

A. J. Jacobs

OMNIBUS

The Know-It-All,
The Year of Living Biblically,
&
My Life as an Experiment



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in the World*

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SIMON & SCHUSTER
New York London Toronto Sydney



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This book is an account of the author's experience reading the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Some events appear out of sequence, and some names and identifying details of individuals mentioned have been changed.

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To my wife, Julie

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

I know the name of Turkey's leading avant-garde publication. I know that John Quincy Adams married for money. I know that Bud Abbott was a double-crosser, that absentee ballots are very popular in Ireland, and that dwarves have prominent buttocks.

I know that the British tried to tax clocks in 1797 (huge mistake). I know that Hank Aaron played for a team called the Indianapolis Clowns. I know that Adam, of Bible fame, lived longer than the combined ages of the correspondents of *60 Minutes* and *60 Minutes II* (930 years, to be exact). I know that South America's Achagua tribe worshiped lakes, that the man who introduced baseball to Japan was a communist, and that Ulysses S. Grant thought Venice would be a nice city "if it were drained."

I know all this because I have just read the first hundred pages of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. I feel as giddy as famed balloonist Ben Abruzzo on a high-altitude flight—but also alarmed at the absurd amount of information in the world. I feel as if I've just stuffed my brain till there are facts dribbling out of my ears. But mostly, I am determined. I'm going to read this book from A to Z—more precisely, *a-ak* to *zywiec*. I'm not even out of the early As, but I'm going to keep turning the pages till I'm done. I'm on my way. Just 32,900 pages to go!

How did this happen? How did I find myself plopped on my couch, squinting at tiny font about dwarf buttocks and South American lakes? Let me back up a little.

I used to be smart. Back in high school and college, I was actually considered somewhat cerebral. I brought D. H. Lawrence novels on vacations, earnestly debated the fundamentals of Marxism, and peppered my conversation with words like "albeit." I knew my stuff. Then, in the years since graduating college, I began a long, slow slide into dumbness. At age thirty-five, I've become embarrassingly ignorant. If things continue at this rate, by my fortieth birthday, I'll be spending my days watching *Wheel of Fortune* and drooling into a bucket.

Like many in my generation, I've watched my expensive college education recede into a haze. Sure, I remember a couple things from my four years at Brown University. For instance, I remember that a burrito left on the dorm room floor is still somewhat edible after five days, as long as you chew really hard. But as for bona fide book learning? Off the top of my head, I recall exactly three things from my classes:

1. When my comp lit professor outed Walt Whitman.
2. When the radical feminist in my Spanish class infuriated the teacher by refusing to use masculine pronouns. "La pollo." "No, *el* pollo." "La pollo." "No, no, no, *el* pollo." Et cetera.
3. When the guy in my Nietzsche seminar raised his hand and said, "If I listen to one more minute of this, I'm going to go crazy," then promptly stood up, walked to the back of the class, and jumped out the window. It was a ground-floor window. But still. It was memorable.

My career choices are partly to blame for my intellectual swan dive. After college, I got a job as a writer at *Entertainment Weekly*, a magazine devoted to the minutiae of movies, TV, and music. I crammed my cranium with pop culture jetsam. I learned the names of 'N Sync's singers—as well as

their choreographer. I could tell you which stars have toupees, which have fake breasts, and which have both. But this meant anything profound got pushed out. I could talk confidently about the doughnut-eating Homer, but I'd forgotten all about the blind guy who wrote long poems. I stopped reading anything except for tabloid gossip columns and books with pictures of attractive celebrities and

reading anything except for tabloid gossip columns and books with pictures of attractive celebrities on the cover. In my library, I actually have a well-thumbed copy of Marilu Henner's autobiography. Things improved slightly when I got a job as an editor at *Esquire* magazine (I now know that Syria and Shiraz are the same wine grape), but still, my current knowledge base is pathetically patchy, filled with gaps the size of Marlon Brando—whose autobiography I've read, by the way.

