



## Dark Age Ahead

*Jane Jacobs*

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In this indispensable book, urban visionary Jane Jacobs--renowned author of **The Death and Life of Great American Cities** and **The Economy of Cities**--convincingly argues that as agrarianism gives way to a technology-based future, we stand on the brink of a new dark age, a period of cultural collapse. Jacobs pinpoints five pillars of our culture that are in serious decay: community and family; higher education; the effective practice of science; taxation, and government; and the self-regulation of the learned professions. The corrosion of these pillars, Jacobs argues, is linked to societal ills such as environmental crisis, racism, and the growing gulf between rich and poor. But this is a hopeful book as well as a warning. Drawing on her vast frame of reference--from fifteenth-century Chinese shipbuilding to Ireland's cultural rebirth--Jacobs suggests how the cycles of decay can be arrested and our way of life renewed. Invigorating and accessible, **Dark Age Ahead** is not only the crowning achievement of Jane Jacobs' career, but one of the most important works of our time.

## Dark Age Ahead Details

Date : Published May 17th 2005 by Vintage (first published May 4th 2004)

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Author : Jane Jacobs

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# From Reader Review Dark Age Ahead for online ebook

## Megan says

we are simultaneously fundamentally regenerative and totally fucked.

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## Tim Weakley says

The society that forgets it's errors is doomed to repeat them. This seems to be the central message in this book. I don't disagree, but the author stretches her arguments from time to time. She also indulges in a lot of referencing of her own previous work as source.

I still enjoyed reading this one, and I would suggest that readers of her other works add this one to their Read shelf as well.

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## Kevin says

I had mixed feelings: Jacobs wrote this book not long before her death, and at times it has the feel of an incoherent, rambling old person. Other times, she makes astute cultural and political analyses, particularly about Canada. Jacobs is an American who lived the better part of her adult life in Canada, so she has ample knowledge of politics, urban life, and cultural on both sides of the border, and she is a respected urban critic/theorist by both Americans and Canadians. In this book, her introduction in which she outlines past dark ages and her argument that we are about to enter into one is a bit all over the place; her attack on academia (accreditation vs. education) has its moments, but mostly sounds like someone who is self-righteous about the fact that she became a superstar in a field in which she received no formal training. Nevertheless, her criticism of the unsentimental tendencies in some academic fields that on the surface seem scientific ("traffic engineering") do get to the point of the failure of city building/re-building since the advent of the automobile, though her generalizations are sometimes hard to digest. Her chapter on "dumbed-down taxes" regards mostly the political situation in Ontario, and in particular in Toronto, in the early 2000s, an issue that could enlighten especially American readers, but that also may feel completely foreign and irrelevant to them. Basically, she echoes the movement towards greater autonomy for urban centers in regard to taxes, especially in relation to the state/provincial and federal levels, which is an issue that is in the press a lot in Canada and in particular in Toronto these days (Toronto's social-democratic mayor being one of its leading proponents). Similar to her criticism of the academy, she devotes a chapter to the self-regulation and self-policing of the learned professions and the impact that such activities have on society. In all, it's an interesting read that's worth the couple of hours it will take to read it, though her arguments are not always entirely coherent or substantiated.

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## Shawn says

The rise of "credentialism" is perhaps the most prescient view of Jacobs' book. With college grads taking menial jobs and more and more teenagers giving up hope in the value of even going to college, the value of a

degree is certainly in question. Perhaps this is why tech companies insist on their own testing standards (Microsoft and Cisco certificate programs for example) because they feel colleges are not preparing students to use the tools of the trade. I always tell college bound kids that an internship is perhaps the most valuable foot in the door because there are 1,001 little things that can't be taught in a classroom.

