

Let us help you beat the Dinner Party Poseur



Thomas W Hodgkinson (right) and Hubert van den Bergh, authors of How to Sound

Thomas W Hodgkinson Hubert van den Bergh

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Picture the man at the dinner party. It might be a woman. That can happen. But it's usually a man. Some smooth-faced Tristram or Tarquin, some bearded Xander or Xavier. His fork pauses, two asparagus tips trembling on its prongs, as, with one eyebrow hiked towards his glistening hairline, he draws, "I think what we're experiencing here is a Wittgensteinian difficulty with language..."

And here you are presented with a choice. You can either launch yourself physically at him over the table, arms windmilling, and try to take him down. Or – and this is the more conventional response – you can hunker down a little in your chair, and rest a cheek resignedly on your bunched fingers, and say nothing. Why? Because you have absolutely no idea what he's talking about. It hurts, though. It might not be Wittgenstein who stymies you. It might be Malthus or Balthus. Or Hegel or Nagel or Schlegel. Or even, one of my personal favourites, Slavoj Žižek.

The point is that the whole and sole reason why Xavier, with his oiled smirk, slides that name into the conversation is in order to intimidate you into silence. I hate Xavier. He mustn't be allowed to get away with it. Which is why I'd like to suggest a third option, which is to speed-read a book published this week called *How to Sound Cultured: Master The 250 Names That Intellectuals Love to Drop into Conversation*. Admittedly, I co-wrote it, but I really believe it can make the world a better place.



If you're faced with a know-all over the braised asparagus, don't despair, say Thomas W Hodgkinson and Hubert van den Bergh

My co-author Hubert van den Bergh and I had only two rules while compiling our list of philosophers, scientists, poets, and artists to be included in the book. The first was that each name had to be one that was currently bandied about by intellectual show-offs. The second was that it had to be one that made us personally feel insecure, either because we knew literally nothing about the character in question, or else because we were aware of a queasy feeling that we ought to know a little bit more.

This – shedding those queasy feelings – was one part of the fun of writing it. Another part was discovering that the basic ideas behind many of these names were actually quite straightforward. Sigmund Freud, the cocaine-using godfather of psychology: his take-home insight is that everything is ultimately all about sex. You can see his point. The moustachioed Nobel Prize-winning missionary Albert Schweitzer? He essentially said we should all try to be nice to each other. Again, it's not unreasonable. And how about the aforementioned Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek?

Let's pause for a moment, and first learn how to pronounce his ominous cognomen. Names with tricky pronunciations are always good ones to drop. Nabokov is “na-BORK-uv”. And Slavoj Žižek, believe it or not, emerges as “SLA-voy ZHEE-zhek”, as in the Polari word “zhuzh”, to doll something up. What, then, is the Big Idea of this whiskery, unhealthy-looking continental? Apparently, it's that we should have a default suspicion of big ideas. The fundamental aim of philosophy, Žižek avers, is merely “making you understand what deep s--- you are in!” To unnerve Xavier, refer to this as “Žižekian nihilism”. Always adjectivise. It's possible with nearly every name on our list. Marx-ist. Pynchon-esque. Are there any that resist it? Anaïs Nin has flummoxed us. Ninian? Ninnish?

Now a possible qualm. In helping readers combat Xavier, are we in fact teaching them to be more like him? It's true that, to take him on, you'll have to handle his dark

conversational weapons: his intellectual nunchucks and knuckle-dusters. His throwing stars. You'll resort to low blows. At one point, you may say: "Yes, but doesn't [whoever it might be] contradict himself in his later work?"

At another: "I think those ideas have been superseded." But you'll have the advantage that, to you, it's just a game. Xavier takes it all so seriously. He lavishes a slavish, slaving respect on these characters. That's why we'll win. For we, by contrast, know that many of them, in the end, are ridiculous. The Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni, for instance, was so pretentious he ended one of his films (*The Eclipse* – prefer the original Italian name, *L'Eclisse*, "leck-LEES-say") with seven minutes in which literally nothing happens.



Are you ready to drop Doris Lessing in to conversation?

The performance artist Joseph Beuys, meanwhile, kick-started his international career by painting his face gold and talking about pictures to a dead hare. As for the French poet Arthur Rimbaud: he once defecated on a table because he was bored. Another time, he put sulphuric acid in someone's drink for a laugh. Does Rimbaud deserve our respect? Not for that sort of behaviour, he doesn't (though the poetry's not bad).

But don't make the mistake of thinking we lack respect for all the cultural figures included in our book. In some cases, for sure, they earn it by being so brainy as to be completely baffling. Take Werner Heisenberg. The German physicist is famous for formulating something called the Uncertainty Principle, and if you think you understand it, you're probably wrong.

But here's the good news. Xavier doesn't understand it either. If Xavier name-drops Heisenberg, just smile at him, and finger your nunchucks. Similarly, Wittgenstein. His big insight was that there are some things that can't be helpfully spoken of in words. But it's a

bit more complicated than that. Nevertheless, the philosopher was a wonderfully inspiring figure.

Born into one of the richest families in Austria, he gave all his money away because it didn't interest him. He was gay, a brave soldier, an architect. And he once clapped the internationally acclaimed philosopher Bertrand Russell on the back while the older man was reading his thesis, and exclaimed cheerfully, "Don't worry! I know you'll never understand it!"

