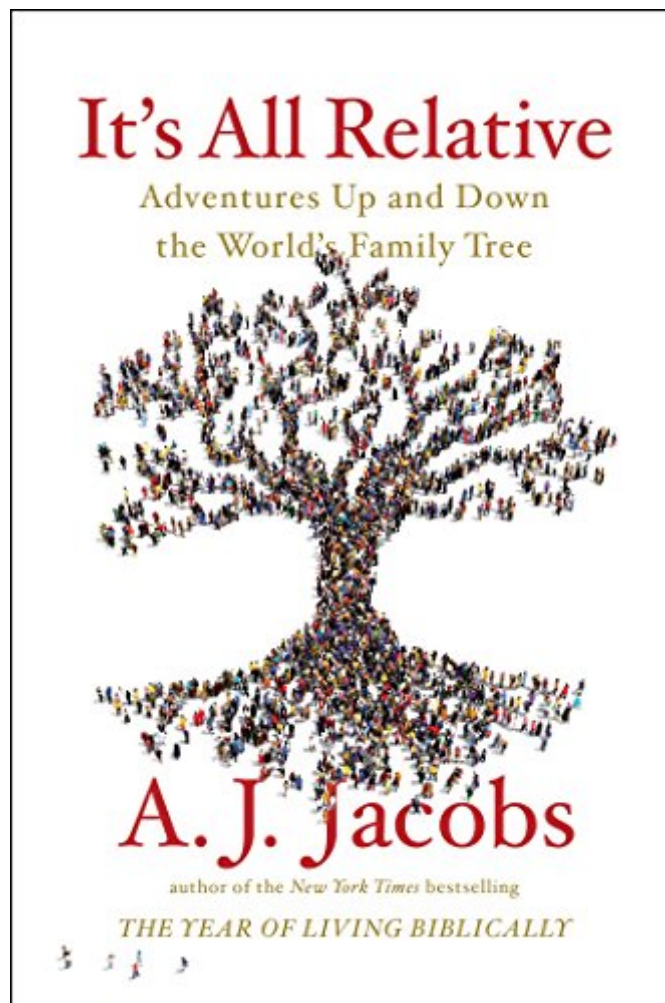


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It's All Relative: Adventures Up And Down The World's Family Tree



Synopsis

New York Times bestselling author of *The Know-It-All* and *The Year of Living Biblically*, A.J. Jacobs undergoes a hilarious, heartfelt quest to understand what constitutes family—where it begins and how far it goes—and attempts to untangle the true meaning of the “Family of Humankind.” A.J. Jacobs has received some strange emails over the years, but this note was perhaps the strangest: “You don’t know me, but I’m your eighth cousin. And we have over 80,000 relatives of yours in our database. That’s enough family members to fill Madison Square Garden four times over. Who are these people, A.J. wondered, and how do I find them? So began Jacobs’s three-year adventure to help build the biggest family tree in history. Jacobs’s journey would take him to all seven continents. He drank beer with a US president, found himself singing with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, and unearthed genetic links to Hollywood actresses and real-life scoundrels. After all, we can choose our friends, but not our family. “Whether he’s posing as a celebrity, outsourcing his chores, or adhering strictly to the Bible, we love reading about the wacky lifestyle experiments of author A.J. Jacobs” (Entertainment Weekly). Now Jacobs upends, in ways both meaningful and hilarious, our understanding of genetics and genealogy, tradition and tribalism, identity and connection. It’s All Relative is a fascinating look at the bonds that connect us all.

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Customer Reviews

There's a popular style of writing these days that's sort of "things that popped into my head" about a topic. It's a form of humor, and can be charming or a bit tedious. In this book, that style eventually wore thin for me. Jacobs talks about genealogy, after he finds that people are trying to create a unified genealogy that connects as many people as possible. Each chapter tells a different aspect of this. He decides that if people realized how connected they are to one another, they might each other better. And conceives of having a "family reunion" which will serve 2 purposes - to help people realize how they are more closely related than they think, and break the Guinness World Record for the largest family reunion. At the end of each chapter, he gives a countdown of events leading up to the reunion. There are some good bits. Jacobs's stories about his own family are interesting, and focus one of my favorite part of researching ancestors - learning about the little details that make up the past. I found his occasional spasms of enthusiasm of "I'm related to so-n-so through my wife's uncle's brother-in-law" boring and a little too desperate to be "connected" to everyone. Most genealogists would say you are not related in those circumstances. The big clunker of this is that we've been hearing about this reunion throughout the book, and then get very little detail. The last chapter is brief (12 pages in the pre-release version I read), and several of those pages are pictures. This whole book has led up to the event, and then we get to the event, and get some lists of the pros and cons of the event. I did a read a pre-release version, so perhaps Jacobs will revise before publication to tell us more about this event, and what it meant to him. Overall, a light read, informs you a bit about genealogy and DNA, and tells the story of a man and his family. Ok, not great. Update: I selected this book for the topic, genealogy, and was not familiar with the author. Further reading suggests he does this type of book routinely (doing something for a year, and writing about it). Not really my thing, but wanted to point out if you like his style, then you might enjoy this more than I did.

For those readers like me who have experienced an AJ Jacobs book before, we know that he has a seriously curious mind. And he doesn't think small. This time around, he has been thinking of his own ancestors and the concept of the World Family Tree (i.e. that we are all, in essence "cousins" descended from a scientific Adam and Eve known as the "Y-Chromosomal Adam" and the "Mitochondrial Eve"). And, of course, Mr. Jacobs dreams up a

project to dwarf anything a rational human being might think of: coordinating a family reunion that breaks the Guinness World Record for most attendees. It would be a project that would take over a year to pull off and would become known as the Global Family Reunion. That's the setup, but as always, AJ Jacobs provides us with far more insightful observations on human nature and in this case, the very nature of what constitutes a "family". The author counts down the weeks until the big reunion by sharing numerous anecdotes from his own family and others who he encounters during his search along the branches of the tree. He examines such topics as family feuds, immigrants to the US, our Neanderthal cousins, and the many forms of genealogy. He does not shy away from the controversial aspects of genealogy, such as privacy, and presents all sides fairly. I'm afraid I'm making this sound like a textbook of some kind but nothing could be further from the truth. While I certainly learned a lot about the inter-relationships of human beings, this is a downright fun book to read. AJ Jacobs is a humorist and his prose is downright funny. He is a sort of everyman who is very observant and also humble when it comes to his own charm. What he achieved with his Global Family Reunion (with the help of hundreds of assistants) was pretty amazing but the truths about ourselves which he discovers and relates along the way are truly inspiring. This book comes along at a great time. We humans seem to be more divided than ever into our little cliques and tribes based on our differences and often, it is our leadership that is throwing fuel on the fire. To read a book wherein we can take pride in our individual cultural histories but realize just how similar we all are is to find hope for the future.

I have to start by saying I'm a fan of this author. His style is humorous and self-deprecating. His books tend to be set within a year, during which he fulfills some odd project: reading the entire Encyclopedia Britannica or following every biblical injunction. In this outing, he spends a year setting up a Global Family Reunion, which ultimately takes place in more than 40 countries. If you're seriously into genealogy, this is not the book for you. His real message is not about the family tree, but about hatred, racism, xenophobia, nationalism, and the fact that we're ALL related somewhere along the evolutionary road. He reads extensively on genealogy, interviews scientists and philosophers, throws in lots of family anecdotes, and - in my opinion - makes a good case for tolerance. But if you want a serious book on prejudice and hatred, this is not it. Mr. Jacobs is a humorist, and his books should be taken that way. This is a fast and funny read and makes some interesting points.

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