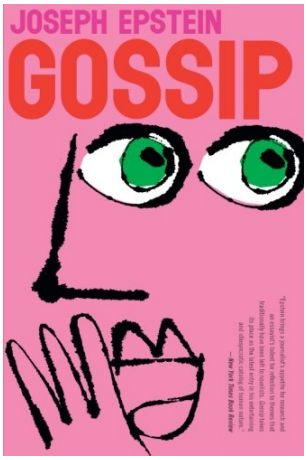
A Note on Gossip

by James Como (June 2016)



Gossip: The Untrivial Pursuit
by Joseph Epstein
Mariner Books, Nov. 2012
256 pgs.

Always in season, a practice as popular as it is proscribed has been engagingly unraveled by Joseph Epstein, in *Gossip: the untrivial pursuit.* Coming upon the book as I browsed a shelf at the Corner Bookstore on Madison Avenue, I at first did not notice that it was by Epstein. If I had, I would have begun at the beginning. Instead I went directly to the index and spent the next twenty minutes cherry-picking. Reading that way the book seemed a big bowlful of nothing *but* cherries, for example Vidal on Capote and he on Vidal. But there is much more. Epstein examines the history of gossip, its media and manifestations, its venues and forms, and its practitioners. Chapter titles (there are eighteen) provide, not so much the flavor of the book (Epstein's distinctively relaxed voiced cannot be so reduced) nor its argument (which is subtle and implicit), but its direction.

Its three large divisions are Private Gossip, Public Gossip, and Private Becomes Public (important and insightful enough to warrant a book of its own). Within these are, for example, "How it Works," "In the Know," "Literary Gossip," "Gay Gossip," "Caught in the Net," and "Whores of Information." At the end of each

chapter are Epstein's "Diary" entries, personally informed vignettes that either report, or are, instances of gossip. Interspersed among these are four Great Gossips of the Western World, short essays on the Duc de Saint-Simon (the Sun King's authoritative, capacious, and elegant gossip), Barbara Walters (was she really *that* banal?), Tina Brown (yes, *she* really is this banal) and, especially, Walter Winchell. At the end is a valuable bibliography.

Full disclosure: I am an Epstein fan of the sort that believes him incapable of dullness; that I largely agree with his opinions is icing. For example "Freud's major notions have by now been largely disqualified" hooks me instantaneously. But then comes a small surprise: "But what hasn't disappeared, and perhaps never will, is the unspoken but patently apparent Freudian notion that we all have something to hide, and [what] we are hiding is likely to be the most important things about us." Then comes the last sentence of this perfectly constructed paragraph: "Freudianism . . . has been a great goad to gossip." The old windbag had some use after all.

Tina Brown once sent an editor to Epstein to ask if he would like to take down some overrated figure in American life; it would appear in the "reputations" department. "I suggested Arthur Miller. 'He's a terrible writer and even less impressive as a guru or a political saint.'" It seems Tina loved it – and nixed it. The editor returned to Epstein, who responded, "'how about Walter Cronkite . . . a man with a face only a nation could love, and a genuinely unintelligent man, though the confident cadences of his broadcaster's fluency served to camouflage this over a long and hugely successful career.'" Tina love the idea but nixed it, finally paying Epstein $5000 for a piece on "the pompous literary critic Harold Bloom." It never ran. (My unsolicited advice: write both and add Anna Wintour, the personification of the one per cent – a trifecta.)

Epstein notes the many motives for gossip, including this one: "perhaps because he senses that conveying this bit of information will increase the intimacy between him and the person with whom he is gossiping," which too often tempts us outside that Middle Domain of manners, where "obedience to the unenforceable" (to use Lord Moulton's formulation) ought to prevail. It seems, as the gossip columnist Earl Wilson put it, that gossip "is hearing something you like about someone you don't." Or, as Epstein puts it, "the most enticing gossip is that which is highly feasible, *often uncheckable* [my emphasis], and deeply damning of the person who is its subject."

