

## Evolutionary Psychology

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### Book Review

#### On Civilizing the Unwashed Masses

A review of Amy Alkon, *Good Manners for Nice People Who Sometimes Say F\*CK*. St. Martin's Griffin: New York, 2014, 289 pp., US\$14.99, ISBN 978-1-250-03071-9 (Paperback); 978-1-250-03072-6 (e-book).

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In his play *No Exit*, Jean-Paul Sartre gave us the expression “Hell is Other People.” Amy Alkon, in *Good Manners for Nice People Who Sometimes Say F\*CK*, takes this metaphor very much to heart as she valiantly sets out to show us how our experience with other people can be upgraded at least to the status of purgatory with a little effort on our part. It is an advice book, yes, but one based solidly on scientific principles, and it should be interesting to just about everyone, albeit for different reasons. Individuals with no background in evolutionary psychology will become acquainted with the fundamental principles of the field while being entertained along the way, and evolutionary psychologists who have no personal experience with everyday etiquette and common decency will learn something about dealing with their fellow humans as well.

Alkon's basic premise is that “rudeness is the human condition” because of the inevitable collision between our Stone Age Minds and a 21<sup>st</sup> century full of technology and strangers. Readers of this journal are well aware of the mismatch between the world in which humans evolved and the world in which they now live. In our ancestral environment, we lived our lives in relatively stable small groups and we knew each person as an individual. Day-after-day interaction with the same group of people over a lifetime has a way of enforcing neighborliness and policing the behavior of obnoxious cheaters, but these strategies unfortunately do not work so well today. The evolutionary roots of rudeness and the psychological principles behind the solutions to rudeness are explored in a light-hearted fashion that spans the social sciences, and she rounds up all of the usual suspects when citing the evolutionary literature: Buss, Cosmides, Dunbar, Fessler, Nesse, Pinker, Tooby, Trivers, and a host of others. In Alkon's book, the reader will be exposed to the basics of reciprocal altruism, sex differences in mating strategies, and the various other cornerstones of evolutionary psychology.

This is a nice follow-up to her first book (*I see rude people*), and she heavily mines her syndicated advice column (“The Advice Goddess”) and her apparently excruciating daily life in Southern California for examples of people behaving badly (She also reveals

an amazing story about her mysterious friendship with the late actor Marlon Brando!). Her three rules for dealing with the “ME FIRST/SCREW YOU” approach to modern social interaction are quite straightforward:

- 1) Stand up to the Rude
- 2) Expose the Rude
- 3) Treat Strangers like Neighbors

After the first two chapters, in which she sets the stage for what is to follow, the chapters can be read in any order. Each chapter is a self-contained unit focusing on a particular social setting and the varieties of rudeness to be found there. I happened to be writing this review on the very day that two people were kicked off of a flight following an emergency landing due to an altercation over a device that prevents the passenger in front of you from reclining in his/her seat, and this is exactly the kind of loutish public behavior that Alkon’s book revels in. She gives advice on how to deal with public ignorami as well as advice on how to avoid becoming the ignoramus yourself. She covers topics as diverse as gracefully weaseling out of telling the truth and properly comporting oneself in public while driving, flying, or eating. I personally picked up some very useful perspectives on how and why we tip the people who serve us, why children do not belong at cocktail parties, and why other people are not at all eager to hear your phone conversations or see (and smell) your bare feet. Unsurprisingly, the art of apologizing well is featured prominently in the book.

Although the subject matter should be enough to hold your attention, it is primarily Amy’s ability to turn a phrase that makes the book such a good ride. Her section headings (e.g., “Dating is War,” “Murder-Suicide and Other Forms of Diplomacy,” “The Tragedy of the Asshole in the Commons”) make it impossible to put the book down and get back to work without reading *just one more* section. My favorite examples of her insights would certainly include the advice that licking one’s plate is only appropriate when “dining with the blind,” and why one should never date anyone to whom you are not physically attracted just because “they’re a good person.” According to Alkon, the problem with doing so is that “... they’ll just get more repellant to you over time, until you’d arrange to be pecked to death by crows just to avoid having sex with the person.” In the same spirit, she recommends an anonymous note for dealing with hygienically challenged coworkers because “What’s even more embarrassing than knowing that you stink? Knowing who knows you stink.” In short, I highly recommend this book. Not so much because it breaks any new scientific ground, but because it is just plain fun. It can be read straight through or digested in small bites over time; it makes for good bedtime reading; it can be read in the bathroom or in an airplane, or even in the bathroom of an airplane. Be sure to recommend it to your academic *and* non-academic friends.