



Prisoner of Trebekistan: A Decade in Jeopardy!

Bob Harris

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"In Prisoner of Trebekistan, Bob Harris chronicles his transformation from a struggling stand-up comic who repeatedly fails the Jeopardy! audition test into an elite player competing against the show's most powerful brains. To get there, he embarks on a series of intense study sessions, using his sense of humor to transform conventional memory skills into a refreshingly playful approach to learning that's as amusing as it is powerful." "What follows is not only a captivating series of high-stakes wins and losses on Jeopardy!, but also a growing appreciation of a borderless world that Bob calls Trebekistan, where a love of learning reigns and the smarter you get the more you realize how much you don't yet know." Filled with secrets that only a veteran contestant could share - from counterintuitive game strategies to Jedi-like tactics with the Jeopardy! signaling device - Prisoner of Trebekistan also gives you the chance to play along with the actual clues that led to victory or defeat in high-level tournaments, plus candid, moving reflections on how the games affected Bob's offstage life - and vice versa.

Prisoner of Trebekistan: A Decade in Jeopardy! Details

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Author : Bob Harris

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From Reader Review Prisoner of Trebekistan: A Decade in Jeopardy! for online ebook

Ken says

"This book is hard to get into. Harris has a tendency to ramble about irrelevant details. For example he spends way too much time on the the makeup that got stuck in his nose during show prep. He thinks anecdotes such as this are far funnier than they are ... and there are lots of these. The writing style is awkward and amaturish. Harris is constantly striving to be witty, trying too hard to be a comedian. I struggled to get through the first few chapter, thinking Harris is like a companion who jokes too much at inappropriate times.

However, about halfway in I found myself getting used to Harris' jokey tone, or at least tolerating it. Meanwhile the book becomes a suspenseful account of his experiences on Jeopardy!, which usually involve him getting through each round via luck, or knowing answers due to strange co-incidences. Harris doesn't quite let go of his strange writing style, but there is quite enough of interest to make it worth skimming the really unusual parts.

I have no plans to compete on the show anytime soon, but I still find the glimpses of backstage life at Jeopardy! compelling, and the Jeopardy! game strategies useful and interesting."

Susie says

This book was so much more than I expected. What a wonderful trip through Harris's times on Jeopardy, but also the ways his life changed and the insight he gained. There were even times I cried, and he's a comedian at heart. His realizations of the ways things are connected, and the ways he finds Trebekistan everywhere are so inspiring.

One of my favorite lines: "It was enough to keep learning how much I can still learn."

Now, excuse me while I get some notebooks...

Katie says

(Written in late October 2009. I'm pulling reviews off of my very dusty blog.)

Prisoner of Trebekistan, as the cover makes immediately clear, is about Jeopardy. And while it includes a range of tips and tricks for memorizing anything from books by Daniel Defoe to Secretaries General of the U.N., it's more a memoir than anything else. Bob Harris writes about the role Jeopardy has played in his life and the games he has played on the show. But in between "Who is Henry James?" and "What is Avignon?" *Trebekistan* develops into a book about Harris's life and the people in it, the joy of learning and how full the world is of unexpected connections.

That's what he means by Trebekistan, actually: a wold view that sees how bits of seeming trivia connect

because of a shared location or time in history or an unexpected acquaintance between two famous dead people. It's Six Degrees of Separation played with a liberal arts curriculum. And if that starts to sound a little weighty, let me tell you that Harris is a comedian. This one I borrowed it from my brother in September and read it on the plane. It's been sitting on my desk since then, so inevitably I picked it back up. I've skimmed some of the memory trick paragraphs this time, but otherwise it's entirely re-readable. This is a clever, funny, heartwarming book.

M.liss says

Confession: I'm pretty much obsessed with trivia. That said, it's no surprise that I love *Jeopardy!* I've always assumed, however, that being on the show would be entirely out of reach. How could anyone possibly prepare for a quiz where every subject ever is fair game?

