



Would It Kill You to Stop Doing That: A Modern Guide to Manners

Henry Alford

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"We all know bad manners when we see them," NPR and *Vanity Fair* contributor Henry Alford observes at the beginning of his new book. But what, he asks, do *good* manners look like in our day and age? When someone answers their cell phone in the middle of dining with you, or runs you off the sidewalk with their doublewide stroller, or you enter a post-apocalyptic public restroom, the long-revered wisdom of Emily Post can seem downright prehistoric.

Troubled by the absence of good manners in his day-to-day life-by the people who clip their toenails on the subway or give three-letter replies to one's laboriously crafted missives-Alford embarks on a journey to find out how things might look if people were on their best behavior a tad more often. He travels to Japan (the "Fort Knox Reserve" of good manners) to observe its culture of collective politesse. He interviews etiquette experts both likely (Judith Martin, Tim Gunn) and unlikely (a former prisoner, an army sergeant). He plays a game called Touch the Waiter. And he volunteers himself as a tour guide to foreigners visiting New York City in order to do ground-level reconnaissance on cultural manners divides. Along the way (in typical Alford style) he also finds time to teach Miss Manners how to steal a cab; designates the World's Most Annoying Bride; and tosses his own hat into the ring, volunteering as an online etiquette coach.

Ultimately, by tackling the etiquette questions specific to our age-such as *Why shouldn't you ask a cab driver where's he's from?*, *Why is posting baby pictures on Facebook a fraught activity?* and *What's the problem with "No problem"?*-Alford finds a wry and warm way into a subject that has sometimes been seen as pedantic or elitist. And in this way, he looks past the standard "dos" and "don'ts" of good form to present an illuminating, seriously entertaining book about grace and civility, and how we can simply treat each other better.

Would It Kill You to Stop Doing That: A Modern Guide to Manners Details

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Kim says

Cassie and I found this author after he wrote the funniest "Best Books Chosen By..." section in The Week. The book is his study of manners in different situations, from Facebook to dating to traveling to many other things. When the index of a book contains the entry, "Japan, banana sanctity in 12-13," you know it is going to be funny. I laughed out loud many times in this book, particularly when the author decided to be a manners coach for several of his friends. My favorite, of course, was when he was giving advice to a mom trying to figure out how to arrange a playdate with someone she met at a park. I also liked when he talked about how we are all each day creating the Wikipedia entry for "Humanity." There are actually some practical tips on manners in this book, but mostly it is a fun read, well-written and funny in a totally oddball kind of way.

Melissa says

I'm going to go with ironic on this one, since Alford is trying to school us on manners and yet he seems like a real jerk.

Ciara says

if you're looking for a "guide to modern manners"--which i interpreted as being an etiquette book--keep looking. in no way can this pass as an etiquette book or a guide to modern manners. instead, it's a david sedaris-esque memoir loosely themed around the topic of etiquette & manners. it was far from unpleasant; it's just not what i expected.

my boyfriend said the other day that the trick to writing book reviews in the historical tradition is to review the book the author did write, rather than the book you wanted them to write. so i will say that i was pretty confused when i dug into this book & it was just a bunch of goofy stories about the author's world travels & a game he likes to play called "touch the waiter" (exactly what it sounds like--very impolite). it was fun, it was light-hearted, it was perhaps even a bit insubstantial, like he'd been offered a contract before he knew if he really wanted to write a book. if you're after a clever collection of personal essays, there are better books out there, but if you've exhausted the library's shelves of david sedaris & sloane crosley, this will do in a pinch. probably a great airplane book.

Maggie says

While it's safe to say that Henry Alford certainly KNOWS his manners, it's also safe to say that he's no gentleman bc he seems to mind his vast knowledge of manners only when it suits him. As it should not be (or should be?)

