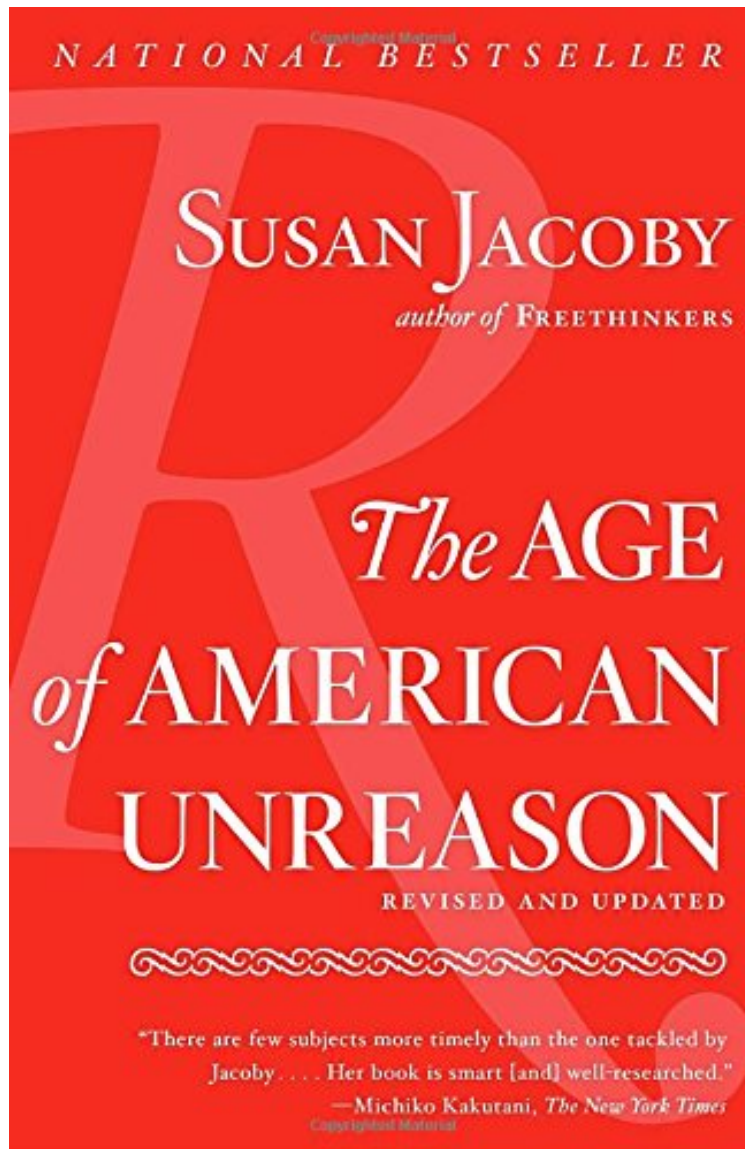


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The Age of American Unreason

Susan Jacoby

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#296525 in Books Vintage 2009-02-10 2009-02-10Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.01 x .80 x 5.231, .59
#File Name: 1400096383384 pages | File size: 31.Mb

Susan Jacoby : The Age of American Unreason before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Age of American Unreason:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. All the more frighteningly relevant nowBy Tim LukemanSusan Jacoby's smart scathing study of American anti-intellectualism was starkly accurate when first published in 2009. The intervening years have only demonstrated proven her thesis with dismaying urgency. If anything, the lack of actual knowledge in context, as well the lack of ability to assemble it into a larger, coherent whole, have both grown worse.

Horribly worse. Beyond Theater of the Absurd worse. America is currently dominated by a mindset that deliberately willfully rejects unassailable fact, education, complexity, science, art, and thought itself. Worse still, those of that mindset are angrily, sneeringly proud of their self-imposed ignorance. They seem to take pleasure in the tearing down of anyone anything that even vaguely suggests the slightest hint of maturity wisdom. And this is what they believe will somehow make our country "great" again? Well -- if you haven't read this fine (if deeply unsettling) book yet, there's no better time for it. Jacoby is smart, witty, and passionate about the dead-end direction so many Americans are taking today. As for the complaints about her use of anecdotal evidence, this is as much *cri de coeur* as it is thoroughly researched study. It's meant to make you feel as well as think, and then think some more. Civilization can be a thin fragile veneer, all too easily lost when not enough people uphold defend it. Start here -- most highly recommended!⁴ of 4 people found the following review helpful. I recommend this book. By Fred I think this book rings true and the issues we see today. I recommend this book. 20 of 21 people found the following review helpful. *The Way We Never Were?* By Santi Tafarella Susan Jacoby's book is suffused with nostalgia for a time in America when the life of the mind was more valued than it seems to her to be today. Her evidence, however, is largely anecdotal. She refers, for example, to her experience, as a young woman in the 1960s, of writing long "snail mail" letters to a lover in South Africa, chronicling the zeitgeist of her place and time, and how he did the same. She praises this languid and sensuous form of communication, then contrasts it with the emotional flatness that she feels sending off electronic e-mails today, which she notes are rarely responded to with any degree of passion or detail. Her thesis, in short, is that contemporary electronic communication, from TV and the Internet, to mass advertising, has drawn America away from nature, books, and the life of the mind. She perceives, correctly, that Steven Johnson's book of just a few years back, "Everything Bad is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter," threatens her thesis, and she attempts, in her first chapter, to dispatch it quickly. But rather than address the substantive claims and supports that book offers, she maligns it with little more than innuendo, contempt, and derision. But Johnson's book is, whatever else you may think of it, suffused with a good deal of empirical data, and Jacoby chooses to simply ignore it and move on. I share Jacoby's sadness that the life of the mind is not broadly valued, but I don't share her belief that it was ever valued all that much more than it is today. The nostalgic aspect of her book is thus the weakest part of it because she is doing something inherently unreasonable, accumulating anecdotes that do not add up (at least for me) to a compelling support for her claim. It was, after all, William F. Buckley who said, long before the Internet and TV preachers presumably made us all stupid, that he preferred that the country be trusted to the first fifty names in the Boston phone book to the faculty of Harvard. Contempt and distrust of intellectuals and the elite, like the poor, have been with us always. Jacoby, who has written a book on Greek tragedy, surely knows Aristophanes' "The Clouds," a funny and disturbing send up of the atheist intellectuals of ancient Greece. For all my complaints, however, the book is worth having and reading, if, for no other reason, to draw fresh intellectual air from someone who loves the life of the mind. But let's not kid ourselves. The average person in 1950 probably could no more locate Iran on a world map than a person can today.