With his totally engaging, often hilarious, and sometimes poignant book, Bob Harris has convinced me that **you can study for *Jeopardy!*!**

Bob Harris is a B (C? D?) list comedian. He's no "Ivy League Serial Killer," yet he repeatedly pulls answers from varied orifices, and in this book he shares his secrets. Pneumonics are key; the baser, the better. "Like it or not, your own hippocampus...has roughly the same tastes and interests as Homer Simpson, drunk, at a bullfight" (27). The mental image of peeking out of a hotel window at a 30-foot rear end links Howard's End with *A Room with a View* and *Where Angels Fear to Tread* in his schema of works by E. M. Forster (91).

Studying for *Jeopardy!* ends up looking a bit like college: notebooks upon notebooks covering an impossibly wide range of subjects. But pneumonic devices do amazing things for Harris's retention and recall. Further improving his performance is his clever device of practicing in an environment similar to the *Jeopardy!* set. Harris rearranges his living room, standing at a low bookshelf that is roughly the same height as a *Jeopardy!* podium, wearing the same clothes he would wear on the show's set, under the ridiculous glare of all the lights he can cram into his apartment. Even better, he uses a homemade "*Jeopardy!* Weapon" (21) to practice his Jedi skills at ringing in without looking at the Go Lights (40).

Super useful for *Jeopardy!* wannabes is Harris's discussion of wagering strategies, interwoven throughout the book. Of course, the Final *Jeopardy!* wager is the most immediate (and I have my own set of theories about how that is properly handled), but Daily Doubles are important, too. Harris makes the super-smart point that "by attacking your weakest category immediately, you'll probably get the hardest clues off the board with the least possible amount of money at stake. If there's a Daily Double in the weak category, it will barely matter, while hitting it late puts you in a difficult betting situation" (109). This is some professional level shit that I never would have thought of without this comedian's seasoned and sage advice.

Apart from the mechanics of doing well at *Jeopardy!*, this book is valuable for the way it promotes a reverence for of information. "Trebekistan is a location unfixed in physical space and time. It's a place of pure learning, where hard playful work can bring sudden shocks of unexpected perception. In Trebekistan, art and math and geography and science stop pretending to be separate subjects, and instead converge in a glorious riot" (134). "Entire lifetimes can be spent learning to marvel in humility at all the diversity" (240).

The characters in the books are awesome, too. I kind of love Bob, and by extension his parents and his sister, Connie. He draws Jane as a beautiful soul who teaches him the value of each day. His portrait of Alex is utterly charming. Johnny Gilbert, "the voice of God in a satin jacket," steals my heart (31). And his

characterization of Ken Jennings as Godzilla is unforgettable: "...once Ken hit his stride, the game was transformed into a one-man Japanese monster movie. Players would scream and one of them would point at the sky, and the Ken would breathe fire and crush them and eat them..." (287). Playing Ken was a (humiliating?) challenge for Bob, but it's an honor for anyone, and Bob did pretty well for himself over the course of his *Jeopardy!* career. Being invited to an Ultimate Tournament of Champions is no small task. Neither is blowing everyone out of the water in his five consecutive runaway wins that got him the ToC invitations in the first place.

Overall, this book is amazing. Even the index is funny. And the bibliography is so valuable for anyone who wants to read about *Jeopardy!* in preparation for one day, maybe, taking the test, hopefully qualifying, and even perhaps, in some fantasy world, actually competing.

tl;dr, Bob gives us:

The Eightfold Path

1. Obvious things may be worth noticing.
2. Remember the basics: the basics are what you remember.
3. Put your head where you can use it later.
4. Doing nothing is better than doing something really stupid.
5. Admit you don't know squat as often as possible.
6. Everything connects to everything else.
7. Just play each moment. Let go of outcome.

Bottom line, if you love *Jeopardy!*, **read this book.**

ALLEN says

Bob Harris, *Jeopardy!* champ, offers himself up as a more-or-less average guy who prepares well, takes risks, and occasionally gets lucky working the *Jeopardy!* boards. There are some useful pointers in this 2006 book, but the price to pay along the way is having to read the author's lame jokes and too-frequent self-references.

Tammy says

I absolutely loved this book and read through it in less than a 24-hour period (which is pretty quick for me -- I get distracted easily). Bob Harris is a former comedian and *Jeopardy!* champion who shares his insights into memory, takes you through stream-of-consciousness in-game responding, reveals the behind-the-scenes of *Jeopardy!* and shares his own life story.