I've been toying with the idea of reading the *Britannica* for years. Since I haven't accomplished anything particularly impressive in my life, unless you count my childhood collection of airsickness bags from every major airline, I've always thought of this as a good crucible. The tallest mountain of knowledge. My Everest. And happily, this Everest won't cause icicles to form on my ears or deprive me of oxygen, one of my favorite gases. I'll get a crash course in everything. I'll leave no gap in my learning unfilled. In this age of extreme specialization, I will be the last guy in America to have a general knowledge. I'll be, quite possibly, the smartest man in the world.

I've actually dabbled in reference books before. After college, I spent a couple of days poring over Webster's dictionary—but mostly I was looking for two-letter words that I could use in Scrabble to make annoyingly clever moves. (I was kind of unemployed at the time.) And that turned out to be a very successful experience. You can bet your bottom *xu* (Vietnamese monetary unit) that I kicked the butt of my *jo* (Scottish slang for girlfriend) without even putting on a *gi* (karate outfit).

But the encyclopedia idea I stole from my father. When I was a freshman in high school, my dad, a New York lawyer, decided he was going to read the *Britannica*. My father is a man who loves learning. He went to engineering grad school, then to business grad school, then to law school. He was about to enroll in medical school when my mom told him that maybe it'd be a good idea to get a job since jobs earn money, which is kind of helpful when trying to buy food. But even with a day job, he continued his book addiction and scholarly writing. Back in 1982, he decided the *Britannica* was a good way to become an instant expert on all subjects. He made it up to the mid-Bs—I think it was right around *Borneo*—before giving up, blaming his busy schedule. Now I'm going to take up the cause. I'm going to redeem the family honor.

I called up my dad to tell him the good news.

"I'm going to finish what you started."

"I'm not sure I follow," he said.

"I'm going to read the entire *Encyclopaedia Britannica*."

A pause. "I hear that the *Ps* are excellent."

I figured he'd have a wisecrack. That's his way. He's got a universe of information and wisdom in his head, but with my sister and me, he'd rather tell jokes and play silly games, like filling our water glasses to the very top, making it impossible to drink without spilling. He saves his serious talks for work—or for the other lawyers in the family, of whom there are a good dozen. Maybe that'll change soon. Maybe when I start telling him about the intricacies of the Phoenician legal system, he'll include me in the adult circle.

I tried the idea out on my wife, Julie, that night as we started scrubbing a mound of dishes.

"I think I need to get smarter," I said.

"Why? You're plenty smart." Julie motioned for me to hand her the sponge.

"I think I need to cut down on reality TV," I said.

"We could probably limit ourselves to two or three hours a day."

"And I think I'm going to read the encyclopedia." No response. "The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* from A to Z."

I could tell Julie was skeptical, and with good reason. I met her when we were both working at *Entertainment Weekly*. She was on the business side, selling ads and chatting up clients, comfortable in social settings as I am awkward, as practical as I am unrealistic. The romance was slow

comfortable in social settings as I am awkward, as practical as I am unrealistic. The romance was supposed to start—mostly because she thought I was gay—but she’s stuck with me for five years now. In the time, she’s heard me announce plenty of other grand schemes—like the time I tried to start a magazine-wide Ping-Pong league, or my plan to write a screenplay about a president with Tourette syndrome (working title: *Hail to the Freakin’ Chief*)—only to see them fizzle.

“I don’t know, honey,” she said finally. “Sounds like kind of a waste of time.”

Make that skeptical and slightly concerned. Julie has enough trouble dragging me out of the apartment to interact with actual, three-dimensional human beings. The encyclopedia, she no doubt surmised, would give me one more excuse to stay pinned to our comfortable couch. “What about eating dinner at every restaurant in New York?” Julie suggested. “You can start with the restaurants with A names, and work your way to the Zs. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

A valiant try. But I’m dead serious about Operation Encyclopedia.

I got no more enthusiasm when I told my friends. “Can’t you just read the Cliffs Notes?” was the popular response. One friend suggested that I read every volume of the children’s book *Encyclopedia Brown* instead. Some wondered if maybe the *World Book* wasn’t more my speed. At least that one has lots of pictures. No, it has to be the *Britannica*, I told them.

