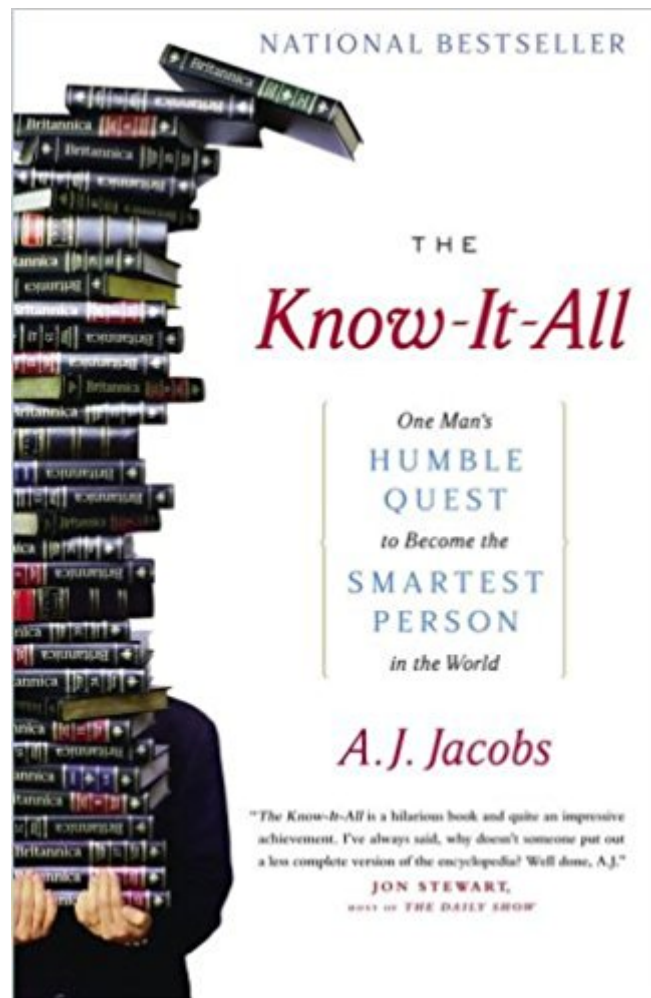


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The Know-It-All: One Man's Humble Quest To Become The Smartest Person In The World



Synopsis

Part memoir and part education (or lack thereof), *The Know-It-All* chronicles NPR contributor A.J. Jacobs's hilarious, enlightening, and seemingly impossible quest to read the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* from A to Z. 33,000 PAGES 44 MILLION WORDS 10 BILLION YEARS OF HISTORY 1 OBSESSED MAN To fill the ever-widening gaps in his Ivy League education, A.J. Jacobs sets for himself the daunting task of reading all thirty-two volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. His wife, Julie, tells him it's a waste of time, his friends believe he is losing his mind, and his father, a brilliant attorney who had once attempted the same feat and quit somewhere around Borneo, is encouraging but unconvinced. With self-deprecating wit and a disarming frankness, *The Know-It-All* recounts the unexpected and comically disruptive effects Operation Encyclopedia has on every part of Jacobs's life -- from his newly minted marriage to his complicated relationship with his father and the rest of his charmingly eccentric New York family to his day job as an editor at *Esquire*. Jacobs's project tests the outer limits of his stamina and forces him to explore the real meaning of intelligence as he endeavors to join Mensa, win a spot on *Jeopardy!*, and absorb 33,000 pages of learning. On his journey he stumbles upon some of the strangest, funniest, and most profound facts about every topic under the sun, all while battling fatigue, ridicule, and the paralyzing fear that attends his first real-life responsibility -- the impending birth of his first child. *The Know-It-All* is an ingenious, mightily entertaining memoir of one man's intellect, neuroses, and obsessions, and a struggle between the all-consuming quest for factual knowledge and the undeniable gift of hard-won wisdom.

