

Books Trend: Living a Year in Another Life

A rash of memoirs by people spending 12 months following rules shows self-deprivation is strangely hip.

By Jennie Yabroff

Newsweek

Oct. 1, 2007 issue - There are lots of rules in the Bible. A. J. Jacobs decided to abide by them all. He followed the Ten Commandments. He strove to refrain from gossiping, lying and coveting. He stopped shaving and avoided wearing clothes made of mixed fibers. Did he choose this arduous path to be closer to God? No, he did it to sell a book. Because, if the publishing industry is right, deprivation is hip. "The Year of Living Biblically," Jacobs's forthcoming chronicle of his yearlong quest to follow every mandate in the Bible, is just one of a recent flurry of "year of" books. Sara Bongiorni gave up buying Chinese products for "A Year Without 'Made in China'." Judith Levine gave up shopping altogether for "Not Buying It." Barbara Kingsolver fed her family with what they could grow or source locally for "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle." Ellen Currey-Wilson banned TV from the house for "The Big Turnoff." And Colin Beavan swore off luxuries like toilet paper, disposable cups and air conditioning for his blog No Impact Man.

These experiments in doing without often result in paydays for the authors: "The Year of Living Biblically" is being made into a film by Paramount, "No Impact Man" will become both a book and a documentary film, and "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle" has been a New York Times best seller. So why is this a year of year-of books? One answer is that the more ethically motivated projects, like Kingsolver's and Beavan's, tap into growing concern about protecting the environment. (NEWSWEEK's Raina Kelley has just finished living as a freegan for a month, and chronicled her experience on NEWSWEEK.com and in this issue of the magazine.) Reading about their sacrifices makes us feel vicariously virtuous—we may not have the discipline to live without olive oil and spices, but at least we know we should. More-esoteric projects, like Jacobs's, provide a sheer rubbernecking thrill while supplying easily digested information on a subject of common interest. And the domestic strife that results from the project can be very funny. In "The Year of Living Biblically," Jacobs's wife suffers through her husband's ever-growing beard, increasingly strange dietary requirements and injunction against touching her, or any chair she may have sat on, while she's menstruating. (As revenge, she purposely sits on every chair in the house, forcing him to perch on his son's six-inch wooden bench.)

But the real appeal for readers may be in the way the writers, by saying no to so much of modern life, impose strict parameters on the abundance of choice facing the rest of us. By limiting their options, confining their experiments to a year and clearly defining their goals, these writers organize the messiness of life.

The recent vogue for year-of memoirs can be traced to Peter Mayle's 1990 "A Year in Provence," in which he moved to France with his wife. Next came 2005's "Julie and Julia," followed in 2006 by Maria Dahvana Headley's year of saying yes to every man who asked her out for "The Year of Yes," and Norah Vincent's year-and-a-half of cross-dressing for "Self-Made Man."

By contrast, many recent year-of books are about the writer's staying home and not doing something. "We're such a hyperaffluent society, what else is left for us to do than take things away from our lives?" says Ron Hogan, author of the publishing-industry blog Galleycat.com. "Part of the idea of saying no is a little old-fashioned," says Judy Clain, the Little, Brown editor who bought "Julie and Julia," a year-of memoir in which writer Julie Powell made every recipe in Julia Child's "Mastering the Art of French Cooking." "We are so overwhelmed by technology, we have so much access to so many choices, these books offer a way to deprive or limit ourselves." Perhaps, in following the writers' attempts to lead lives pared down to the essentials, readers may be reminded of the necessity of finding a way to give their remaining years meaning, whether by not buying tropical fruit in February or letting their beards grow to their knees. "All of the possibilities in a life happen in a year," says Lorin Stein, an editor at Farrar, Straus and Giroux. "The idea that the year is going to be a productive year, that it will not go unmarked, is really soothing." And what could be more soothing than a year in which your options are so limited as to almost not exist? As Kingsolver's daughter Camille, who contributes recipes to the book, discovered, limiting her shopping list to local, organic produce was "actually easier. When you peruse the farmers' market for fresh produce, the options are clear. You don't miss what's not there." Similarly, Jacobs finds himself longing for the simple, Biblical life once his experiment ends: "The first day was the worst. I felt unanchored. Too many choices." However, if the fad for deprivation memoirs continues at its current pace, readers considering a packed shelf in a bookstore may not enjoy that same luxury.

Biblical Living: Following Every Rule for One Year

What if you spent one year following every rule in the Bible? A. J. Jacobs did exactly that.

