



Sorry!: The English and Their Manners

Henry Hitchings

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Most of us know a bit about what passes for good manners - holding doors open, sending thank-you notes, no elbows on the table. We certainly know bad manners when we see them. But where has this patchwork of beliefs and behaviours come from? How did manners develop? How do they change? And why do they matter so much to us? In examining our manners, Henry Hitchings delves into the English character and investigates our notions of Englishness.

Sorry! presents an amusing, illuminating and quirky audit of English manners. From basic table manners to appropriate sexual conduct, via hospitality, chivalry, faux pas and online etiquette, Hitchings traces the history of our country's customs and courtesies. Putting under the microscope some of our most astute observers of humanity, including Jane Austen and Samuel Pepys, he uses their lives and writings to pry open the often downright peculiar secrets of the English character. Hitchings' blend of history, anthropology and personal journey helps us understand our bizarre and contested cultural baggage - and ourselves.

Sorry!: The English and Their Manners Details

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Author : Henry Hitchings

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From Reader Review Sorry!: The English and Their Manners for online ebook

Lindsey says

I'm "Sorry" I bought this book and "sorry" I tried to read it. I thought this book would be a list of the quirky things only British people say to be polite. But instead this book chronicles the incredibly boring evolution of nothing in particular. It's clear he did read a lot of books about etiquette as research for this, because he shares his reviews of all of them. Every chapter rambles on and on and yet nothing new is said. Unbelievably circular writing. I can't bring myself to waste anymore of my time trying to finish it. I only got as far as I did because it was the book I was stuck with on the airplane.

Susanne says

Most interesting!

Karolien says

This is the first non-fiction book of 2014 that has nothing to do with my studies. I have read a lot of this author before so it caught my eye.

This book is about the history of manners. It tells us of the origins of everyday habits like for e.g. where the cutlery is invented, when did French sneak into the English language to make it very fancy? It is very fascinating to read all of this because social history is history that comes close to the heart.

I certainly know there is a lot more to discover but this book gives a nice start for anyone who is interested in the history of manners and civilization.

Anne says

For some reason this book just didn't quite do it for me. It is an interdisciplinary look at English manners (including all my favorite social science "-ologies" - anthropology, sociology) containing many interesting bits. But maybe it was the organization (or lack thereof) and jumbling up of the topics that made it more challenging than it should have been to read. I really wanted more introduction or context or something. For example, I'm not really sure why there were several chapters on American manners. Was it filler? Was it the fear that American manners will take over the world? Something else? I don't know because the author never explained!

I'm still giving it three stars because it was by no means the worst book on the English that I've ever read. I got a sufficient amount of information and entertainment out of it. But it had so much potential to be so much

better!

Scott says

I read around 150-200 pages of this book, skipping around a bit. I thought it was going to be an interesting look into why there are certain types of manners and how they came about. Instead, it was mostly anecdotes and random historical aspects like what manners consisted of back in the day. It was really boring and I thought, very poorly written. I didn't finish it.

Brittani Lenz says

It didn't really hold my attention (sorry not sorry)

Joy says

This book was just not as interesting as I thought it would be.

Penny says

Interesting in parts, slightly dull and boring in others.

Eustacia Tan says

I picked this book up because it seemed pretty interesting and I'm all about reading about England right now.

Sorry! The English and their Manners is pretty self-explanatory. It's a chronological exploration of the development of manners in the English, starting with manners in medieval Britain.

Although the book is supposed to be all about the English, the fact that the English have been influenced by different cultures, like the Italians, means that the book also touches on manners in different countries as well. There are also two chapters where American manners are discussed and a few more where they're mentioned. So while this book is primarily about the English, it's not exclusively about them.

Something I found interesting (in a TIL manner) is that the Victorians had an "aversion to wasted words", which was in turn "part of a new science of conversation". Thus the shortening of "I am sorry" to just "sorry".

I also liked the discussion about manners at the end of the book, where the author raises the possibility that instead of manners being in decline, the world has simply become more complex. For example, people in the past didn't have to deal with the complexities of internet etiquette, like if you have to accept your boss's

Facebook friend request.

While this isn't a book on etiquette in England, it's an interesting look and discussion on how manners have evolved. If you're interested in the lesser-considered aspects of history, you may want to take a look at this.

This review was first posted at Inside the mind of a Bibliophile

Julie Bestry says

Yet in truth material comfort insulates most of us from the deprivation that manners used to palliate.

That's the first sentence of the final paragraph of *Sorry!: The English and Their Manners* and it's representative of the book. Hitchings' writing isn't stuffy, *per se*. The book is peppered with words we wouldn't be allowed to say on American television (primarily the F-word and the C-word), and occasional (and oddly) colorful expressions, like sexual assault as "priapic blitzkrieg." But the writing is **fussy**, academic (though not entirely dry), and lacking the verve (that would usually make a title promoted like this one was) to be charming. It works better if you imagine a tweedy, professorial sort standing and reading the book aloud than if you try to snuggle on the couch and take it all in.

The problem, I fear, is that Hitchings is no Bill Bryson, and that's what this book needs. Stick with me here. The book is well-researched, just like a Bryson book, but it lacks warmth, real humor, and any sort of narrative flow. With Bryson's book, everything always comes full circle, so you see the connections at the end of what initially appears to be discursive, and you smile with that sense of having achieved the Ah-ha moment.