And it does. Last night, I did some preliminary research on encyclopedias. The *Britannica* is still the gold standard, the Tiffany of encyclopedias. Founded in 1768, it’s the longest continually published reference book in history. Over the years, the *Britannica*’s contributors have included Einstein, Freud, and Harry Houdini. Its current roster includes dozens of academics with Nobel Prizes and Pulitzers, and other awards with ceremonies that don’t feature commentary from Melissa Rivers. The *Britannica* passed through some tough times during the dot-com craze, and it long ago phased out the door-to-door salesman, but it keeps chugging along. The legendary eleventh edition from 1911 is thought by many to be the best—it has inspired a fervent, if mild-mannered, cult—but the current editions are still the greatest single source of knowledge.

Yes, there’s the Internet. I could try to read Google from A to Z. But the Internet’s about as reliable as publications sold next to Trident and Duracell at the supermarket checkout line. Want a quick check on the trustworthiness of the Internet? Do a search on the words “perfectionist” and “perfectionism.” No, I prefer my old-school books. There’s something appealingly stable about the *Britannica*. I don’t even want that newfangled CD-ROM for \$49, or the monthly *Britannica* online service. I’ll take the leatherette volumes for \$1,400—which is not cheap, but it’s certainly less expensive than grad school. And anyway, at the end of this, maybe I can go on *Jeopardy!* and win enough to buy a dozen sets.

A couple of days after I placed my order, my boxes arrive. There are three of them, and they’re each big enough to hold an air conditioner. I rip open the cardboard and get a look at my new purchase. It’s a handsome set of books—sleek and black, with gold embossing on the spine that spells out the first and last entries in that volume. An actual example: *Excretion/Geometry*. Another: *Menage/Ottawa*, which somehow confirms what we’ve all heard about those wanton Canadians.

Seeing the *Britannica* in three dimensions not only causes Julie to panic that it’ll eat up most of our apartment’s shelf space, it also drives home the magnitude of my quest. I’m looking at 33,000 pages, 65,000 articles, 9,500 contributors, 24,000 images. I’m looking at thirty-two volumes, each one weighing in at a solid four pounds, each packed with those giant, tissue-thin pages. The total: 4 million words.

As a clever procrastination device, I pile all the volumes on the floor in one big stack. It reaches past my nipples. Four foot two! Practically a Danny DeVito of knowledge. I do a little shadowboxing with my new adversary, feint a right jab, then step back and look at it again. It’s a disturbing sight. Is this whole endeavor really a bright idea? Is this the best use of my time? Maybe I should try to accomplish something easier like taking a course at Columbia University or buying a new bathrobe.

accomplish something easier, like taking a course at Columbia University or buying a new bathing suit. But no, I've made a commitment.

I plunk the first volume on my lap. It feels weighty. It feels learned. It feels good. When I crack open, the sturdy spine gives me a pleasant amount of resistance. And then I start to read.

a-ak

That's the first word in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. "A-ak." Followed by this write-up: "Ancient East Asian music. See gagaku."

That's the entire article. Four words and then: "See gagaku."

What a tease! Right at the start, the crafty *Britannica* has presented me with a dilemma. Should I flip ahead to volume 6 and find out what's up with this gagaku, or should I stick with the plan, and move on to the second word in the AA section? I decide to plow ahead with the AAs. Why ruin the suspense? If anyone brings up "a-ak" in conversation, I'll just bluff. I'll say, "Oh, I love gagaku!" or "Did you hear that Madonna's going to record an a-ak track on her next CD?"

a cappella

A lovely surprise. I know exactly what this is—an ex-girlfriend of mine belonged to an a cappella group in college. They sang songs from Def Leppard and called it Rockapella. One for two. Not bad.

Aachen

The next few entries destroy my average. I don't recognize the names of any Chinese generals or Buddhist compendiums. And I've never heard of Aachen, the German city that's home to Schwertbauquelle, the hottest sulfur spring in the country. I try to memorize the information. If my goal is to know everything, I can't discriminate, even against obscure Teutonic landmarks.

Aaron

I move on to Aaron, the brother of Moses. Seems he was sort of the Frank Stallone of ancient Judaism. The loser brother, the one Mom didn't talk about too much. "Oh, Aaron? He's doing okay. Still finding his way. But back to Moses. Did you hear about the Red Sea?"

