

Notes on  
Narcissus Leave the Pool  
Book Author: Joseph Epstein  
Notes Author: William Gasarch

The title of the book is the title of the first chapter.

## 1 Overall

The chapters that are about the authors own life are narcissistic and uninteresting. Those that are about more general points are more interesting. Some are inbetween and are some-interesting.

## 2 Narcissus Leaves the Swimming Pool

Mostly the author complaining about growing old. Not much insight on the topic in general.

One things of interest: Studies show that even the very old should work out for PHYSICAL health but this means people with dementia live longer. Is that good for them? For Society?

## 3 An Extremely Well Informed SOB

The author complaints about having to many magazines and books in his house. He DOES read them (NOTE- I have to many math books in my house, mostly unread) but still then complaints that he READS to much. He asks the GOOD question *why is it good to be well informed?*.

It allows one to have opinions on more topics. Not sure this matters- lots of people have opinions on topics they know nothing about. Perhaps being well-informed allows one to have INTELLIGENT or at least WELL REASONED opinions. Not sure thats true either. He complains that even if you know A LOT about some controversial topic, there is more to know.

He says that the four great political controversies of the 20th century are

1. The Sacco-Vanzetti case.
2. Rosenberg spy trial. Why is this controversial when it is now know that they were GUILTY. There is still the question of (a) how guilty was

the wife, (b) did they deserve the death penalty, (c) how much damage did they do. The trouble is that this is all probably unknowable so people just argue based on their pre-conceived opinion.

3. Hiss-Chambers case. Again, why is this controversial? Hiss is now known to be GUILTY.
4. JFK assassination. Seriously? Oswald did it and acted alone.

I once read the the Dreyfus's affair in France is controversial, but I can't see how since he was innocent.

There are four types of informed-ness

1. Well informed. E.g., Newsmen who need to know who-voted-what-way on a bill. Know alot about NOW.
2. Knowledgeable. Well rounded, and know a lot about THEN.
3. Hip. Knows stuff outside the mainstream. There is a paradox since it ends up with its own standard set of knowledge. Jazz is one thing hip people know.
4. Cultivated. They know whats important. Isn't that a matter of opinion.

He ends with thoughts that because of technology we have to much information. He does not dwell on this, but its an interesting topic. We think about lots of things shallowly rather than few things deeply.

## **4 I like a Gershwin Tune**

This chapter is just about the music he likes. Nothing of interest.

## **5 The Art of the Nap**

This chapter is just about his sleep habits, and others, but not much of interest.

## 6 A Nice Little Knack for Name-Dropping

This chapter was about Name-Dropping. One odd thing is that many of the names he dropped in the chapter are people I either never heard of or just knew their name but nothing else. By looking some of them up I learned stuff!

He first gives examples from high school where he and his friends would try to impress girls by saying that a basketball player at the girls school was their cousin (which was not true). I doubt this worked. Interesting in that (1) you can name drop people who really are not that famous, though known to the person you are talking to, (2) you can lie.

One can also name-drop indirectly: *I was at a party with Woody Allen* does not quite say that you know him or even talked to him, just that you know people who know Woody Allen. It can be even more indirect.

Name dropping can be done better if you use a well known nickname for the dropee.

When Name dropping one issue might be, does the person you are talking to know the person? If I said to this group:

*Donald Knuth recently emailed me about a book review I did. He was delighted with my description of the Truel game.*

This would impress Clyde and maybe Darling, but nobody else. (By the way, the above is true. I actually don't name-drop it (except now) since Knuth is known for not using email—his secretary does it for him— but if I said I got an email from him, people might want to know the email address he used and I would rather respect his privacy. Analogous: what if someone said *I was at J.D. Salinger's house the other day.*)

The author notes (Page 86) that there are fewer and fewer names to drop now. This is an interesting point and I think correct. My speculation:

1. We no longer have public intellectuals. At one time a group of scientists go together and made a statement against nuclear weapons- AND PEOPLE CARED. At one time College President's opinions matters. Now they go around asking the Koch brothers for money to endow a chair in the business school (that is true at UMCP).
2. There are very few famous living scientists. On Jeopardy they had the category CHEMISTRY and rather than have a famous chemist, or any chemist, read the questions, they had Bryan Cranston who PLAYED a chemist on Breaking Bad.

3. There are very few universally famous writers, sports figures, etc.
4. The old joke: There are so many famous people that its hard to know about all of them.
5. Royalty- this is a minor point, but only 1/3 of people in England like the Monarchy (1/3 don't care and 1/3 are against).

Never meet your heroes- if you MEET people you admired you may find flaws in them and ruin the mystique. This may be especially true of actors where you confuse their on-screen persona with the real person. Darling is convinced that Angela Lansbury is a nice person (is Jessica Fletcher) and to be fair I've always read nice things about her. Then we met her and she punched me in the nose (I am kidding).

