



It's All Relative: Adventures Up and Down the World's Family Tree

A.J. Jacobs

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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.

It's All Relative: Adventures Up and Down the World's Family Tree Details

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From Reader Review It's All Relative: Adventures Up and Down the World's Family Tree for online ebook

Beth Jusino says

Meh.

This would have been better if it spent more time exploring genetics, family trees, and human connections, and less time complaining about party planning.

Benjamin Thomas says

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 really 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.

Wanda says

I would call this a book about genealogy for people who aren't really all that interested in the subject. It is genealogy lite. Which is not to say that it isn't a good book or that I didn't like it. I enjoyed it a great deal.

I've been doing genealogy since I was a teenager and discovered our family Bible, with my great-

grandfather's handwritten records of the family in it. It's huge & heavy and he bought it from someone in a California train station for 25 cents back in the day. He was a lumberman and his family lived in New Brunswick (and he got migraines—he's who I blame my headaches on!).

Maybe not the most exciting of stories, but you find all kinds of interesting tales when you start investigating. I haven't made time for this pursuit for years, but reading this book has encouraged me to get thinking about it again.

I had read in a genealogy book that if you have European heritage, the very furthest apart you can be related to others with similar ties is 10th cousin. Jacobs' research takes things a step farther: the farthest apart you can be related to anyone on Earth is 70th cousins. Start singing Kumbaya, folks, because we really do belong to the Family of Humankind.

The strange thing is, we do have a bias for treating our family just a little better than others—cutting them some slack when they do things that we don't understand, for example. What better way is there to increase the kindness quotient in the world than to realize that we are all relatives and all deserve that kind of treatment.

Pie in the sky, I know, but both the author & I wish that it could come true.

Read for the PopSugar reading challenge to fill the “Book tied to your ancestry” choice.

Alex O'Brien says

An interesting and funny account of Jacobs' efforts to research his ancestors, prepare a global family tree, and stage the world's biggest reunion. The book is well-written and will serve as a good guide for budding genealogists, but it's not as deep in content as Jacobs' previous works and I found the ending-his description of the actual reunion—a bit of a let-down. Unfortunately, Jacobs only touches on this event which the whole book had been building up to.

Daniel Chaikin says

18. It's All Relative : Adventures Up and Down the World's Family Tree (audio) by A. J. Jacobs

read by the author

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format: 8:07 overdrive audiobook (~225 pages, 336 pages in hardcover)

acquired: Library

listened: Apr 3-11

rating: 2½

Not much to this. This is my first book by Jacobs, and he's charming and reads really nicely on audio and can make almost anything interesting, no matter how thin. And this is really really thin. In sum, we are all related, we are all cousins at some level and you can probably connect yourself to anyone else if you find the right database. And maybe that can impact how we all treat each other. But, outside a mostly failed event he planned around this idea, that's about the whole book.

Randee says

Did you know that we share an estimated 99.9% of DNA with each other? Did you know that most homo sapiens have a small percentage of Neanderthal DNA? Or an atom of Beethoven's? How about that we share 88% of the same DNA with mice?

If information like this fascinates you, you'll like the writings of A.J. Jacobs. I read his first book 'Know It All' when it came out. It was his account of reading his way through the encyclopedia. I have never read an entire encyclopedia, but I have picked one up many times and browsed for hours. I also read 'The Year of Living Biblically' and although I would not want to even try it for a day, I found it interesting to read about the challenges he faced.

This new book is about genealogy, his own and in general plus his year of planning a World Tree Family Reunion with thousands of his relatives. His conjecture is that if we all feel more connected to one another because we are related if you go back far enough, we will treat each other more kindly, etc. Every once in a while, I feel that I was born into the wrong species and planet, but in reality, it's only a matter of mathematics that if any one person goes back far enough, they will find relatives in common with virtually anyone. Knowing that I am marginally related to everyone on the planet is interesting, but I'm not sure that it makes me feel more inclusive. Nonetheless, I found the book to be entertaining and I shall try to remember the next time I feel like directing my vitriolic tongue at a person who has annoyed me, I shall remind myself they are a relative and will try to show some restraint.

