecca West: A Celebration*, a rich selection of previously published work, as well as five previously uncollected essays. This year marks an even greater celebration. On December 21, 1982, Dame Rebecca turns ninety. (That is the date given in a publicity release, although she herself, in *Who's Who*, prefers to give Christmas as her birthday.) Those years give her an extraordinary, almost mythic, range of memory. Few survive so long, and even more rarely those who have played such a prominent role.

The first piece in Jane Marcus's collection was published just before West's nineteenth birthday; her rumination on 1900 is appearing some months before her ninetieth. In between there have been novels, essays, books of criticism, political commentary—an extraordinary outpouring. Profound gratitude is due to her and to Jane Marcus for making available her early essays and journalism; it is striking how consistent she has been in her concerns and style—she is now just as militant in the defense of good sense and feminism. Jane Marcus does have a wish to depict her heroes, whether Virginia Woolf or Rebecca West, as feminists and socialists as militant as she is herself, and this is evident in the powerful, if rather hortatory, prose of her comments about West (and elsewhere about Woolf). In *The Young Rebecca* we have the wide range of West's activities, even in her youth—writing in the suffragist paper, *The Freewoman*, Robert Blatchford's socialist *Clarion*, and A. G. Gardiner's *Liberal Daily*

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*News*. West is a tough, unsentimental participator, commentator, and witness (as she appeared gloriously in *Reds*) to the events of this century.

As she is richly entitled to do, she has written *1900*, a more idiosyncratic essay than those of her youth. It is a commentary on the year, mostly but far from exclusively confined to England. There is quite a long section on France, with particular reference to Proust and to the Dreyfus case, and there are remarks about the United States and photographs of black construction workers, a black about to be electrocuted, a house upturned by a tidal wave in Galveston, Texas, in the autumn of 1900, and a train crossing the Dale Creek Bridge somewhere in the United States, but little discussion of the significance of these images. There is a photograph of Freud with his son Ernest in 1900 and of the Ur-couch in Berggasse 19, but little about Freud in the text.

*1900* appears to be a description of the events that were to shape West—whether she was fully aware of them or not, in the year 1900, when she turned eight. 1900 not only marked the death of the nineteenth century but brings to her mind other significant deaths. She permits herself to go two years backwards—and the most delightful bits are those on her childhood. (One hopes that it is true that she is writing her autobiography.) There is a wonderful picture of her being fed blackberries by her sisters and cousins at the age of six; the lovely suburban life of Richmond-on-Thames. The book opens with the death of Gladstone, whose passing West's father bemoaned: "Gladstone looked like the stern and wise and honored father everybody would like to have. Where are we to find another like that? It does not matter on which side he is. Things are better for a country when they have an elder statesman who looks as if he could save one from any sort of drowning." West herself says about the