

Jacobs, Alan. *How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds*. New York: Currency, 2017.

INTRODUCTION

Alan Jacobs has a Ph.D. from the University of Virginia and a B.A. from the University of Alabama. He currently teaches in the Honors Program at Baylor University, and he has written for *The Atlantic* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Jacobs has authored multiple books including *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C.S. Lewis* and *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love*. *Good!*

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

In the introduction, Jacobs establishes his motivation for the book, which is to acknowledge the practical benefits of having crucial guidelines on how to think (11). Jacobs seeks to retain a level of optimism towards everyone's potential to think well as he moves on to explain how they might do so (12-17). Jacobs begins by defining thinking as not merely the result or outcome but the process of decision-making (14). Throughout this decision-making process, Jacobs claims that thinking must resemble an art rather than a science to remain authentic and

empathetic (14-15). He argues that the fundamental struggle in approaching thinking as an art is bias, which he defines as the predisposed posture to not think at all (17). Jacobs continues explaining that biases leave thinkers prone to Refutation Mode, which Jacobs defines as the state of halting all listening and thinking in favor of opposing a divergent viewpoint (18). Next, he states that people are also prone to reject a thoughtful conclusion in favor of appearing compatible with the culture around them (20-21). Jacobs warns that the thinker must be cautious of his emotions and biases so that he can be wary of the social pull towards a non-thinking mindset (22-23). Jacobs continues to warn that this tendency towards bias and Refutation Mode hinders the potential of critical thought and inhibits one's ability to relate to others (26-27). He argues that simply being aware of the unseen forces that impede thinking is the first step towards proficient thinking (29).

In chapter one, Jacobs cautions that thinking offers no promise of relational success or assurance; sometimes it guarantees the opposite (31-36). He begins with the idea that human thinking is innately relational and that the notion that relational beings could think independently is illogical and unrealistic (37). Jacobs adds that people can be so biased that their reasons behind their convictions can be distorted even

though their beliefs may be correct (38-39). Jacobs continues by arguing that productive and objective thinking can only occur when emotional bias and analysis are both utilized in the decision-making process (43-44). ^{Finally} ~~Lastly~~, he claims that assumptions make it impossible to critique the rationality of a decision (45-49).

In chapter two, Jacobs argues that although social development offers considerable potential for thoughtful ^{WC} accord, it also offers substantial potential for a rigid mindset and stubbornness (55). Jacobs then advises that what outlook a social group or clique has regarding diverging perspectives will indicate what they expect the individuals within that group to believe and to think (58-59). He uses an excerpt from C. S. Lewis, who highlights this aspect of human society and the lengths that people will go for a feeling of acceptance (56-57). However, Jacobs still claims that the individual requires social ^{a bit of} association, but the thinker must be wary of seeking social echo-chambers to satiate some idealistic ^{WPU? - 1} wish-list (62-63). Jacobs concludes that a diverse exchange of ideas is a result of optimistically conversing in social settings with thought-provoking interaction in mind; ^{incl. - 1} (optimism and cold observation must be restrained and pulled together to form thoughtful prudence (64-66, 69-70). ^{incl. - 1}]

In chapter three, Jacobs transitions to how discuss people ²⁻¹ treat those whom they are repulsed by (71). He claims that those who subscribe to set dogmas of thought are more likely to oppose those outside of their perspective than they are to support those who share their own perspective (73). He argues that those who are so loyal to their causes and ideals tend to be pushed to extreme lengths of opposition such that their loyalty violates their own ethical limits (74-75). Jacob explains that one can overcome this natural tendency by listening to sensible advocates for an opposing point of view (75). Jacobs also provides ^{wc - 1} the mindset that everyone has been wrong at some point, even those who tend to be idolized in their respective idealistic realms (78). However, while it seems that Jacobs is advocating for emotionless judgment, he clarifies that emotion is the driving force and a necessary boundary that keeps prudent analysis empathetic and human (84). Jacobs concludes the chapter by providing ^{wc - 1} bias as another way to regulate ^{wpv?} thinking (86). He argues that biases are key to how thinkers perceive the world because they provide guidance and focus through experience and familiarity (86-87).

In chapter four, Jacobs deals with the immense power of words (90). One aspect of words that Jacobs covers is keywords, which are what people use to associate complex ideals in quick

conversational labels (91). While Jacobs admits that keywords are good and necessary, he warns that they have the tendency to replace thoughtfulness with thoughtless regurgitation of associated keywords (95). Next, he explains that keywords can manifest as metaphors that are one-word symbols used throughout conversations or exchanges of ideas to reword or even twist ideas and arguments (96). Jacobs provides the specific metaphor of war, which, he explains, has the power to dehumanize the opposing party through the zeal to win the war of the argument (98). Jacobs explains that keywords also manifest as myths that end up replacing the fact with the metaphor used to represent it (102). He acknowledges that myths are useful tools to create association, but he also brings up how these analogous associations end up turning the thinker's attention away from the original thought to supplementary distractions (104-105). Jacobs proposes that the ability to dictate opposing points of view in a strong fashion is a solution to the overuse of keywords. He explains that doing so reveals that the thinker returns attention and empathy rather than predisposed, thoughtless refutation (109).