I read the entire book, and yet I don't feel I have any greater sense of what makes English manners particularly *English*. Perhaps it's because the book spends an inordinate amount of text on pre-1700s global history of what people said about manners and the language used to reference manners, then takes a brief foray into Fanny Trollope's views on America, and finally, tucked away in a chapter entitled "What Were Victorian Values?" there's one paragraph on Nancy Mitford's *Noblesse Oblige* of 1956, class indicators, U vs. Non-U, and what I would have expected a book about English manners to say about language selection. The rest of the book seems to be an occasionally entertaining slog through history without creating palpable, clarified connections.

The main problem is not the style of the writing, but the content, or at least, with readers' expectations regarding the content. Had this been put forth as an academic tome, we Anglophiles may have picked it up anyway, but it was portrayed as a book that explains from where these English styles of manners have come, and notwithstanding the dense references to other writers and commenters through history, we rarely get a sense of a timeline as to how particular manners came to be, nor what makes them particularly English.

There are glimmers -- the chapter on table manners does an excellent job of pinning the change from Game of Thrones-style use of knives and the delicacy at table we see in Downton Abbey. But these glimmers are all too brief. The last 100 years of manners, and specifically English manners, are lost. You'd expect a book like this to dig deeply in explaining how manners have (or even haven't) changed in England from pre-WWI life through WWII (and particularly through the Blitz), and onward through the century into current days, but aside from a quick nod to modern rudeness, it's as if everything that we need to know about English manners was solidly in place by 1840.

Hitchings writes flawlessly in that there are no grammatical errors. He has a fine mastery of language. (I had to look up "rebarbative" as it's not commonly used on this side of the Atlantic.) And he's able to create vivid visuals when he chooses to. But the book is dense where it should be light, shallow where it should go into depth with details, and it flits around when a timeline or narrative flow is really needed to propel the reader forward with interest.

Perhaps I'm damning Hitchings for not being a Bill Bryson (or even a David McCullough) when I should be damning his editor for not massaging this into something that could have been great rather than good. This is not for the casual reader or Anglophile. I'm a completist, but if you're not burdened by that particular character flaw, skip this. Kate Fox's *Watching the English* does a much better job of explaining English manners, even if it's not quite the history lesson Hitchings tries to present.

Lynn says

Today's Nonfiction post is on Sorry! The English and Their Manners by Henry Hitchings. It is 392 pages long including notes, bibliography, and index. It is published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. The cover is a table set with different kinds of silver and dishware. There is some strong language, talk of sex, and no violence in this book. The intended reader is someone who is interested in the way that manners have developed over the centuries. The tone is academic but readable. There Be Spoilers Ahead.

From the dust jacket- Most of us know a bit about what passes for good manners- holding doors open, sending thank-you notes, no elbows on the table- and we certainly know bad manners when we see them. But where has this patchwork of beliefs and behaviors come from? How did manners develop? How do they change? And why do they matter so much? In examining his countrymen's manners, Henry Hitchings delves into the English character and investigates what it means to be English.

Sorry! presents an amusing, illuminating, and quirky audit of English manners. From basic table manners to appropriate sexual conduct, via hospitality, chivalry, faux pas, and online etiquette, Hitchings traces the history of England's customs and courtesies. Putting some of the most astute observers of humanity- including Jane Austen and Samuel Pepys- under the microscope, he uses their lives and writings to pry open the often downright peculiar secrets of Englishness. Hitchings's blend of history, anthropology, and personal journey helps us understand the bizarre and contested cultural baggage that is bundled with our understanding of what it means to have good manners.

Review- This is an amusing and interesting about the history and current state of manners. Hitchings starts the reader in modern day with some interactions of two tennis stars and how they behaved. Then he moves us from the beginning of written word with how manners started and delivers us back to modern day. Hitchings is engaged and engaging with this subject. This could have been a very boring book but it is not. It is funny, interesting, and a little sad with all the information about how manners and the people who use them have evolved over the course of history. Instead of dry and boring quotes Hitchings gives real stories from over the course of time. Famous people have had a lot to say about how young people, poor people, and people in general act. I had to read some parts of this book to my spouse to he could laugh too. I highly recommend this book.

I give this book a Five out of Five stars. I get nothing for my review and I borrowed this book from my local library.

Jill Hutchinson says

An interesting but over detailed look at the history of the manners of the British. The author doesn't seem to have any particular method of presenting the information....in other words, it rambles. That was rather off-putting and I often found myself skimming through chapters which is never a good sign. An OK read but not exactly what I expected.

Jo says

Hitchings looks at the history of manners and etiquette and changing social mores. Fascinating in some respects although I did bristle at some of the observations I didn't feel were quite accurate. An entertaining read though.

Michael Pryor says

Solid, serious, comprehensive.

Marcia says

Hmm. I loved the review in the New York Times Book Review. The book was a serious survey of manners from medieval times to the present. For some reason I wasn't expecting it; mostly, because of the title. Being new to London, one day I had a sudden realization that everyone I met or more likely bumped into was "sorry." In fact it seemed as if the whole city was "sorry." I also noticed that they looked at me as if I were crazy when I returned an "excuse me" or "pardon". Based on the title, I thought the book would really help me get to the heart of all of this sorry business. It did and it didn't. But I did read the whole book. I actually rather grew to like Henry (or should I say Mr. Hitchings) and wish he had included more about himself in the book.