This story of life-long learning and self-discovery made me laugh and tear up, and ultimately made me want to watch some old episodes of *Jeopardy!*

(And if you enjoy reading this, Bob Harris has also written a book, "The International Bank of Bob" about

his experiences as a Kiva lender -- which is why I picked up this book in the first place -- I am a Kiva enthusiast.)

Betsy says

Narrator: Brett Barry. He seemed to capture Bob Harris' writing style perfectly. I kept forgetting I wasn't listening to the author himself reading. Quick, engaging, humorous narration.

I loved this book! A really fun read. Part memoir, part ideas about memory and how the brain works, and of course lots of Jeopardy. I had such a great time playing along with Bob.

Brad says

This is a great introduction to how Jeopardy! works, its fandom, but also the life of Bob Harris. I'm a huge Jeopardy fan (I DVR it whenever baseball isn't on), but I learned a lot about the show's history that you don't pick up on just by watching. Bob Harris does a good job explaining the show's origin, its most famous players, and its strategy. (He does his best to make Chuck Forest and Frank Spangenberg household names, just like Ken Jennings.)

I most enjoyed, as you might guess, Harris' detailed breakdowns of all his games. His humor perfectly captures the nerves he felt being on a game show. Before he reeled off his impressive victories, though, Harris went through a ridiculous amount of training and cramming to get good enough to win. (Ira Glass has a great interview with Harris on *This American Life*'s "Quiz Shows" episode that highlights his training.) He has enough self-awareness to realize that studying for 10 hours a day for a game show is ludicrous, yet it all works out for him in the end.

Detailing two dozen games of Jeopardy won't fill enough pages for a book, so Harris includes a lot of meandering stories about his life. He does tie most of them into Jeopardy!, but I nearly shouted at his text to get back to the game shows. As I've written above, Harris is a funny dude, but he does go on a bit too long. *Prisoner of Trebekistan* is a very encouraging book, and made me want to actually take the Jeopardy! contestant test rather than just shout at my TV and hit my autographed Ken Jennings bobblehead doll.

Sara says

I enjoyed this book more than I thought I would. I remember Newberry's five and dime stores from my childhood, and I grew up in a small town (the South, not the Midwest) so could relate to much of what Harris writes about his parents and his upbringing. I would have been in seventh heaven if my dad had quoted *Jabberwocky* to me. Yes, his dad would have loved Shakespeare...as Bob discovers when he falls in love with the Bard in the course of learning facts about him.

This book is as much about Bob Harris and his journey from being pretty much a misfit comedian to being a Jeopardy-winning misfit comedian...NO, I'm just being funny...to being a person with a life, in addition to an

obsession with learning stuff to win Jeopardy.

It is also about Trebekistan, which is way more than the country Bob inhabits when he studies for Jeopardy. He first encountered Trebekistan as a child when he visited the Bull Run battlefield:

"Unmarked by the years, those hills could have still been in the previous century. Forgetting the timeline, I could almost hear the gunfire and see the panicking petticoats scurrying back to their carriages. I was no longer looking at grass and trees and hills or a story in a book. I was looking at a real place, and real events, and thinking about what they meant in ways I hadn't expected. This was my first glimpse of Trebekistan." You know this place...even if you've never studied for Jeopardy...and so do I.

Imagination opens up supposedly commonplace scenes in this world and makes connections to times, places, things, other people, which make life infinitely richer. This is the story of Bob's journey there. Along the way he makes lots of jokes, which are sometimes fun and sometimes a bit tiresome, but the seriousness beneath gets enough attention to make his book quite worth reading.

Grace says

One of my top three books last year. Bob has learned something that I've been learning as I go along as well. He just says it much better. I would've loved this book even if I weren't in it...

Malin Friess says

Bob Harris is a comedian, who transforms himself in unlikely ways to become a Jeopardy 5 time champion and an elite player on the tournament of Champions.

Fascinating look at the strategy behind Jeopardy--Harris was able to win by simply not messing up. Don't guess on Jeopardy. If you get a \$1000 dollar question wrong--both your opponents gain \$1000. You must bet large on the daily doubles..and their are always clues in these answers that a trivia pro can figure out the answer.