This is good stuff. I'm Jewish, but I never got any religious training, never got a bar mitzvah. I know most of my Jewish lore from Charlton Heston movies, and I wouldn't call myself observant, though I do have a light lunch on Yom Kippur. So the *Britannica* will be my savior, my belated Hebrew school.

Abbott, Bud, and Costello, Lou

After a bunch of Persian rulers named Abbas, I get to these two familiar faces. But any sense of relief fades when I learn about their sketchy past. Turns out that the famed partnership began when Costello's regular straight man fell ill during a gig at the Empire Theater in New York, and Abbott—who was working the theater's box office—offered to substitute. It went so well, Abbott became Costello's permanent partner. This is not a heartwarming story; it's a cautionary tale. I'm never calling in sick again. I don't want to come back after a twenty-four-hour flu and find Robbie from the mail room volunteered to be the senior editor. It's a tough world.

ABO blood group

Stomach cancer is 20 percent more common in people with type A blood than those with type B or type O. That's me, type A. This is even more disturbing than the tale of the backstabbing Costello. Clearly, I have to be prepared to learn some things I don't like

Absalom

Absalom, a biblical hero, has the oddest death so far in the encyclopedia. During a battle in the forest, Absalom got his flowing hair caught in the branches of an oak tree, which allowed his enemy Joab, to catch him and slay him. This, I figure, is exactly why the army requires crew cuts.

Acoemeti

A group of monks who provided nonstop choral singing in the 5th century. They did it with a relay system—every few hours, a fresh monk would replace the exhausted monk. I love this image, though I am glad I wasn't their neighbor. We're talking twenty-four-hour entertainment long before MTV went on the air. Quite possibly before Mick Jagger was born.

Addled Brain Syndrome

Okay, I made that up. There's no such thing as addled brain syndrome. But I'm definitely suffering from something. As I vacuum up this information hour after hour, I find myself so overwhelmed that I have to take frequent breaks to walk around the office. Walk it off, as my gym teachers used to say. You only sprained that brain. It's not a fracture. Walk it off, son.

The reading is much, much harder than I expected. But at the same time, in some ways, it's strangely easier. In some ways, it's the perfect book for someone like me, who grew up with Peter Dinklage and Gabriel videos, who has the attention span of a gnat on methamphetamines. Each essay is a bite-sized nugget. Bored with Abilene, Texas? Here comes abolitionism. Tired of that? Not to worry, the Abominable Snowman's lurking right around the corner (by the way, the mythical Snowman's footprints are actually produced by running bears). Reading the *Britannica* is like channel surfing on a very highbrow cable system, one with no shortage of shows about Sumerian cities.

The changes are so abrupt and relentless, you can't help but get mental whiplash. You go from depressing to uplifting, from tiny to cosmic, from ancient to modern. There's no segue, no local news anchor to tell you, "And now, on the lighter side." Just a little white space, and boom, you've switched from theology to worm behavior. But I don't mind. Bring on the whiplash—the odder the juxtapositions, the better. That's the way reality is—a bizarre, jumbled-up Cobb salad. I love seeing the prophet Abraham rub elbows with Karl Abraham, a German shrink who theorized about the anal, expulsive and phallic stages.

Oh yes, that's another thing. Sex. This came as a pleasant surprise to me. The *Britannica* may not be Cinemax, but it's got its fair share of randiness. I've learned, for instance, that Eskimos swap wives. Plus, the Achagua men have three to four spouses and flowers in the Acanthaceae family are bisexual. Yowza! That's some racy stuff. Hot. Hotter than the Schwertbad-Quelle sulfur spring. I expected the *Britannica* to be prudish, but it seems quite happy to acknowledge the seamy world below the belt.

And speaking of titillating R-rated material, my God—the violence! It's extraordinary how blood-soaked our history is. One Persian politician was strangled by servants, another suffocated in a steam bath. Or consider poor Peter Abelard, an 11th-century Christian theologian who, judging from his miniature portrait, looks a bit like Steve Buscemi. Abelard came up with some interesting ideas—namely that deeds don't matter, only intentions; in other words, the road to heaven is paved with good intentions. But how can I give much deep thought to that idea when the entry also discusses Abelard's love affair with his student Heloise, which ended rather badly: Abelard suffered castration at the order of Heloise's outraged uncle. Sweet Jesus! I'm guessing Heloise didn't get asked on a whole lot of dates after that one.