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Customer Reviews

Imagine, the original Berserkers were "savage Norse soldiers" of the Middle Ages who went into battle stark naked! Or consider the Etruscan habit of writing in "boustrophedon style." Intrigued? Well, either hunker down with your own Encyclopedia Britannica, or buy Esquire editor Jacobs's memoir of the year he spent reading all 32 volumes of the 2002 edition—that's 33,000 pages with some 44 million words. Jacobs set out on this delightfully eccentric endeavor attempting to become the "smartest person in the world," although he agrees smart doesn't mean wise. Apart from the sheer pleasure of scaling a major intellectual mountain, Jacobs figured reading the encyclopedia from beginning to end would fill some gaps in his formal education and greatly increase his "quirkiness factor." Reading alphabetically through whole topics he never knew existed meant he'd accumulate huge quantities of trivia to insert into conversations with unsuspecting victims. As his wife shunned him and cocktail party guests edged away, Jacobs started testing his knowledge in a hilarious series of humiliating adventures: hobnobbing at Mensa meetings, shuffling off to chess houses, trying out for the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, visiting his old prep school, even competing on Who Wants to Be a Millionaire. Indeed, one of the book's strongest parts is its laugh-out-loud humor. Jacobs's ability to juxtapose his quirky, sardonic wit with oddball trivia make this one of the season's most unusual books. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Adult/High School - When Jacobs, a pop-culture junkie and magazine editor, got a bee in his bonnet to read the entire abridged set of the Encyclopedia Britannica to stave off the decline of his recalled knowledge, his wife, family, and coworkers looked on with disbelief, amusement, and annoyance. They thought he'd give up on his quest, but fortunately he did not, for his recap manages to impart the joys of learning, along with a lot of laughs. The alphabetical arrangement of his book allows Jacobs to share highlights, many of which show his fixation on the morbid, the insane, and the grotesque in history. Cortés had syphilis. Descartes had a fetish for cross-eyed women. Throughout, the author digresses with anecdotes about such things as his trip to a Mensa meeting, his visit with Alex Trebek, and (mainly) his wife's attempts to get pregnant. While the pregnancy woes probably won't hold the same resonance with teens as with adults, they are all short, and soon there is another funny or gross item. As Jacobs wraps up, he leaves readers with the sense of satisfaction and wistfulness that often occurs when finishing a particularly satisfying book, only multiplied by the magnitude of what he has accomplished. This is a love note to human knowledge

and the joys of obtaining it. - Jamie Watson, Harford County Public Library, MD Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book is not as good as *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*, but it's still a terrific read once it gets going. The story has a fascinating arrangement - each chapter covers one letter of the alphabet (except XYZ, which are lumped together), and the story is guided by alphabetical subheadings. A section with the title of an artist may lead to a snarky one-liner about the man's fetishes, while a section with the title of a mountain range yields a revealing meditation on a time that Jacobs was lost in that range (and the effect that the incident had on his relationship with his father). These longer musings, which are much more frequent near the end of the alphabet, make the book truly worthwhile, and Jacobs really seems to be baring his soul (as opposed to the difficult first sections, where he is only willing to bare his pop culture fluency and his most unusual trying-too-hard-for-attention personality quirks). The basic story is interesting, as Jacobs embarks on a quest to read the entire *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, but the quest is a self-centered one, and it is difficult to read the inconveniences suffered by Jacobs' wife and other family members when the reader knows that even Jacobs doesn't seem convinced that his pursuit has a worthwhile goal. As the book progresses, though, Jacobs matures as a storyteller and presents beautiful studies of intelligence and wisdom, along with honest struggles with infertility and with his larger-than-life father. By the end, this is a truly wonderful book, and I highly recommend it.

What Kindle users want to know: Active Table of Contents for each letter chapter. You can browse chapter to chapter with one click. Formatting is nice and simple to read. Index available but is neither clickable or page numbered which makes an index useless. What readers want to know: This is a narrative of one man's adventure in reading the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. For select entries, the author expounds on the content and history and its application in his world (his wife, his job, etc.). It is humorous, enlightening, and fun. If you are a trivia or reference book enthusiast than this is your comfort reading! It has hilarity and heart. And even I, a reference book junkie learned a thing or too! The narrative is pleasant and makes the effort more enjoyable than just reading about entries. Jacobs has brought stunt authoring to the academics... or at least Jeopardy watchers! It makes you want to go back when information searching began with sifting through pages of a heavy set of leather bound books.

