



Reality TV, Literarily

The Guinea Pig Diaries: My Life as an Experiment
by A.J. Jacobs

Review by Stefan Lonce

A.J. Jacobs is a practitioner of a literary form of reality TV: He embarks on a personal quest ("PQ"), and then he writes about it in a memoir-ish humor book that makes readers laugh...and makes them think.

The Guinea Pig Diaries is Jacobs's latest PQ, which recounts his "experiments," including such hysterical hijinks as registering his children's beautiful nanny, Michelle, on an online dating site and setting her up on dates, with Jacobs, pretending to be Michelle.

According to Jacobs, "[T]he semi-anonymity of the Internet... makes it an honest amplifier. Men will open themselves right up, laying bare their fears, insecurities and hopes...."

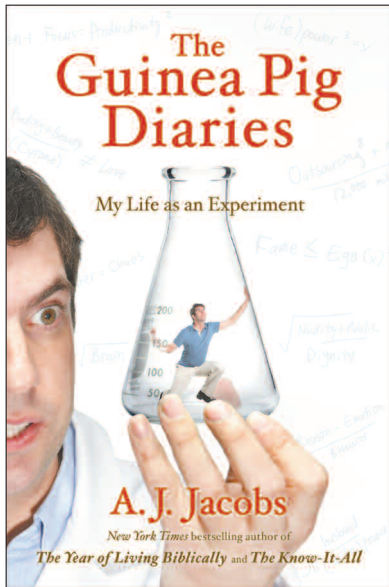
In another PQ, Jacobs hired two personal assistants in India, who, by email and phone, assist him;

Asha handles Jacobs' personal tasks (such as writing apologetic emails to Jacobs's wife) and Honey helps with his job – Jacobs writes for *Esquire* Magazine. Jacobs also tried to observe George Washington's 110 "Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour." Jacobs writes that GW was extremely disciplined, which enabled him persevere through the harrowing Revolutionary War.

Like his previous book, *The Year of Living Biblically* (when he tried to observe as many Biblical commandments as possible), Jacobs's PQs are the latest incarnation of an old American literary art form. In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau described his PQ of spending a year living in a tiny cabin in the woods. Upton Sinclair, pretending to be an ordinary worker, worked in meatpacking plants, whose unsanitary and dangerous working conditions he exposed in *The Jungle*. Eric Schlosser updated Sinclair in his compelling PQ that examined America's agricultural-industrial complex, *Fast Food Nation*.

A more recent literary PQ is Julie Powell's delicious book, *Julie & Julia*, about a year spent cooking every recipe in Julia Child's *Mastering the art of French Cooking*. These PQ books work because they tell great stories in a compelling way; we root for the author/protagonist to succeed because...the PQ is fun, or shocking, or enlightening, or some combination thereof.

I interviewed A.J. Jacobs (www.ajjacobs.com) by email; here are excerpts:



How do you get your ideas for your "experiments"?

Sometimes readers suggest them. The last chapter of *The Guinea Pig Diaries* is actually a reader's idea.

How much lying do you think people do on the Internet?

A crazy amount. But at the same time, the Internet does allow us to open ourselves up like no other medium before. On the Internet, people talk about their fears, addictions, secret crushes on Dick Cheney, etc.

How did your experiment of pretending, online, to be a beautiful woman enlighten you about how men treat women?

Some men were sleazier than you could have imagined. Married men hitting on her. And one guy wrote 'I'm not a professional gynecologist, but I'd be happy to take a look.' On the other hand, there were many wonderful, open, sweet men out there.

People often read emails carelessly. As a writer and a regular email-er, what advice do you have for writing effective emails?

Keep them short! Not as short as this answer, but short. I try to keep mine about five sentences, max.

If you could travel in time and ask George Washington one question, what would you ask, and what do you think his answer would be?

I'd ask him what is the key to greatness. I think he would say thinking of others first. Self-sacrifice was his key. As a young man, he wrote a list of the 110 Rules of Life. It was all about respect for others, self-discipline and dignity. Also, not adjusting your private parts in public. That was literally rule number two out of the 110. It seems to have served him well.

If you had car and were to get a vanity plate, what would it say?

XKY 412. I've always thought it'd be cool to own a vanity plate with random letters and numbers, so that no one would know it's a vanity plate but me.

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<p style="text-align: center; color: blue; font-weight: bold; margin: 0;">Tuesday:</p> <p style="margin: 0;">Stuffed Flounder French Fries & Salad \$15⁹⁵</p>	<p style="text-align: center; color: blue; font-weight: bold; margin: 0;">Wednesday:</p> <p style="margin: 0;">Broiled Scallops Pasta & Salad \$15⁹⁵</p>
<p style="text-align: center; color: blue; font-weight: bold; margin: 0;">Thursday: BBQ Ribs French Fries & Salad \$15⁹⁵</p> <p style="text-align: center; color: blue; font-weight: bold; margin: 0;">Bar Karaoke at 9:00</p>	<p style="text-align: center; color: blue; font-weight: bold; margin: 0;">Friday: Steak French Fries, Onion Rings & Salad \$18⁹⁵</p>
<p style="text-align: center; color: blue; font-weight: bold; margin: 0;">Saturday: Prime Rib \$19⁹⁵ Baked Potato, Corn on the Cob & Salad</p>	

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