By Jennie Yabroff

Newsweek

Sept. 21, 2007 - After A. J. Jacobs spent a year reading the entire Encyclopaedia Britannica for his book "The Know-It-All," he figured he had the yearlong experiment thing down. How much harder could it be to follow every rule in the Bible? Much, much harder, he soon discovered, as he found himself growing his beard, struggling not to curse and asking strangers for permission to stone them for adultery. Jacobs spent the year carrying around a stapled list of the more than 700 rules and prohibitions identified in the Good Book, and also consulted with religious leaders and spent time with the Amish, Hassidic Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses. He spoke to NEWSWEEK's Jennie Yabroff about his experience and his new book, "The Year of Living Biblically" (*Simon & Schuster*), which goes on sale Oct. 9. Excerpts:

NEWSWEEK: It's been a little over a year since your experiment ended and you shaved your beard. How's the life of sin?

A. J. Jacobs: It's all right. I miss my sin-free life, but I guess I was never sin free. I was able to cut down on my coveting maybe 40 percent, but I was still a coveter. Flat-screen TVs, the front yard of my friend in the suburbs, a better cell phone, higher Amazon rankings. And that's not to mention coveting my neighbor's wife. I live in New York, I work in publishing, so there's a lot of coveting, lying and gossiping.

What, if any, rules are you still following?

I'm not Gandhi or Angelina Jolie, but I made some strides. The experience changed me in big ways and small ways. There's a lot about gratefulness in the Bible, and I would say I'm more thankful. I focus on the hundred little things that go right in a day, instead of the three or four things that go wrong. And I love the Sabbath. There's something I really like about a forced day of rest. Also, during the experiment I wore a lot of white clothes, because Ecclesiastes says let your garments always be white, and I loved it, so I look like Tom Wolfe now. Wearing white just made me happier. I couldn't be in a bad mood walking down the street looking like I was about to play in the semifinals at Wimbledon. One thing I learned is that the outside affects the inside, your behavior shapes your thoughts. I also really liked what one of my spiritual advisers said, which was that you can view life as a series of rights and entitlements, or a series of responsibilities. I like seeing my life as a series of responsibilities. It's sort of, "Ask not what the world can do for you, ask what you can do for the world."

There seems to be a great interest in religion and fundamentalism in our culture right now. Why do you think that is?

As far as I can see it, it goes in waves. Now it seems like the third great awakening. Is that right? I've forgotten my encyclopedia knowledge. But I do think we're going through a wave right now. You certainly see it with Islam. I think it's ebbed a little bit because the atheist

movement is creating backlash against the religious movement, so it might have peaked a year ago. But it's certainly the defining issue of our time. I hope the book will appeal to both the sacred and the profane.

Are you a more religious person as a result of this experiment?

Well, I don't want to give away the ending, but let's say I started the year as an agnostic, and now I am a reverent agnostic. Whether or not there is a God, I believe in sacredness. Rituals can be sacred, the Sabbath can be sacred however you choose to observe it.

Which is the greater learning tool, the Bible or the encyclopedia?

That's a tough question. The Bible project was a lot more difficult than the encyclopedia project. The Bible affected every single part of my life, it affected the way I walked, the way I dressed, the way I hugged my wife, the way I ate. The year was the most extreme makeover of my life. In terms of which is the better learning tool, the encyclopedia does contain a lot of biblical passages in the different books, so it might contain most of the Bible in it.

Most of the religious figures you met with seemed very willing to help you with your quest. Were you afraid anyone would be offended by the idea of you doing this as a commercial project, or see it as a gimmick?

Yes, I thought I would encounter that. I didn't encounter it that much, and I don't know why. Maybe because I went in really curious, I didn't go in to mock religion. It was much more a journey to understand. There are parts of the book where I take the Bible literally and show that that is not a good way to read the Bible. There are people in America who do read it that way, and I think that is a mistake. So there is that aspect to the book, but at the same time it is an earnest spiritual quest where I'm trying to figure out if something's missing in my life and what I should tell my kids about religion. I actually invited a Jehovah's Witness over to my apartment, and I think I'm the only person in history who out-Bible-talked a Jehovah's Witness. After three hours, he looked at his watch and told me he had to leave.

What rule was the hardest to follow?

