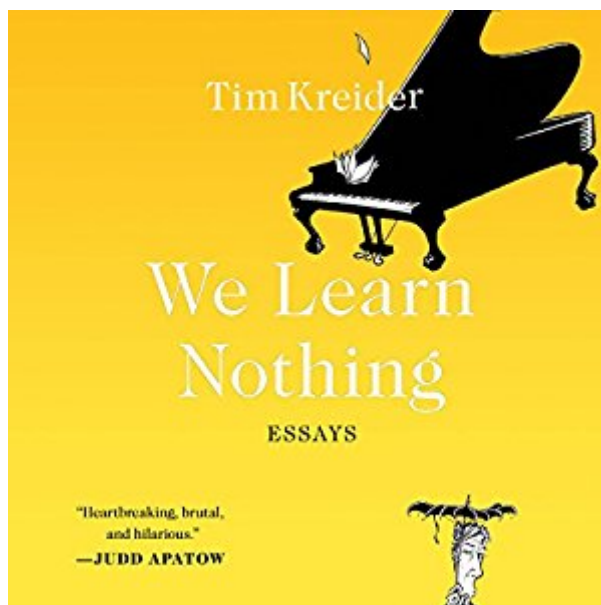


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We Learn Nothing: Essays



Synopsis

In *We Learn Nothing*, satirical cartoonist Tim Kreider turns his funny, brutally honest eye to the dark truths of the human condition, asking big questions about human-sized problems: What if you survive a brush with death and it doesn't change you? Why do we fall in love with people we don't even like? How do you react when someone you've known for years unexpectedly changes genders? With a perfect combination of humor and pathos, these essays leave us with newfound wisdom and a unique prism through which to examine our own chaotic journeys through life. These are the conversations you have only with best friends or total strangers, late at night over drinks, near closing time.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I bought this book after reading an essay ("The Busy Trap") by this author in the New York Times online. I had never heard of Tim Kreider before, but this essay was so topical, so insightful, so on-target that I simply had to see what else he had to say. I was a little hesitant because it became clear after a bit of research that Kreider's politics and mine were pretty far out of sync. (Not that I mind competing viewpoints, I just don't like the whole bashing thing.) I need not have worried. Unlike much of Kreider's work of the George W. Bush era, which consistently savaged all things Republican, *We Learn Nothing* is not overtly political. Each essay is unique, highly original, wistful, soul-baring, poignant, and achingly human. Although a naturally passionate lefty partisan, Kreider is, to his immense credit, rigorously intellectually honest and reflexively fair throughout this latest

collection. He is unsparingly critical of himself and those with whom he aligns, and gracious and empathetic to his philosophical opposites. It feels a little like an act of atonement, as though Kreider is saying: Sorry I got a little carried away there. See, I'm much better now. I cannot recall ever having read an author so preternaturally incisive, so aware, so adept at performing what amounts to a full monty of the soul without seeming self-indulgent. Kreider is relentlessly introspective and profoundly self-aware. Yet this is no act of mere navel-gazing. Above all, *We Learn Nothing* is the work of a sensitive, piercing intelligence trying to make sense of the world by first making sense of itself. This book should be required reading for anyone trying to come to terms with this messy, confusing, brutal, beautiful, tragic, hilarious, stupid, fragile thing we call life. Scratch that: This book should be required reading, period. After reading this book I thought, I would love to spend an afternoon with this guy over beers, discussing anything and everything.

It's easy to compare a book like this to the works of a host of other contemporary essayists (Sedaris, et al), but after the second or third essay I realized Kreider's voice is unique: he tells stories, often with the barest of details, in a way that doesn't expose himself too much and/or doesn't exploit someone else in the process. Which is to say, he has written a book that is heart-breaking, charming, edge-of-your-seat suspenseful (hoping that he will offer up all the gory details) and -- even though I hate this word when used to describe writing -- generous. Kreider is a masterful storyteller, and I can't recall the last time I enjoyed a book of essays this much. The stories themselves cover a lot of terrain: dysfunctional family members, transgendered friends, near death experiences, relationships; but always from the perspective of someone who's madly in love with his friends and family, warts and all. Kreider exposes the ugly/beautiful truth of what it means to be human in the most honest, thoughtful, endearing and entertaining way. Highly, highly recommended.

Tim Kreider emerges in "*We Learn Nothing*" as an artful essayist and a careful observer of human nature. Through life experiences ranging from a near death experience to dealing with the family pain of an uncle with mental illness, Tim brings deep and honest introspection to bear on complex issues. (DISCLAIMER: Having grown up with Tim through high school and college, it could be argued I am not the most objective of literary critics here. That being said, having some personal insight into certain chapters--the lost friendship of Felix, for instance, or the death of his father--has made this book even more poignant for me.) What I learned from this book, most of all, was that Kreider HAD, through honest thinking and well-crafted prose, learned quite about himself and others. I think I learned a thing or two about myself, as well. An easy "Five Stars!"

"I'm more productive now, and more successful; for the first time in my life I'm supporting myself by doing what I've always wanted to do. But I laugh less than I used to. Drinking was, among other things, an excellent excuse to devote eight or ten consecutive hours to sitting idly around having hilarious conversations with friends, than which I'm still not convinced there is any better possible use of our time on earth." "With some people, it's all a foregone conclusion once you get close enough to inhale the scent of their hair." "It's like the revelation I had the first time I ever flew in an airplane as a kid: when you break through the cloud cover you realize that above the passing squalls and doldrums there is a realm of eternal sunlight, so keen and brilliant you have to squint against it, a vision to hold on to when you descend once again beneath the clouds, under the oppressive, petty jurisdiction of the local weather." "After my unsuccessful murder I wasn't unhappy for an entire year."

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