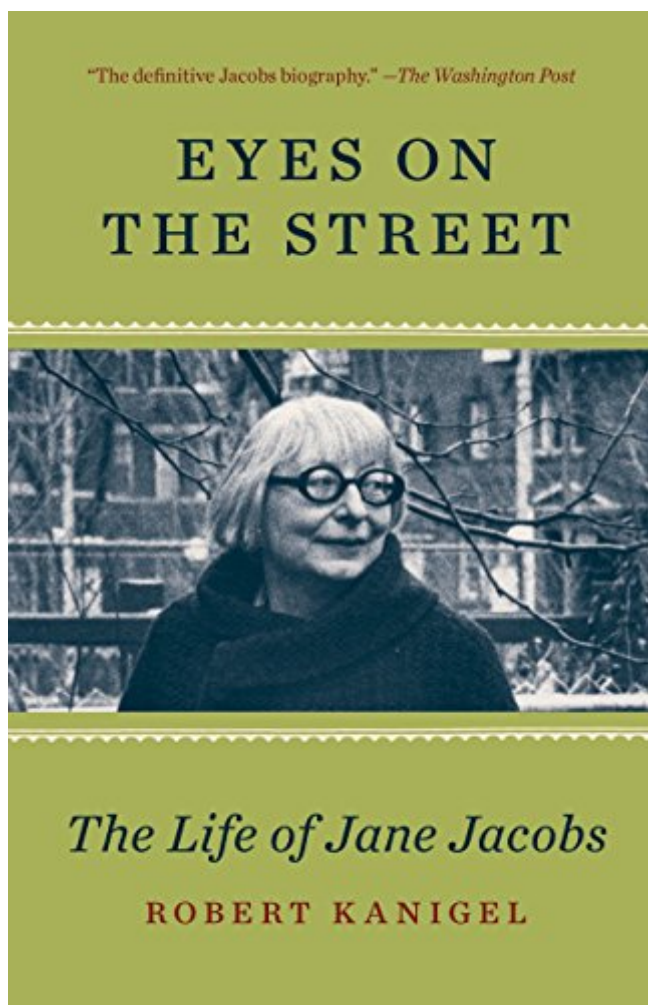


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Eyes On The Street: The Life Of Jane Jacobs



Synopsis

The first major biography of the irrepressible woman who changed the way we view and live in cities, and whose influence can still be felt in any discussion of urban planning to this day. *Eyes on the Street* is a revelation of the phenomenal woman who raised three children, wrote seven groundbreaking books, saved neighborhoods, stopped expressways, was arrested twice, and engaged at home and on the streets in thousands of debates--all of which she won. Here is the child who challenged her third-grade teacher; the high school poet; the journalist who honed her writing skills at *Iron Age*, *Architectural Forum*, *Fortune*, and other outlets, while amassing the knowledge she would draw upon to write her most famous book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Here, too, is the activist who helped lead an ultimately successful protest against Robert Moses's proposed expressway through her beloved Greenwich Village; and who, in order to keep her sons out of the Vietnam War, moved to Canada, where she became as well known and admired as she was in the United States. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

This is a great read for fans of Jane Jacobs. The author is a very good writer and researcher, whom I know from his excellent book on the unschooled yet extraordinary mathematician Ramanujan. Robert Kanigel takes us deep into the improbable life of Jane Jacobs, born obscurely in a tiny Pennsylvania coal town in 1916, died an urbanist celebrity in Toronto in 2006. She is portrayed as a fearless skeptic, keen observer of city and economic life, and dedicated writer and investigator. But she was also a good family woman and one of the most successful activists of all time. To me, she is right up there with Rachel Carson as one of the most seminal of women thinkers, writers, and advocates of the 20th century. This book owes much to interviews with surviving family members and associates. Jane and her husband Bob had one of the most successful marriages I've ever read about. But she had a tough time in school with teachers who often seemed stupid to her, and she later refused to join the academic game, not even finishing the standard degrees of higher education. In line with the dogma she sometimes observed in academia, she refused all the many offers of honorary degrees later in her life. Yet within a year of the publication of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* her work was being taught in academia. It not only caught the professional and academic world by surprise, it had the ring of a new revealed truth. This famous book was a powerful articulation of the social failures of urban renewal, failures that were already being felt by other sensitive souls, people like the Episcopal priest William Kirk who in 1955 pointed her to the tragedy of the *projects* in East Harlem and the disappearance of street life. Jane's own neighborhood of Greenwich Village was the model of urban socio-economic diversity, at least for her. But for her nemesis, Robert Moses, it was just another slum to be torn down, like the tenements of East Harlem had been demolished. In a series of now legendary political battles, Jane Jacobs led the fight to keep the wrecking ball out of her part of New York City. Unassuming in person, and not at all charismatic, she nevertheless was a stupendous organizer and extraordinarily persuasive through the broad and deep scope of her analysis and examples, someone who politicians were forced to pay attention to. Ironically, as a younger woman, she had been a WW II and cold war propagandist for the US government, though outspoken enough that she was investigated by the FBI during the McCarthy era. Then she became a writer for an architectural magazine that featured urban renewal, but a visit to Philadelphia in 1955 became a turning point for her. The renowned urban planner Edmund Bacon gave her the tour of his splendid new projects in Philadelphia, except that something was missing from his revitalized streets: people!