In chapter five, Jacobs tackles the common tendency for thinkers to *lump* points of views or arguments into neatly packed categories (113). First, Jacobs establishes that lumping can be

useful as a means of managing large amounts of information and including new information into pre-existing mental distinctions (116). However, he then ties lumping back to the notion of the myths discussed in chapter four (119). Jacobs argues that lumping ~~does~~^{has} have the potential to reduce people's reputations to the worst examples of their identity and character (119). The solution Jacobs offers is splitting, which places emphasis on individualism while also associating people with suitable identities (123-124). ✓

In chapter six, Jacobs discusses open and closed minds (125). First, Jacobs makes clear that some issues must be settled and closed before any further intellectual discussion can be had with an open mind (126). He argues that a closed mind is not only beneficial but necessary for mental integrity (126). Jacobs states that he is opposed to the notion that all decisions can be made by objective judgement and analysis; instead, he defends the position that some issues are impossible to resolve due to a lack of sufficient, concrete evidence (128). ✓

Second, Jacobs makes clear that it is sometimes healthy to change one's mind on certain issues (129). He argues that thinkers ^{often} hold their ideals ⁱⁿ such a high regard that if they abandoned their ideals, they feel that they have wasted all their time spent holding to that ideal. ^{J. 11. 63} he refers to this

mindset as the fallacy of sunk-costs (129). Jacobs then moves on to discuss the opposite end of open-mindedness (136). Jacobs defines fanatics as such deeply invested believers ⁱⁿ of an ideal that they avoid consideration of any other alternative perspective at all costs (136). He then ends the chapter with a key distinction to use when determining if a social group is healthy or not: how it views those outside of its own ingroup, which is the assembly ^{WC / sub} of those who agree with a certain ideal (138).

In chapter seven, Jacobs condenses the topics from the previous chapters ^{WPU? -1} (into the primary tool that is the mastery of the English language) (139). Jacobs begins by expressing his admiration of the rare ability for writers to give their opinions without causing their readers to ^{WC} deviate into immediate refutation (142). Jacobs recommends developing the ability to ^{WPU? -1} linguistically function in different social and conversational settings by learning familiar associations and keywords that are commonly used in those settings (144). He argues that this ability is a signal that the thinker actively cares enough to relate to others with ⁱⁿ their own contexts and social dialects (144). Jacobs explains that the way to ^{ach} accomplish this ability is to realize that in another set of circumstances, the thinker could hold the very position that he opposes (146).

A bit hard to follow

In the conclusion of the book, Jacobs encourages the reader to argue well and to express empathy to see fruitful conversation and dialogue (149-150). He warns that it takes a certain kind of person to adhere to the tools and principles that he lays out in the book: one who cares more about truth than the moral high ground (150). Jacobs explains that hope is the secret ingredient to long-term improvement in one's thinking (151).

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Jacob closes his book with the afterword containing a checklist for the thinking person to utilize (155-156). He cautions that it takes a humble type of person to adopt a checklist because it demeans his ability to pride himself on his own memory (154). Lastly, Jacobs encourages the reader to take courage in utilizing the various techniques to improve and develop better thinking (156).

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Jacobs wrote his book in a way that reflected the logical process he wished to convey, as his structure portrayed a step-by-step process of topics that built on each consecutive point. He ^{also} used memorable examples that gave weight and relevance to each point he made. However, some of the examples hindered the points in a way that distracted from the overall theme. Overall,

Jacobs' book conveys his perspectives and tips in an illuminating and evidence-based manner that was readable and memorable.

WC here -1

Another strength Jacobs utilized was how he structured his book. Throughout his book, he employed each of his previous points to expound on the new topic he introduced in each chapter. In his introduction, he set and defined the terms he used in the rest of the book so that the reader would be familiarized with them (11-30). For example, in chapter one he dealt with some of the common nuances and myths about independent thinking so that he could lay a new foundation in the successive chapters (31-49). Throughout chapters two and three, he used the terms already defined from his introduction to build on his idea that thinking occurs in a social setting and not independently (51-88). Lastly, from chapter seven to his afterword, Jacobs merged all his tips and tools together to aid the reader in applying them to real interactions (139-156). Each of these successive chapters required the previous chapter to make sense to the reader because each chapter presented or defined a term or an idea that Jacobs would later utilize.

Jacobs also provided helpful biographical examples for most of his points. The examples Jacobs included added a tactile representation of the concepts he was arguing. His examples fit

neatly into the context of his topics so that the reader could easily perceive the key tenet. The way that Jacobs placed and explained the excerpts made the points sufficiently memorable and ingrained ⁱⁿ in the reader's thoughts. He also would visit certain examples multiple times throughout the book because he could bring out more than one lesson that fit his topics. For example, Jacobs introduced the story of Megan Phelps-Roper in the first sentence of chapter one (31-34). In this instance, he details how she changed her mind not because of independent thinking but due to an exposure of ideas held by others in her community. This example supports his point that he made in chapter one: thinking happens in a communal and social setting, not independently. However, he revisited her story in chapter three and in chapter six. In chapter three, he used her account to support his point that no matter how repulsed a thinker is by a certain viewpoint, the people holding that viewpoint are still humans (76). In chapter six, he used her story to support his plea to avoid the fallacy of sunk costs in the debate of whether the thinker's mind should be open or closed on a specific issue (137). Jacobs' examples carry with them a significance that prove that the issues he is discussing matter when applying them in thinking.

Good Transition!

While many of Jacobs' examples were helpful, one weakness that some of Jacobs' examples carried with them was their placement within the chapter and their length. For example, chapter two began with an example of a young woman named Leah Libresco (51-54). The story spans over three pages while its application to the point he was trying to make is only one paragraph. He transitions directly after that paragraph into another completely different example that pertains to a completely different point (54-55). One paragraph after that example, he included another example about C. S. Lewis (55-56). Throughout his book, Jacobs had the tendency to transition from example to example at a speed that left the reader dazed and trying to remember which example applied to the point he was trying to make. Good transitions!

CONCLUSION

Jacobs structured his book in a way that allows a progression of topics to flow and build on each other in a coherent fashion. He used unique examples that created memorable and clear evidence for the points he made; however, some of the examples proved to be more cumbersome and misplaced than useful and relatable. Jacobs proves to be a strong writer with valuable points that he clearly conveys in his book.