

Cancel Culture Fights for 'Dr.' Jill Biden

A career as a writer offers many thrills as one piece after another gets picked up and published. Today, however, it also offers many nervous chills, as the specter of cancel culture could broadside a writer at any moment.

I experienced one of the former thrills of writing when a piece of mine was published several years ago alongside one by Joseph Epstein, a man whom I regarded then and now as one of America's great living essayists. Half a dozen of his collections—[A Literary Education](#), [Once More Around the Block](#), and others—are enthroned on my bookshelves, and I've read many of his other works. Though I can't remember the subject of either of our articles, I do recollect the joy I felt finding myself in such grand company.

Unfortunately, Epstein is now experiencing the chill of cancel culture.

The 84-year-old writer and former teacher is under heavy fire for writing "Is There a Doctor in the White House? Not if You Need an M.D." an [article](#) published in *The Wall Street Journal* questioning whether Jill Biden, Ed.D. should continue to call herself "doctor." The essay prompted attacks from several quarters, [including Northwestern University](#), where Epstein taught English literature for years. The same university that once granted Epstein an honorary doctorate has now wiped him from its website and condemned him for his "misogynistic views" while declaring itself "firmly committed to equity, diversity, and inclusion."

Epstein's trouble began when he called into question the true value of a doctorate, noting that "the erosion of seriousness and the relaxation of standards in university education

generally” has reduced the prestige of a doctorate degree.

“Getting a doctorate was then an arduous proceeding,” writes Epstein, “One had to pass examinations in two foreign languages, one of them Greek or Latin, defend one’s thesis, and take an oral examination on general knowledge in one’s field.” This was especially the case at Columbia University where, once upon a time, “a secretary sat outside the room where these examinations were administered, a pitcher of water and a glass on her desk. The water and glass were there for the candidates who fainted.”

Epstein continues:

A far cry, this, from the few doctoral examinations I sat in on during my teaching days, where candidates and teachers addressed one another by first names and the general atmosphere more resembled a kaffeeklatsch. Dr. Jill, I note you acquired your Ed.D. as recently as 15 years ago at age 55, or long after the terror had departed.”

Epstein is not loathe to work humor into this essay, poking fun at his own title of “Dr.”:

During my years as a university teacher I was sometimes addressed, usually on the phone, as ‘Dr. Epstein.’ On such occasions it was all I could do not to reply, ‘Read two chapters of Henry James and get into bed. I’ll be right over.’

Despite the flack from cancel culture, Epstein still has at least [one defender in Bruce Bawer](#) over at *City Journal*. “On this matter, Epstein was, quite simply, right,” Bawer concludes. “Unfortunately for him, he decided to use Jill Biden as a hook for a thoughtful piece on an important issue. In retribution for that politically inadmissible choice, he’s now a non-person—at least in the eyes of Northwestern

University.”

The only point in Bawer’s conclusion with which I disagree is that this is “an important issue.” Compared to other issues of our day, the “increasing meaninglessness of advanced degrees in the humanities and social sciences” is a sad fraud, but a trifle, as far as important issues go.

No—what’s important here is Northwestern University resorting to the now hackneyed, and formulaic “equity, diversity, and inclusion.” These words long ago lost their meaning. In fact, if we examine this threesome when joined together in this way, we spot contradictions. Can we simultaneously be equal and diverse? Can inclusion and diversity co-exist? If so, then why rap Joseph Epstein on the knuckles for his essay?

Equally important is the rapidity with which “cancel culture” attempts to destroy those it detests. At Epstein’s Wikipedia page, for example, someone has already added a section titled “Article on Jill Biden,” a two-paragraph [piece](#) knocking Epstein’s essay. Keep in mind that his essay appeared in print on Dec. 11, and by Dec. 16 someone had already attacked him through Wikipedia. Other comments in this Wikipedia article are also mostly critical of Epstein. Nowhere do the writers, whoever they are, say a word about the hundreds of brilliant, amusing essays this man has produced over the past 50 years.

For readers of *Intellectual Takeout* interested in meeting Joseph Epstein, I would suggest a recent collection, [Wind Sprints](#), which contains his shorter essays. Here you will find a grand sampler of his humor, wit, and sparkling language.

And if by some slim chance you, Mr. Epstein, happen to read these words, please know that your books will continue to occupy the place of honor they deserve in my home library. Over the years, you have brought me laughter, smiles, and bits of wisdom, and have made me a better writer.

Thank you, sir.

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