Soon one thing led to another and before long she was on the warpath that marked the rest of her career. Jane started giving talks that caught the eye of people like the famous cultural critic Lewis Mumford. Soon her magazine editor Douglas Haskell helped get her an appointment with Chadbourne Gilpatric at the Rockefeller Foundation, who agreed to give her a research and writing grant to flesh out her ideas in book form. Quickly she found a good editor, Jason Epstein at Doubleday, who became her life long friend, and she was on her way to stardom, including a visit to the White House. Already in 1958 Jane had led the final fight to close Washington Square Park to traffic and succeeded (without any ill effects, traffic wise), in direct defiance of the legendary power broker Robert Moses. Next up in 1960 were the sidewalks of her own street, Hudson Street, that Moses wanted to slim down in order to widen the street for traffic. She immediately went into high gear and rallied the neighborhood to preserve life on the sidewalks. Yet only a year later Moses came back with a plan to level a good portion of her neighborhood. Once again she went into action and formed the "Committee to Save the West Village", eventually convincing Mayor Wagner that Greenwich Village was no slum, using sound research in addition to politics. Instead Jane led a long battle to get new 5 story walk up apartments that would fit seamlessly into the neighborhood. By 1969 her rock star status was confirmed by a "thunderous standing ovation" when she walked into meeting of the planning commission after the new Mayor, John Lindsay, backed her seemingly archaic yet life giving proposal. By that time she had long since led the battle, beginning in 1962, against Moses' proposed Lower Manhattan Expressway, which would have followed the southern edge of Greenwich Village, cutting off the entire southern tip of Manhattan Island. Then, seemingly out of the blue, Jane and family were off to Toronto for the rest of her life. Why did she leave her beloved Manhattan? Answer: the Vietnam War. It threatened to engulf her two sons, Jim and Ned, both of draft age. I myself remember, decades later, being struck at a college reunion by how many of my fellow male graduates arrived from Canada "they had left to escape the evils of an imperial war and had never come back. A religious person, I'd been saved by becoming a conscientious objector, yet that path was all but closed to many others. Very quickly Jane Jacobs made her mark on Canada, helping to stop the Spadina Expressway and becoming a supportive presence behind a new, more organic kind of urban revitalization. A prime example was the Toronto neighborhood of St. Lawrence, formerly 56 acres of industrial wasteland, that become "the best example of a mixed-income, mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly, sensitively-scaled, densely-populated community ever built in the province" (p. 317). More books followed, such as "The Economy of Cities" and "Cities and the Wealth of Nations", championing new economic ideas like

import substitution. Yet by the early 2000s the Reagan era had led to some very disturbing and malignant trends, such as escalating economic inequality and the reign of the neocons. Hence the prescient title of her final book, *Dark Age Ahead*, 2005. Mind you, this was well before the financial crash of 2008 and the US election of Donald Trump in 2016. Public services in Toronto were deteriorating, housing was increasingly unaffordable with spreading homelessness, more families were under severe stress, business fraud was already rampant (think Enron), higher education was more about credentials than education, cars and suburbia had become overwhelmingly destructive of community, science itself was sometimes corrupt or clueless, taxes were regressive and inadequate, and much more. Yet with all this, she was looking for silver linings, something in the human spirit that would get us back on track. Thank you, Jane Jacobs and Robert Kanigel.

A well written biography on a remarkable woman.

Wordy, repetitive but had some insights into Citizen Jane and city planning. It was a struggle to finish, but I did learn a lot!

A great book inspired by a great woman!

Best line (from 1962) while Greenwich Village is prosperous , Chelsea remains a slum ! Give it twenty years and wait for Gay Gentrification girl!

The depth of the research by Mr. Kanigel is astonishing. I learned things about cousin Jane Jacobs that I never knew. I had spoken with her about her time in Higgins, NC where her Aunt Martha (my great Aunt) served in a Presbyterian mission to a rural community but I learned that Eleanor Roosevelt visited and that there exists a film made by the Presbyterian Board of Missions. These gems are worth the price of the book for me. I haven't finished reading the book and look forward to reading Mr. Kanigel's version of Jane's preparation for putting Aunt Hannah's memoirs into the form of a very readable book, *A Schoolteacher in Old Alaska*. Jane describes her process herself in her introduction to the book I look forward to seeing how Mr. Kanigel treats it and what new I might learn..

Interesting person, interesting book.

Book was well written, I wouldn't have cared, Because I Love Jane Jacobs; with that said. The book had many insights, and I enjoyed it thoroughly.

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