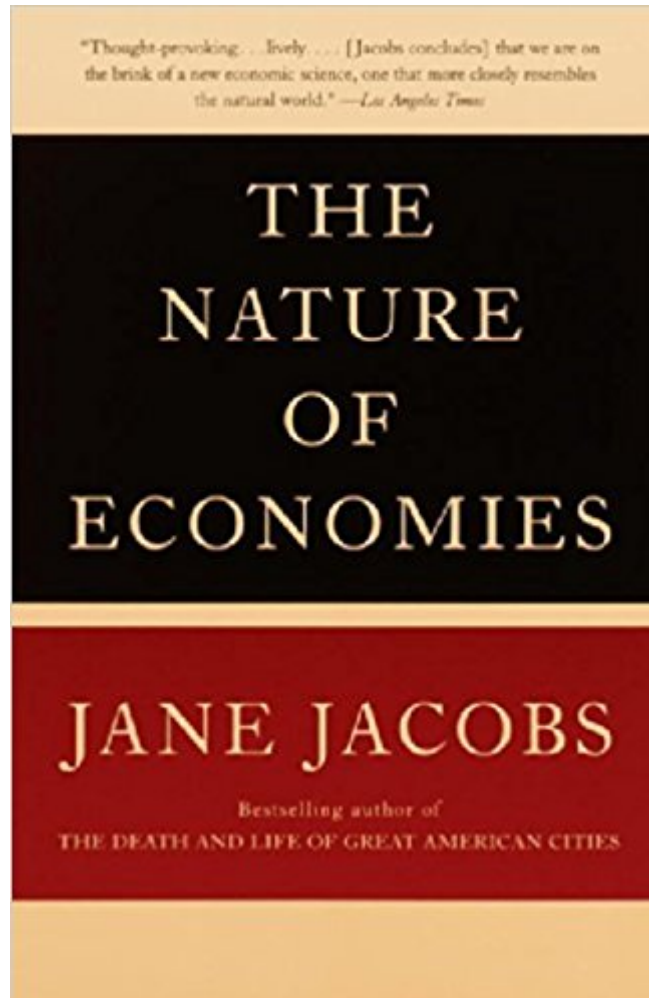


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The Nature Of Economies



Synopsis

From the revered author of the classic *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* comes a new book that will revolutionize the way we think about the economy. Starting from the premise that human beings "exist wholly within nature as part of natural order in every respect," Jane Jacobs has focused her singular eye on the natural world in order to discover the fundamental models for a vibrant economy. The lessons she discloses come from fields as diverse as ecology, evolution, and cell biology. Written in the form of a Platonic dialogue among five fictional characters, *The Nature of Economies* is as astonishingly accessible and clear as it is irrepressibly brilliant and wise—œa groundbreaking yet humane study destined to become another world-altering classic.

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Customer Reviews

Over the past 40 years, Jane Jacobs has produced an acclaimed series of analytical essays that examine the development of complex human systems and environments in a manner that's as literary as it is visionary. Her latest, *The Nature of Economies*, continues this artistic and provocative tradition by dissecting relationships between economics and ecology through a multilayered discourse around the fundamental premise that "human beings exist wholly within nature as part of a natural order." In a style reminiscent of the cinematic *My Dinner with Andre*, Jacobs gives us a captivating ongoing conversation between five contemporary New Yorkers who sip coffee and voice accepted, fact-based theories along with subjective but solid opinions regarding the way our society's fractal-like development is actually dependent upon "the same universal principles that the

rest of nature uses." Digressing onto various and sundry paths as such dialogues always do--albeit, this time, on a very specific and methodical route as prescribed by Jacobs--the characters mull over business cycles, animal husbandry, habitat destruction, the implications of standardization and monopoly, competition in nature, the obsolescence of computers, and much, much more. This book is recommended for the eclectically curious who welcome the opportunity to eavesdrop on such stimulating table talk, even while lamenting the fact they can't join in. --Howard Rothman --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Jacobs's 1961 classic, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, broke new ground in its insistence that humane urban planning could result from looking intently at people's everyday lives as a microcosm of the needs of city, economic and national life. The book also showcased Jacobs's superb ability to weave her own and her neighbors' personal stories into her theories of urban planning and development. In this important, essentially philosophical new work on patterns of social and economic growth, Jacobs immerses herself in the role of storyteller, building her arguments through a series of conversations between a group of environmentally aware, countercultural friends talking about what it means for humans to interact, understand one another and dwell safely and without causing harm in the world. Jacobs's choice to explore this material within a Socratic dialogue might seem pretentious or simplistic in less skilled hands. Yet her tone and style are so assured that it is hard to imagine a straightforward, expository examination of the same ideas that conveys as much nuance. The approach also amplifies Jacobs's theme of exploring the myriad ways in which humans exist "wholly within nature" and not, as some environmentalists claim, as "interlopers." Drawing upon examples from nature, the physical sciences, evolutionary theory, mathematics and quantum physics, Jacobs cogently illustrates how human beings and the civilizations they create can be in harmony with the world around them. Sounding the same themes she has been investigating for the past 40 years, this witty, beautifully expressed book represents the culmination of Jacobs's previous thinking, and a step forward that deftly invokes a broader philosophical, even metaphysical, context. Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