Two kinds of rules were hard. Avoiding sins we commit every day like lying, gossiping and coveting was hard, and then there were the rules that were hard to do in modern life, like stoning adulterers. But I did manage to fulfill that one. What happened was, I was in the park, dressed in my white garb, and this man in his 70s came over and asked what I was doing. I explained I was trying to follow every rule in the Bible as literally as possible, including growing my beard, not mixing fibers, stoning adulterers, and he said, "I'm an adulterer, are you going to stone me?" I said, "Yeah that would be great." The Bible doesn't say what size the stones have to be, so I had been carrying around these pebbles in my pocket for just such an occasion. I took the pebbles out of my pocket, and he instantly picked

one up and threw it at me, so I decided, an eye for an eye, and I tossed one at him. It did provide an entry for talking to people about capital punishment and the Bible. How could they stone adulterers, what was life like back then, does it apply today. I tried to say to the guy, you shouldn't sleep with other women, but I don't know if it sunk in.

Reading this book, I felt so bad for your wife.

Yes, after "The Know-It-All" she was hoping I'd do a book about eating in every restaurant in New York. She's a saint. It definitely put some stress in our marriage. There was the beard, I had this hedgehog on my face. She wouldn't kiss me for two months. Also, the Bible tells you to build a hut. And since I couldn't get permission to build one on the sidewalks of New York, I built a hut in our apartment. My wife didn't appreciate the construction project in our living room.

Many women say some passages in the Bible can seem pretty misogynistic. Was that a problem for your relationship?

It was. Parts of the Bible say that the man is the head of the household and should make the decisions, which did not translate into reality in our household. She found that a disturbing part of religion. It was something I really had to wrestle with. One of the lessons of the book is, there is some picking and choosing in following the Bible, and I think that's OK. Some people call that cafeteria religion, which is supposed to be a disparaging term, but I think there's nothing wrong with cafeterias, I've had some delicious meals in cafeterias. I've also had some terrible meals in cafeterias. It's all about picking the right parts. You want to take a heaping serving of the parts about compassion, mercy and gratefulness—instead of the parts about hatred and intolerance.

Once the experiment ends, you write about being feeling unanchored without your list of rules. Were you comforted by the restrictions of living Biblically? And do you think that's part of the attraction of organized religion for many people?

Oh, absolutely. We all talk about freedom of choice, but there's something very attractive about freedom from choice. Religion provides structure, mooring, anchoring. Should you covet? No. Should you give 10 percent to the needy? Yes. It really structures your life. After my year I felt unmoored, overwhelmed by choice. I have adjusted, but I'm still overwhelmed by choice, as we all are in America.

What's the next book?

I'm waiting for divine inspiration. Seriously, I happen to love these experiments, and I like reading about other people's experiments as well, so I'd like to stay in the genre for a couple more books. I think it's a really interesting way to approach a subject. These books are like memoir, with added value. You get someone's life, and you also get an introduction to a whole fascinating topic.

My One Month Living as a Freegan

Are freegans oddballs or sages? NEWSWEEK's Raina Kelley spent a month living as one to find out.

By Raina Kelley

Newsweek

Oct. 1, 2007 issue - Before June of this year, I thought only the sad and desperate ate garbage. Then I discovered the freegans. For those new to the term (free + vegan), a freegan is a person who has decided to boycott capitalist society by severely curtailing consumption of resources through reusing, recycling and Dumpster diving. Taking the expression "Waste not, want not" to its extreme conclusion, freegans try not to purchase anything up to and including food. Instead, they rely on bartering and what the rest of us leave for the garbageman. Now a presence in most American cities, freeganism first popped up out West in Seattle and Portland in the mid-1990s. At first blush, freegans might seem odd and peripheral. But I began to wonder: are they a fringe group reminiscent of our primitive past or are they our carbon-neutral future? At a time when the environmental movement is gaining mainstream acceptance, the freegans are actually living the most hard-core beliefs about consumption and sustainability.

America's overconsumption is legendary. We struggle with morbid obesity, use 25 percent of the world's oil and buy houses we can't afford. If the mildest projections are true, we are recklessly contributing to the warming of the planet. OK, we've made some changes, but does anyone really believe that "carbon offsetting" is anything other than eating your cake and having it, too?

Thus an innocent idea was born. I would live as a freegan for a month. I had nine rules: I would be a vegan who bought nothing but local and/or organic food. I would use only ecofriendly transportation, cut my electricity bill in half and erase my carbon footprint. My mantra would be "Recycle, reuse, renew," while never forgetting to reflect on my impact on the Earth before acting. Any money I saved would go into a "Freedom Savings Account" and be used toward allowing me to quit my 9-to-5 as soon as possible. That's tough work for an eBay-loving, omnivorous, cigarette-smoking shopaholic. But I was determined to change my profligate ways. I would transform myself into an eco-princess—a green goddess.

