

BOOK REVIEW

Eyes on the street: The life of Jane Jacobs, by Robert Kanigel, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2016

Most people, if they know the name Jane Jacobs, know her from her seminal work, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Jacobs, 1961). Some will be familiar with her forays into economics including the lesser-known *The Economy of Cities* (Jacobs, 1970) and *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* (Jacobs, 1985), and her work as an urban activist in New York City and Toronto. Yet few know the Jane Jacobs as revealed by Robert Kanigel in his meticulously researched biography, *Eyes on the Street: The Life of Jane Jacobs*. In it, Jacobs is revealed to be simultaneously more extraordinary, and more ordinary, than is widely known.

This book is about the various professional influences and personal experiences that shaped her life and her viewpoints on urbanity, community, and activism. It is also about the ongoing private struggles she had being a wife, mother, friend, and full-time employee, exacerbated by the multiple demands on her time after she found fame with the publication of *Death and Life* (Jacobs, 1961). Finally, it is about the way in which she influenced others; mentored young thinkers, writers, and activists; and never stopped trying, and wanting, to share her insatiable curiosity about cities.

Kanigel splits the book into three parts. The first part, the strongest, focuses on years that are generally unknown to a wider audience and reveals many experiences that would shape her later writings. It delves into Jacobs' childhood, her early life experiences, and the first 15 years she spent in New York City. Here, before Jacobs became the hero, the activist, the theoretician, and the urbanist, we learn about Jane the daughter and sister, the innocent, the wife and friend, and the employee. An example of how Jacobs' early life influenced her later views is illustrated by her short visit to an aunt in a rural Appalachian town, which exposed Jacobs to the decline of formerly vibrant communities through the "loss of human craft, ingenuity, and economic vitality" (p. 59), a visit that had a strong impact on the rest of her life. Eighty-five years later, it may be easy to read much into her early introduction to social upheaval stemming from industrial design, perhaps too much; however, this early fascination with, and regard for, the lives of the seemingly unremarkable appears to have been a common theme in Jacobs' life.

A similarly instructive early experience was Jacobs' 1935–1937 series of four articles for *Vogue* magazine. Each article presents an exposé-cum-travelogue of a different wholesale fashion district in Manhattan (Butzner, 1935; 1936a; 1936b; 1937), revealing Jacobs as a remarkable urbanist. In these anthropologically inspired visits to the fur, leather, flower, and diamond districts of Manhattan, Jacobs spent as much column space describing the goods on sale as the people living and working there. In her first submission, she described the activity in the streets: "sidewalks and gutters of the district are crowded with groups of cigar-puffing fur merchants, dapper buyers, and sales [personnel] from the adjoining garment district, who engage in loud and unrestrained dickering," and in the auction house, where "dickering gets more and more involved, the auctioneer skillfully lures the rivals on, and the competing buyers, before the sale is concluded, have probably spat at each other and called down picturesque curses upon each others' heads" (Butzner, 1935, p. 103). Here we see evidence of Jacobs' nascent fascination with how people interact with their environment and each other and the sort of community that emerges, palimpsest-like, from years, and layers, of these interactions.

Kanigel covers Jacobs' subsequent writing jobs in New York, which are as varied and strangely fascinating as one could hope. She converted technical information to clear prose for *Iron Age* magazine; worked in the World War II-era Office of War Information to create propaganda for both domestic and international audiences; and wrote for the State Department's *Amerika* magazine,

destined for the Cold War–era Soviet Union. Though these experiences undoubtedly gave Jacobs opportunities to hone her skills at making complicated or dense subjects understandable for diverse audiences, they also paint the picture of a woman far from the motherly, white-haired activist of her later years. Who is this Jane Jacobs writing about iron smelters and enlightening Soviets about U.S. high schools? Why is the Jane Jacobs we love or loathe so different from the real woman we come to know through this book, the woman with a tight circle of friends and family, the woman who could be insecure about writing and editing her own work, the woman who maintained decades-long correspondence with students, editors, and admirers, all quickly turned into close friends?

As expected, *Eyes on the Street* does go into detail about Jacobs' writing process, her editing relationships, and the reception of her best-known books. The second section discusses Jane Jacobs at her more broadly known peak as a critic of contemporary urban theory and planning practice, focusing on the researching and writing of *Death and Life* (Jacobs, 1961) and her work as a neighborhood activist. The final section follows Jacobs and her family to Toronto as she simultaneously establishes herself in a new home and country and reacts to her fame as a critic and activist.

Eyes on the Street is part of an increasingly crowded landscape of biographies and reexaminations of Jane Jacobs. Months before its publishing, Peter Laurence's *Becoming Jane Jacobs* (Laurence, 2016) was released, joining *Reconsidering Jane Jacobs* (Mennel, Mennel, & Mennel, 2011), *The Battle for Gotham: New York in the Shadow of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs* (Gratz, 2010), and *Wrestling with Moses: How Jane Jacobs Took on New York's Master Builder and Transformed the American City* (Flint, 2010), all published between 2010 and 2011. Kanigel's book finds its niche among this plethora of recent interest and writing in its focus on Jacobs' personal life and relationships. His determination to go beyond her professional and public accomplishments and flesh Jacobs out as an individual, insecure and flawed, brave and gutsy, creates an immensely enjoyable and ceaselessly readable biography of an illustrious, yet strangely unknown, icon.

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