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### **Gordon Howard says**

A short, perhaps lazy last book from Jane Jacobs, author of the far better *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* back in 1961. While she makes some good points, her picks of items that will lead to a decline of civilization include some idiosyncratic choices, choices that I don't think she makes a good case for, such as "Credentialing vs. Educating," (bemoaning the fact that education is no longer general and lacking in practicality in obtaining employment) "Self-policing subverted," (she almost seems to be asking for a return to some sort of medieval guild system) and "Dumbed-down Taxes" (more taxes should be local, despite the fact that when taxes were more local the result was gross inequities between nearby communities). She also trumpets the now-somewhat discredited notion of the Great Plot to Destroy Streetcars led by General Motors and the oil companies during the early and mid-20th century.

Nevertheless, there are some very good insights in this book, and since it is short you won't spend a lot of time wading through other stuff to glean from these insights. Her diatribes against the traffic engineering profession are perhaps the most compelling of these insights.

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### **Matthew says**

Though not as interesting or compelling as *Systems of Survival*, *Dark Age Ahead* is a well thought out warning of impending loss of civilization. Jacobs, who has a knack for showing familiar concepts in interesting new ways, argues that we must shore up the five pillars of N. American (and Western) civilization: Community & the family; education; science; tax and government accountability and responsiveness to citizens; and the self-regulation of professions. She argues that if we do not, we will no longer live in a system that is even remotely responsive to our needs (which in any case have been subverted by rampant consumerism and the bottom line).

Knowledge of how to create such a system will give way to the rule of political and economic ideologues, akin to the Roman Catholic church in the Middle Ages, which obliterated almost all traces of the relatively sophisticated and urbane Roman civilization that preceded it. The loss of knowledge and the erosion of social memory is a recurring theme. How do we know what we've lost when we no longer even remember that we knew something once?

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### **TheVampireBookworm says**

This is such an eye-opener, everyone should read it. We think how smart we are, how we live in an amazing place but something is fading, something is disappearing from our society and that can bring the downfall of our culture (as it has happened many times over the course of human history - I'm sure you have heard about developed cultures vanishing in the matter of decades and it wasn't natural catastrophe which killed them off). It's a very scary book given the fact it's non-fiction.

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## Mark Valentine says

Published during the nadir of the Bush Regime (2004), the title may seem biased. But Jacobs' cautionary book offers some keen perceptions. She warns against mass amnesia and having a culture that cannot generate "human ingenuity, knowledge and skills," that is, homogeneity and conformity. With the digital means at hand, our culture (the West, anyway) might err toward forgetfulness.

I was particularly impressed by the accuracy of one prediction she made. She predicted the bubble of the housing and mortgage crisis of 2008/2009 as an impending doom and described how it will change our culture. She died in 2006.

Her concerns involve the decay of the family/community structures, credentialing in education over teaching wisdom, a phobia of genuine science and the scientific method, tax models that create greater divides in class and social strata, and the lack of self-policing in the professions.

At times droll, the book caused me to think about the nature of our culture and where we are headed. She finishes by stating that we could go up or down, but since she has published, things have only become more difficult to solve.

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## Avery says

This is a decidedly minor book, notable mostly because of the severity of Jacobs' prediction. Applying her keen eye for city life to the early 21st century, Jacobs became convinced that she was witnessing a culture in collapse. She then went about gathering data to support this thesis, but it's not exactly a bulletproof thesis, and some of it will be familiar to readers who already possess similarly critical views. Still, a very serious thesis, and worth a look.

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## Lynn says

Even though this was published 13 years ago, it was as prophetic AF. Just listen to this:

"Hospitals, transit systems, and orchestras are scorned [by far-right conservatives] as freeloaders seeking handouts if they can't directly pay their way or, better yet, make a profit either for tax collectors or for a corporate partner. *Greed becomes culturally admired as competence, and false or unrealistic promises as cleverness.*" [Italics mine]

Did she see what was coming or what?! Highly recommended.

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## **Nancy says**

I appreciated the passages in which I got macro-views of civilization, when Jacobs brought her rich life of studying cities and culture to bear on the problems of our disintegration. I appreciate, too, the conciseness of her argument, which sometimes left me wanting the kernel of her thought to bloom -- such as when she gave a small poke at Wendell Berry's romantic torch for agrarian life. He looks foolish, not understanding agrarianism in its wider context, as the thing that usurped foraging, and will be eclipsed by this next thing. (um, which I don't quite get)

I didn't quite get -- or rather quite wholly accept -- Jacobs' premise. But that doesn't shake her from her pedestal, where she stands in my Great Room of Great Thinkers.