Napoleon Bonaparte was an avid ice skater. "Wicked Bibles" were published in Britain in 1631, which neglected to include the word "not" in Exodus 20:14, thus creating the commandment "Thou shalt commit adultery." Ancient Egyptians used geese as guard animals. Did those three factual tidbits entertain you? Does the prospect of reading 400 pages of similar fare interspersed with some memoir-ish reflections and anecdotes appeal to you? If your answers are in the affirmative then you will probably enjoy *The Know-It-All* by A.J. Jacobs. The book chronicles Jacobs' attempt to read the complete *Encyclopedia Britannica* and his more-difficult task of keeping the reader interested during the whole affair. Jacobs' largely succeeds with the latter, and *The Know-It-All* is a worthwhile read to anyone looking for a light read instilled with plenty of trivia. The idea was sparked out of Jacobs' wish to reengage with his intellectual side, which had been languishing a bit due to his job as a magazine editor for the likes of *Entertainment Weekly* and *Esquire*. Jacobs has found his niche in the "stunt journalism" genre, as his other books include *Drop Dead Healthy* (where he attempts to become the healthiest human ever in a highly readable and engaging fashion) and *The Year of Living Biblically* (where he attempts to become the most Biblical human ever I guess, I haven't read that one yet). Reading the encyclopedia (when some skimming is inevitable) clearly is a bit pedestrian in comparison in terms of total commitment and strenuousness. Realizing this, Jacobs doesn't really focus much on the physical act of reading the volume, though he does mention several times that it is often incredibly boring and repetitive. Instead, the book is largely a vehicle for Jacobs to riff on some fun facts he encounters, pursue some semi-relevant intellectual activities like attending Mensa meetings and playing chess, and reflecting a bit on the nature of intelligence and knowledge with some more personal passages. The book is organized in a slightly unorthodox fashion. Every chapter covers a letter, and Jacobs recounts his efforts from a-ak (a genre of Korean court music) to Zywiec (a small town of 32,000 in Poland). Each chapter is further divided into individual entries, where Jacobs cultivates several usually fascinating factual morsels, such as the three that kicked off this review. There is never any drama regarding whether he will actually finish the book, which is appreciated given that he could really just have skimmed everything and we would be none the wiser. It's not like we the collective reading public were going to quiz him at the end or something. The format is mainly a success, as it still provides Jacobs with the freedom to tangentially relate particular entries to stories from his past or some of his scholarly field trips undertaken during his quest. Tackling the *Britannica*, and describing how one goes about such an endeavor, is something that could easily fail in the hands of the wrong writer. Thankfully, Jacobs does a pretty commendable job of maintaining interest. Like *Drop Dead Healthy*, Jacobs and his immediate family

and friends are featured prominently and these segments that focus on the author's attempts to one-up his intellectual brother-in-law help keep the book from becoming a mere list of random trivia. The Mensa meetings, school visits, and chess games also break up the monotony, though some asides such as Jacobs' appearance on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* (the book was published in 2004 when the show had already passed any shreds of cultural relevance or importance) fell a bit flat. But overall Jacobs does an excellent job touring the reader through the highlights of the *Britannica* and the prose is snappy, light, and self-effacing, something he has likely perfected through a career in magazines. While the book is facetiously titled and Jacobs often makes light of his deteriorating levels of "useful" knowledge, he does let his more highbrow and Ivy League education show during some clever and legitimately funny sections. I felt that the book lost some steam near the end but that it was ultimately an engaging mix of memoir and trivia, in a very similar vein to *Drop Dead Healthy*, which I also recommend. In Sum If you are looking for some light reading and enjoy historical facts with some anecdotes and riffs on pop culture thrown in for good measure then you can certainly do worse than A.J. Jacobs' amusing and even sometimes witty *The Know-It-All*. 7/10

Very entertaining. A humorous account of a professional writer's pursuit of his goal of reading the entire *Encyclopedia Britannica*, his wife's tolerance of his objective and progress, and of his family's, friend's and co-workers endorsement and skepticism. Author offers both humorous and profound insights as he works through 22 volumes, 33 thousand pages in his attempt to absorb the entire corpus of human knowledge according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Many laugh-out-loud moments in this book.

I loved it from A-ak to Zywiec. A.J. takes us through the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* with facts that you may or may not want to know (like the 5-assed snail... wonder where I can use this?!?!?) Seriously, after reading this book and *The Year of Living Biblically*, I want to meet Julie, she takes it all in stride, it cannot be easy to live with a man who is CONSTANTLY blurting out weird facts that 99.9% of the time is the last thing you want to hear. The book is very entertaining, he doesn't miss a beat, he is quirky and makes himself vulnerable at times (when it comes to the Jacobs infertility issues it's just heartbreaking, I'm going through the exact same phase in which it seems EVERYONE is pregnant but me!). I'm looking forward to reading his next memoir.

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