

Teacher's notes

How to be an Alien

by George Mikes



SUMMARY

How to be an Alien is a very impolite and humorous view of the strange habits of the British people, given by an outsider. With frank and open humour Mikes attacks the British for everything from ruining tea to being hypocritical.

At the same time Mikes offers guidelines to foreigners on how to cope as a stranger in Britain. He highlights the confusion that can arise because of the subtle differences between Europe and England, such as the way the bell on a bus is used. With masterful irony Mikes draws colourful pictures of life in Britain, and makes amusing comparisons between continental European and British habits. Nobody escapes his wry and sometimes cutting wit, as he ruthlessly makes fun of people's habits. He makes the reader laugh by seeing himself as he must appear to the British: 'I have such funny foreign ways'. Beneath the guise of laughing at the habits of the British people, Mikes mocks human nature in general.

ABOUT GEORGE MIKES

George Mikes was born on February 15th 1912 in Siklos, a pleasant rural village in Hungary. His father died when he was only ten years old, and his family then moved to Budapest. This migration to Budapest, and his later move to London, were to have a profound impression on Mikes. He wrote in his autobiography, 'These migrations ... filled me with awe and wonder, with horror and delight; and - for better or worse - they formed me and made me what I am.'

To keep his mother happy, Mikes began to study law at Budapest University. However, he had always wanted to be a journalist and writer and managed to get a job on a Budapest newspaper.

In 1938, when the Munich crisis threatened a Second World War, Mikes was sent by his newspaper to London. His editor told him, 'You go to cover this crisis. You'll be back in a fortnight or so.' Mikes stayed in Britain for the rest of his life.

Mikes married twice. His first marriage failed and his wife took their son to Switzerland. Mikes, who dealt with most of life light-heartedly, was devastated. Mikes belonged to several gentlemen's clubs in London,

including the Garrick, where he would have been able to observe the upper sectors of British male society. He enjoyed tennis, cooking and not listening to funny stories.

George Mikes died on August 30th 1987.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

George Mikes did not realize that he had a talent as a humorist until he wrote his first book, *We were there to Escape*, in which he reported about life in a prisoner-of-war camp. A review of the book written in *The Times Literary Supplement* was to be tremendously important to Mikes. The review praised the humour, saying 'it has a light touch that turns an unpleasant and indeed horrifying experience into good reading. Even the appalling monotony of camp life ... is presented in a comic light.'

Mikes had not intended the book to be funny. However, the review set him thinking. He decided to sit down and narrate all his unpleasant and horrifying experiences about the English - this became his second book, *How to be an Alien*.

How to be an Alien was published in 1946, just after the Second World War. The British were in an introspective mood, wondering about their status in the world after a war which had shaken their self confidence. Into this inward-looking nation came Mikes's satirical view of strange British habits. Always able to laugh at themselves, the British thought the book highly amusing and were flattered at being depicted as peculiarly unique. Far from being upset by the rudeness of the pictures Mikes painted, the British thought they were wonderful.

The humour of *How to be an Alien* was much appreciated after the long drab years of war. No one wanted to be serious. Albert Einstein wrote to Mikes after he had read the book: 'In all the miseries which plague mankind there is hardly anything better than such radiant humour as is given to you. Everyone must laugh with you, even those who are hit with your little arrows.'

The irony with which Mikes depicts people of all nations is all the more poignant because there is always more than a grain of truth in what he says. The reader can empathize with his thoughts because there will have been a time when he or she has experienced similar events to

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HOW TO BE AN ALIEN



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what Mikes describes. The difference lies in the way Mikes tells his stories - with a touch of caricature, a morsel of exaggeration, and a huge dose of laughter.

The tone of *How to be an Alien* is at times exasperated and critical, at others fondly paternalistic. The author appears confused, bewildered, lost in a maze of idiosyncrasies he doesn't understand - what we would now call being in 'culture shock'.

Mikes had a casual, cavalier attitude to life, accepting whatever it threw at him, whilst remaining serenely happy. He admitted that he had not often been depressed in his life. He had a lively, amused interest in people around him, and an ability to put into words this light-hearted outlook on life. He looked with new eyes at the people around him, noticing little habits and remarks which pass over most people's heads. It is this open-eyed, almost innocent style that makes his work so enchantingly, delicately funny.

How to be an Alien has remained Mikes's most famous book, although he wrote 44 books in total. Most of his works are humorous, and several others, such as *English Humour for Beginners* and *How to be a Brit* are also about Britain.

Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the reader, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book, see the photocopiable Student's Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers but, with the exception of discussion and pair/group work questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

Write the following adjectives on the board: *funny, angry, interested, bored, lonely, tired, happy, sad, amused, busy, crazy, important, pleasant, polite, serious*.

Divide the class into pairs. Ask each student to choose a picture from the book and to describe it to their partner, using some of the adjectives from the board. The partner must find the right picture in the book.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

Preface - Chapter 8

Put students into groups of three. Students practise doing English introductions as described on page 5 of their book. First, one student introduces the others, being careful not to speak their names clearly. Then they play the non-handshaking game.

Afterwards, ask students to look up *exaggerate* (v) in their dictionaries. They then discuss these questions:

Are introductions like this now in England? Do you think this happened in the past in England? How much does Mikes exaggerate?

Chapters 9-18

Make a list of items from the topics suggested below. Mix up the different items.

Compromises that Mikes sees in the English way of life; small pleasures; the characteristics of Mayfair playboys; the characteristics of Bloomsbury Intellectuals.

Divide the class into small groups and give each group a copy of the list. The groups put the items under the four headings: Compromises, Small Pleasures, Mayfair Playboys, Bloomsbury Intellectuals. They must not look at the book.

Chapters 19-24

Divide the class into small groups. Ask students to look up *advertisement* and *quality* (n) in their dictionaries. Ask some groups to write a job advertisement for a British civil servant, stating the qualities and skills needed (as seen by Mikes). The other groups write a job advertisement for a European civil servant. Then, as a whole-class activity, compare their advertisements.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

Get a map of London and photocopy the central part. Divide students into small groups, and give each group a map. Ask them to look through the book for all the streets that are named, and find them on the map. Extend this exercise to famous places that the students may have heard of, such as Buckingham Palace, Harrods, and so on. Students find where these would be on the map. If possible find postcards, photographs and pictures. You can extend this exercise further into a project on London. Give each group an area of London to find out about.

Glossary

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the 'Before You Read' sections of exercises at the back of the book (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

Preface - Chapter 8

accent (n) how you say words because of where you were born

alien (n) a foreigner; also: somebody from another place, not Earth

bell (n) this makes a ringing sound

lawyer (n) someone who works with the law and gives people help

manners (n) the way people act with other people - if they are polite, they have good manners

preface (n) an introduction at the beginning of a book

soul (n) the part of the person that has their deepest thoughts

warning (n) something that tells you that something bad will happen

Chapters 9-18

compromise (v) to accept less than you really want to

hypocrite (n) someone who says something but does or thinks the opposite

pleasure (n) a feeling of happiness or enjoyment

queue (v) to wait in a line of people

sphinx (n) a big stone lion (a big dangerous cat) with a man's head which was built in Egypt a long time ago

Chapters 19-24

bend (n) when a road or river does not go straight

mad (adj) sick in the head

naturalized (adj) with the right by law to live in a country that you were not born in

park (v) to stop the car and leave it somewhere

porridge (n) this is white and hot and some people eat it for breakfast with milk and sugar

refinery (n) a factory where something like oil or sugar is made better



Student's activities

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Students can do these exercises alone or with one or more other students. Pair/group-only activities are marked.

Activities before reading the book

- Read the introduction to your book. Then close your book and answer these questions.
 - Why did George Mikes write this book?
 - Where was Mikes born?
 - When did Mikes come to England?
 - When did Mikes leave England?
 - How old was Mikes when he died?
 - When did he write *How to be an Alien*?
- Write your answer or talk to another student.
In 1946, the English did not think they were part of 'Europe'. What does 'Europe' mean now?

Activities while reading the book

PREFACE - CHAPTER 8

Preface-Chapter 4

- Write down your answer or talk to another student.
Mikes calls himself an 'alien'. What does he mean by this?
- Complete each sentence.
 - If you are like the English they think you are
 - If you are not like the English, they think you are
 - In Europe you get Sunday newspapers on Monday. In England you get Sunday newspapers on
 - In Europe people speak loudly and clearly.
 - In England important people speak..... and so that you cannot them.
 - The English at their problems.
 - Many Europeans think that is a game.
 - Things are not good if British weather has to mix with weather.
- Two friends meet in the street and talk about the weather. Write down what they say, or have the conversation with another student.

Chapters 5-8

- Put the two halves of these sentences together.
 - In England a boy says, 'I say ... would you ...?'

