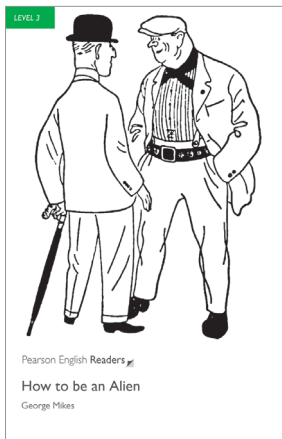


How to be an Alien

George Mikes



About the author

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 shortly after the funeral, his family moved to Budapest. His migration to Budapest – and his eventual relocation to London – were to make 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 become a journalist and a writer, so he eventually managed to get a job at a Budapest newspaper.

In 1938, as the Munich crisis was threatening to start a second worldwide war, Mikes was sent to London, England, by his newspaper. His editor told him, 'You go to cover this crisis. You'll be back in a fortnight or so.' At the time, Mikes had no idea that he would spend the rest of his life in Britain.

Mikes married twice. His first marriage failed, and his wife took their son to Switzerland. Mikes dealt with most of life's trials in a light-hearted manner, but not this time – he was devastated. Mikes belonged to several gentlemen's clubs in London, including the Garrick, where he was able to observe the upper sectors of British male society – observations that he went on to utilise in *How to be an Alien*.

Mikes died on August 30th, 1987.

Summary

How to be an Alien is a very impolite and humorous view of the strange habits of British people as they are viewed

by an outsider. George Mikes uses frank and unforgiving humour to mock the British for being British – i.e. for ruining tea, for having poor taste in food and for 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 that exist between Europe and England, for example, the way in which a bell on a bus is used. Employing masterful irony, Mikes draws colourful pictures of life in Britain, and he makes amusing comparisons between continental European and British habits. Nobody escapes his wry and cutting wit as he ruthlessly makes fun of English habits. In addition, he makes the reader laugh by conveying himself as he must appear to the British: 'I have such funny foreign ways.' Mikes isn't just laughing at the habits of the British people – he is mocking human nature in general.

Background and themes

George Mikes didn't realise 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 in the *Times Literary Supplement* was to become tremendously important to Mikes. The review praised his 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.'

However, in truth, Mikes hadn't intended *We Were There to Escape* to be humorous. The review caused him to consider shifting his literary focus, and he decided to sit down and narrate all of the unpleasant and horrifying experiences that he had amassed while interacting with the English. The product of his musings became his second book, *How to be an Alien*.

How to be an Alien was first published in 1946 – just after the conclusion of the Second World War. The British were in an introspective mood, wondering about their status in the world after enduring a devastating war that had shaken their self-confidence to the core, and into this inward-looking nation came Mikes' satirical view of their strange habits. Never hesitant to laugh at themselves, the British thought that the book was highly amusing, and they were flattered at being depicted as peculiarly unique. Far from being upset by the rudeness of the pictures that Mikes painted, the British thought that they were wonderful.

How to be an Alien

The humour of *How to be an Alien* was much appreciated after the long, dreary years of the war. Nobody 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 poignant because there is always more than a grain of truth in what he says. The reader can empathise with his thoughts because there will have been a time when he or she has experienced similar events to those which Mikes describes. The difference lies in the way in which Mikes tells his stories – with a touch of caricature, a morsel of exaggeration and a dose of laughter.

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

Mikes maintained a cavalier attitude towards life, and he accepted whatever it threw at him without relinquishing his happiness. He admitted that he hadn't often been depressed in his life. He nurtured a lively interest in people around him, and an ability to put this light-hearted outlook on life into words. He looked with new eyes at the people around him, noticing little habits and remarks that escaped most people's notice. It is this open-eyed – almost innocent – style that makes his work so enchantingly, delicately funny.

