

# Stephen Fry

## On His Best Behavior



**INTERVIEW**  
Charles Shafaieh

**PHOTOGRAPHY**  
Chris Floyd

Getting to the heart of social mores and manners with the incomparable British actor and writer Stephen Fry.

In 1922, Emily Post published her first book, *Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics, and at Home*. Today, many of its rules appear strange, irrelevant or sexist: “A gentleman on the street never shakes hands with a lady without first removing his right glove,” for example. But manners never disappear – they merely change form.

Stephen Fry, the British Renaissance man known equally for his prose and his acting, takes great interest in their origin and evolution. With a sharp wit and observational eye that make him an heir to Oscar Wilde and Evelyn Waugh, he undoubtedly would be an entertaining manners columnist – that is, when he isn’t writing books about Greek mythology or making documentaries about Wagner or language. (The very idea, however, likely would provoke

his characteristic boisterous laugh.)

In the late 1980s, Fry became a household name in Britain as one half of a comedic duo with Hugh Laurie, costarring on television in *A Bit of Fry and Laurie* and *Jeeves and Wooster*. Roles in films from *Gosford Park* to *V for Vendetta* followed, and his *Harry Potter* audiobooks further entrenched him as a beloved figure in British culture.

From 2003 to 2016, he became synonymous with erudition as the host of the BBC comedy quiz show *QI*. From his Los Angeles home, he shares some of his vast supply of knowledge as he muses about Victorian dinner-party traditions, the cigarette as an ideal symbol for identifying social mores, and what happened when the Queen Mother once played with etiquette rules.

**CHARLES SHAFAlEH** Etiquette often causes a clash between individual will and the collective good, such as not smoking on planes or turning off phones in theaters. How should we resolve that tension?

**STEPHEN FRY** It’s a fundamental question that strikes at the heart of politics, let alone social behavior. I think traffic is the best metaphor for the difference, if you like, between Americans’ individualism and Europeans’ more social upbringing and outlook. Now, you must not take this as anti-Americanism – I love America. But Americans are simply appalling drivers because they don’t have any real sense of traffic. By which I mean the movement of it, of traffic as society – as in, if I let this person in, that will help the traffic, and things will move more smoothly. If you have



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a sense of society or common good, you think of traffic not as an atomistic agglomeration but as an organism with an identity of its own, to which you can contribute.

That resonates throughout the question of manners and behavior. The ideal is that we all do our little bit to make the traffic flow better, which could mean holding back a cough in the theater because you know it will upset others.

Of course, it's so easy to turn into an old grouch who seethes at the lack of consideration of the people around you. I was brought up that, at the symphony, you *do not move*. You find your position, and the only time you move, ironically, is between movements!

**CS** Rules of behavior are culturally contingent. In 2016, you starred in a commercial for London's Heathrow Airport focused on British manners. What does it say about a country that discusses these practices in welcome ads?

**SF** Part of being British, and particularly being English, is an enormous sense of guilt, embarrassment, shame and sorrow. More or less, the national emotion is embarrassment. We are sorry we had the empire; we are sorry we kick-started the Industrial Revolution, which caused misery, pollution, wage slavery and despair. Somehow, there became imprinted in the British code of behavior a sense of having to be self-deprecating and slightly apologetic – that the things that were intolerable were barging into a queue, parading your privilege, expecting good service just because you came from a particular place.

D.H. Lawrence understood that there's a deep hypocrisy about it. Read his poem “The Oxford Voice.” He understood both that there was such a voice and that one of the most irritating things about it is that it seems so self-effacing and

depreciating, and that that in itself becomes a sign of superiority.

**CS** Do you believe etiquette rules have changed drastically since your childhood?

**SF** We are on a tectonic fault at the moment. I grew up when one pretty stable plate of behavior was in play around the world that I visited: opening doors for women, a certain kind of language and formality. My parents had dinner parties where, after the pudding course, the women would leave, and the men would gather with port and cigars. It's a tradition still performed by the royal family. And there are reasons for that. My mother told me that the Victorians just couldn't bear the idea that women should ever draw attention to the fact they had to go to the bathroom. So, the little game was they'd leave the men and race off to have a piss! It's a microcosm of anthropology and a question asked by Margaret Mead and Claude Lévi-Strauss: do taboos and fetishes in societies arise for a reason, or are they arbitrary, like language?

It makes for some wonderful moments. I was friends with Martin Gilliat, a marvelous fellow who was the Queen Mother's private secretary. They were having a dinner party at the Castle of Mey. When the women went to the drawing room, the Queen Mother said: “Let's play a trick on the men. Let's hide!” When the men came in, Martin looked around and, in a very loud voice, said, “Well, thank God for that – they've all fucked off to bed!”

**CS** You've written about your passion for smoking paraphernalia and the activity of smoking. Do any of its fetishes have origins in reason?

**SF** E.F. Benson writes about how men wouldn't smoke in the dining room. They would go into a smoking room. What is more, they put on

a velvet jacket and a smoking cap. The reason was that it was considered appalling for a woman to be able to smell tobacco on a man. It would linger on clothing and the hair, and velvet absorbed the smell. So, it was all quite purposeful and to do with consideration.

