FOR THIRTYSOMETHING A.J. Jacobs, the years following graduation from Brown University have been "a long, slow slide into dumbness." The former philosophy major's jobs at Entertainment Weekly and Esquire demanded such avid attention to popular culture that "anything profound got pushed out." He "could talk confidently about the doughnut-eating Homer, but I'd forgotten all about the blind guy who wrote long poems."

What else does his year or so of reading accomplish? He notices connections between disparate people and events. For example, "that Winston Churchill wrote the obituary for Ian Fleming's father. Or that Bach and Handel were both treated by the same quack doctor." Such discoveries turn the world into a giant game of six degrees of separation. More profoundly, he discovers "that history is simultaneously a bloody mess and a collection of feats so inspiring and amazing they make you proud to share the same DNA structure with the rest of humanity."

He draws a conclusion back in the E's (ethical relativism) that to my mind makes his entire A-to-Z endeavor worthwhile: "I had a vague idea from high school and college that I shouldn't be judging other cultures, especially preliterate ones. They have their own customs, and who are we to critique them with our biased Western eyes? A few thousand pages of the Britannica will cure you of any fuzzy idealization of preliterate societies. I've read about culture after culture with traditions that strike me as wrong -- evil, even." He isn't kidding, this time.

THE KNOW-IT-ALL
By A.J. Jacobs
(Simon & Schuster, 386 pages, $25)

FOR THIRTYSOMETHING A.J. Jacobs, the years following graduation from Brown University have been "a long, slow slide into dumbness." The former philosophy major's jobs at Entertainment Weekly and Esquire demanded such avid attention to popular culture that "anything profound got pushed out." He "could talk confidently about the doughnut-eating Homer, but I'd forgotten all about the blind guy who wrote long poems."

His daunting solution for his one-man brain drain? Reading the entire 2002 edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, from a-ak (Ancient East Asian music) to Zywiec (a Polish town and entry 65,000). As it happens, the author's father -- a prominent lawyer and the holder of the world record for most footnotes in a legal article (4,824) -- quit his own Britannica slog years ago in the middle of the B's, so the son's quest has more than a bit of filial one-upmanship about it.

We learn this and a lot of other family history in the course of "The Know-It-All," a kind of readathon-cum-memoir. Mr. Jacobs gives us portraits of his long-suffering wife, his insufferably smart brother-in-law, his loony-left aunt and other members of his accomplished clan. Not to mention the compulsively wisecracking author himself, who emerges here as high-strung, illness-prone and aggressively ingratiating.

Mr. Jacobs, a National Public Radio contributor, holds down his day job as an editor at Esquire, schlepsthose weighty EB hardcover volumes on the New York subways and uses his now encyclopedic knowledge -- or at least the factoids he retains from all that reading -- to bore family, friends and colleagues. He is ineligible for "Jeopardy!" -- he once interviewed Alex Trebek -- but wins a shot in the hot seat on the daytime version of "Who
Wants to Be a Millionaire."

What else does his year or so of reading accomplish? He notices connections between disparate people and events. For example, "that Winston Churchill wrote the obituary for Ian Fleming's father. Or that Bach and Handel were both treated by the same quack doctor." Such discoveries turn the world into a giant game of six degrees of separation. More profoundly, he discovers "that history is simultaneously a bloody mess and a collection of feats so inspiring and amazing they make you proud to share the same DNA structure with the rest of humanity."

And he draws a conclusion back in the E's (ethical relativism) that to my mind makes his entire A-to-Z endeavor worthwhile: "I had a vague idea from high school and college that I shouldn't be judging other cultures, especially preliterate ones. They have their own customs, and who are we to critique them with our biased Western eyes? A few thousand pages of the Britannica will cure you of any fuzzy idealization of preliterate societies. I've read about culture after culture with traditions that strike me as wrong -- evil, even." He isn't kidding, this time.

-- Barbara D. Phillips

THE KENNEDY ASSASSINATION TAPES

By Max Holland

(Knopf, 453 pages, $26.95)

NEARLY EVERYTHING about the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson has come to seem ironic. Not least, as Max Holland's "The Kennedy Assassination Tapes" makes clear, the way he handled the investigation of his predecessor's murder.

Here, in his own words, which he obsessively tape-recorded, is the story of how Johnson was reluctantly brought along to the creation of the Warren Commission. Both he and Attorney General Robert Kennedy saw it as a means of preventing an investigation by Senator James O. Eastland's Judiciary Committee. Eastland, both men feared, might be all too eager to pin the Kennedy killing on the Soviet Union or on Fidel Castro.

Johnson feared such a judgment because he thought it unfounded and sought to avoid calls for an unnecessary war. Kennedy, as Mr. Holland makes clear, had less noble motives: He was worried that the Kennedy administration's efforts to kill Castro, which he had superintended, might come to light. To fill the Warren Commission's "public" seats, Johnson defers to Kennedy, who recommends former CIA director Allen Dulles and John McCone, the so-called chairman of the Establishment. Not exactly the rebellious Bobby of 1968.

The ironies abound. Johnson unwittingly protects RFK, who is plotting to destabilize and unseat him. While the commission almost certainly reaches the right conclusion -- that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in killing the president -- it does so in a manner that later saps public confidence. And the chief doubter becomes Johnson himself, who ultimately comes to believe that Oswald was part of a Cuban plot.

Max Holland's editing and annotation are superb, and his 60-odd pages describing the events of Nov. 22, 1963, are gripping. But the center of this book remains Lyndon Johnson. It is an engrossing, if ultimately tragic, story. -- Richard J. Tofel

Copyright (c) 2004, Dow Jones & Company Inc. Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

---

**Indexing (details)**

**Subject:**
- Books-titles -- Multiple review;
- Nonfiction;
- Autobiographies;
- Biographies

**People:**
- Kennedy, John Fitzgerald (1917-63), Jacobs, A J, Holland, Max

**Classification:**
- 8690: Publishing industry

**Title:**
- WEEKEND JOURNAL; Bookmarks

**Publication title:**
- Wall Street Journal

**Pages:**
- W.6

**Publication year:**
- 2004

**Publication date:**
- Oct 15, 2004

**Year:**
- 2004

**Publisher:**
- New York, N.Y.
- Dow Jones & Company Inc