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# CURRENT BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTEWORTHY NONFICTION

## The Corrosion of the American Mind

Reviewed by Wendy Kaminer

WHETHER THEY ANTICIPATE THE RAP-  
ture or the ravages of climate change, apoca-  
lyptic thinkers abound. Given the course of  
the 21st century so far, skeptics should be  
forgiven for viewing hope as more delu-  
sional than audacious.

For some aging intellectuals, the apoca-  
lypse is now. Like Nathan Zuckerman rail-  
ing at cell phones, they long for what was  
lost in the transition to a postprint culture  
and can't imagine what might be gained.  
Illiteracy, innumeracy, attention deficits,  
close-mindedness, civic ignorance, junk  
science, celebrity worship, anti-ration-  
alism, and outright disdain for intellectu-  
alism are some of the plagues Susan Jac-  
oby laments. In *The Age of American  
Unreason*, she mourns the end of civiliza-  
tion as she knew it.

Jacoby is a perceptive and prolific critic, a  
former journalist with a talent for social and  
intellectual history. Her most recent previ-  
ous book was *Freethinkers: A History of  
American Secularism*, and her critique of  
unreason immediately identifies religious  
fundamentalism as a "major spur to anti-

intellectualism," evidenced  
by the popular embrace of  
creationism and intelli-  
gent design. Not surpris-  
ingly, Jacoby also assails  
the mass media and what she considers the  
devolution from reading to viewing, and  
from writing to messaging. She has little  
patience for the contention that technology  
and new media are spawning new forms of  
intelligence, and she sees slim literary prom-  
ise in the disjointed reading and writing  
encouraged by computers or in their facilita-  
tion of "packaging-plagiarism," by book  
publishers as well as students.

Many of Jacoby's criticisms and com-  
plaints are familiar, but she doesn't aim to  
surprise us with her critique of unreason so  
much as she wants to alert us to its clear and  
present dangers. Jacoby envisions her book  
as a sort of sequel to Richard Hofstadter's  
relatively sanguine 1963 classic, *Anti-  
Intellectualism in American Life*. His judi-  
cious, cautiously optimistic analysis was  
written when intellectuals were either enjoy-  
ing or anticipating a renaissance, Jacoby

### THE AGE OF AMERI- CAN UNREASON.

By Susan Jacoby.  
Pantheon. 356 pp. \$26

observes, but in the half-century since, our descent into unreason has been steep. Indeed, while Hofstadter regarded anti-intellectualism as a fluctuating force in American life, Jacoby suggests that it's now the fabric of our culture.

She looks back on the 1950s and early '60s—coincidentally, the years of her youth and television's infancy—as, if not quite a golden age for intellectuals, then a period of promise. Her own historical analysis of our intellectual decline includes a eulogy for mid-20th-century middlebrow culture—a “culture of aspiration” and

“effort” that provided a thought-provoking “alternative to mass popular culture.” While a typical middlebrow reading list omitted literary modernists, she notes, it included an eclectic mix of “classics” from

Homer to Dostoyevsky, as well as Irving Stone's historical fiction or William Shirer's history of the Third Reich.

In the spirit of this tradition, Jacoby deftly surveys the development of unreason since Ralph Waldo Emerson's unheeded call for intellectual independence in 1837. America's original sin, she suggests, was straying from the intellectual demands of the Enlightenment and liberal Protestantism to embrace the emotional comforts of “evangelical fundamentalist religion.” It is, she writes, one of the great historical ironies that the Founders' enlightened rejection of theocracy enabled revivalism and the flourishing of fundamentalist faiths.

Education didn't conquer unreason. Instead, she observes, in many areas of the country, especially the predominantly fundamentalist South, unreason conquered education. Regional religious differences contributed to great regional educational disparities and the emergence of superior schools in urban areas and in the North, especially New England. As a result of local control of public schools, “the content of education in

the most backward areas of the country would be determined by backward people.”

Still, educated Northerners were not paragons of reason. Jacoby singles out their attraction to the pseudoscience of social Darwinism in the post-Civil War period, noting that the popularity of this ideological rationale for “untrammeled capitalism” demonstrated the susceptibility of intellectuals to irrationalism, the confusion of sociology with hard science, and the dangers of a little knowledge: “Many Americans possessed just enough education to be fascinated by the late-19th-century advances in both science and technology, but they had too little education to distinguish between real scientists and those who peddled theories in the guise of science.” Jacoby rightly identifies pseudoscience and religion as two “critical ingredients” of unreason since then. Indeed, they often work in tandem: The “sciences” of mind cure and New Thought flourished, and Mary Baker Eddy “discovered” Christian Science in the 1860s. Then came Scientology, the “science” of positive thinking, and, more recently, New Age healer Deepak Chopra's nonsensical references to quantum physics.

Irrational belief systems such as these appeal to educated and uneducated people alike, regardless of political preference. But the anti-intellectual bias that irrationalism fuels has been highly politicized and generally directed against liberals. Justifiably irritated by the success with which right-wing intellectual elites have exploited “popular anti-intellectualism” to deride left-wing intellectual elites, Jacoby parses the political causes and effects of our stupefaction. She reviews the liberal intelligentsia's brief, mid-20th-century romance with communism's “social pseudoscience,” and the dynamics of McCarthyism and its indelible portrayal of liberal thinkers as godless anti-Americans. She revisits the 1960s, a complicated period that saw the consolidation of Richard Nixon's silent majority and the growth of fundamentalist churches, along with a revolution in civil rights and the rise of youth culture and the counterculture, as well as the New Left, which does not escape her critique. (The political

America's unreason, cultural critic Susan Jacoby suggests, grew after it strayed from the intellectual demands of the Enlightenment and liberal Protestantism.

performance art of the period was not exactly an exercise in reason.)

