



# SNOBS

by Julian Fellowes

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ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN



## A Note About the Author

Julian Fellowes is an English writer, actor, and film director who was born in Egypt and educated at Ampleforth College, Yorkshire. He went on to Magdalene College, Cambridge University, and the Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art. As an actor, he appeared in *Monarch of the Glen*, the *Aristocrats*, *Damage*, *Shadowlands*, and other films and TV series.

As a screenwriter, his first feature film was *Gosford Park*, directed by Robert Altman, which won awards for the best original screenplay from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the National Film Critics Circle, the National Society of Film Critics, and the Writers Guild of America. He also wrote the book for the Cameron Mackintosh/Walt Disney stage musical of *Mary Poppins*, before creating *Downton Abbey*, which entered the *Guinness Book of Records* as the most critically acclaimed show on television of 2010. Julian won an Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing for a Miniseries, Movie, or Dramatic Special for *Downton Abbey*, which also received the Emmy for the Outstanding Miniseries or Movie, in addition to winning the Golden Globe in that category.

In 1990, Julian married Emma Joy Kitchener, a lady-in-waiting to Princess Michael of Kent, with whom he has a son named Peregrine. In 2011 he was made a life peer of the House of Lords, with the title Baron Fellowes of West Stafford. The Kitchener-Fellowes family divides their time between London and Dorset.



Photo by: David Chancellor

Julian  
Fellowes



## *An Interview with Julian Fellowes*

**Q:** What inspired you to write *Snobs*?

**A:** It occurred to me that I had in my life, through no great merit on my part, inhabited two essentially “secret” worlds, Society and Showbiz. Many people fantasize about these groups, leafing through magazines in a dentist’s waiting room, imagining all sorts of sin and splendor when they stare at the photographs of them. But I have known these people, close up, and I suppose I felt that it might be interesting to pull the curtain aside and reveal them in their less grandiose truthfulness. Like all of us, I had a certain amount that I wanted to say about the world that had nurtured me and about whose frailties and strengths I had kept silent for so long. Because there are strengths, as the reader will discover. I have my criticisms, of course, but I have also tried to demonstrate the elements in the beliefs of these folk that, when all is said and done, I respect. Though I probably shouldn’t say it, I do think it is a pretty truthful account of them, humorous too, I hope, but truthful. I imagine this is why, in the end, despite a certain bristling from an acquaintance when the book first came out, I seem to have been forgiven for it.

**Q:** How would you describe *Snobs*?

**A:** People talk as if the book is entirely about class. For me, it is about choice. Edith makes a choice and, in my eyes, she has to learn to take responsibility for it. Our lives, to a greater or lesser degree, are the product of the choices we make.

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*Get  
to Know  
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*“My wife is  
always anxious  
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that she is  
NOT Adela  
(no comment).”*

Modern society is inclined to suggest that we can somehow wriggle out of the consequences, but I don't agree. We make our choices and, on some level or other, we are stuck with them. I suppose I feel that one of the greatest journeys in life is learning to accept that.

**Q: What did you do before you became a novelist?  
What else do you do now?**

**A:** I am probably better known as a screenwriter than a novelist, or indeed as an actor, both of which careers I have pursued, and continue to pursue, with differing degrees of success. It was after I had written the script of the film, *Gosford Park*, that I was asked to have a go at prose and a long suppressed desire to be a novelist came to the surface in answer to the invitation. I think what drew me to it was the cleanliness of simply working with one editor to refine and shape my own voice. I would not, for once, have to deal with the ideas of a hundred movie executives and directors and stars, all of whom want and need to make their mark on any script they work with, but with my own ideas. Mine. As I started to work, I found I gradually ceased the defensive position common to all screenwriters and started to examine what it was that I really wanted to say.

**Q: Were any of the characters in *Snobs* based on you?**

**A:** Inevitably perhaps, most people assume that the nameless narrator is based on me and of course there is a good deal of me in him—although my



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wife is always anxious to make it clear that she is NOT Adela (no comment). The narrator is an actor but not a very successful one. He is “in Society,” whatever that means, but not at an especially elevated level. All of which would be true of me, particularly when I was starting out. I was taken up by the demands of “The Season” as an “eligible” young man (though why I was considered eligible, I have no idea) and I had many experiences of people like the Uckfields and their kind. There was in fact one family who played a big part in my life in the late teens and early twenties who might be regarded as the progenitors of the Broughton Clan. I had begun by falling in love with one of the daughters and I took to staying with her parents whenever I could in order to further my cause. I got nowhere with her but I ended up more or less in love with the whole family. Actually, I thought no one had spotted this connection but, the other day, at the last Christie’s summer party (that I talk about in the book), a voice behind me said rather dryly: “We’re the Broughtons, aren’t we?” I turned and there was the eldest daughter. She had not much changed despite the gap of years, standing there with a caustic smile, and so of course I had to admit that they were. It will remain our secret. But, anyway, it is not the narrator’s similarity of experiences to my own that made me create and use him. Rather it was because it seemed a good idea to have a really accessible character who might introduce the readers to the Broughtons and their life, who was not, in himself, much out of the ordinary and certainly not daunting. They would, in short, have a friend, a tour guide, to accompany them into this peculiar world.