Sex violence MTV pacing—all this makes my quest much more palatable. But I don't mean

Sex, violence, MTV pacing — all this makes my quest much more palatable. But I don't mean to give the wrong idea. As I said, it's hard. Excruciatingly hard. First, the vastness of it. I knew there was an ocean of information out there. But I didn't really comprehend what I was up against until I started trying to drink that ocean cup by cup. I'll be reading about Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, and I'll get a list of the seven different ethnicities that comprise that city: Gallas, Gurages, Hareris, Tigre, Walamos, Somalis, and Dorses. Should I even try to memorize those? Six ethnicities I could handle, but seven? That's daunting.

The *Britannica* is not a book you can skim. This is a book you have to hunch over and pay full attention to, like needlepoint or splinter removal. It hurts my poor little head. Until now, I didn't realize quite how out of shape my brain had become. It's just not accustomed to this kind of thinking. I feel like I'm making it run a triathlon in ninety-degree heat when it's used to sitting in a hammock drinking *mojitos*. The math and science parts of my brain have gone particularly flabby since college. At most, I have to calculate the number of subway rides I have remaining on my little electronic Metrocard. That rarely requires quadratic equations. At my job, the toughest science I've encountered was the time I had to edit a few sentences about Botox for men. So when I read about acid-base reactions with conjugate bases and nonaqueous solvents, I'm mystified. I generally read this type of stuff again and again and just hope it'll sink in. It's the same strategy that American tourists in Europe employ when confronted with a non-English-speaking store owner. *Umbrella. Um-brella! Um-BRELLA!* Say it often and loud enough, and it'll click. But I forge on.

Alcott, Bronson

The father of novelist Louisa May Alcott was famous in his own right. A radical reformer full of unorthodox ideas, he opened several schools for children. The schools had a particularly unusual discipline system: teachers received punishment at the hands of the offending pupil. The idea was that this would instill a sense of shame in the mind of the errant child. Now, this is a brilliant concept. I have a long list of teachers I wish I could have spanked, among them my fifth-grade instructor, Mr. Barker, who forced us to have a sugar-free bake sale, which earned us a humiliating \$1.53.

Alger, Horatio

I knew he was the 19th-century author of the famous rags-to-riches novels. I didn't know he turned to writing after being kicked out of a Massachusetts church for allegations of sexual misconduct with local boys. I told you—the *Britannica* can be a gossip rag.

amethyst

One of my biggest challenges is figuring out how to shoehorn my newfound knowledge into conversations. Naturally, I want to show off, but I can't just start reeling off facts or I'll be as annoying as an *Acarina*, a type of mite that, incidentally, copulates by transferring little packets of sperm called spermatophores.

And since I've read only entries in the very early *As*, my new topics of expertise don't come up that often. You'd be surprised at how many days can go by without one of my friends mentioning aardvarks, much less aardwolves—an African carnivore that the *Britannica* generously describes as "harmless and shy."

But today I had my first successful reference. Well, I don't know if it was actually successful. Okay, it was spectacularly unsuccessful. A total failure. But it was a start.

I'm in my office with a writer, and I need to give him a deadline for his piece.

"Can you get it to me Tuesday?"

"How about Wednesday?" he says.

"Okay. But Wednesday is the latest. Otherwise, I'll be angry. I'll have to rip you more asshole."

Okay. But Wednesday is the latest. Otherwise, I'll be angry. I'll have to tip you more assholes than an abalone."

Puzzled look.

"Abalones are a type of snail with five assholes."

Silence.

"They've got a row of holes in their shells, and five of them serve as outlets for waste."

Silence. Annoyed look.

I thought it was an amusing little tidbit, a nice twist on the cliché, a clever way to make it clear that I really needed the article. Instead, I came off like a colossal outlet for waste.

I figure it'll be easier to show off my increasing intelligence in a relaxed social environment. So when Julie and I go to her friends' house for dinner that night, I am prepared to dazzle. We arrive at Shannon and David's apartment, exchange cheek kisses and "Great to see you's."