You can study for Jeopardy. Harris set up a lectern in his TV room, created a fake buzzer, eats protein shakes before his matches, and has watched and cataloged every jeopardy question. He bats about 80% on final jeopardy questions. You can memorize state capitols, poets, bodies of water, academy award winners, presidents, etc...Harris has 300 journals filled with obscure trivia..he often uses picture associations.

So what is Alex like?? Harris would say... I don't really know..it's not like they were talking about potent potables in the Jacuzzi together. But he has great respect for Trebek. Alex is always genuinely routing for each player. He really has joy when a tough clue is conquered. Trebek after 20 years still loves a close final jeopardy. He's too modest to admit..but he knows most of the responses and could beat many former Jeopardy champions. Lastly, the rhythm of his voice and smoothness in which he reads the clues is paradigm to the timing of the buzzers..Alex will often go through an entire show without flubbing one syllable (and that may be in latin or French or Chinese.)

Who doesn't like Alex Trebek??

There are 60 clues in a game...3 daily doubles..so 57 decisions if to ring in. A great player still may only know 2/3 of the responses. You are lucky to beat the only players to the buzzer so you may only get 1/3

chances for a question..or about 13 responses in a show. You better get those 13 responses right.

Fascinating book. I'm getting more interested in Jeopardy. Maybe I should start studying obscure trivia and take a shot at applying for the show.

Alison says

What did I learn from this book? I have a LOT of studying to do before I finally go on *Jeopardy!* I also need to practice the buzzer and start dressing in the clothes I will wear on the program, as well as arising at the same time every day and only eat foods that can be found in the green room at Sony Pictures studios. This book is insight into the mind of Bob Harris, a five-game winner who also participated in a Tournament of Champions, a Jeopardy Masters Tournament, and the Ultimate Tournament of Champions. This book is a must for people who like the show (or ADORE it, in my case).

Scarlett Sims says

I read this basically as research since I'm hoping to become a *Jeopardy!* contestant. There is tons of great behind-the-scenes information about how the show works and stuff that could give you a bit of an edge. It's definitely a must for all fans of the show.

However, it's also more than that. It's Bob Harris' memoir of growing up in the snow belt, of failed relationships, and of living up to his family's expectations. In that way, I think it might hold some appeal even for people who just like a good human story.

Kelly says

There are *Jeopardy!* nerds --those who watch the show every night and play along-- and then there are *Jeopardy! nerds*. Those who shout out the answers in the form of a question to be better prepared for the show, take the qualifying tests and know the names of past favorite players (Ken Jennings doesn't count).

I'm unashamedly one of the latter, and picked up Bob Harris' book partly for insight into game play should I ever be selected. It's a light, quick read, suitable for a couple of nights' before-bed reading or an airplane trip.

Harris worked as a stand-up comedian before going on *Jeopardy*, and his sense of humor keeps the book moving along as he doles out facts about *Jeopardy*'s history and details about the show's production (what happens backstage, etc.)

You'll learn enough *Jeopardy!* trivia to drive your friends batty for years: Merv Griffin has made \$70 million in royalties from the music alone, the first ever answer was "rats," and Alex has a mysterious secret drawer in his podium, for example.

If you have any aspirations of being a contestant, Harris explains how he studied and crammed his way into a string of wins, and also prepares the potential contestant for the intricacies of buzzer technique and "category bouncing."

In between, Harris tells his life story, one that he no doubt would never have published if he didn't have the Jeopardy! hook to hang the book on. It's not bad --a heartfelt and funny account of an ordinary life-- but it's always a relief when the Jeopardy! thread is picked up again.

It is, after all, what anyone picked up the book for, and I, for one, will thank Bob Harris if I ever make it on Jeopardy! and answer more than a couple of questions correctly.

Dana Berglund says

As a former Jeopardy! junkie, I had fairly high hopes that this book would lead me down a fun and nerdy path in what Harris dubs Trebekistan. I wasn't disappointed. He covers his circuitous party to Jeopardy, and how he chose to study and prepare for his opportunities. I loved the trip down Memory Lane. Plus, the book was quite funny overall. The guy did eke out a living as a stand up comic for a while, after all. It gets a little sappy and faux-deep for a few minutes near the end, but I'll allow it this once because I enjoyed the rest so much.