Oscar Wilde said that smoking is the perfect form of perfect pleasure. It has no purpose. All it does is satisfy itself. So, it became very symbolic. The Peninsular War caused a lot of British soldiers to return with the Spanish and Portuguese habit of the cigarillo. In the late 19th century, cigarettes were considered a sign of the decadent new young person, not pipes or cigars. It coincided with the Great Binge, the period from the 1890s until the Great War when everyone started to get off their faces on absinthe, cocaine and laudanum. Women then started to smoke during the 1920s, which was very much connected with the New Woman. Later, lighting up became absolutely the rudest thing you could do. It's very much a symbol of how behavior is moderated and interpreted, and how we parse it in the social sphere – because it's so random.

**CS** Language, by contrast, is not purposeless. How do you feel about contemporary censorship debates?

**SF** I have a fantasy that I've been invited onto the program of the pestilential Piers Morgan, who's always going on about “canceling the cancelers.” I want to come on and say, “How are you, old cunt?” He'd say, “Could you steady your language?” I'd reply: “Oh, I thought you were a free-speech absolutist against people being canceled for using the fucking language that's cunting different. The words I'm using are a bit taboo, but they are taboo words to do with sex and reproduction, not with belittling a minority.

You pretend that your life has been made unfortunate because you can't say the n-word. But when you visit your grandmother, do you speak the same way as when you're in the pub with friends? No. It's like clothes. You wear a suit for a job interview, and you wear a linguistic suit, in which you speak slightly more formally. But you're not trapped in it.”

People make as if their personal identity or agency is threatened by having to conform. Conformity isn't a permanent thing. We have plasticity. We can be pushed into a mold for an hour and then spring into our rubbery selves again. And there's nothing maverick about being rude.

**CS** Should dress codes still be enforced in particular places?

**SF** A part of me is with St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 13: “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” We don't now put away childish things. We want Disney, superheroes, play clothes and sporting goods. A five-star hotel that, 20 years ago, required men to wear a tie and jacket can't have such a rule today because they would have no Hollywood film directors or Silicon Valley billionaires who all slop around in teenage clothing. I'm wearing a T-shirt now, and there's nothing wrong with that. But we like, where possible, to belong to a tradition or to have a sense of belonging to something that we *know* is a kind of joke. I value the idea of being able to wear the “club tie.” I like that sense of belonging. It's a kind of social play that I've got this tie, I've gone to this club, and I can be at home here – but then, I also can be something completely different. The variety of it all is what's enjoyable.

Then there's jargon as a rite of passage.

Learning that every part of a boat has a special word that we don't use in normal English is part of learning the trade of sailing, of being inducted into that mystery. There's a snobbery among us bohemians who mock business language – all this rubbish you hear people say on phones in airport lounges such as “scaling up.” But maybe it is important that they have their own language and that they know what they mean.

**CS** Do these shifts perhaps stem from society being organized in a markedly different manner today?

**SF** Niall Ferguson – who is not someone I necessarily want to impersonate – wrote an interesting book about how we've moved from a hierarchical to a networked society. Like Neapolitan ice cream, a hierarchical society is made of more-or-less frozen layers: you know which layer you're in by your dress, your school, your life expectation but also your random weird linguistic expressions, as in Nancy Mitford's wonderful book *Noblesse Oblige*.

Dickens understood where this was going. The old feudal, class-bound hierarchies – the utilitarian way of ordering Victorian life to which he so objected – he saw as fake. It was idea-shaped, not human-shaped, and certain things – money and disease, in particular, in his books – melted the interstices of the Neapolitan ice cream.

We judge people by the language they speak. We don't think it's an etiquette judgement. We think it's a moral or ethical judgement to do with views on gender, race and charged issues that concern us so much now. We're aware that the old fences and hedges of etiquette don't fit this new way of judging.

“Etiquette” is an interesting word, of course. It originally means a “ticket,” from the Old

French “estiquette.” I believe it is thought that there were, in France, literal tickets sent around in the military and various other places telling how things were done. So, when you went to a particular place, there was a list of behaviors that were appropriate for that place. It's a guide.

**CS** Now, “etiquette” is associated with another kind of ticket: a clothing tag. The first finishing school in China offers a class entitled “Pronunciation of Foreign Luxury Brands.”

**SF** If you want to unleash English gentleman snobbery, it would be against foreign luxury brands. But the new upper-class, I suppose, are Instagram influencers who have gift accounts from all these fashion houses that make what is, to my eye, vulgar junk. But then, who am I to say? I have to realize it's pure snobbery. Alan Bennett, one of my literary heroes, once said: “There are two types of snobbery out there. There's the snobbery that looks up, and there's the snobbery that looks down, and I think the snobbery that looks up is an amiable enough vice.” I know what he means. It is amiable to glamorize what you aspire to. It's silly, but we're all silly. What isn't really tolerable is sneering down. We all want to believe that our tastes and sense of what is proper and right are the most valuable.

Essentially, being polite is utterly changing your etiquette according to the needs of the group you're with in a way that doesn't push you forward as the determinant of what is good and bad class. We try to put people at ease, we try to be at ease ourselves, and we value those who put us at ease. I have friends with whom I watch professional darts matches. I talk to them in a completely different way from those I watch cricket with, let alone those I go to art galleries with. You have to be a chameleon. 🐸