Melki says

This is one I picked up solely because of the author. I have no real interest in genealogy, but I'm ALWAYS interested in a new book by A.J. Jacobs. His books are packed with fascinating facts and tidbits. This one, however, is on a more personal level, and much of the information is about A.J.'s relatives. He has some fun tales to tell, but I'm willing to bet most of us have stories of immigrants and wartime heroes hovering in our backgrounds just waiting to be discovered.

And that, I suppose, is the point of all this - encouraging readers to delve into their own pasts to see what sort of knotholes and nuts populate our own family trees. His appendix (okay - the book's appendix, NOT A.J.'s) offers hints for getting started on your own genealogical quest. I was mildly curious, so I thought I might give it a try. One of the best methods is, of course, talking to living relatives. I'm pretty much out of luck when it comes to that - I've got one elderly aunt and eight cousins . . . none of whom I'd consider friends. So, I headed to one of the free sites - familysearch.org. I only tried my father's side of the family, as I was curious to see the origins of my last name. Alas, the list only went back as far as my great, great grandfather - Elias Barrick. However . . . Elias's *mother's* line went the whole way back to Clement Zahn in 1485 Germany and, okay . . . I can see how people get hooked on genealogy. The weirdest thing was after I found this out yesterday, I was inexplicably, *absurdly* happy, as if I had suddenly just proven my own existence.

You know, I might just reach out to my cousin Frances; she's a genealogy buff, and she might know the name of Elias's father. How do you like that? I could get to know one of my actual living relatives thanks to this book.

But, I'm still only giving it three stars. Sorry, A.J. You set the bar pretty high with your other books, and this

one just doesn't measure up. But when your next one comes out, you'd better believe I'll buy it. That's what cousins do, right?

Karyn says

At best, a very light introduction to genealogy and the world family tree.
Not recommended for anyone with experience in genealogy seeking any insight.

Carol says

Not what I was expecting and didn't find it that funny.

Deb (Readerbuzz) Nance says

I have loved everything A. J. Jacobs has written so far, and I'm happy to say that I loved his new book, It's All Relative, too. Jacobs takes on huge personal projects in his writing. This time, he takes on genealogy. He does all the DNA tests, and researches his family members from the past, and decides to put on a huge family reunion. Everything he does makes me laugh, and laugh out loud, and it takes something good to have me laughing out loud. It's All Relative is something good.

J says

Couldn't finish this one. Stopped at Chapter 10: Should Families Be Abolished. In this chapter, the author discusses the idea that instead of being building blocks of society, families are actually bad because they encourage an us-versus-them mentality. All people of goodwill should denounce their mothers, fathers and ancestors and embrace the Universe as your light-giving force. Or you might as well be a full fledged warlord. Okay, I exaggerate in the style of the author, but that seemed to be where he was headed.

The author's main premise seemed to be that everyone in the world is basically related and if we embraced each other as relatives the world would be a more peaceful place. He supports the idea of a "world family tree" where all genealogy is accessible, so we can see how we are related to each other and no family information is private. He doesn't seem to understand or appreciate the value of privacy in this Facebook-driven, the-only-bad-publicity-is-no-publicity, me-centered world.

He talks numerous times about valuing all people and ideas and yet he is stuck in a deeply liberal worldview. The pointed language he utilizes and specific moral values he espouses heavily handedly leave little doubt about his political and social orientations. He gets high marks for self-awareness as he references his own bias/shortcomings numerous times but zero points for self-discipline because he doesn't seem to make any serious efforts to better himself in these areas.

