



Envy: The Seven Deadly Sins (New York Public Library Lectures in Humanities)

By Joseph Epstein

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Malice that cannot speak its name, cold-blooded but secret hostility, impotent desire, hidden rancor and spite--all cluster at the center of envy. Envy clouds thought, writes Joseph Epstein, clobbers generosity, precludes any hope of serenity, and ends in shriveling the heart. Of the seven deadly sins, he concludes, only envy is no fun at all.

Writing in a conversational, erudite, self-deprecating style that wears its learning lightly, Epstein takes us on a stimulating tour of the many faces of envy. He considers what great thinkers--such as John Rawls, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche--have written about envy; distinguishes between envy, yearning, jealousy, resentment, and schadenfreude ("a hardy perennial in the weedy garden of sour emotions"); and catalogs the many things that are enviable, including wealth, beauty, power, talent, knowledge and wisdom, extraordinary good luck, and youth (or as the title of Epstein's chapter on youth has it, "The Young, God Damn Them"). He looks at resentment in academia, where envy is mixed with snobbery, stirred by impotence, and played out against a background of cosmic injustice; and he offers a brilliant reading of *Othello* as a play more driven by Iago's envy than Othello's jealousy. He reveals that envy has a strong touch of malice behind it--the envious want to destroy the happiness of others. He suggests that envy of the astonishing success of Jews in Germany and Austria may have lurked behind the virulent anti-Semitism of the Nazis.

As he proved in his best-selling *Snobbery*, Joseph Epstein has an unmatched ability to highlight our failings in a way that is thoughtful, provocative, and entertaining. If envy is no fun, Epstein's *Envy* is truly a joy to read.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The Oxford University Press/New York Public Library Seven Deadly Sins series, of which Envy is the first volume, comes hot on the heels of Penguin's successful Lives, which provocatively pairs celebrated subjects with well-known writers in compact and accessible biographies. Unfortunately, Envy is insubstantial and unambitious even for its modest size. While it might have seemed a good idea to get Epstein, author of the uneven but amusing Snobbery: The American Version, to address the related sin of envy, he does not seem to have anything very provocative to say about it. Derived from a public lecture, Epstein's opening chapters give a decent if unenlightening overview, larded with enough quotations from such greats as Schopenhauer and Lord Chesterfield to maintain interest. Over the course of 14 chapters, some of a few hundred words each, cliche turns up often (Shakespeare is "that most universal of writers," and Othello is about Iago, it turns out), yet the book's airy charm and lightly worn learning might work as diverting, high-toned amusement if not for the one-dimensionality of some of the ideas that emerge. For Epstein's notion of envy is ultimately that of the moneyed and powerful, who characterize any challenge to their power as being based on envy. Marxism? Envy. Feminism? Envy. The academy? Envy and "hopelessly radical political views." This kind of rhetoric might go over in a country club or cigar lounge, but in the world of ideas to which it is presumably addressed, it reads more like an example of the eighth deadly sin: smugness.

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From [Booklist](#)

Seven writers have been invited to consider the seven deadly sins, and the results are being published in a promising series of small, cleverly illustrated, and, so far, scintillating volumes.

Epstein's recent book on snobbery has met with great acclaim, making him uniquely suited to the task of analyzing envy, since snobbery is based on its cultivation, and, indeed, Epstein is a witty and thoughtful elucidator of this covert and poisonous state of mind. Of the seven sins, Epstein observes, envy is the most common and insidious and the least enjoyable. He discusses various types of envy, the differences between women's and men's envy, Freud's preoccupation with it, and worlds in which envy rages (the arts and academia may be the worst). Epstein confesses to his own struggles with envy over the course of his musings, which grow in gravitas as he moves beyond individuals to consider how envy between nations leads to war and how anti-Semitism can be interpreted as a particularly malignant manifestation of this deadly sin.

Novelist and critic Prose brings her keen interest in our conflicted relationship with our bodies to her creatively, even voraciously researched and elegantly argued inquiry into the paradoxes of gluttony, a sin writ large on the body and, therefore, impossible to conceal. Prose notes that the term is rarely used now that overeating is viewed as a psychological and health problem rather than a "crime against God." Equally conversant in religious and secular perspectives, Prose turns to theology and art to illuminate the curious history of a sin rooted in a behavior essential to survival. She traces the line between gourmandism and binging and ponders the increase in obesity in our consumer culture and the stigma of being overweight in a society that loves excess in everything but body size. Gluttons now sin against "prevailing standards of beauty and health," and the punishment is living hell. *Donna Seaman*

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Review

"What midsummer night's feast would be digestible without Francine Prose's *Gluttony*; what weekend jaunt to your best friend's chateau would be survivable without Joseph Epstein's *Envy*? And you'll need Wendy Wasserstein's *Sloth* (wickedly subtitled 'And How to Get It') while you're struggling out of your deck chair."--*O, The Oprah Magazine* (on the series)