Take Joe DiMaggio. Saul Bellow allowed that, yes, DiMaggio was generous in taking over the details and expense of Marilyn Monroe's funeral, but added, "then of course, when they were married, he used to beat her up fairly regularly, or so Arthur Miller told me." Epstein continues, "Is this, do you suppose, true? . . . [Marilyn] presumably told Arthur Miller, who told Saul Bellow, who told me, who is now telling you. . . . Is this gossip or merely reporting something deeply unpleasant? Or is this a distinction without a difference?" Or is it disingenuousness, pure and simple? (Epstein immediately goes on to tell us that Miller institutionalized his new-born Down's Syndrome son, never to see him again.)

Epstein agrees with Bertrand Russell: "no one gossips about other people's secret virtues," real or invented, of which dictum I offer a test case. Among my dearest friends is a colleague I'll call Samuel, especially valuable for a certain brand of mischief-making. Not otherwise given to practical jokes, he has an inspired *penchant* for the tall, but somehow, at the time, plausible, tale. For example, some decades ago a few colleagues, for a very short spell, looked at me . . . differently. It seems a female colleague mentioned to Samuel the possibility of my joining her department, with the tag line, "it's about time we get an alpha male." Samuel, though, seemed incredulous. "You do mean Jim *Como,* don't you?" "Yes," she answered. "But," said Samuel, "you do know he's homosexual." It was now the colleague's turn to be incredulous. "But he has two children!" – which apparently was the best she could do off the cuff to defend my alpha maleness (as opposed, say, to citing my Bold offering of a revised academic calendar!). "Oh," said Samuel, without missing even half a beat, "they are [and here he named a colleague whom I will call Walter] Walter's, not Jim's." As it happens the shelf life of the tale was short, and it never came back to me; in fact it was Samuel himself who told me about it. Is that gossip? Well, that depends on the answer to the question, What if . . . ? (There are Spaniards on Mallorca who, thanks to Samuel, remain convinced that Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas were brothers.)

The rhetorical vectors of gossip are so many and variable that the concept itself is one of the most amorphous in the inventory of human behavior. There are content (salacious? useful? true – or probably so?), intent (malicious? innocent? practical?), tonal coloring (sarcastic, savoring, nonchalant, urgent), status of the teller (reliable, reluctant, compulsive), gathering (one

other person, a few, many, massive), occasion (festive, sad, social, business), response of the victim (anger, denial, laugh-along, ignorance), persistence of the tale both in breadth of circulation and time, and especially the listener: the wrong interlocutor can be disastrous (like all intimacy). Could gossip-spotting *be* more subjective, rather like pornography? And always lines are blurred, between legitimate news (pubic or private), necessary intelligence, and idle chatter (malicious or not, true or false).

Gossip tends to make me uneasy, as does anything that renders me clueless: what do I say to it? What do I do with it now? Perhaps nothing. Epstein allows that gossip "may be the simple appetite for analysis of other men and women, friends included . . . ." And I (like most people, whether they know it or not) like characters and stories, so a good anecdote – complex, revealing, well-told – might hook me. The teller could even change the names: it wouldn't matter *as long as those names are at least vaguely familiar*. That is, gossip must somehow connect us to others, a connection, after all, at the heart of conversation in all its modes.

Here is what the *Online Etymological Dictionary* tells us: "Old English *godsibb* 'sponsor, godparent,' from God + sibb 'relative' (see sibling). Extended in Middle English to 'a familiar acquaintance, a friend, neighbor' (c. 1300), especially to woman friends invited to attend a birth, later to 'anyone engaging in familiar . . . talk' (1560s). Sense extended 1811 to 'trifling talk, groundless rumor.'" It seems to take a village.

Or not. Decades ago I found myself on our cafeteria line next to the provost's secretary, a condescending and deceptive woman who arrogated to herself all the authority and malice of her boss. I greeted her cordially, and she said, "so what do you make of D's and S's tumbling, right there in your department [which at the time I chaired]?" I had no idea what she was talking about and told her so, at which she actually became angry, accusing me of coyness. "I'm supposed to believe that you don't know what everybody else does? They've been screwing for two years!" Well, no, I did not, nor did I care, and when I told her (nonchalantly) that I had no interest, she read me (correctly) as being dismissive. Not my village.