*“Aristocrats  
are no different  
from the rest of  
the human  
race.”*

**Q:** Do you have a favorite character from *Snobs*?

**A:** Well, I do have a soft spot for Lady Uckfield. Of course, no character in a novel is a complete portrait; they're almost always a slight amalgamation. But she is the nearest to a complete portrait of a very old friend of mine. She knew nothing about it until one day, when we were in a house party together in Sussex, she asked me what I was up to and, after a pause, I heard Emma saying sharply, "Tell her!" so I did. I thought and hoped she might be amused but she was in fact absolutely furious with me and it has taken quite a while to claw my way back into her good graces. She said to me the other day, "A lifetime of avoiding the newspapers and now look!" I suppose it's her mixture of benevolent tyranny and a sense of humor and a certain kind of understanding of the way things work, which at the beginning of the novel you wouldn't credit her with, that appeals to me. And finally, the reason she dislikes Edith is not because she is middle class but because Edith does not make Charles happy. Personally, knowing the true model, I am certain that if Googie had felt within a year or two that the couple were well suited and loving and content, she would have backed off and become supportive. In the end, any mother will forgive sons- and daughters-in-law their faults if they make their children happy. In this, aristocrats are no different from the rest of the human race.



**Q: Which authors do you see as the major influences upon your writing?**

**A:** Incredibly flatteringly, I have been compared to all sorts of writers in various reviews, Wodehouse and Waugh among them, but I suppose I was most pleased to be likened to Anthony Trollope and Edith Wharton. I would certainly love to believe there was any connection. I find that I no longer really enjoy the passionate polarities of Dickens and his ilk, who, like the makers of early Westerns, are always so anxious to establish who wears the white hats and who the black. To Dickens, the evil are wicked to their very core while his good characters, those wise old men, those saintly virgins, are unblemished by the slightest stain. Well, I don't know about you but, in my experience, things aren't like that. The characters of Trollope and Wharton are flawed but seldom irredeemable, any more than they are pure and sinless as driven snow. They exist, for the most part, in the largely well-intentioned but often fallible, gray territory known as Real Life. I love the way these writers both invite us to sympathize with characters, like Lily Bart or Glencora Palliser, who are full of the weaknesses of the world but somehow retain a sort of decency in their soul. This is my kind of heroine.

**Q: What is your life's motto?**

**A:** My family's motto is: Post proelia praemia—"After the battles, the prizes." My mother used to say: "Well, we've had the battles. Where are the prizes?" But it'll do just fine for me.

*Get  
to Know  
the Author*



## Julian Fellowes on Class

**Q:** Your own background is not so different from some of the aristocrats you write about in *Snoobs*. Is this book an indictment of the British upper class? Affectionate teasing? A little bit of both?

**A:** My background is not quite as lustrous as it has been painted by some of the media. I mean, in one newspaper I was given a childhood in a Scottish castle with nineteen servants (why nineteen?). But I grew up as part of a junior branch since my grandfather was a younger son. And so, although I do belong to one of those families and my name is in *Burke's Landed Gentry* and all that kind of thing, it's in a very minor capacity. I think that was what gave me a unique perspective as an observer.

*"I think it's a cliché to make out that everyone with money and success and birth is unhappy."*

When I was eighteen or nineteen, the London debutante season was still very much going on. You'll hardly credit this, but there was a chap called Peter Townend who really ran the season. In order to find escorts for the debs, he would go through *Burke's Peerage* and *Burke's Landed Gentry* and take the names out of young men who were the right age and invite them for a drink. If you passed this test, and were deemed "safe in taxis," you were put on a list and given to the mothers of these girls to be invited to the various balls and cocktail parties. So you spent a lot of time going and staying with complete strangers in the country to attend the dances of girls you hardly knew. I was on that list. I was what was then called a "Debs' Delight," but I was simply "making up numbers." I wasn't good looking, I wasn't a great heir, I didn't have a title. So I was there, but





no one noticed me. I was the one who had the bedroom next to the nursery with a lumpy bed, and what my mother used to call “starvation corner” at the table. And I think it gave me a much better kind of viewpoint. There is a famous moment when someone went to the Comtesse Greffulhe, who is the original of Marcel Proust’s Duchesse de Guermantes in his great novel, and they said to her, “What was it like having Proust at your parties? That must have been incredible!” And the Comtesse replied, “Que j’ai jamais su! (If only I’d known.)” And of course, although he was in that society (not that I’m comparing myself to Proust), and attending their gatherings and strolling among them, because nobody thought he was of the slightest importance, nobody adjusted their behavior for him.