"Brrrrr," says Julie as she unbundles her several layers of winter wear.

"A little nippy out there, huh?" says Shannon.

"Not quite as cold as Antarctica's Vostok Station, which reached a record 128 degrees below zero," I reply. "But still cold."

Shannon chuckles politely.

We sit down in the living room and Shannon starts telling Julie about her upcoming vacation in Saint Bart's.

"I'm so jealous," says Julie.

"Yeah, I can't wait to get some sun," Shannon says. "Look how white I am."

"Albinism affects one in twenty thousand Americans," I say.

Shannon doesn't quite know how to respond to that one.

"Anyhoo," says Julie, "where are you staying?"

I probably shouldn't have said my albinism fact, but I can't help it. I'm so loaded up with information that when I see a hole—even if it's a small hole, even a microscopic hole, the size of an abalone's butt hole—I have to dive right in.

David returns from the kitchen with a bottle of wine.

"Anyone want some cabernet?"

"I'll have a glass," says Julie.

"I'll have some too," I say. "And an amethyst if you've got one."

David cocks his head.

"Amethysts protect against drunkenness, according to the ancients," I say.

"Is that so?" says David.

"Yes. I don't want to end up like Alexander the Great, who died after getting ill from a drinking bout."

"No, I suppose not," says David. He laughs. Nervously, I think.

Julie turns back to Shannon, hoping to resume the vacation talk. "So, which hotel?"

"We've got reservations at this place I found in *Conde Nast Traveler*—"

"Also, speaking of alcohol consumption," I say, "what country do you think has the highest per capita rate? I'll give you a hint: it's not Ireland."

"Hmm. Is it France?" asks Shannon. She's very polite.

"Nope. Not France. The residents of Luxembourg are the biggest boozers in the world."

"Huh."

"Who woulda thunk?" I ask. "Luxembourg! But seriously, do not get between a Luxembourgian and a bottle of whiskey!" I say, shaking my head and laughing.

Part of me is hoping Shannon and David won't notice that all my facts start with A. But at the same time I'm also kind of longing to be exposed. I've already logged thirty hours reading m

time, I'm also kind of longing to be exposed. I've already logged thirty hours reading an encyclopedia, and I want them to ooh and aaah at my accomplishment. Maybe Julie senses this, maybe she just wants to avoid further embarrassment, but she decides to spill my secret.

"A.J.'s decided to read the encyclopedia," she tells Shannon. "And he's only in the As, so you'll be hearing a lot of A facts."

"The encyclopedia?" says David. "That's some light reading."

"Yeah, it'll be good on the beach," I say.

"Seriously, why are you reading the encyclopedia?" says Shannon.

I had prepared for this. I had my answer.

"Well, there's an African folktale I think is relevant here. Once upon a time, there's this tortoise who steals a gourd that contains all the knowledge of the world. He hangs it around his neck. When he comes to a tree trunk lying across road, he can't climb over it because the gourd is in his way. He's in such a hurry to get home, he smashes the gourd. And ever since, wisdom has been scattered across the world in tiny pieces. So, I want to try to gather all that wisdom and put it together."

"I guess you're not up to *P*, for 'Please shut up,' " says Julie.

They all laugh at that one.

Arabian horses

Next morning, it's back to my daily dose of *Britannica*. Arabian horses have twenty-three vertebrae instead of the twenty-four found in most horses. I spend a moment trying to think of a situation in which this information might be useful. Maybe I could write a mystery story where the identification of an Arabian horse skeleton is a major plot point. Maybe I could win a bar bet with a moderately—but not overly—knowledgeable equestrian. Who knows?

Asimov, Isaac

I was aware that Asimov was a major figure in American literature, the author of numerous science fiction and science books. I didn't know just how many books: about five hundred. The man wrote five hundred books. I don't think I've written five hundred Post-it notes. He wrote so many books, even his biographers are reduced to the vague "about five hundred." The *Britannica* can be depressing that way. As you read accomplishment after accomplishment, Nobel after Nobel, you are reminded just how little you've done with your life. My entry—if written today—would look something like this:

Jacobs, Arnold "A.J." (b. March 20, 1968, New York, N.Y.)

