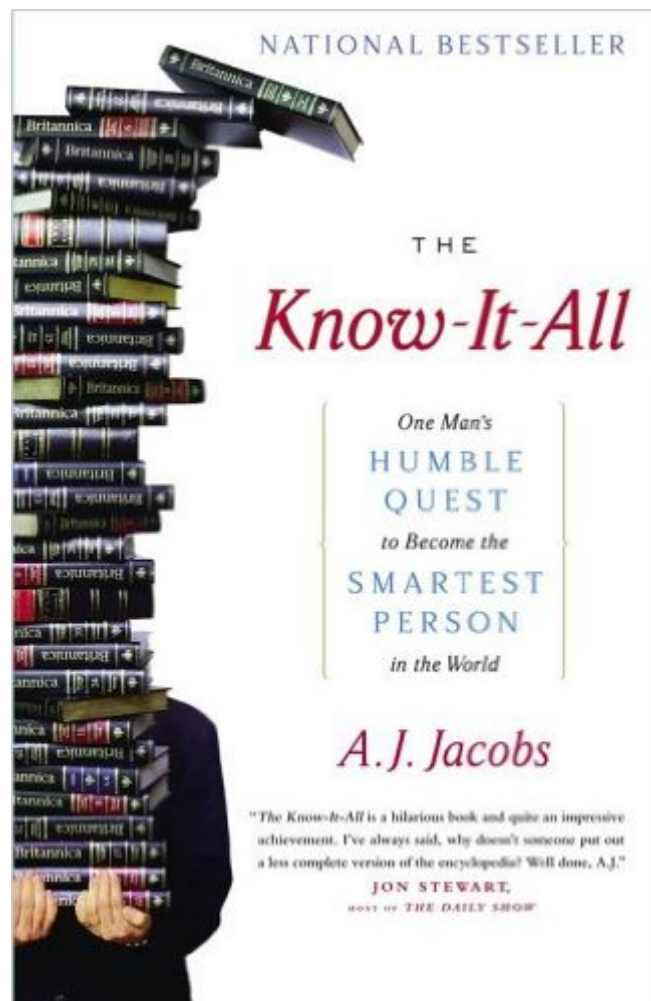


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# The Know-It-All: One Man's Humble Quest To Become The Smartest Person In The World



## 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book came highly recommended, but I was skeptical. Nerdy pointless trivia? Becoming the "smartest person in the world" by reading Britannica? I was even skeptical about the format--an alphabetical tour through the encyclopedia, with starting entries on a-ak, a capella, Aachen, Aaron, etc. Fortunately, Jacobs is a very talented narrator, and he had me hooked in the first few pages. His method of detailing the journey from A to Z was very effective. This isn't random repeated trivia, it's a very good memoir. We learn about Jacobs's career at Esquire, his relationship with his wife, their on-going fertility troubles, his playfully combative relationship with his brother-in-law, and his relationship with his dad and how dad shaped Jacobs as a person. All of this is intertwined with his journey through Britannica, and I learned a lot on the way. Jacobs also spices up his quest for knowledge by taking a speed reading class, joining Mensa and attending a gathering, meeting Alex Trebek, and trying out for Who Wants to Be A Millionaire, among other things. There is, of course, the requisite Britannica trivia, but Jacobs weaves it all into a cohesive narrative. He points out how many people died of syphilis, the overshadowed siblings of famous people like Charles Darwin, the many occurrences of cross-eyed people and those who had fetishes for them, the "good parts" and racy pictures in the Britannica, and so on. I also learned about the historical biases of the encyclopedia and how the machine that is the Britannica works. This book has mass appeal. I know I'll be loaning it out to my family, because Jacobs tells a story most anyone can relate to. I was sad when I got to the Z's and I had to part with this talented narrator.

AJ Jacobs may not have realized his book could be seen as redemptive, or life-affirming, but to me The Know-It-All is both. I purchased this book one week after losing my dearest friend, at far too young an age, to colon cancer. At the time I was grasping at straws in a mad attempt to find something that could distract me from my grief. Nothing else was working, frankly, and I was mired in unhappiness. I'd read a review of Jacobs' book a few weeks before, and the premise sounded intriguing. When I saw it hit the bookstore shelves I decided I'd give it a try. Imagine my surprise when I found myself riveted, and able to lose myself (and thus for a time forget my sorrow) completely. Then I found myself laughing at the self-deprecating humor, and before I knew it I began to feel a certain sense of inspiration and consolation in the whole sweep of human history, despite the occasional human foibles pointed out so perceptively by Jacobs. I'll never forget that this book, and this author, helped me through one of the darkest times in my life. This book may not be such a savior to everyone, but I can't see how anyone could read it and not be charmed and instructed. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

I saw this book at the bookstore and after glancing through it, I knew I had to take it home. What a funny, funny book. Oh..... and very informative. I can't imagine anyone actually trying to read the whole encyclopedia, from A to Z. How boring, how daunting, how strange. But oh, how glad I am this author took on this task. Funny, funny book. I found myself laughing out loud more times than I can count, and I kept wanting to share the entries as I was reading them, not just for the extra laughs, but for the really interesting tidbits the author chose to tell. Since I was alone in the house most of the time I was reading, and couldn't share anything I was reading, I went to and ordered a couple of copies for other people. I shouldn't be the only one to enjoy this book. Read this book and give one as a gift to someone you know. Well worth it.

Although it's nice to learn select factoids from the Encyclopedia Britannica, the best part of the book is A.J. Jacobs' moments of know-it-allness. He drives his (trying to conceive - a cute side story) wife, family members, friends and acquaintances crazy, foisting his facts on them at opportune and inopportune times. His wife eventually starts fining him for factoid infractions. In addition to reading every word of every volume of the encyclopedia, he supplements his knowledge by getting involved with Mensa, interviewing know-it-alls like Alex Trebek, and participating in some of the activities required to publishing the volumes at the Britannica plant. The humor is laugh out loud funny at times, but you can have too much of a good thing. And even taking into account the book's silly slant, some may take issue with the commentating on some of the facts, notably (p 225) about Isaac Newton, of whom he writes, "...Newton was a complete nut job, the angriest and nastiest scientist in history," and "He also hated the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz." For one thing, GWL was also a mathematician, and for another, the dislike was mutual and involved a dispute over which of the two was the legitimate inventor of calculus (Newton was first but didn't publish his findings, Leibniz invented it later, independently, and published). In general, the book is filled with lots of great trivia and is written in an easy to read, funny format. For more moments of laugh out loud humor, read *Me Talk Pretty Some Day* by David Sedaris. Great books on words: *Author Unknown: Tales of a Literary Detective* by Don Foster, *The Professor and the Madman* by Simon Winchester, and *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* by Lynne Truss.

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