A cultural history of the last forty years, *The Age of American Unreason* focuses on the convergence of social forces usually treated as separate entities that has created a perfect storm of anti-rationalism. These include the upsurge of religious fundamentalism, with more political power today than ever before; the failure of public education to create an informed citizenry; and the triumph of video over print culture. Sparing neither the right nor the left, Jacoby asserts that Americans today have embraced a universe of junk thought that makes almost no effort to separate fact from opinion.

From *Publishers Weekly* Inspired by Richard Hofstadter's trenchant 1963 cultural analysis *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, Jacoby (*Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*) has produced an engaging, updated and meticulously thought-out continuation of her academic idol's research. Dismayed by the average U.S. citizen's political and social apathy and the overall crisis of memory and knowledge involving everything about the way we learn and think, Jacoby passionately argues that the nation's current cult of unreason has deadly and destructive consequences (the war in Iraq, for one) and traces the seeds of current anti-intellectualism (and its partner in crime, antirationalism) back to post-WWII society. Unafraid of pointing fingers, she singles out mass media and the resurgence of fundamentalist religion as the primary vectors of anti-intellectualism, while also having harsh words for pseudoscientists. Through historical research, Jacoby breaks down popular beliefs that the 1950s were a cultural wasteland and the 1960s were solely a breeding ground for liberals. Though sometimes partial to inflated prose (America's endemic anti-intellectual tendencies have been grievously exacerbated by a new species of semiconscious anti-rationalism), Jacoby has assembled an erudite mix of personal anecdotes, cultural history and social commentary to decry America's retreat into junk thought. (Feb. 12) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From *The New Yorker* Identifying herself as a "cultural conservationist" (but by no means a cultural conservative), Jacoby laments the decline of middlebrow American culture and presents a cogent defense of intellectualism. America, she believes, faces a "crisis of memory and knowledge," in which anti-

intellectualism is not only tolerated but celebrated by those in politics and the media to whom we are all "just folks." The Internet, for all its promise, is too often "a highway to the far-flung regions of junk thought." Meanwhile, twenty-five per cent of high-school biology teachers believe that human beings and dinosaurs shared the earth, and more than a third of Americans can't name a single First Amendment right. In such an environment, Jacoby argues, the secular left and the religious right can have no fruitful dialogue on issues like the separation of church and state. She offers little hope that the situation will improve, opining that, despite increasing levels of education, "Americans seem to know less and less." Copyright 2008 Click here to subscribe to The New Yorker There are few subjects more timely than the one tackled by Jacoby. . . . Her book is smart [and] well-researched. Michiko Kakutani, The New York Times Forceful. . . . Cogently argued. . . . An intellectual journey of the first order. Chicago Tribune One hopes Jacoby's incisive book will find an audience among the unconverted who will take her warnings seriously. San Francisco Chronicle Provocative, well-written and often witty. USA Today Jacoby's is a moderate, sensible, well-founded position, shared by many Americans, yet it somehow rarely got voiced amid the raging hyperbole of the culture wars. Salon Jacoby deploys sharp insight on our present straits Los Angeles Times Trenchant One hopes her incisive book, just in time for the 2008 elections, will find an audience among the unconverted who will take her warnings seriously. San Francisco Chronicle A surprising and uncommonly sophisticated treatment of a familiar topic. New York Observer "The Age of American Unreason picks up where Richard Hofstadter left off. With analytic verve and deep historical knowledge, Susan Jacoby documents the dumbing down of our culture like a maestro. make no mistake about it, this is an important book." Douglas Brinkley, residential historian and author of The Great Deluge "This is one of the most eye-opening books I've read in a long time. Jacoby charts the intellectual and cultural currents that have characterized the United States since its founding and explains just how and why Americans have recently become so, well, dumb. Anyone who cares about the future of our country will want to read it." Marcia Angell, editor in chief emerita, New England Journal of Medicine "Jacoby has written a brilliant, sad story of the anti-intellectualism and lack of reasonable thought that has put this country in one of the sorriest states in its history." Helen Thomas, author of Watchdogs of Democracy?: The Waning Washington Press Corps and How It Has Failed the Public "Jacoby's fearless jeremiad, at once passionate, witty, and solidly grounded in facts, aries at a propitious moment, when many Americans are perceiving that ignorance conjoined to arrogance can be deadly. This book deserves to be widely read, and especially by concerned parents. As Jacoby insists, it is only within families that some immunity to mind-numbing 'infotainment' can now be acquired. First, however, there must be a will to resist and if this stirring book can't rally it, nothing can." Frederick Crews, author of Follies of the Wise: Dissenting Essays "To a country of underachievers and proud of it, this book delivers a magnificent, occasionally hilarious kick in the pants. Snap out of it, Jacoby says: Getting it right matters. Tough talk and wicked wit in the tradition of Richard Hofstadter's Anti-Intellectualism in American Life and Neil Postman's Amusing Ourselves to Death." Jack Miles, author of God: A Biography