Discussion activities

Preface–Chapter 8

Before reading

- 1 Pair work:** Write the following adjectives on the board: *amused, angry, bored, busy, crazy, funny, happy, important, interested, lonely, pleasant, polite, sad, serious and tired*. Put students into pairs and get each student to choose a picture from the book and describe it to his or her partner using some of the adjectives from the board. The other student should listen to the description and try to find the right picture in the book.
- 2 Research:** Put students into pairs and get them to look up the word *alien* in a dictionary. Make the exercise into a competition – the first pair of students to find the definition wins. They should stand up and read the definition out loud to the rest of the class.

- 3 Discuss:** Put students into small groups and get them to think about why the book is called 'How to be an Alien'. *What do you think 'alien' means in the title? Does it have a positive or negative meaning? Who do you think the word refers to in the book? Why do you think this?*

After reading

- 4 Role play:** Put students into groups of three and get them to practise introducing each other in the English manner as it is described on page 5. Each student should describe the other students in the group without saying their names clearly. Then they should practise giving 'non-shaking' handshakes (see point 1 on page 5). When they have finished, they should look up the word *exaggerate* in a dictionary and then discuss the following questions:
Do you think that people introduce each other like this now in England? Why do you think this?
Do you think that people introduced each other like this in the past in England? Why do you think this?
Do you think that the author exaggerates? Why do you think this?
- 5 Research:** Ask students to bring information about England to class. Put a large piece of paper on the wall and then get students to attach their information to the piece of paper to make a wall display.
- 6 Role play:** Put students into pairs and get them to role play the example conversation for good weather presented on page 7 and the example conversation for bad weather presented on page 8. When they have finished, some of the pairs should role play the example conversations in front of the class.

Chapters 9–16

Before reading

- 7 Discuss:** Teach the words *sarcasm* and *mockery* to students. Then put students into small groups and get them to discuss the following questions:
Do you think that sarcasm and mockery are funny? Why do you think this?
Do you think that sarcasm and mockery can be used to hurt people's feelings? Why do you think this?
Do you think that sarcasm and mockery are used in a positive or negative way in the book? Why do you think this?
Do you use sarcasm or mockery when you are trying to be funny? Why or why not?
- 8 Write:** Students should pretend that they know someone who is planning to visit England for the first time. They should write a letter to the person to describe at least one characteristic of the country, its customs or its people in a humorous way.

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After reading

- 9 Read carefully:** Define the word *hypocrite* to students. Then get them to read Chapter 12 as a class. Each student should stand up and carefully read one sentence out loud until the entire chapter has been read. When they have finished, they should discuss the word *hypocrite* in greater detail.
- 10 Pair work:** *Do you think that English people really like to queue? Why do you think this? Do you like to queue? Why or why not?* Get students to work in pairs and ask each other these questions.
- 11 Write:** Get students to look up the verb *compromise* in a dictionary. Then get them to write the definition and an example sentence on a piece of paper. When they have finished, some of the students should stand up and read their definitions and example sentences to the rest of the class.

Chapters 17–24

Before reading

- 12 Research:** Put students into pairs and ask them to find a map of London on the Internet. They should print up the map and highlight the following areas / streets of London that are mentioned in the book: Bloomsbury, Central London, Charing Cross Road, Fleet Street, Great Portland Street, Harley Street, Hornsey Lane, Leicester Square, Lincoln's Inn Fields, Manchester, Mayfair, Middle End Road, Piccadilly Circus, Saville Row and the West End. Make the exercise into a competition – the pair of students to find the most areas / streets wins. They should stand up and show the highlighted areas / streets on the map to the rest of the class.

After reading

- 13 Discuss:** Put students into small groups and get them to look up the words *advertisement* and *quality* in a dictionary. Some of the groups should write a job advertisement for a British civil servant. They should state the qualities and skills that are required for the position (as they are described by the author in Chapter 22). The other groups should write a job advertisement for a European civil servant. When they have finished, the groups should compare their advertisements.
- 14 Role play:** Put students into groups of three and get them to role play the scene on page 39. When they have finished, some of the pairs should role play the example conversations in front of the class. Then the students should discuss the following questions:
What does 'naturalised' mean?
Who is the man referring to when he uses the pronoun 'ours'?
Why do the women look at him coldly?
Who is the woman referring to when she uses the pronoun 'ours'?
- 15 Pair work:** *Do you agree with the author's opinions about England and English people? Why or why not?* Get students to work in pairs and ask each other these questions.

