

How to infiltrate posh society: bang on about beauty and invest in some tweed

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As a young American chancer has shown, you can trick the rich into thinking you are one of them

We've had enough of the posh, surely? What with their squirrelling away all the good stuff for themselves, keeping us riff-raff in our places, quietly fuelling the toxic war between the squeezed middle, the already squeezed completely dry and the never had a lemon to squeeze in the first place, to act as decoy while they trouser the profits and laugh up their sleeves at everyone else's stupidity.

If it proves to be true, as Nadine Dorries has repeatedly and vehemently told anyone who will listen, that posh boys stopped her getting into the House of Lords, we might have something to thank them for; but it's small return, in any case, for centuries of subjugation.

Not everyone agrees, of course, and certainly not a young American woman called Caroline Calloway, who has just published a memoir, the engagingly titled *Scammer*, detailing how she fibbed her way into St Edmund's College, Cambridge, and thereby began a picaresque rinse-and-repeat tale of self-invention, social media stardom and exposure that earned her the sobriquet or, less poshly, nickname, "the Gatsby of Cambridge". (The tag seems to rest largely on Calloway's manipulation of her origin story, her fondness for parties and the faint similarity between her surname and that of the novel's narrator, Nick Carraway, rather than a close reading of the text, but so it goes.)

Interviewed recently, Calloway was far more intriguing than the bare bones of her story might suggest, given that chancers are 10 a penny. She had desperately wanted, she claims, to be a memoirist, and going to Cambridge would provide her with an appropriately dramatic and suggestive backdrop, the quads and bridges and riverbanks easy to populate with students in subfusc, or riotously cavorting at balls, or languidly trailing a hand over the side of a punt. "I just love everything about Oxbridge and posh country houses," she said, adding that "for me it wasn't about having gravitas – it was just about trying to be a part of beautiful things. And I just find so much beauty in posh culture."

The indeterminacy of "poshness" is part of its power, of course. It allows one to isolate an apparently uncontestable quality – beauty, who could be opposed to beauty? – and obscure its source, its nature, what allows it to thrive. There are many beautiful things beside the cloisters of Oxbridge colleges, or the Palladian frontage of an English stately home, or a perfectly cut champagne coupe proffered on a highly

polished silver tray, but they did not seem to exert the same hold over a twentysomething from Virginia.

The kind of beauty Calloway preferred was perhaps what Lady Montdore, the monstrous aristocrat in Nancy Mitford's *Love in a Cold Climate*, refers to as "all this". The unsuspecting eavesdropper might take "all this" to mean the scale and bounty of Lord and Lady Montdore's estate, Hampton. What she really means, as Mitford's heroine Fanny points out, is "position allied to such solid assets as acres, coal mines, real estate, jewels, silver, pictures, incunabula, and other possessions of the sort. Lord Montdore owned an almost incredible number of such things, fortunately."

Sadly, "all this" doesn't guarantee Lady Montdore's acceptance among those of her supposed class: "she was not gifted with an aesthetic sense," notes Fanny, "and if she admired anything at all it was rather what might be described stockbroker's picturesque." Ouch! This when Fanny, one of the novel's rather nicer characters, has gorged herself on Hampton's delicious food, wallowed in its plentiful hot water supply and wandered its avenues with a dashing Frenchman, and then pronounced the whole set-up a little too perfect. The truly posh: endlessly ungrateful.

When Calloway said she wanted to be part of beautiful things, could the "part of" have been more important than the beauty? It's the million-dollar question (though how vulgar to put a price tag on it) that explains the enduring appeal of narratives of class interlopers in the culture, from *Brideshead Revisited*'s Charles Ryder to Patricia Highsmith's Tom Ripley to Nick Guest in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*. Some of them are clever enough to bypass it entirely – *Succession*'s Tom Wambsgans, for example, wants into the money and power and seems not to care much for the cheese-paring, crust-freezing parsimony of Harriet Walter's Lady Caroline Collingwood. (Naturally, viewers did not share his indifference to this wonderful character and one wonders to what extent US audiences felt this vision of the emotionally stunted, reluctant matriarch confirmed all their suspicions about the British aristocracy.)

For a wonderfully sideways take on the complex intersections between class, wealth and power – intersections that invariably favour those who have most of them already – I recommend reading *The English Understand Wool*, by the American writer Helen DeWitt.

It's about 60 pages long, and it concerns a 17-year-old girl who has been brought up in Marrakech, but makes frequent journeys abroad with her French mother (her English father is mysteriously absent throughout). Mother and daughter take a suite in Claridge's, from which the television is removed and a piano brought in, and travel to the Outer Hebrides in search of the perfect wool, bringing back an entire bolt of tweed to their favoured tailor in London to prevent it falling into the hands of the tasteless.

They avoid, at all costs, what the older woman calls mauvais ton – looking like you haven't been able to ride a horse since you were five, treating your household staff inconsiderately, wearing unspeakable shoes. It is perhaps unsurprising that all is not as it seems, nor that all manner of malfeasance may be masked beneath a flawless appearance. One can crack a social code the same as any other, after all, no matter how ingenious those in charge might like to make it seem. Remember that, poshos.