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## Etiquette Can Be Murder

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*Etiquette will make you dignified. It will make your actions and speech refined, polished, impressive. It will make you a leader instead of a follower, a participant instead of a looker-on. It will...make you immune to all embarrassment, enable you to conduct yourself with ease and confidence at all times, under all circumstances.*

Lillian Eichler, *Book of Etiquette*, 1921

*Bear in mind that it is not the end of the world if you use the wrong fork, stumble over an introduction, or stand up when you are the one being toasted. Still, you'll feel a lot more relaxed if you are familiar with the code of behavior for any given situation.*

Tuckerman and Dunnan, *The Amy Vanderbilt Complete Book of Etiquette*, 1995

### Etiquette is Not Dead It's Complicated

Did you know that if you call off your wedding, you are supposed to send out a formal cancellation card to the invited guests, in the same style as your wedding invitations?

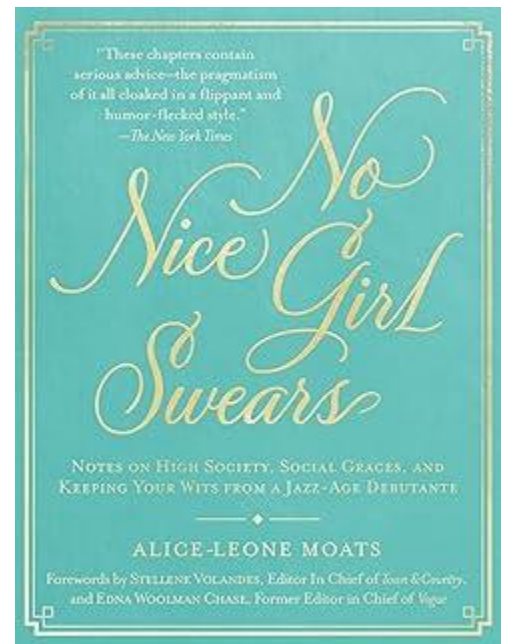
Do you know how to use a grapefruit fork? Or how to skip a stone?

Are you aware that in some countries it is considered bad luck to give your hostess an even number of flowers?

Have you ever been accused of mansplaining, or accidentally phubbed a friend?

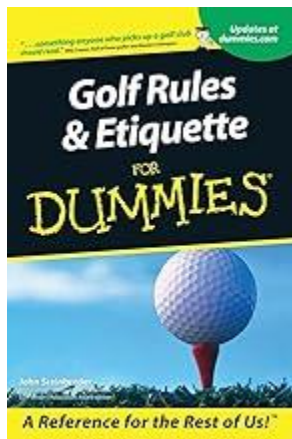
What do all of these things have in common? They are all situations addressed in modern etiquette books.

When I chose to write a cozy mystery series with an etiquette teacher as the amateur sleuth, a number of people assumed that I was writing a historical set of novels, since they believed etiquette was a relic of the past and



didn't apply today. Or at best that it was only an anachronism, useful for tutoring the children of royalty but not much else.

Actually the etiquette business is thriving, with schools of protocol in Atlanta, Charleston, and Washington, DC still churning out teachers certified to give etiquette instruction in topics ranging from children's and adult etiquette to the proper serving of tea. There are courses in dining and social skills, interview preparation, corporate and healthcare etiquette, protocol officer training, and detailed curriculums in intercultural etiquette, which prepare businesspeople and politicians for the niceties of dealing with citizens of other countries.



For those who don't receive specialized training, etiquette books have become a hot commodity. They range from the general, massive tomes of prior years to the new trend of very specific books for special uses. I collect etiquette manuals, and I have books on executive, electronic, lifestyle, wedding, multicultural, breakfast, and boudoir etiquette. There are guidelines explicitly for men, volumes on how to behave when traveling to individual foreign countries, table setting manuals, and multiple works on the proper etiquette for golf, tennis, and pickleball—just to name a few.

For further etiquette advice, *Miss Manners* is still one of the most popular columns in daily newspapers, appearing in over 200 editions, and the author, Judith Martin, was recently awarded the National Humanities Medal by the President of the United States. There are also numerous etiquette blogs on the internet—and a search for etiquette websites turns up over a million entries.

Based on the proliferation of etiquette resources and their steadily narrowing specializations, it seems that etiquette is not dead—it's just growing progressively more complicated. And in fact, in today's increasingly hectic, mad-dash world, guidelines for good manners may be needed now more than ever.

In my upcoming newsletters, I will be discussing some of the more outlandish rules of etiquette from the past, explaining the medieval reasons behind certain current etiquette rules, and offering rather zany tips from modern etiquette books on a number of topics. I hope you'll subscribe to future editions, at [www.LucindaGerlitz.com](http://www.LucindaGerlitz.com).