That's not exactly what happened. Here is a summary diary of what did.

DAY 1: I want a Diet Coke. I am craving sugar. Sometimes a 75-cent packet of Skittles is all that prevents a co-worker from getting slapped. I haven't been the same since I pitched this story. I see waste everywhere. I feel guilty about everything—doing my laundry, spending a day at the mall, leaving my computer on at night, relaxing in the shower, BUYING FOOD AT THE GROCERY STORE. How can absolutely everything I've been taught to do to survive be wrong?

DAY 2: Caught in the rain, unable to buy an umbrella and late for work is not a good start to this experiment. Luckily, I don't give up in the face of hardship, I whine. Lesson #1: People don't want to hear about your moral superiority or the difficulty of a choice you made voluntarily. It's a bit like models saying their jobs are hard or movie stars complaining about the paparazzi (a bit, just a bit). The only possible response from people is Shut Up! So I did. Briefly.

DAY 3: I watched a freegan "trash tour" (also known as Dumpster diving). Yes, it sounds disgusting, and is illegal in many cities, which is why our lawyers would not let me partake. But you would be surprised at what freegans find in the garbage. I'd bet that you would eat it. I saw trash bags full of bagels so fresh that when they were opened, the air filled with the aroma of freshly baked bread. I also saw canned goods and even toilet paper among the rubbish. The USDA estimates that more than 90 billion pounds of food is wasted in America every year—much of it from inefficient ordering and inventory systems. Combine that with a scarcity of space on store shelves, and grocers cannot afford to let products languish unsold. I also discovered America's Second Harvest. This nonprofit group takes surplus and distressed food and other groceries, distributes it through its network of food banks and thus feeds more than 25 million hungry people a year. So maybe the Freegans have a point.

DAYS 4-6: Who knew you could gather wild parsnips, bay leaves and sorrel for your dinner in Brooklyn's Prospect Park? Freegans think of themselves as urban foragers—they root around in public parks for food. It's fun, but don't mushroom-hunt if you, like me, don't know what you're doing—someone could die.

DAY 8: Who has time to forage after a hard day's work? Why do I have to make all the sacrifices for this planet? Don't let anyone tell you going green is easy. It's not. It's time-consuming, confusing and infuriating. I was doing fine, living my little piece of the American Dream, and now the inconvenient truth is that I feel bad about it. I like the convenience of modern life. That's the problem with freeganism—it is hard work. Under normal circumstances, I constantly run late. But as a freegan, I was late for 83 percent of my obligations—up sharply from 47 percent the previous month. There are just so many things to do—pack my organic lunch, unplug all my chargers, turn off my computer and put scraps in the compost.

DAY 14: I hate being a vegan. I have wide flat teeth in the back for grain and pointy ones in the front for meat—animals are a natural part of my diet. I feel like I'm starving to death out of guilt over being at the top of the food chain. Sure, I've lost 12 pounds and have lots of energy. So what? There had to be some kind of upside to subsisting on Kashi cereal and peanut butter and jelly. I'm craving sushi so badly, I might go and catch my own. Oh, and it is impossible to compost in a house with three cats.

DAYS 24-26: I'm whipsawing wildly from self-righteousness to despair. My poor husband was nearly strangled when he put a non-organic lemon in my iced tea. We are getting a little testy with each other—squabbling over stupid stuff like who gets to press fast forward on the digital video recorder. Some people say meat makes you aggressive. But meat's got nothing on deprivation. As it turns out, being a freegan is a lonely existence. I didn't want to hang out with my freegan mentors because I feel like a pretender. And I don't want to see my friends. I don't want to be a mooch or a killjoy. That's just what happens when you think most people in the world are living their lives the wrong way.

DAY 31: I expected to go flying back into the arms of my local Target without a glance back. I can't. I would just feel too guilty. And not that free-form kind of liberal guilt because life is harder on some people than it is on me, but real guilt. I know, I whined a lot. It's not easy to make all your decisions in line with your conscience. But we can't deny that our planet is warming and therefore I am hedging my bets. I think I'll try moderation. I've already learned how to turn the lights out when I leave the room. And you know what? I am determined to limit my buying. So one pair of fall shoes won't break my budget or make me feel guilty but 12 pairs would—a distinction that I would not have been able to make four weeks ago. There's too much waste, and I'd like to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem. And with the twelve hundred dollars I saved, I can now retire two weeks earlier than I planned. I'm a changed woman. Recycle, reuse, renew? You bet. Shopping in the trash? Sorry, can't do it.