How to be an Alien

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While reading

Preface—Chapter 8

1 Discuss these questions with another student.

What do you think?

What does the author mean when he calls himself an 'alien'?

2 Finish these sentences.

- a If you are like the English, they think that you are
- b If you aren't like the English, they think that you are
- c In England, you get Sunday newspapers on
- d In Europe, people speak loudly and clearly.
- e In England, important people speak and
- f The English at their problems.
- g Many Europeans think that life is a
- h Things aren't good if British weather has to mix with weather.

3 Match the letters with the numbers to complete the sentences.

- a In England, a boy says, 'I say ... would you ...' ...
- b The British make tea into ...
- c The author doesn't like to ...
- d The English say less ...
- e If you speak with an Oxford accent, ...
- f It is better to speak quietly in good German ...
 - 1 drink tea all the time.
 - 2 people think that you are very intelligent.
 - 3 if he wants to marry a girl.
 - 4 an unpleasant drink.
 - 5 than to shout loudly in bad English.
 - 6 than they mean.

4 Make a list.

Write down three things that foreigners can do to hide their accent.

5 Work in pairs.

Student A is an English boy with no soul and Student B is the girl whom he wants to marry. The English boy should tell the girl that he loves her, and then he should ask her to marry him.

6 Work in pairs.

Student A is a European boy with soul and Student B is the girl whom he wants to marry. The European boy should tell the girl that he loves her, and then he should ask her to marry him.

7 Draw a picture of a European person with soul.

Chapters 9–16

8 Correct these sentences.

- a In England, it is good to be clever.
.....
- b An Englishman uses many words but says a lot with them.
.....
- c An Englishman looks at a beautiful place and says a lot about it.
.....
- d Nothing about England is a compromise.
.....
- e If you want to be British, you mustn't be a hypocrite.
.....
- f To be English, you must enjoy great pleasures.
.....
- g English people sing when everybody is in the room.
.....
- h In England, people hate to queue.
.....

9 Write the right words in the sentences.

- children's cold dislike dog
excited purple queue rude
- a English people people who are clever.
 - b English houses are as as the garden.
 - c In the war, the English played games when they weren't fighting.
 - d It is easy to be in Europe — you just shout and call people animal names.
 - e In England, you must for hours to get into the cinema.
 - f English people don't often get
 - g In England, if you go for a walk with your, you should talk to it.
 - h Bloomsbury intellectuals like to wear shoes.

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10 Work in pairs. Write the conversation.

Student A walks into Student B on a busy street in London. Role play the conversation in English. Then role play the conversation again in your own language. Discuss the differences between the role plays.

11 Discuss these questions with another student.

What do you think? Write the answers.

Do you think that the author likes to queue?

.....
Why do you think this?

.....
Do you think that the author likes Bloomsbury intellectuals?

.....
Why do you think this?

Chapters 17–24

12 Twenty things are wrong in the paragraphs below. Find them and make them right.

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 written 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 do not move; 3) they wait for everyone to get on the bus and then move away slowly. People are very happy with bus drivers.

13 Match the letters with the numbers to complete the sentences.

- a A book-seller works in ...
 - b A car salesman works in ...
 - c A doctor works in ...
 - d An actress works in ...
 - e A lawyer works in ...
 - f A newspaper reporter works in ...
 - g A men's clothing-maker works in ...
 - h A person who plays films in a cinema works in ...
- 1 Harley Street.
 - 2 Great Portland Street.
 - 3 Charing Cross Road.
 - 4 Lincoln's Inn Fields.
 - 5 Fleet Street.
 - 6 Saville Row.
 - 7 Piccadilly Circus.
 - 8 Leicester Square.