I have another angle on this- you may find yourself talking about mundane things and wondering (in my case) *I am having an email discussion with Donald Knuth and he want to know if I got the books his publisher was supposed to send me to review in my column. Shouldn't I be talking to him about more profound things?*

Question: If you are really famous, then whose name do you drip? Did Carl Sagan drop Stephen Hawkings? Or perhaps you drop names of people older and more established.

The really famous can drop their own name to get, say, a table in a restaurant.

When you drop someone's name you need to be able to say something interesting about them.

Place dropping: *My daughter is at Princeton, Last year I went on an African Safari*

Name dropping is a way to brag by association. (I think thats stupid.)

Ancestor worship is also name dropping.

## 7 So to Speak

About how he and others mispronounce some words. Not that interesting.

Nice quote by George Bernard Shaw

*Anyone who has a lot to say in his own language does not have the time to learn another one.*

## 8 A Real Page Turner

About very long books that the author liked or didn't like, and some other comments. Not that interesting. A few notes of interest:

1. Some books are to long. Ambrose Pierce once said of a book  
*The covers of this book are to far apart.*  
But alas- he later let friends put together *The collected writings of Ambrose Pierce.* which was 12 volumes!
2. People who read to much about the Holocaust are more likely to ponder suicide. This is NOT a documented fact, but he is making the point that reading about depressing topics can depress one.
3. The author spends a lot of words on Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Wikipedia says that its main thesis (that Christianity lead to the decline) has been debunked. The author does say that Gibbon consulted no other historians, but seems to see this as a plus. Also, his praise of the book seems to be more the writing style then the content.

## 9 Ticked to the Min

The author claims that young people say they are *ticked to the max* which means VERY annoyed. This chapter is about things that are annoy him a little, hence the title.

This is a narcissistic chapter- who cares what annoys him? For example, he is annoyed that a singer wore non-black socks. WHO CARES!!

He also talks about things that annoy other people.

Everything that ticks him off either (1) I don't care about, or (2) shows he is an old man complaining that things were better when he was young, or (3) both.

## 10 Trivial Pursuit

This chapter is mostly about the triviality of sports and that we (or maybe just him) spends to much time watching or, thinking about it, caring about it, when its rally a bunch of grown men playing a kids game.

1. He points to an earlier era of sportsmanship and politeness. I think he's crazy. Sports have always had some rude characters and some nice ones. Nostalgia for an age that never was. See next point.
2. Here is an example: *We have reached the extraordinary condition where fans are more loyal to a team than to a player. Most of the players do not even live, nor were brought up, in the town they play in.* BUT THAT WAS ALWAYS THE CASE, unless you want to go to, say, the 1910's.
3. In the past athletes were sometimes alcoholic, often racist, misogynistic, etc. Perhaps it was hidden better. TODAY we do things like fine players if they beat up women in elevators ON CAMERA.
4. Even with is realizing that caring about sports is silly, he still does. He wants a 12-step program to recover.
5. He says that woman's gymnastics is sado-masochism. He's right about that. Imagine being injured for life JUST to stick the landing. It is INSANE.
6. More generally, I think sports is INSANE because of the injuries.

## 11 Whats in it for the Talent

He makes a distinction between Talent and Genius though I can't quite tell what it is.

Talent is something you are BORN with.

Genius's change the world. But gee, they can be BORN smart or strong of whatever also.

There is some stuff about Talent and Desire- you have to WANT to succeed.

Some talent is easy to recognize early (Math, Music) others not-so-much (Writing).

## 12 The Pleasure of Reading

MISC notes on the pleasure of Reading.

1. He didn't like how his own books-on-tape sounded and prefers reading.
2. If you BUY a book you don't HAVE to read it. If you BORROW it you do. I see this as an advantage to borrowing. He sees it as an adv to buying.
3. Any list of must-read books gets dated. (He did not bring up *the cannon*). Also, the list should also include what age is good. Not sure why he says that Thomas Wolfe should not be read past the age of 18.
4. In passing he mentions that in 1928 black people were not allowed in libraries in Memphis, TN.

## 13 Will you Still Feed Me?

At sixty you are too old to die young.

At sixty your life is pretty well set.

DISAGREE: Some people CHANGE what they are doing at a later and later age.

The author complains about things changing, making this chapter similar to the one about being ticked to the min. Cranky old man complaining about things I don't understand.

When you are old you simply do not have to do things you don't want to do. (In my case something similar- I am NOT embarrassed by, say fear of heights. TELL STORY.)

I think this is the chapter with the following quote that needs some background

Moses Mendelssohn was a renowned Jewish Philosopher

His son Abraham M was a banker, not particularly known.

His son Felix M was a brilliant composer, pianist, organist, conductor

Abraham would say *Formerly I was the son of my father, now I am the father of my son.*

Here is hoping the same happens to Clyde (e.g., if Alexander becomes famous.)

## 14 Anglophilia-English Style

Anglophilia means a great respect for England the English.

This chapter goes on about how the author has a great respect and admiration of the English.

Not that interesting and I really can't relate. A few points I learned.

