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## Etiquette Can Be Murder

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*The amount of space that etiquette books and etiquette columns devote to proper introductions often makes the whole process sound as complicated as integral calculus.*

Francis Benton, *Etiquette*, 1956

### Introductions

I've been thinking a lot about introductions this month—mostly because I've started several new things. I've joined a recently formed critique group, taken a couple of online classes, and begun a newsletter. I've attended a meeting of complete strangers, worked with a new salesperson to try on makeup, and finally met the husband of a good friend.

In all of these situations I had to introduce myself and make an effort to start a conversation. But since I'm an introvert, it wasn't always comfortable. (Especially since the saleswoman put the makeup on my face for me—yikes!) So, I thought I would check my collection of modern and antique etiquette books to hopefully learn ways to introduce myself with ease. Or at least without making any glaring mistakes.



The concept of formal introductions has been around for centuries. In ancient times, people would carefully present themselves to others in order to establish their identity and social status, as well as their peaceful intentions.

The rules for performing introductions became more formalized in the Middle Ages, with specific protocols being established for who could be introduced to whom, and how the presentation was to be made. And the guidelines only became more complicated in succeeding periods, reaching a peak of intricacy in the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

For example, in the Victorian era you could not simply start a conversation with a stranger, but had to wait until you were presented to one another by a relative, friend, or mentor.

We've all heard of Victorian society's rule that no young lady could acknowledge the presence of a gentleman, or a gentleman presume to make himself known to a lady, without a proper introduction. But did you know that even in the 1920s in America, two gentlemen could not enter

into a discussion without first being introduced to one another by an intermediary? Or that two ladies could not develop a friendship without the intervention of someone who could establish the acquaintance?

There were exceptions, of course. Per Lilian Eicher's *Book of Etiquette*, "When two men are sitting side-by-side on a steamer deck, both glorying in the solemn dignity of the sea...it would be petty indeed to refrain from conversation. If a friendship is to be developed later, a formal introduction may be sought."



When two ladies were seated across from one another while traveling, they were also allowed to exchange remarks about the scenery without having been formally introduced. However, neither of them would be permitted to acknowledge the other in future meetings until they had been officially presented to one another.



Of course, this put the burden of deciding who could be friends and acquaintances squarely on the shoulders of the person who had the power to make introductions. And he or she was cautioned in the same book never to introduce two people "unless you are quite certain it will be agreeable to them both." It was also the introducer's duty to break the ice between the strangers and make sure that the conversation was "easy and agreeable."

Introductions today are far more informal. People are commonly allowed to speak to strangers at will, and all that is required is an "enthusiastic" announcement of the name or names, followed by a few words about the person to use as a helpful discussion starter. Such as, "Hi. I'm Lucinda Gerlitz. I'm a mystery writer and I collect old etiquette books."

According to Nancy Tuckerman in the current edition of *The Amy Vanderbilt Complete Book of Etiquette*, "What you want to remember is that strict protocol, except in diplomatic circles, is not nearly as important as warmth and spontaneity." (Of course, this is followed by four pages of instructions on how to make introductions if you need to, but that is a far cry from the twenty-nine pages devoted to the subject in the 1920s *Book of Etiquette*.)



Introductions of diplomats are still so complicated that there are entire tomes devoted to the subject. There is even an Office Of Protocol in Washington DC that is completely dedicated to answering questions on which officials should be presented to whom, and who should be seated where at a dinner party.

In contrast to the diplomats, it seems that introducing myself to my critique group, my fellow classmates, my readers, the strangers, and the makeup lady who would sit inches from my face should be a thing of comparative ease in these modern times. But to be honest, I think being formally introduced might actually have been more relaxing and comfortable in the days when there were stricter protocols and an intermediary was required.

At least the pressure of making conversation and ensuring that things went well was mostly on the introducer then, and not so much on the person trying to present themselves to total strangers.

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I would love for my readers to introduce themselves! You can drop me a note on my contact page at [www.LucindaGerlitz.com](http://www.LucindaGerlitz.com).

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And since you can't have a newsletter without a pet picture, here is the obligatory cat photo. These are my two devilish kittens, Cricket and Izzie, doing a bit of birdwatching.



Wishing everyone a Happy New Year