A minor figure in 20th-century American journalism. Jacobs attended Brown University, where he studied philosophy, attracted to the discipline because it required the lowest number of course credits necessary to graduate. Upon receiving his degree, he began his career writing articles for *Dental Economics*, the leading publication covering financial matters for dentists and orthodontists. He later established his reputation with a prescient sidebar in the pop culture magazine *Entertainment Weekly* comparing O. J. Simpson and Homer Simpson, which received great acclaim across America or at least within the home of his parents. He met many of the midlevel show business figures of his day, including Bill Maher and Sarah Michelle Gellar, neither of whom knew his name.

In 2000, Jacobs married Julie Schoenberg, a vivacious advertising sales representative also working at *Entertainment Weekly*. The marriage was apparently a happy one, despite the fact that Jacobs whined whenever Schoenberg suggested maybe he should put on pants because they were going to a nice restaurant.

Jacobs's other achievements include folding napkins into such shapes as a rabbit and a hat. So also: hypochondria and germaphobe.

I think the Asimov entry stings all the more because I have a quasi Asimov in my own family. My dad—in his spare time, just for fun—writes legal books, and has so far published twenty-four of them. These are serious volumes, books with titles like *The Impact of Rule 10b-5* and *Disclosures and Remedies Under the Securities Law*. He specializes in laws on insider trading, the kind that Martha Stewart was investigated for breaking, launching a thousand riffs on ways she might redecorate her jail cell.

The other day, I was over at my parents' house for lunch, and I figured, since I am trying to finish my dad's quest, I should take a look at his books. So after the meal, I wandered into his study and was confronted with those twenty-four tomes. A big, sagging shelf of them.

I haven't picked one up in years, not since I was fourteen. Back then, I used to enjoy the first volume of *The Impact of Rule 10b-5*, mainly because my dad had inserted a *Playboy* centerfold into a half dozen copies to send to friends as a joke. He had kept one of these customized copies for himself. So that was probably the closest I came to going to law school—studying the case of Miss January missing ballet tutu.

This time, I figure I should read words other than “Turn-ons: champagne, walks on the beach, and men who can help my acting career.” I pick up *The Impact of Rule 10b-5* and read a sentence thick with words like “fiduciary” and “annuity plan” and “corpus.” No comprehension; it could be random ink splatters on the page and I would have had the same level of understanding.

I flip to the middle of the book. As expected, the pages are heavy with footnotes. Really heavy. Some pages have just a couple of lines of regular text floating at the top, then a sea of footnotes all the way down. I guess footnotes isn't the right word when they get this abundant—more like shouldernotes or foreheadnotes.

My father is proud of his footnotes. A few years ago, he broke the world's record for most footnotes in a legal article, coming in at an impressive 1,247. Soon after that, a California law professor topped my dad's record with 1,611 footnotes. My dad didn't stand for that. He wrote another legal article and just crushed his opponent. Squashed him with 4,824 footnotes, ensuring his status as the Wayne Gretsky of footnotes. My dad tried to get the *Guinness Book of World Records* interested, but legal footnotes apparently don't get the same respect as fingernails the size of adult rattlesnake. So he had to settle for a mention in *Harper's Index*.

I flip to Dad's own index to see if I recognize any words. More dense Latinate legalese. And then I spot this entry: “Birds, for the, 1–894.” My mother had once told me about that joke of Dad's, but I had forgotten about it. One of his better ones. But my Lord, 894 pages of text in just one volume—that's no joke. No wonder he gave up reading the *Britannica*—he was writing his own encyclopedia.

This investigation into my dad's oeuvre wasn't particularly good for my self-esteem. The scope and denseness of his work—those were both envy inducing. But that's not to mention that my dad had made himself the expert on insider trading. Not *an* expert. *The* expert. What had I made myself an expert on? The plot lines of the various *Police Academy* movies? Not even that. Though I haven't read the *Britannica*'s write-up of psychoanalysis, I figure my dad's accomplishments have something to do with my quest to finish the encyclopedia. If I can't beat my dad on depth, at least I can get him on breadth.

assault and battery

They're always lumped together but there is a difference. Assault is the *attempt* to apply force

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