14 Discuss these questions with another student. What do you think?

Which city have you had the most difficulty finding your way in? Why was it difficult to find your way in this city? Which city have you had the least difficulty finding your way in? Why wasn't it difficult to find your way in this city?

After reading

15 Work in pairs. Ask each other questions about the story. Do you think that *How to be an Alien* is a funny book? Why or why not? Who does the author laugh at in the book? Do you think that the author is serious at the same time?

16 Work in pairs. Do you know an English person? If so, describe him or her to your partner. Is your description the same as or different from the author's descriptions in the book?

How to be an Alien

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Preface–Chapter 8

1 Who says the sentences a–e?

- a 'My mother doesn't want me to marry a foreigner.'
.....
- b 'What a funny thing to say.'
.....
- c 'He is the type of person who talks about the weather.'
.....
- d 'I say ... shall we ...?'
.....
- e 'You speak with a very good accent, but without any English.'
.....

2 What are the things in *italics*?

- a Many people bought *it* and said kind things about it.
.....
- b The English eat bad food but they say *it* tastes good.
.....
- c ... you must be good at talking about *it*.
.....
- d Learn these conversations by heart. You can use *them* again ...
.....
- e ... with lemon and sugar *it* tastes very pleasant.
.....
- f ... my poor wife ... has *them*, too ...
.....
- g ... but I could never use *it* really well.
.....
- h Nobody has heard of *them*.
.....

Chapters 9–16

3 Write the right words in the sentences.

best cricket fire important ordinary party
proud quiet say snows stupid terrible

- a The author knows many foreigners who are
.....
- b In England, you must never that two and two make four.
- c Englishmen are shy and
- d To be very rude in Europe, you make up stories about them.
- e The English are very of their queen for being so rude.
- f Compromise is very to English people.
- g English people don't speak to anyone at a
.....

- h It is all right to have a in an English home.
- i It usually rains or in England.
- j Serious Englishmen play
- k In England, the queues are in front of cinemas.
- l Bloomsbury intellectuals think that shaving is only for people.

4 Are these sentences true (T) or not true (NT)?

- a In England, the word *clever* means 'possibly a bit dishonest'.
.....
- b It is good manners to be proud of your intelligence in England.
.....
- c It is very English to say, 'Shut your mouth!'
.....
- d English houses are very warm inside.
.....
- e In English pubs, you can have a drink at five minutes past six.
.....
- f Many grown-up people in England want to hit a little ball into a little hole.
.....
- g You must be polite to be a Bloomsbury intellectual.
.....
- h Bloomsbury intellectuals only want to talk about new ideas.
.....

Chapters 17–24

5 Underline the wrong word in each sentence and write the right word.

- a If you have the word *de* in front of your name, you are very boring.
.....
- b In Mayfair, a man must not do useless work.
.....
- c Mayfair playboys always shout if someone says something amusing.
.....
- d Really good British film-makers have a little English blood in them.
.....
- e Cockneys are people who were born in the west of London.
.....
- f Cockneys can't say the letter *f*.
.....
- g English taxi drivers teach bad manners to other drivers.
.....
- h English people think being comfortable makes them strong.
.....