This was my pick for my book-group, except I picked it so late no one had time to finish it, so, alas, we didn't feel ready to declare yes or no on the coming Dark Age. Or, okay, basically, I talked and no one got a word in edgewise, so I have no idea what my friends thought or think about Jane Jacobs. How said is that. Talk about social amnesia.

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## **Joel says**

Due to my current borderline obsession with social collapse, I was intrigued when I saw this recommended on the Multnomah County Library's website. So I placed a hold and received a copy not long after and got to reading.

I liked it. Hence the three stars. I didn't quite love it. Not because of any lack of good information and ideas or a lack of quality writing, but more because I wanted it to be a little more riled up. A bit more emotional. It was very straightforward and even, which is perfectly commendable but doesn't get my blood flowing.

Jacobs basically claims that North America (the U.S. and Canada, that is) is teetering dangerously close on the brink of sliding into a Dark Age. She cites five major reasons why: the continuing degradation of community and family, our higher education system, misuse of science and technology, governmental representation that has become disconnected from local needs, and the failure of self-regulation of the learned professions.

I found all the points really intriguing, with quite a number of viewpoints offered that I hadn't before heard or considered. Her talk of the degradation of community and family was a great section, not focusing on ranting moralistic concerns so much as on the ever-worsening economic brutalities that households face while trying to support themselves, as well as the destruction of community (in its most holistic sense) brought about by those economic hardships as well as poor planning practices. For instance, she takes suburban design to task. Again, this is not in some kind of moralistic view in which she proclaims suburbs evil, but rather she simply points out the ways in which thought-processes behind their planning have been terribly misguided and destructive, often leading to neighborhoods that lack any real sense of community.

Her taking to task of most of the universities in North America was also quite compelling. It comes across as a somewhat more dispassionate version of Wendell Berry's arguments in *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition*, although the substance of the arguments do have their differences, as well. Still, she quite convincingly argues that universities have become little more than credentialing agencies, rather than

institutions that work to create fully formed human beings via comprehensive education (that fosters and creates the ability of critical and independent thought) and mentoring.

Those are just a few of the intriguing arguments Jacobs makes in the book, and if they sound interesting, I certainly would recommend reading it. I perhaps prefer this sort of information to come to me via a more agitated voice--someone railing, though ideally not to the degree of incoherence. That *Dark Age Ahead* doesn't come in that exact voice is no condemnation of it as a fine bit of writing. Hell, for some, it's probably a much more palatable approach to a topic that can easily become very emotionally charged. For me, I would have preferred a bit more Berry-type anger.

But then, I have Berry for that. Jacobs fulfills her own niche quite nicely.

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### **rebekah says**

I tried to start this book last year, after her funeral. Jane was my Great Aunt. But I couldn't bring myself to turn the pages after she died. I don't know why, I am sure she is pleased that people will read her books and she can live on through the written page, ideas that matter...but it just made me sad...So a year later I picked it up again and had a good read. I really enjoyed it on a personal level mentions of my grandfather and cousins...and to hear her voice once more, besides the ghostly whispers I get every now and again when I wonder what the hell I am doing with my life. Anyway, I liked it even though it made me sad thinking about the collapse of many great cultures and watching our own not- so- great culture go right down the crapper. I wish I hadn't waited to read it until after she died. But I can hear her now, "Oh that's fine, I am just glad you found the time to read it." I am glad too.