Don't read this book in one sitting--especially if you're like me and can get really into a book and absolutely no patience for whining. Alford's whining (decidedly NOT venting) is so recurrent you'll be tempted to toss it (and if you don't know me, you should know that I find such treatment of a book absolutely vile). So my advice is to read this one essay at a time: the whining will be much easier to shrug off as the humorous dressing-down of others. Read this way, I spent quality time giggling. As far as learning my manners? Well, I have been given a tip on how to best hail a cab and now understand how "no problem" is not a gracious way of saying "you're welcome." Can't say much otherwise...

There are better books on manners and better books in the humor genre. If you haven't covered all the iconic titles by authors in either category and on the fence with this one, I'd give this a pass.

Brooke says

I am midway through and am amused by the number of reviews that are upset or confused about this being a book of humor and not an actual guide to manners. I'm not sure how one can be disappointed by a book that lists entries for "Random, bitchy comments on" and "Sex tentacles" in its index.

I have now completed the book, and had forgotten above to mention that I do not understand how people mistook this for a Serious Manners Book because it has a TOILET on the front cover. Having not read a real Serious Manners Book, maybe this is par for the course, but surely not?

It seems that the Goodreads word of the day for this book is "disjointed" and that is probably because it is. Each chapter is a different essayish rumination on manners, and it all theoretically flows from one topic to another, but does feel a bit "everything and the kitchen sink." No worries though, it was all perfectly amusing and provided more than a few genuine laugh out loud moments.

Parker F says

This book is exceptionally disjointed, and I am a bit upset that the author could pass this off as "A Modern Guide to Manners." I think Alford can be described as ruder-than-average and has little authority to be offering his guidance.

Nerak says

Curiously disjointed, rambling, unconnected series of random observances..... would have been a much better book if I hadn't expected it to actually be "a modern guide to manners." Why didn't he just say "a disjointed series of random observances"? My expectations would have been much lower, and I might have enjoyed it more. Look at David Sedaris. Does he write a "guide"? No, he writes humorous anecdotes, and much more effortlessly than Alford. Gaaaack.

Very few gems in this book, after a lot of sifting through dross. One gem: Take a photo of a gift, everyone has photo/phone capabilities these days, it's a nice thing to attach to a thank-you email. And yes, guys, put

the toilet seat down. Thank you.

Richard says

I waffled between giving this book 1 star and 2 stars. I did get some scraps of useful information out of it here and there. But every time I started warming up to the book just a little, Alford managed to put me off again. In a book ostensibly about manners, he certainly engages in some very unmannerly behavior... and seems pleased with himself for doing so. One example is a game he calls Touch the Waiter. Another is his characterization of suburban Arkansans as being Bible thumpers and having a "lingual handicap." I guess I shouldn't be surprised to hear this coming from a Vanity Fair/New Yorker/New York Times author, NPR contributor, and Manhattan liberal.

I forced myself to read this book through to the end. Fortunately, the book is short.

Heather says

This was hard to rate - I *enjoyed* the book, but wouldn't recommend it, at least within its own genre. I don't know if the author even knows what this book was meant to be - was it a book *about* manners as a topic, was it an etiquette book giving hints on how to behave, was it a series of (admittedly often amusing) essays? I sure couldn't tell you.

At times, there were great moments in reading, and then at times I'd get to the end of a chapter and still not sure what the topic of said chapter was. (The cutesy chapter titles were little more than that - cutesy.)

I would enjoy speaking with Mr. Alford at a social gathering - he is quite witty and made me laugh out loud a few times while reading. However, I would not recommend him as an expert on manners based on this particular book.