How to be an Alien

Book key

- 1 a Hungary
b He has lived in England most of his life.
- 2 a alien
b hypocrite, lawyer, So-and-so
c sphinx
d cricket
- 3 a accent
b queue
c manners
d army
e compromise
- 4 a ✓ b ✓ c ✗ d ✓ e ✗
- 5 a always
b a foreigner
c more
- 6 a sad
b weather
c food
d clearly
e stupid
f cry
g lie
h honest
- 7–12 Open answers
- 13 a won't
b Never
c hate
d dislike
e should
f very little
- 14–15 Open answers
- 16 a colourless
b sex
c 'nice'
d laugh
e dishonest
f amused
- 17 Any ten from the following list:
You have it at breakfast, at 11 a.m., after lunch, at 4 p.m., after supper, at 11 p.m. You have it if the weather is hot, or if it's cold. You have it if you're tired or if you look tired. You have it if you're afraid. You have it before you go out, and when you are out. You have it when you get home. You have it when you want some. You have it when you don't want some. You have it when you haven't had some for some time. You have it when you have just had some.
- 18 They can mix it with a local accent, or they can put something in their mouth (a pipe or cigar) and speak through their teeth, and finish every sentence with 'isn't it?'
- 19 Europeans say a lot and give some history and facts. English people are silent for a long time then say three or four words only.
- 20 They say 'Oh, is that so?' or 'That's quite an unusual story, isn't it?'
- 21 Open answers
- 22 a ✗ b ✓ c ✓ d ✗ e ✓ f ✗ g ✗
- 23–24 Open answers
- 25 a famous
b Cockneys in them
c three policemen
d leave your lights on
e in their cars
f without stopping
g fall off the bus
- 26–28 Open answers
- 29 a stronger
b towns
c straight
d understand
e names
f area
g sign
- 30 a papers
b building
c question
d work
e relatives
- 31–32 Open answers
- 33 a differently
b not very clearly
c boring
d high class
e the best
f worse
g never
h we
- 34–44 Open answers

How to be an Alien

Discussion activities key

1–10 Open answers

11 Possible answer:

The verb *compromise* means 'to reach an agreement in which everyone involved accepts less than what they wanted at first' – e.g. 'My sister never wants to compromise.'

12–15 Open answers

Activity worksheets key

1 Open answers

- 2 a funny
b funnier
c Sunday
d important
e slowly / quietly
f laugh
g game
h foreign

3 a 3 b 4 c 1 d 6 e 2 f 5

4 Possible answers:

They can mix their accent with another accent.
They can hold a pipe or cigar their mouth, speak through their teeth and finish all their sentences with the question, 'Isn't it?'
They can write what they want to say, not speak it.

5–7 Open answers

- 8 a In England, it is bad to be clever.
b An Englishman uses few words but says a lot with them.
c An Englishman looks at a beautiful place and says nothing about it.
d Everything about England is a compromise.
e If you want to be British, you must be a hypocrite.
f To be English, you must enjoy small pleasures.
g English people sing when nobody is in the room.
h In England, people love to queue.
- 9 a dislike b cold c children's d rude e queue
f excited g dog h purple

10–11 Open answers

12 In English towns, you must **drive** at thirty **miles** an hour. The police **watch** for people who drive too **fast** / **quickly**. You know if a police car is following you because they always drive **blue** cars, **three** policemen sit in each car and the word POLICE is written in **big** letters on the **front** of the cars.

Some people drive **their** cars out of Central London to the **big / large / great** park Hampstead Heath on **sunny** days. They park **their** cars, **close** the windows and **sleep**. They are very **uncomfortable**.

Bus drivers play **three** games: 1) they **turn** suddenly so that cars crash into them; 2) they drive up to a bus-stop and do not **stop**; 3) they wait for everyone to get on the bus and then move away **fast / quickly**. People are very **angry** with bus drivers.

13 a 3 b 2 c 1 d 7 e 4 f 5 g 6 h 8

14–16 Open answers

Progress test key

- 1 a George Mikes / the author
b a young woman who was very proud of being English
c Europeans / people in Europe
d an English boy / a boy in England
e a very kind woman
- 2 a the book / *How to be an Alien*
b bad food / English food / food in England
c the weather
d conversations
e tea
f funny foreign ways
g the language / English
h another fifty thousand words
- 3 a stupid b say c quiet d terrible e proud
f important g party h fire i snows j cricket
k best l ordinary
- 4 a T b NT c NT d NT e T f T g NT
h T
- 5 a If you have the word *de* in front of your name, you are very **important**.
b In Mayfair, a man must not do **useful** work.
c Mayfair playboys always **laugh** if someone says something amusing.
d Really good British film-makers have a little **foreign** blood in them.
e Cockneys are people who were born in the **east** of London.
f Cockneys can't say the letter **h**.
g English taxi drivers teach **good** manners to other drivers.
h English people think being **uncomfortable** makes them strong.