As for whether my novel is an indictment of that world, I have come to a conclusion in my late middle-age: I’m not convinced anymore that there is a kind of life that makes you happier than any other. I mean, I know—of course—there are lives that are happier than other lives, but I think you’re just as likely to come upon them among coal miners or middle-class businessmen or people living in the suburbs or the very rich and great aristocrats. I think it’s a cliché to make out that everyone with money and success and birth is unhappy. I don’t think they are, I think there are lots of them that are very happy. But it’s also a cliché to suggest that these things make you happy. And I hope that in the novel (and in life too) I take a fairly unprejudiced view of all of them. I do poke fun at them and there are sort of

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*“I just hope that I paint a picture of a group of people who, in the last analysis, are trying to do their best like all the rest of us are.”*

observations and customs and habits that are rather amusing to the rest of society, but I don't think you hate any of the characters at the end, not Lady Uckfield nor poor Mrs. Lavery (the greatest “snob” of all of them, I think) nor any of them, really. I just hope that I paint a picture of a group of people who, in the last analysis, are trying to do their best like all the rest of us are.

**Q:** It's striking that both *Gosford Park* and *Snobs* explore the world and manners of different classes. Do you think this is a particularly English preoccupation?

**A:** Class does interest me; I won't run away from that. I can never really decide whether class is a kind of honorable thing: that you are brought up with these traditions—whether you are working class or aristocratic or whatever—and it's your job to keep all this stuff going and make sure people don't forget. Or is it a sort of terrible practical joke that's being practiced on 98% of the world? Telling them that they're not good enough. That, from the moment they're born, there's this other group of people who know more than they will ever know and who have standards they can never aspire to and who are more cultured and elegant than they will ever be. In the end, I sort of fall in-between those two really. It is odd that you take a baby, and you place them in this group, and you bring them up in a certain way with a certain vocabulary and prejudices and manners, and after that, they are indelibly stamped from then on. But

on the other hand, isn't some variant of this happening in every civilization on earth?

Obviously, it's more obvious in Europe than it is in America. I mean, where I do think America has achieved something that is very enviable is that here you have a very strongly entrenched hereditary upper class. People think you don't, but you do. Where else in the Western world could you have two generations of the same family being president? This would be quite impossible with the role of prime minister in England as, to us, it would smack uncomfortably of privilege. Added to which, you have enormous inherited fortunes here, enough to launch ten dukedoms. But at the same time, you have self-made men and women who have come up in one generation. And they live together—the old money and the new—in a very unjostling way that doesn't seem to create any difficulty. They mingle freely and contentedly. This, of course, was Napoleon's vision, his dream—to create an aristocracy in France that was a mixture of old families with old traditions, keeping things going, and new blood and new high achievers that would mix on equal terms. I can't think of any country, other than America, that has truly managed that.



*Get  
to Know the  
Aristocracy*



## Reading Group Questions

1. What is your opinion of Edith? In what ways do you feel her choices are justified or otherwise? Did she know—or should she have known—what marriage to Charles would entail?
2. Edith might be said to have made a “bargain” in life. She has chosen to provide herself with a position of importance and power rather than to marry for love. Is this kind of bargain immoral in our day and age—or is it her failure to stick to the deal that puts her at fault?
3. Both the narrator and Julian Fellowes have a certain soft spot for Lady Uckfield. How do you feel about Googie’s approach to life, including the value she places on doing things “properly”?
4. The Uckfields and Charles accept that their largely unearned status carries with it certain public duties and responsibilities. How is hereditary obligation, in exchange for privilege, useful in a society? In what ways is it detrimental?
5. Contrast the actors’ world to life at Broughton. What are the attractions and limitations of both?
6. Who are the biggest snobs in the book, and how does this affect your view of them?
7. The ending of *Snobs* could be called cynical. Edith is “happy enough,” which is hardly a fairy-tale conclusion. Is she right to “settle” for a reasonable level of contentment without continuing to search for more or should she have set off again into the unknown? In other words, is it moral or immoral to be realistic? In fact, what



- sort of future do you envision for Edith and Charles? How about for the other couples?
8. The narrator describes the English as “addicted to exclusivity. Leave three Englishmen in a room and they will invent a rule that prevents a fourth joining them.” How does this manifest itself in American society? Would you say that Americans are also “addicted” to exclusivity, or is this a peculiarly English phenomenon?
  9. F. Scott Fitzgerald said, “The rich are different from you and me.” In what ways do the wealthy characters in *Snobs* seem different from—or similar to—other people you’ve met?
  10. What do you think of the narrator’s observation that “one of the basic truths of life is that, as a general rule, the world takes you at your own estimation”?
  11. Julian Fellowes says in his interview that he sees *Snobs* as being more about choice than about class. How do you rate the relative importance of social standing and their own actions in the main characters’ lives?
  12. How do the characters’ perceptions of the different lives being lived around them differ from the reality? Is Charles’s view of the stage world accurate? Is Mrs. Lavery’s idea of the aristocratic life accurate? How much misunderstanding is caused by inaccurate preconceptions of what other people are going through?

*Keep  
on  
Reading*