Ericka says

I don't really understand all the negative reviews except that people must've thought this book really was an etiquette book. In a way I kind of made the same mistake but I also read the blurb so I knew I was in for something different. I also wasn't expecting anything humorous as the critics quipped. I've learned to never trust THE CRITICS. What I found was an interesting, quick reading essay on the differences between cultures in different countries, classes, educations, sexual orientations, etc.... Some was funny, some was sad, some was jaw dropping. I believe if you look at the title closely you can see it really does describe the book. First is the slightly comedic part "Would It Kill You to Stop Doing That?" It's both mannerly and unmannerly at the same time. It make no specific reference to the problem at hand and it's basically letting the respondent decide what they're going to do. Naturally, in "high" society you'd never say this, but in some circles you'd have to be more blatant to get the message across. The second half gives the book away: "A Modern Guide to Manners". This isn't a guide to manners or to modern manners (there are some available), but rather a modern guide--kind of like modern art. It's not the kind of guide you expect so expect the unexpected. I did, and I loved the book and found the author and his work quite interesting.

Sara says

This book was a quick, fun read. Henry Alford is very funny and I found myself chuckling throughout. I especially enjoyed the beginning of his journey through the ins and outs of modern day manners because he went to the (as he calls it) 'Fort Knox of manners' - Japan. After this, he delves into all sorts of American social situations movie theatre "ushers," unresponsive party guests, play dates for your children, wedding invitations, vegetable trading (for real), reverse apologies, false compliments, and so on and so forth... but one area I found lacking that I wish he would have had more to say about was social media. To de-friend or not to de-friend, to block or not to block, do you point out inaccuracies on facebook or 'save face' on facebook? Or what about those friends who seem to enjoy your company when you invite them out, but yet have never once invited you out? Is that a hint, or cluelessness? Or digital family drama? - can you de-friend your uncle without causing a rift or do you sit back and let him prattle on all over your post? I would have liked more of his hilarious commentary on that end.

Anyway - it was a thoroughly enjoyable read though it didn't really present anything new or thought provoking - mostly a lot of laughs, which fit the bill for a lazy Sunday.

Heather says

A better title for this book would have been *All About Me, My Lifestyle, My Interests, My Idiosyncrasies, and My Relationships, with Not a Few Witticisms, and Some Discussion on Manners, All in Near-Complete Random Order*. There were times when I wanted to chuck this book out the window (and I might have had my copy not belonged to the library) in sheer frustration at the lack of focus, substance, and organization. I gave it two stars instead of one because there were times when it was laugh-out-loud funny, and I did learn a few useful things. Bottom line: definitely underwhelming.

Laura McNeal says

I love this book, and I love the fact that I observed Henry Alford (before I recognized him) on a train platform near Washington D.C. being as civil and charming as he is in print. I love the fact that he doesn't oversimplify the process of analyzing a social situation and determining what would be gracious and correct. I love that he acknowledges how muddy real life is and how one of the things we love about reading Advice About Manners is the possibly false sensation it gives us that we can resolve social mishaps in our daily lives. I think one reason he can make you feel better about the complexity of modern society is that he's not just funny but forgiving. That particular combination is very rare.

Arminzerella says

If I were looking to expand my collection of gay, male best friends, I'd accept applications first from Henry Alford and Joel Derfner. Henry Alford is exceptionally well-mannered and well-behaved (at least on the surface and when he's not playing risky games like 'touch the waiter/waitress'). He's annoyed by other

people's poor manners, disregard for others, and ignorance in the face of decorum and protocol. Alternately amusing and enlightening, readers are sure to find something over which to form a kvetching klatch. Of note are the opening chapter where the author visits Japan, and his experiments in retaliatory manners. After reading this, I also find myself tempted to write my own Miss Manners responses. Next creative writing exercise, anyone? Henry Alford sounds like he'd be fun to hang out with. The book itself is a little all over the place and may have worked better as a few strong individual essays.

Natalie says

Funny, nicely written, smart, witty, quip.

I would describe it as a mixture between a Knigge adaptation to the 21.Century and a user's manual inspired by last years hilarious email disaster between the wannabe classy lady Carolyn Bourne and her dreadfully chavvy daughter-in-law-to-be Heidi Withers.

Draw Your own conclusions... ;-)