Jacoby easily skewers disgruntled conservative critics of social change, such as Allan Bloom, who couldn't even get his facts straight, but she recognizes the left-wing anti-intellectualism that appeared to justify his wrath: While campus protests of the late '60s were generally motivated less by concerns about the curriculum than outrage over higher education's military and corporate ties, she stresses, a "vocal, vulgar, and stupid" minority of activists busied themselves categorically denouncing the works of Dead White European Males. Their demands partly reflected what Jacoby condemns as "resistance to the idea of aesthetic hierarchy," which she regards as a

regrettably powerful legacy that helped shape the proud anti-intellectualism of celebrity culture today.

The frequently maligned relativism associated with the '60s had real effects in academia as well as popular culture (it helped make pop culture scholarship fashionable), but it was essentially a pose. Opposition to hierarchy, aesthetic and otherwise, which flourished among multiculturalists and other "progressive" descendents of this influential decade, focused much more on rearranging hierarchies than on destroying them. Identity politics and repressive codes regarding speech, civility, and harassment on college campuses exemplify the unthinking moral dogmatism of these putative relativists. The distressingly ubiquitous codes typically give administrators broad discretion to punish speech they consider offensive or insensitive, in the interest of building diverse communities in which everyone can feel "safe"—so long as they practice safe speech.

In fact, identity politics, enforced by speech

codes, creates highly irrational, unsafe environments for people who violate its strictures, as the three Duke University lacrosse players famously and shamefully indicted for a rape that obviously never occurred might testify. Their accusers assumed their guilt, ignoring the facts of the case and focusing instead on the students' identity as relatively affluent white athletes, who insensitively hired a black female stripper for a team party.

Unaccountably, Jacoby does not address the virulent unreason of identity politics on Amer-

ican campuses today or the pervasive liberal academic embrace of censorship, both of which pose obvious threats to free inquiry and the knowledge of civics for which she longs.

Discussing the dire, "long-term problem" of civic

illiteracy, Jacoby bemoans public ignorance of First Amendment guarantees, but she doesn't seem to recognize how effectively that ignorance is exacerbated when students are taught to expect protection from "offensive" speech and not taught to value or engage in the rough-and-tumble of debate.

It's not that Jacoby ignores anti-intellectual trends on campus: She worries about the prevalence of courses devoted to popular culture that "allow students to continue aiming their minds at low objects." And she discusses a notorious example of de facto speech and idea policing—the controversy over former Harvard president Lawrence Summers's injudicious speculations about women's scientific aptitudes—but she embarks on this discussion only to lambaste his "junk thought" about cognitive sexual differences. Jacoby is right to debunk unsubstantiated assumptions about sexual difference but wrong to frame the vilification of Summers as a victory for reason. His comments were not simply



"Do you have 'Intelligence for Idiots?'"

disputed; they were treated as unfit for public expression or consumption and exploited in an eventually successful campaign to oust him.

What are the prospects for a new age of reason in America? Jacoby makes the obligatory attempt to end her profoundly pessimistic critique with a stab at optimism, but it's appropriately halfhearted. The de facto publishing rule that critical analyses of serious problems must conclude with proposed solutions reflects the intellectual shallowness that is the subject of Jacoby's book. She does not yield to it. "To seize

the moment," she writes, "Americans must recognize that we are living through an overarching crisis of memory and knowledge, involving everything about the way we learn and think." In other words, Americans must reason their way through the crisis of unreason, like people learning to walk on atrophied limbs. No wonder she's discouraged. It takes more than reason—it takes faith—to rest on improbabilities.

WENDY KAMINER is the author of several books, including *Sleeping With Extra-Terrestrials: The Rise of Irrationalism and Perils of Piety* (1999), and is a blogger at thefreeforall.net.

## Reading in the Dark

*Reviewed by Matthew Battles*

OLD AS WRITING, THE LIBRARY IS AN INSTITUTION and an archetype. Its symbolic dimensions embody the contradictions of civilization: It's a token of authority that threatens to undermine regnant powers, a figure of memory and forgetting, an object of longing and loathing. With its promise of comprehensive wisdom, it forever reminds us of the incompleteness of our knowledge, the limits of our vision. But it's also a physical place—a home for books and a workshop for those who read and care for them.

Like the world itself, the library dichotomizes. Books are included or excluded; they are free for all or reserved for the select few; some enjoy attention and acclaim, while others lie shrouded in obscurity—just as after nightfall, light falls on open volumes while other pages remain in darkness. In Alberto Manguel's evocative formulation, it's this last either/or—the turning of day into night—that reveals the library's tensions. And he recalls Virginia Woolf's useful distinction between two types of readers, the scholarly and the casual. While the former, Woolf tells us, "searches through books to discover some particular grain of truth upon which he has set his heart," the latter eschews the impulse to read systematically, which "is very apt to kill . . . the more

humane passion for pure and disinterested reading." What to Woolf is a matter of taxonomy, however, for Manguel is a question of diurnal rhythm.

"During the day," he writes, "the concentration and system tempt me; at night I can read with a lightheartedness verging on insouciance." When night falls, amid pools of lamplight and glittering books his library in France seems to float like a ship on the sea; it becomes "a universe of self-serving rules that pretend to replace or translate those of the shapeless universe beyond."

Like Manguel's best-known work, *A History of Reading* (1996), *The Library at Night* is a sentimental history. That earlier book introduced a wide circle of readers to the revelation, previously appreciated only by historians of the book, that reading has not been the same thing in all times and places, but that its textures change with alterations to culture and the nature of the individual consciousness as much as with changes in the media of writing and publishing. In *The Library at Night*, Manguel's point is a different, nearly opposite one: All libraries partake of the same dream of completeness. Behind and

### THE LIBRARY AT NIGHT.

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