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### **Donna says**

I was distinctly underwhelmed by the contents of this book. Jacobs argues that the culture of North America is disappearing. The reasons? Disintegration of the family, deteriorating quality of higher education, poor science used unquestioningly, and more. The book is worth a read, because she raises some valid points combined with interesting commentary and there are even a couple of moments that make you go "Hmmmm...." However, her conclusion that the end of North American culture is nigh is, in my opinion, severely flawed. A comparison to the Dark Ages of medieval Europe is unsupportable; and, even if it were, an assumption that we are on an unwavering path that will lead to an identical place is erroneous. Besides.... Didn't the Dark Ages lead to the Enlightenment? Furthermore, even though Jacobs clearly states that her concerns, philosophies, and predictions are based on North America only, it truly irritated me that she didn't take any other part of the world into account. In short, Jacobs' judgments about the future are based on the same kinds of faulty science that she condemns. Go figure.

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### **Mindy says**

I was sadly disappointed- the first few chapters are promising but the bulk of her argument is disjointed logic and barely relatable personal experiences. She makes definitive statements that are barely backed up and if so, not properly. Her opinions are stated as fact and weak interpretations are used to combat stronger logic. If you know nothing about civic development and like someone who's most interesting writing is when

she's regurgitating another author's research, you may like this book. But if you want original or at least well-reasoned introspectives, well-argued positions, and narratives that flow logically then avoid this book. I expected so much more from Jane Jacobs, and I really hope that her other books are stronger than this one... but the more I read of this the less I wanted to read...  
What a waste of 15\$ and subway reading hours...I'm still debating whether I'll finish this one...

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### **Jbondandrews says**

I don't think that the late Jane Jacobs thought her book through very thoroughly. She only based her analysis on the places she lived in Canada and the U.S. and I can't agree with her five pillars that are the cause of the downfall of society.

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### **Peter Brimacombe says**

this book has sat on a shelf at work for many years. I retired and took it home to write a review and then give it away.

#### Chapter 3 Credentialing Versus Education:

"My father, a doctor, worked long hours, seven days a week, and in spite of weariness he stayed in good spirits because he was needed and, especially, because his work interested him. But, like everyone else, he worried about getting by. In our little city, where the chief industry was mining expensive high-grade anthracite coal, the Great Depression was intensified because, in effect it had started four years early with a long and bitter coal strike and subsequent loss of markets.

Few of my father's patients were able to pay him, as the effects of mass unemployment spread. He told me one Saturday evening in 1936 that he had to earn \$48 a day merely to pay for his office rent, his subscriptions to medical journals, office supplies, and the salary of his assisting nurse. To me that seemed an incomprehensibly formidable sum: I was earning \$12 a week in New York as a stenographer in a candy manufacturing company that soon went into bankruptcy."

#### Chapter 4 Science Abandoned:

"If a body of inquiry becomes disconnected from the scientific state of mind, that unfortunate segment of knowledge is no longer scientific. It stagnates. Intellectually, it is poisonous, because thereafter almost everything the stagnated and warped knowledge touches is harmed by it. Nazi ideologies of race. Marxist ideologies of economics and social utopias, capitalist confusion of commercial competition with Darwinism, along with the elimination of cooperation from understanding of evolution, are all examples of inquiries claiming scientific validity that were disconnected from the scientific state of mind and sank into dogma."

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### **Markus says**

Hey remember Razzles? they were gum and candy at the same time. That shit was awesome.



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## **Dale Kushner says**

Jane Jacob's brilliantly prophetic book *Dark Age Ahead* was published posthumously in 2004 and forecasts the cultural collapse the United States now is experiencing. Jacobs uses historical precedent to show how the decline of previously flourishing cultures had certain traits in common and that these traits, including Mesopotamia and 15th c China, are now apparent in our own time. But Jacobs does not present a hopeless case, and offers a list of powerful corrective actions to combat economic and cultural stagnation.

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## **Jeff says**

The title may leave prospective readers with the impression that Jacobs espoused a rather pessimistic view of our urban future but as she points out in the text, the book actually outlines a number of thought-provoking and entirely practical approaches that could be adopted in the planning of our urban spaces to improve our quality of life without risking some sort of economic catastrophe or vastly increased costs of living. The influence of the late Jacobs' thinking on urban planning continues to make itself felt today ... this book will help readers to gain a better appreciation of why that is so.

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