A great example of this is found in the Introduction: *Up until recently I figured humans were marching slowly but surely along a rational path (toward my desired end goals). I figured we'd eventually shed primitive tribalism and join forces to try to solve the world's big problems (i.e. breaking the bonds of*

traditional morality and good/bad paradigms). *Instead, we seem to be more tribal than ever.* (Read: We lost the election. Some people disagree with my worldview and refuse to bow to my judgement.) *We're obsessed with us-versus-them thinking.* (I hate them). *Blue states versus red states. Americans versus foreigners.* (And you know I'm on the righteous side of that issue.) *Believers versus atheists. Black versus white. Patriot fans versus everyone else.* (Token obvious humor thrown in so that if anyone is offend by something else, I can claim it too was joke and shouldn't be taken seriously.) *I see this trait in myself too and it disturbs me. I try to be all noble and teach my kids to be good homo sapiens.* (Subtext: I believe in rational and logical things like science.) *Over dinner, I'll tell them not to dehumanize anyone. Don't fall for hate. Be respectful and rational. And then ten minutes into the meal (and throughout my writing) I'll find myself ranting about the issues of the day - gun control, isolationism - and slamming the other side as drooling, brain-dead idiots.* (Yep.)

I picked this book up because I have a genuine interest in genealogy. However, the author doesn't share much insight or knowledge about how to uncover your own family history. He apparently was handed substantial genealogical information from older relatives on a silver platter (which incidentally link him to famous and important people - a fact he says doesn't matter because all people are equally important but nevertheless makes a point to mention repeatedly).

More about his political worldview than actual genealogy. Disappointing.

Linda says

Who could get me to read an entire book about genealogy, without holding me hostage and/or threatening bodily harm? The list is very short, and A.J. Jacobs' name is right at the top.

He admits that it's a topic he became interested in only after he had kids, and became old enough to start contemplating his own mortality. He also admits that it's one of the most narcissistic pursuits ever. I like honesty in a person.

He outlines the ways that genealogy has been used for less than noble purposes, then starts planning the world's largest family reunion, in hope that the event will bring people together. The theory is that we look more favorably upon people who are related to us, so if we think of everyone on earth as a cousin, then we'll all be nicer to each other. Nice theory. Humans being what they are, it doesn't work perfectly in practice.

There were many laugh out loud moments in the book: the chapter about a group advocating first cousin marriage (all together now: ewwwwwww!), A. J. going to lunch with Barbara and George H.W. Bush, A. J. learning that not all the members of Sister Sledge will be performing "We are Family" at the reunion because some members are no longer speaking to others, A. J. opening for Donny Osmond... There's also plenty of good information for anyone truly interested in genealogy. I had no idea the global tree movement had gained as much popularity as it has.

As little interest as I have in the subject, I admit that plugging my name in to a global tree website to see how distantly I'm related to the famous and infamous is intriguing. Recommended for anyone with an interest in the subject, or who enjoys a good laugh.

Angel Hench says

This book was interesting and amusing in some places, but I didn't get the sense that this was an A.J. Jacobs' usual in-depth ultra-obsessed project book. This felt more like A.J. Jacobs-lite. It did get me looking into my family history, which I'm thankful for. I've learned that my great-grandmother's second marriage was to a man almost 15 years her junior (go, grandma!) and my maternal grandmother's family was probably Amish. So, if you are interested in genealogy at all, you will enjoy this book. If not, you will probably just give it a huge shoulder-shrug.

(A review copy of this book was provided by the publisher.)

fortuna.spinning says

I love AJ Jacobs but this wasn't quite as strong as his other experimental ventures. I thought the idea of a global family reunion was pretty ridiculous, but the genealogy bits were interesting, and as always, his writing was very witty and fun. I know next to nothing about my family history so this might just inspire me to do some research.

Caryn says

I became a fan of AJ Jacobs after finishing his first book, *The Know-it-All*. He expertly is able to combine humor with factual info and make a subject you wouldn't expect to find entertaining, well, entertaining.

His newest book starts with the idea that we are all related. It's so timely, given the popularity of sites like Ancestry.com and mail-in DNA kits.

This book gives us some examples of his family history, but it also covers genealogical connections to presidents, celebrities, and scientists. Aside from his own family, we get snippets of how the family tree works in other families, in some cases surprising and fascinating. I was often quoting snippets out loud to my husband as I was reading. It's Jacobs' humor that propels the narrative and makes you want to keep reading.

I look forward to the subject matter he chooses to explore next. My thanks to the publisher for a copy in exchange for an honest review.