A joy, for us, was learning more about figures like Wittgenstein, who commanded our admiration or affection. Alan Turing springs to mind. As do Lao Tzu, Doris Lessing, Virginia Woolf. But the prize probably goes to Socrates. Fat and ugly he may have been, but the barefoot philosopher could drink anyone under the table, and on campaign he bested the bravest with his sheer toughness. He was also modest.

Admittedly, he took this quality to an entertaining extreme, claiming that he literally knew nothing. Then, after a suitable pause, he added that this actually made him the most intelligent person in the world, since he was the only person who knew that he knew nothing.



Faced by any incomprehensible work of art, observe sagely: 'It's another contribution to Marcel Duchamp's debate about the nature of art itself.' CREDIT: ALAMY

As jokes go, it's a yard better than the one with the sulphuric acid. Socrates – perhaps the patron saint of our book – devoted his life to combating the Athenian equivalent of Xaviers. Committed Xavier-haters could do worse than take him as a model. But a word of warning. Socrates was executed on trumped-up charges after he had succeeded in annoying one too many people.

So if there's a large number of Xaviers in the room, proceed with caution. There's a risk that several of them may launch themselves across the table at you in a pincer movement, and try to stab you to death with their asparagus forks.

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What does it take to become a cultural titan?

Hubert van den Bergh reveals all

Most of these terrifying characters – Goethe, Foucault and Freud – are renowned for just one Big Idea (and one that isn't that hard to understand) but they also share certain traits that seem to have set them aside as intellectuals in the making. The following appear to be indicators of cerebral prowess:

Parental abandonment

Aristotle's parents both died when he was around 10 years old, and he was sent for adoption: psychologists claim that adopted children can make the most ambitious adults, forever trying to compensate for the sense of rejection they experienced in infancy.

François Truffaut, the French film director, was abandoned by his mother because he had been born out of wedlock, and sent to live with his grandmother.

Childhood illness

One of the great advantages of falling seriously ill as a child is that you're left with lots of time for lying around in bed, reading: take French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, who spent uninterrupted days reclining in his bedroom, and became a child prodigy – as did young Marcel Proust, a martyr to stomach cramps. The German art critic Walter Benjamin emerged from his bed in Berlin after years of agony (alleviated only by extensive reading) to become one of the great public intellectuals of the 20th century.

A change of name

Consider Balthasar Klossowski. The young painter was given the nickname of Balthus by his mother's lover, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who thought it sounded more elevated. Balthus didn't complain: to be known by a single name (another example is the English short-story writer Saki) is a mark of distinction. Then there's the French novelist Honoré de Balzac, born plain old Honoré Balzac, whose additional "de" made him sound much grander.

Tragedy

A personal catastrophe seems to unblock creative forces. The Persian poet Rumi discovered his voice straight after his mentor, Shams of Tabriz, was murdered, while American novelist Paul Auster who, as a child, watched a thunderbolt strike and kill the boy next to him, has been writing acclaimed novels about the cruel randomness of life ever since.

High profile bedfellows

To confirm your place in the pantheon, there's nothing like sleeping with another one of its members. Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, to punish her husband for having an affair with her younger sister, got it on with Trotsky. The American photographer Lee Miller – most famous for taking a photo of herself, naked, in Hitler's bathtub in Munich a few days before the Führer killed himself in his bunker – had an affair with the fantastically named Surrealist artist Man Ray.

Coffee

Voltaire's intake of coffee was so vast (more than 50 cups a day), it's a miracle he ever slept. Also possessed of a caffeine addiction, as well as of a singular coffee-drinking technique, was Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. First he would fill a cup with sugar.

Then he poured in coffee, so the sugar melted. Then he downed it. And, to return to Balzac, he used to go to bed at 5pm, then get up at midnight and write for 15 hours straight, fuelled by innumerable cups of strong black coffee. Eventually he died of heart failure.

Fighting

James Joyce got so drunk in Parisian bars that he regularly challenged people to fights – and would then push Hemingway into the fray, to take his place. American novelist Norman Mailer angrily knocked down rival novelist Gore Vidal at a party. But it was Vidal who had the last word. “Once again,” he drawled from the floor, “words fail Norman Mailer.” At a film premiere in 1976 in Mexico City, Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa punched the Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez in the face. Why? Márquez’s advice to Llosa’s jilted wife Patricia. “You must pretend to have an affair with someone he’s jealous of,” Márquez counselled, before adding: “There’s only one person in the world he’s jealous of. Me.”

A gruesome death

A grisly fate can cement your reputation. Trotsky had an ice pick put through his skull; the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca was shot twice in the backside (as an expression of disgust at his homosexuality). And Isadora Duncan, the creator of modern dance, who set off from a hotel in Nice, ill-advisedly wearing a long flowing scarf.

“Adieu, mes amis,” she exclaimed. “Je vais à la gloire!” (“Goodbye, my friends. I go to glory!”) The scarf caught in the car’s wheels and Duncan was flung into the road, her neck broken. “Affectations can be dangerous,” the writer Gertrude Stein wryly observed.



Voltaire drank over 50 cups of coffee per day



Vanessa Redgrave as Isadora Duncan