1. Churchill cared a lot more about the plight of the Jews in the Holocaust than FDR.

I found an article to back this up:

<https://winstonchurchill.org/the-life-of-churchill/war-leader/churchill-and-the-holocaust-the-possible-and-impossible/>

2. Dickens *The Christmas Carol* invented Christmas. That may be true for some traditions and for helping the poor.

BILL: *Twas the night before Christmas* also set some of the traditions.

3. Dickens *Oliver Twist* made people realize the horrid conditions the poor faced.

4. *Beyond the Fringe* was a British Comedy troupe that he admired.

I was wondering if I could find anything about them on you-tube. I found *Beyond the Fringe (complete)* which is their final performance, which is long:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUd10xPbKk4>

5. He claims that American Prep school were imitations of English ones.

BILL: While I am sure this is true, it does not mean the English ones are better.

6. During communism and Nazism threats the English had writers like Orwell, Koestler, Silone, Malraux, Pasternak. American had none like that

BILL: Is it true that America did not have people like that?

7. England is too sensible to be swept up in Communism or other radical ideologies.

BILL: Disagree: Jeremy Corbyn's Labor party was radical. Agree: They have had nothing like MAGA.



8. American writers like Mark Twain, Willa Cather, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner do not touch him the way the English writers do.

BILL: Poppycock! Or more seriously, this is really just his opinion. I doubt there is a rigorous argument for English literature being better. The only thing one can say is that there is so much more of it since England has been around... forever. Also, I grant them Shakespeare.

9. He makes an interesting point ABOUT the diff in literature (Page 240). British Literature takes Society for granted and then examines its complexity.

American Literature is not about society but is about individuals.

BILL: Not sure if this sweeping statement is true, but even if it is, it shows that the literature are different, not better or worse.

10. Page 241. *In the 1950's, along with the notion of England as a coherent society, an additional notion was abroad that everything in English life—food and central heating excepted—was superior. English tailoring, English Schooling, English manners...*

I have no idea what he is talking about. Was this really a thing?

11. English weeklies are written assuming the audience is intelligent. They gave no examples, but I will agree that *The Economist (English)* does indeed fit this and is better than *The New Republic (American)*
12. English Common Sense make them not susceptible to isms like Communism, Socialism, Freud-ism. BILL- Is that really true?
13. He does mention British Colonism and some of the bad things, but avoids the really bad things (massacres in India, supporting the Slave Trade) and doesn't even try to explain it away except to say that it build character.
14. England fading as an influence culturally. Georgetown no longer requires Shakespeare but is more multicultural.

## 15 Taking the Bypass

All about his getting a heart bypass operation with NOTHING of interest beyond his own issues. BORING.

## 16 Grow Up Why Doncha?

This chapter is about how American today is Youth-Centered which it wasn't when he was a kid. Kind of interesting.

1. Some religions revere their elders. Not so in America. BILL: In an earlier time the elders knew about storms and other problems which others did not (pre-internet, even pre-book) so that is one reason their stock has declined. BILL: I've heard too many stories about elders being bigots or even in the KKK to really bemoan their lack of influence.
2. His parents treated him like an adult early on and did not shield him from stuff. Today's parents are overprotective. BILL: Definitely true. I can't judge the PROS and CONS. I wonder if one reason is that in his day people had so many kids that losing one was not a big deal, whereas nowadays people have much fewer kids.
3. Even he did not grow up that fast- College enabled him to put off being an adult for 4 more years. BILL: Me too! and Grad school another 5 years!
4. He considers wearing a backpack a sign of an adult who is not grown up. Gee, I use one. He is being idiotic here. backpacks are a convenient way to carry books. I suspect he would not like me wearing funny T-shirts, though for that the notion that I am not grown up is correct.
5. Seinfeld and Friends and other TV shows are about adults who act like children. BILL- Agree! I wonder if they reflect or amplify adults doing that. I think more reflect.
6. The book and phrase *Life Begins at Forty* sounds quaint now. There are people who at 40 do not know what they want to do with their lives. BILL- Also, people change careers more than they used to. This is probably good. (Darling did that in her 30's.)

7. In Hollywood you NEED to be young or appear young to get a job. BILL: This is getting better. There are more roles for older women then their used to be. Part of this is that with 1000 channels there are more roles overall. Also, for people behind the scenes this was not really a problem. My Uncle Irwin Winkler, the producer, is 90 and still works. THAT old is unusual, but producers (the business people) can be old.
8. He complains that people today do not know that wearing a hat indoors is bad form. BILL: He is being an idiot again. A stupid custom that has no meaning is no longer a custom. YEAH! I first learned that wearing a had indoors is (or more likely was) bad form FROM THIS BOOK.
9. He quotes David Foster Wallace: *If I want to be any kind of grownup then I have to make choices and regret foreclosures and try to try to live with them.* BILL: The book was written in 1999. In 2008, at the age of 46, David Foster Wallace committee suicide.

## 17 My Friend Edward

About his friendship with Edward Shils. Not much of interest here.