

What Jeffrey Epstein's black book tells us about Manhattan

Rich people don't get richer only because of tax windfalls. Rich people get richer because they hang out together



By Holly Peterson
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While the American justice system is scrutinised over how Jeffrey Epstein was able to hang himself inside his prison cell, New York's world of social and business high-flyers is focused on his "black book" — a list of real and aspirational contacts.

The pages of the convicted sex offender's black book comprise a scrapbook of modern Manhattan's most powerful. (The list was published in 2015 by Gawker.com, but recently reprinted in New York magazine).

One evening was enough to get my own name added to the black book. I never met Epstein, but a friend recently told me that we were once at the same party. She had invited me to a cocktail event to meet Prince Andrew in the townhouse of Epstein's confidante Ghislaine Maxwell. This was around 2010, two years after Epstein's plea deal on felony prostitution counts with a minor. I was surprised to learn he had been there, as Maxwell was by that point dating another man.

In common with many others who have since found their names inscribed in the black book, I was horrified. How had I strayed into the orbit of a man accused of trafficking and abusing scores of young women? I am also familiar with numerous other names in Epstein's black book and know dozens of them personally. Many I've contacted say they never met Epstein and are dumbfounded they are on the list, which is thought by many to have been embellished by Maxwell.

In truth, it makes perfect sense that Epstein would need a black book of people he knew — and wanted to know. He couldn't get to the top of the totem pole otherwise. His career was so secretive, his CV so sparse, that no one knew where his money came from. What he needed was a social network.

The primary axiom to remember in this hideous saga: rich people don't get richer only because of tax windfalls. Rich people get richer because they hang out together

As a journalist and author with a family in banking, I cover the world of power to which I've been afforded proximity, including the excess and dark ambition of the elite. I study how people earn their cash, keep it, blow it, grope for power, and lose that too, and then have the chutzpah to regain it in second or even third acts.

Most of the Americans included in the black book have one common denominator: they are socially and professionally voracious people who form part of New York's "Accomplisher Class". The accomplishers appear at book parties, Davos, the Aspen Ideas Festival, benefits and openings. They understand that to be avidly social is to assure recognition and prominence.

Remember, the rich covet convening power: the ability to reach a point where one's social and professional life are confused as one.

Among these accomplisher types, I often see a shocking lack of perspective, coupled with massive insecurity. Many of them seek constant recognition to fuel their drive. The centrifugal force of the merry-go-round becomes so intense that people do not know how to get off.

Tina Brown has been an astute observer of New York society since she moved to the city from London in the 1980s, to take up the editorship of Vanity Fair magazine. "The alpha energy of Manhattan is far more intense than anywhere European: more money, bigger stakes. Every achiever who wants to get to the top, has to fight like hell to be seen and heard on this island."

The now ossified Wasp culture may still count for country club memberships or the preppy glow of a Ralph Lauren advertisement, but not much else. New York high society has been paradoxically meritocratic for a few decades, at least since the go-go 1980s, when Gordon Gekko's "greed is good" speech wiped old-world mores off the map.

On a grander scale, the accomplisher class is neither defective nor debauched. When accomplishers exchange ideas, much good can come in the form of entrepreneurship in technology, business or innovative arts.

At its best, the American system of philanthropy launches museums and hospitals, urban and charter schools, and relief to the poor in towns all over America. Much of this is enabled by the accomplisners, aided by tax laws that promote charitable deductions. People in this group have multiple invites most weekday nights to attend benefits that help the causes they care about most, with the added value of showing off how magnanimous they are in programmes that list precisely how much they gave.

Attending a high-end event in New York is a way of taking a victory lap with other accomplisners around the room. Or, when a banking deal tanks or a new book flops, one can still buy a table at the Museum of Modern Art gala and send out the message, “Hey! I’m still here, don’t count me out!”

It would be a mistake to assume that the accomplisher class is all about wealth. If you want access to capital or airwaves, boring and rich doesn’t get you that far in this high-testosterone playground. If you ran your father’s company into the ground, you’re a nobody in this town. The paycheck is not all that matters: editorial media power controls the conversation, foundation power means you write the big checks. What people admire is top achievement in almost any field.

Were Epstein’s acquaintances ruthless or spellbound or both? Accomplisners in New York society may be particularly American in that they do not necessarily shy away from a bad reputation. They are so interested in a story and a comeback that they can forgive human failings, and are often intrigued with flaws as much as success.

What’s more, New York is so relentlessly fast-paced and ambition among the accomplisners so colossal, they don’t always take the time to be discerning. By this autumn, New York accomplisher society will have moved on to dissecting the next downfall or comeback — hopefully one less lurid than Epstein’s. I haven’t heard one person say this story will change the way they socialise or convene.

This may be because the more money people have, the more significant their lack of empathy. A US National Academy of Sciences study concluded that the less we need to rely on others, the less we care about their feelings. Call it the fanciest form of FOMO: a fear of missing out so heated one loses one’s moral compass.

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