MUGNESS IS AN occupational hazard for the writer on etiquette. The exquisite Miss Manners, in Miss Manners’ Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behaviour, describes the ‘wicked joy’ of her trade: ‘There is that pleasant bubble in the throat, the suppressed giggle at another’s ignorance; the flush of generosity accompanying the resolve to set the poor soul straight; that fever of human kindness when one proclaims, for the benefit of others, one’s superior knowledge.’ Suppressed giggles resound throughout the genre. Surely there’s one coming from the late John Morgan in Debrett’s New Guide to Etiquette and Modern Manners when he suggests that ‘when inviting royalty it is important first to decide, as with any guest, if you are on close enough terms to proffer an invitation’; or that ‘it is bad manners to expel any liquid from any orifice in public, and breastfeeding is no different’. Somehow, between its covers (dressed impeccably in ‘Tiffany blue’) it tells you everything your mother might have told you, if she had had time. There’s advice on child rearing, the dangers of sudden fame, and how to behave sportingly as a Sporting Parent. Von Adlerstein offers a useful strategy for evicting a straggler: ‘If all else fails, and there are no Wagnerians in the group, put on the “Ride of the Valkyries” and say that, after that, you’re going to play the whole of his weighty opera Parsifal.’

The book tips its cap to the Information Age with brief entries on ‘Manners and the Mobile’ and ‘Netiquette: Niceties on the Internet’. I felt these could have been expanded, but perhaps that would require another book. My favourite section concerns the oxymoronic ‘etiquette in the mosh pit’: ‘Etiquette for guys in the mosh pit dictates that you must lend your support to the person, most often a male, who is being passed around and protect any girl who is near you.’ This may not become the most thumbed section of the book, but I do relish the thought of the young mosh-er-to-be swotting up on moshing etiquette before the big night out.

Von Adlerstein doesn’t play to the gallery like a Miss Manners, or even a John Morgan, but she knows her material, and she’s nice as well. At last, a writer on courtesy whom you wouldn’t be scared to meet in the street.