Like all human communication, gossip has a cultural dimension. For example, Peruvians, with whom I've had a long and loving relationship, affect a profound

distaste for *chisme*, yet they all practice it, making the most casuistic distinction between this juicy piece and that in order to exculpate themselves from the charge of being *un chismoso.* And it's not all innocent. Once in Peru a callow young foreign service officer accused me – at a party filled with dignitaries and their henchmen – of being with the CIA (I was merely playing center field for the American embassy softball team). A veteran of our service, and a teammate, warned me not to let him get away with it: "you know how seriously Peruvians take their gossip." That is, the default assumption is something like "where there's smoke . . ." At the next party he did it again, but this time a quick, light slap made my point; barely anyone not very nearby noticed, but word got around, especially among those who might have had a practical interest in the rumor.

If there is a recurring theme rumbling like a bass line throughout the book it is narcissism. Christopher Lasch first caught the scent of this rising trend – now a tsunami – forty years ago in his landmark *The Culture of Narcissism*. But he could not have predicted its exponential rise owing to the hegemony of the internet. For example, "the line between 'reporter' and 'blogger', 'gossip' and 'news' has blurred almost beyond distinction" – that's Epstein quoting *Times* writer Alex Williams, who continues, "blogging has become a career path in its own right, offering visibility, influence, and an actual paycheck." (One of those sites, Don't Date Him Girl, seems especially noisome.)

Of course the apex of Web hegemony – its throne room, so to speak – are the social media: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram; Friendster, MySpace, Mylife. I used to think that a magazine called *Self* was a parody; little could I have guessed . . . Epstein, as always, provides concrete examples of the many depredations perpetrated by this in-feeding frenzy, one of the most pathetic being Andrew Sullivan trying to 'out' Elena Kagan (now Associate Justice Kagan). Inevitably, such freedom so widely-available has led to license, and that license has led to the juvenalization of much of our talk which, once private, is now public: self-actualization on the cheap. In one of my favorite paragraphs, Epstein cuts loose:

> The change of tone was a slow one, an accumulation of many bridges being lowered, gates opened, walls allowed to crumble. When was the first time an athlete said 'pissed off' or 'kick ass' on television, a woman said, 'fuck' at a middle-class dinner party table, kids took to using the phrase 'it

> sucks' for things they didn't like, permission given to run ads for Viagra . . . on prime time television? . . . the first time a comedian . . . did skits about cunnilingus on cable television . . . the first time *The New Yorker* permitted . . . phrases such as 'cunty fingers' (thank you John Updike) in its fiction.

Is gossip ever conversationally legitimate? Certainly it is if, as I believe, the primary function of conversation is to know others and to be known by them; like avid listeners, avid tellers reveal a good deal about themselves. Unfortunately, whereas good, rich conversation is *re-creational*, gossip is too often mere recreation – but not therefore necessarily useless. Epstein reports that one David Sloan Wilson, a professor of biology and anthropology, thinks gossip "appears to be a very sophisticated, multifunctional interaction which is important in policing behavior in a group and defining group membership," and surely that makes it legitimate.

Well then, is Samuel a gossip, providing a sort of academic adhesive? He certainly does not generally lend himself to rumor for its own sake. Rather, he will perpetrate some enormity, always an enormous enormity, than which, he believes, his listener should, within a few heartbeats, know better, and then – he watches. He expects his listener to get the joke, indeed to share its hearing with as much cheer as there was in its telling: risky business to be sure – for anyone whose choice of interlocutors is less astute than Samuel's.

In his section on Walter Winchell, Epstein quotes Winchell biographer Neal Gabler, tossing off a most trenchant insight, powerful for its applicability far beyond Winchell: "Vaudeville made Walter an entertainer for life and in life. Growing up in vaudeville as he did, he not only absorbed its diversity, its energy, its nihilism, and then deployed them in his journalism, but he learned how to create his journalism *from* them: journalism as vaudeville." Just watch: we're looking at a five-month run.

"In its destructive aspect," Epstein writes, "gossip is about two things: the ruination of reputation and the invasion of privacy." In that light, I find that *Gossip* shares a peculiar attraction with the *Inferno*: where do I stand? As he was writing the book Epstein seems to have cringed with self-recognition. "The next time you find yourself setting an item of gossip in play . . . you might do well to ask why you are doing so. . . . What have you gained? . . . I have begun

to ask myself this question, sometimes with . . . sadly degrading results . . . .” – Eighth Circle, ninth bolgia: pronouncedly untrivial, as is Epstein’s book.

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James Como is the author, most recently, of *here*.

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