"Whimsically packaged examinations of Lust by Simon Blackburn, Gluttony by Francine Prose, Envy by Joseph Epstein, Anger by Robert Thurman, Greed by Phyllis Tickle, Sloth by Wendy Wasserstein and Pride by Michael Eric Dyson become playgrounds for cultural reflection by authors and playwrights in Oxford's Seven Deadly Sins series."--*Publishers Weekly* (on the series)

"Diverting, high-toned amusement."--*Publishers Weekly*

"Epstein wields a nimble pen in this consideration of the 'most pervasive' mortal sin.... Though experiencing envy may be 'no fun at all,' under Epstein's guidance, this sin is pretty entertaining to contemplate in all its fine permutations.... Strangely comforting in its reassurance that the reader is not alone in being a petty SOB."--*Kirkus Reviews*

"Joseph Epstein has earned his reputation as one of our most respected men of letters through his mastery of the essay.... With *Envy*, we are back in familiar Epstein territory.... Delightful...entertaining and provocative."--*Chicago Sun-Times*

"Eternally fascinating to saint, sinner and everyone occupying the vast expanse between those two poles...penetrating and perspicacious.... Epstein's tone is as attractive as his judgment and analysis are sound."--*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Will win new readers for one of the most entertaining of contemporary writers.... Epstein cites an impressive range of authorities, from Aristotle to Gore Vidal ('Whenever a friend succeeds, a little something in me dies,' Vidal once wrote). Yet the real vim of the book comes from Epstein's honest search for envy close to home."--*National Post*

"A stimulating tour of the killjoy sin of envy."--*Books and Culture*

"Epstein explores this vice with candor and clarity...Though this book is compact and can easily be read in one sitting, it feels exhaustive. It delves into tortuous *malebolge*--resentment, schadenfreude, envy of youth, anti-Semitism, Marxism and so on--and examines how they are rooted in or fueled by envy.... The book's virtue lies less in explaining the vice than in warning of its danger. The reader who expects a smug, winking

skepticism will be disappointed. Yes, Epstein has fun. (Each chapter comes with a *New Yorker* cartoon, but these wither in the heat of the author's wit.) He is, nonetheless, deadly serious about a sin that 'tends to diminish all in whom it takes possession.' Epstein's writing is a rare alloy of sobriety, sophistication, and warm humor that--quite contrary to the spirit of his book--I wish I possessed."--*National Review*

"Epstein is a witty and thoughtful elucidator of this covert and poisonous state of mind."--*Booklist*

"Epstein deftly untangles jealousy from envy, Othello from Iago, and Nietzsche from Schopenhauer while decoding an impressive universe of things enviable and revisiting the seeds of resentment that gave rise to anti-Semitism."--*Elle*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Matthew Ramey:

The book Envy: The Seven Deadly Sins (New York Public Library Lectures in Humanities) make you feel enjoy for your spare time. You may use to make your capable a lot more increase. Book can be your best friend when you getting strain or having big problem along with your subject. If you can make studying a book Envy: The Seven Deadly Sins (New York Public Library Lectures in Humanities) to become your habit, you can get a lot more advantages, like add your own capable, increase your knowledge about some or all subjects. You could know everything if you like open up and read a book Envy: The Seven Deadly Sins (New York Public Library Lectures in Humanities). Kinds of book are a lot of. It means that, science book or encyclopedia or others. So , how do you think about this publication?

Roger Sowa:

Hey guys, do you want to find a new book to see? May be the book with the name Envy: The Seven Deadly Sins (New York Public Library Lectures in Humanities) suitable to you? The actual book was written by well-known writer in this era. The book untitled Envy: The Seven Deadly Sins (New York Public Library Lectures in Humanities) is the main one of several books this everyone read now. This kind of book was inspired lots of people in the world. When you read this book you will enter the new way of measuring that you ever know just before. The author explained their plan in the simple way, consequently all of people can easily understand the core of this book. This book will give you a wide range of information about this world now. So you can see the represented of the world on this book.

Ward Beaver:

Precisely why? Because this Envy: The Seven Deadly Sins (New York Public Library Lectures in Humanities) is an unordinary book that the inside of the reserve waiting for you to snap the item but latter it

will surprise you with the secret this inside. Reading this book close to it was fantastic author who also write the book in such awesome way makes the content inside easier to understand, entertaining approach but still convey the meaning fully. So , it is good for you for not hesitating having this anymore or you going to regret it. This unique book will give you a lot of positive aspects than the other book possess such as help improving your skill and your critical thinking approach. So , still want to hesitate having that book? If I have been you I will go to the book store hurriedly.

Colleen Williams:

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