How to be an Alien

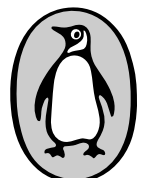


- The British make tea into...
 - Mikes does not like to
 - The English say less
 - If you speak with an Oxford accent...
 - It is better to speak quietly in good German ...
 - ...drink tea all the time.
 - ...people think you are very intelligent.
 - ...if he wants to marry a girl.
 - ...an unpleasant drink.
 - ...than to shout loudly in bad English.
 - ...than they mean.
- Write down three ways in which Mikes suggests that foreigners can hide their accent.
 - Work with another student. Act these conversations.
 - An English boy with no soul tells a girl that he loves her and asks her to marry him.
 - A European boy with soul tells a girl he loves her and asks her to marry him.

CHAPTERS 9-18

Chapters 9-13

- Correct these sentences:
 - In England it is good manners to be clever.
 - An Englishman uses a lot of words but says a lot with them.
 - An Englishman looks at a beautiful place and talks about it.
 - A hundred years ago, when someone made the Queen of England angry she said, 'Cut off their head'.
 - Nothing about England is a compromise.
- Put these words in the right place.
queue, cold, hypocrite, rude, dislike, children's
 - English people people who are clever.
 - English houses are as as the garden.
 - To be truly British you have to be a
 - In the war, the English played games when they were not fighting.
 - It is easy to be in Europe. You just shout and call people animal names.
 - In England you must for hours to get into the cinema.



Student's activities

- 3 Have a conversation with another student.
You are two people on the street in London. One person walks into the other person. One person drops their shopping. The other drops their newspaper. What do you say?
If possible, now act this story out in your own language. What do you say? Are there any differences?

Chapters 14-18

- 1 Write down your answer or discuss with another student.
Do you think Mikes likes Mayfair Playboys and Bloomsbury Intellectuals? Why?
- 2 Answer these questions.
- Where are Mayfair and Bloomsbury?
 - How much did it cost to go to the cinema in 1946?
 - What could you do at Richmond in 1946?
 - What is a playboy?
 - What do the English do if they walk with their dog?
 - What is a Cockney?
 - Who is Noel Coward?
 - What must every British film have in it?
- 3 English money changed to pounds and new pence in 1971. Before this, there were shillings and pence. There were 12 pence in a shilling, and 20 shillings in a pound. 9s 3d means 9 shillings and 3 pence. One shilling = 5 new pence; and 6d = 2½ new pence. How much are the cinema tickets in new English money? (Do not have less than one new pence. Go to the nearest new pence.) How much does it cost you to go to the cinema today?

CHAPTERS 19-24

Chapters 19 & 20

- 1 Find the mistakes and put in the right words.
In English towns you must walk at thirty metres an hour. The police see for people who drive too slowly. You know if a police car is following you because they always drive green cars, four policemen sit in each car, and the word POLICE is in small letters on the side of the cars.
Some people drive his cars out of Central London to the little park Hampstead Heath on rainy days. They park her cars, open the windows, and read. They are very comfortable.
Bus drivers play five games. 1. They stop suddenly so that cars crash into them. 2. They drive up to a bus-stop and stay there for a long time. 3. They stop at the bus-stop, wait for everyone to get on the bus and move away slowly. People are very happy with bus drivers.

- 2 Write down your answer or discuss with another student.
Mikes says 'car drivers are at war with other people'. Do you think that was true when Mikes was writing his book? Do you think it is true today?

Chapters 21-24

- 1 Which job goes with which street?
- Harley Street
 - Great Portland Street
 - Charing Cross Road
 - Lincoln's Inn Fields
 - Fleet Street
 - Saville Row
 - Piccadilly Circus
- book-seller
 - car salesman
 - doctor
 - actress
 - lawyer
 - person who writes for a newspaper
 - person who makes men's clothes
- 2 Choose from these words to fill in the gaps (.....).
British, change, porridge, speak, read, real
To become a person you must be naturalized, by becoming If you become British you must the way you think. You must eat for breakfast. You must only English, and English books.
- 3 Write down your answer or discuss with another student.
What town in the world have you found the most difficult to find your way in? Why? Which town have you found the easiest? Why?

Activities after reading the book

- 1 Discuss *How to be an Alien* with another student. Think about these questions.
Do you think it is a funny book? What makes it funny? Who does Mikes laugh at? Do you think he is serious at the same time? How do you think he felt as a foreigner in England?
- 2 Talk with another student.
Do you know an English person? If you do, describe him or her. Is your description the same or different from Mikes's description of the English?

