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A literary education

by [Joseph Epstein](#)

On being well-versed in literature.

Sydney Smith, the early-nineteenth-century clergyman, wit, and one of the founders of the *Edinburgh Review*, once remarked that, if the same progress as had been made in education were made in the culinary arts, we should today still be eating soup with our hands. Quite so. Sydney Smith's simile holds up all too well in our time. New ideas and reforms continue to crop up in education—from the installation of the elective system more than a century ago at Harvard to the advent of digital technology throughout the educational system in recent years—each, in its turn and time, heralding fresh new revolutions in learning. One after another, these revolutions fizzle, then go down in flames, leaving their heralds all looking like some variation of what Wallace Stevens called “lunatics of one idea.”

Meanwhile, things continue to slide: standards slip, curricula are politicized and watered down, and, d ...

Joseph Epstein's new collection of essays is *In A Cardboard Belt!* (Houghton Mifflin)

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