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## Nuthatch v. Deadline

The rapping began on a Tuesday afternoon. It was gentle at first, a tentative tip-tap that barely brushed at the edge of my consciousness while I concentrated on my work. The next day the knocking was more authoritative, a definite thumping noise too loud to be ignored. Sighing at this distraction from my writing deadline, I pulled myself away from my desk and went to discover the culprit: a tiny bird, blue on top and white underneath, with a long, straight bill

sharper than a Ginsu knife. A simple nuthatch, walking headfirst down the side of my two-story house, so cute and innocent-looking that I shooed him away with only a soft slamming of my window.

Of course, I had no idea at the time that he'd just selected the wooden siding close to my eaves as the perfect location for his new nest. When the drumming started up again, I merely slammed the window harder.



By the fourth day, we were into a routine. He would whack and bang, I would slam, and he'd glide over to a nearby tree. I could take as long as I liked, break for a sandwich, or even take a shower. But the very next time my rear touched the leather of my writing chair, the rhythmic beating would resume, often with a mocking note.

A week later, as I swung a broom wildly out the window and yelled, "This is *my* house. Get off my house," I noticed the neighborhood children giving me odd looks. The nuthatch, however, merely swooped over the straw end of my weapon as he headed for his construction site. It wasn't long before I could beat my head on the palm rest of my keyboard in perfect timing to the rhythm of his hammering. Much to the detriment of my fifteenth draft.

My online community offered suggestions for saving my sanity. I could get rid of the evil-minded demon by covering his hole over with two-sided tape, or by filling it entirely with steel wool. However, the height of his aerie, along with my own fear of climbing anything taller than a bread box, made that impractical. I went to the local bird store instead, for professional advice.

Nuthatches imprint on certain locales for their homes, the owner explained, and once they settled on an area, a family would nest in the exact same spot year after year. However, since my industrious little builder hadn't yet finished his home, I might be able to entice him away from my office by putting up inviting nesting boxes in the nearby woods.

I bought two houses, and by the next morning happy nuthatches were flying in and out of the boxes' circular openings, joyously bringing in twigs to ornament their fancy new living quarters. It just happened that none of the new residents turned out to be my own particular pet nuthatch. I put up more nesting boxes. He knocked even harder on my walls, apparently widening the hole in my siding to make room for a wife and kids.

My neighbors, noticing I looked a bit rundown, quickly offered new ideas. "You need to put up something that moves beside the house, where it can startle him." The swirling pink tape I stuck on my drainpipes disturbed my feathered nemesis for fifteen minutes, the sparkly, plastic icicle-on-a-string for only ten. But they did make me jump six inches backwards, every time I glanced up and saw an unexpected object fluttering outside the glass panes of my window.

Plastic owls, fake snakes, and the "terror-eyes" balloons that were supposed to make the nuthatch think a predator was lurking? He scoffed. The silver pie-pans I hung on stakes didn't even earn a snicker. The pelting, driving, thundering noises began to echo in my brain at night, and my line-edit revisions were two days late.



Nearing desperation, I did more research, and discussed the options with my husband. The electronic device which repelled birds by randomly emitting distress calls would, he thought, be almost as annoying as the constant pounding on our walls. The \$2800 silent unit was beyond our means, titanium siding out of the question. If I bought the shotgun I longed for, he predicted that I'd more than likely miss my four-inch target, wing a pedestrian, and put more holes in the house than the nuthatch already had. Besides which, if I did manage to hit the horrible twittering monster, I would no doubt cry for three days and then spend the rest of my life feeling guilty for killing him. And maybe all I needed was some rest?

My husband knows me very well, so I decided to sleep on it.

The next day I went to the window when my little friend arrived and spoke to him quietly. “I understand,” I said. “It’s Mother Nature. Your ancestors lived here long before the developers moved in, and you’ve become attached to the area. You’ve imprinted on my house now, and there’s nothing I can do to change that. So I give. But I live here, too, and we need to make a deal. Your house will be finished soon. The noise will stop, and I’ll leave you alone. Have as many kids as you want. Just, please, don’t tell any of your friends what a great place this is. I have to earn a living, which means meeting deadlines, and one of you is all that I can take.”

The rest of the morning was blissfully, unexpectedly devoid of sound. And then, that afternoon, he brought in a ragged avian work crew, and they began turning his single-family dwelling into a string of condos.

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And, as promised, a cat picture: This is my nineteen-year-old, Thomas, who always helps me write.