This is a truly unique book--a serious book on a critical topic written with much insight, originality, and an unbelievable amount of imagination. I've heard much talk of the author before--especially her seminal book "*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*"--but "*Nature of Economies*" is the first book by Jacobs I've ever read. I'm glad to report that all the positive things I've heard about the

author is true: she is as sharp and thoughtful a thinker as they come. What's even more endearing (for me anyway) is that she eschews the jargons and pompous prose of academy and writes with simplicity and grace so that anyone and everyone can understand her points. (I can't remember the last time that I've read a book on economics or sociology and not been put off by the awful language.) Another special thing about this book, as most of you've probably heard by now, is that Jacobs has cast her thoughts in the dialogue form: conversations between 5 intimate friends. I must say it's quite strange to come upon a serious treatise on economics and nature, written and published in the first year of the 21st century, that uses what seems (to me) an 18th- or 19th-century format (I'm thinking in particular of those philosophical dialogues on religion, morality, etc., written by the likes of David Hume and Giacomo Leopardi, not to mention all those "philosophes" of the Enlightenment), which was in turn an imitation of the Platonic dialogues. Well, why not? After all, Jacobs has the brilliance of mind and sharpness of wit to get away with it. (Though it does mean getting some used to for an average reader like me.) As for what the book is trying to say, I'm still trying to figure it out. It's such a tiny little book but yet I'm not embarrassed to say that I've not fully grasped all her points. But I do know that this book has all the trappings of a classic (in the best sense of the word) and it'll be read and reread, debated over and written about, again and again, in the years to come. So is Jacobs the new Hume or Leopardi? Maybe. The last "philosophe" of our modern era? Definitely.

This is the second work I have read by Jane Jacobs (the first being her widely and well-known *Death and Life of Great American Cities*) and it reinforces my notion that during her life she authored a sparkling well of common sense from which every individual should draw deeply.

It is no accident that Toronto is often rated as one of the most livable cities in North America -- Jane Jacobs lives there, and she takes an active role in helping shape her adopted city. She also does something original; she actively examines the topics she writes about, instead of relying upon the mere observations of others. When you use a chunk of granite, a bar of steel or the speed of light, it's worth knowing that inanimate objects don't change much. But, Jacobs and all other social scientists deal with people; and people are continually changing. One of her central themes is that since Adam Smith in 1776, economists have tended to ignore the real world. "Smith himself was partly responsible for that blind spot," Jacobs writes. "He led himself and others astray by declaring that economic specialization of regions and nations was more efficient than economic diversification. "The theorists after Smith retreated into their own heads instead of engaging ever

more deeply with the real world," Jacobs writes. "Plenty of observable, germane facts were lying around in plain sight, ready and waiting to lead Smith's insights, straight as directional arrows, into the subjects of development and bifurcations." Adam Smith overturned centuries of thinking when he wrote, "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard for their own interest." Until then, there was a general feeling that God, or Nature, or other supernatural force provided our sustenance; Smith said personal interest is the key to economic life. Smith takes that idea the next step: Yes, natural products exist, but we can wipe them out by overuse. Every system in nature is harmed by over-indulgence; nothing can be exploited without some collateral cost. Excess carries the seeds of its own destruction; humans are a part of nature, and thus subject to similar limitations. Thus, the book's title -- "The Nature of Economies." Every society is a part of nature; people are always subject to the inevitable laws of nature. This isn't tree-hugging ecology or a 'Save a Whale for Jesus' fad; it's the fundamental rules by which nature, and thus our communities, live on a day-to-day basis. Consider a real example: Phoenix literally "paves the desert." Twenty years ago, climatologists knew this raised night temperatures, because asphalt soaks up heat during the day and radiates at night. Night temperatures have risen by almost 10 degrees -- which adds immensely to air conditioning bills, and greatly reduces livability. Yet, city officials steadfastly ignore this feedback to pursue a policy of unlimited growth. Is this unusual? Think of Los Angeles traffic, Las Vegas, Albuquerque, El Paso, and Tucson -- each with its own growing problems. Jacobs argues the "nature of economies" means being aware of feedback, and facing issues before they become a crisis. Despite her living in Toronto, do Canadians do it? No, Canadians ignored overfishing of the Grand Banks -- once the richest fishing area in the world -- until the area was fished out which caused the economy of Newfoundland to collapse. In brief, that's her lesson. Ignore feedback, ignore the evidence in front of our eyes, and we'll have economic and social collapse. Nature never offers "Get out of Jail Free" cards. Unlike many ecologists, Jacobs doesn't offer simplistic "get rid of the automobile" solutions. She says problems will arise whatever we do; the solution is in recognizing the feedback, then responding to the problem. In other words, "Look around." Then ask, "What can we do different?" She doesn't offer solutions; she offers thought processes to enable intelligent people to find solutions. Does she have a valid point? Well, Toronto officials listen to her, and have one of the best cities in North America. It's time her audience was expanded.

Continuation of the fine work of Jane Jacobs!

Jane Jacobs is a bit like Agatha Christie. A no nonsense view of economics and the city as an economic engine. I do sometimes wish she would look a little deeper into the policies she references.

A fantastic book that sabotages as many preconceptions about the dismal science as it can. It's cast in a wonderful format, I can barely abide economics and I read this in one sitting. Some pretty ballsy conclusions, too. Attacking government subsidies wholeheartedly in a book that is mired in shades and nuance brings it all to a refreshing close. Although she sees economies as naturally developing and interacting entities, it would have been interesting if she could have explored the implications of state involvement; i.e., tax and tariffs, the fiscal policies behind them. Since states and economies are coexisting -and in the best cases mutually cohabitating- it is appropriate to explore their relationship within Jane's context. All in all, though, lots of fun. It's awesome to read all of these new books coming out that call for an imaginative, multi-dimensional awareness of systems and laws. I'm looking forward to reading her previous works.

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