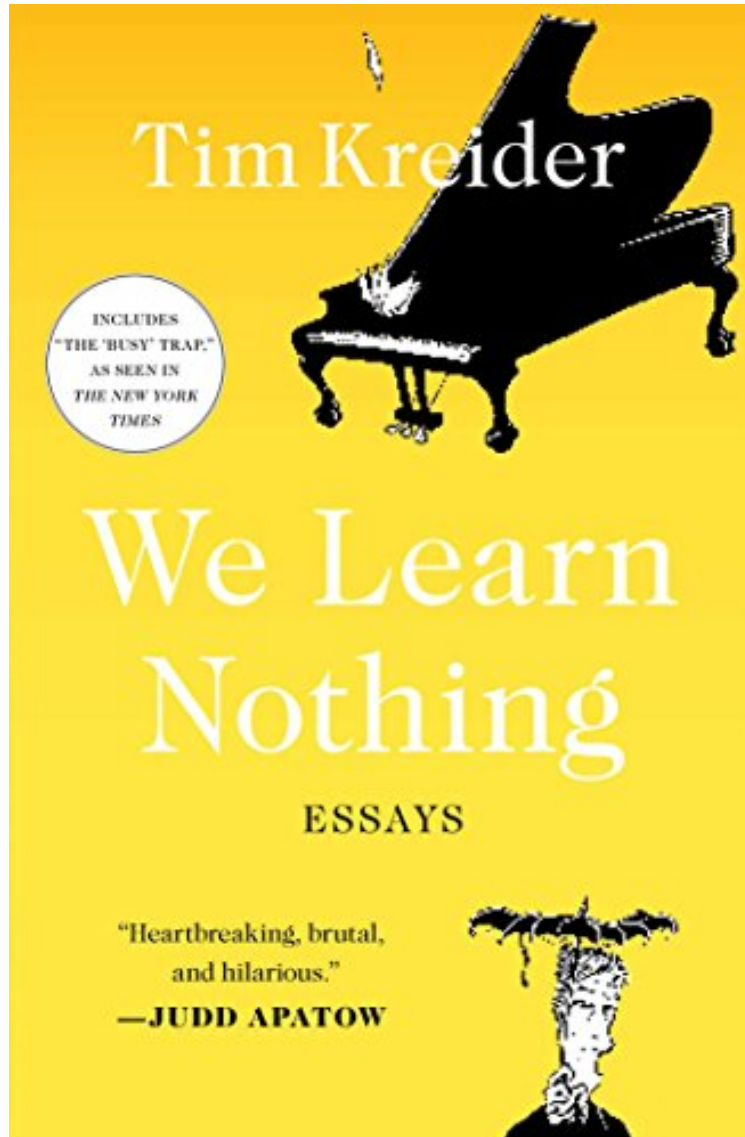


(Download pdf ebook) We Learn Nothing: Essays

We Learn Nothing: Essays

Tim Kreider

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Tim Kreider : We Learn Nothing: Essays before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised We Learn Nothing: Essays:

64 of 64 people found the following review helpful. Incisive, confessional, hilarious, rueful commentary by a master essayist By ReddheddI 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. 50 of 52 people found the following review helpful. Masterful storytelling By Dustin G. Rhodes 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. 8 of 8 people found the following review helpful. The "Apology" of Kreider By Xydecco 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!"

"Kreider locates the right simile and the pith of situations as he carefully catalogues humanity's inventive and manifold ways of failing" (Publishers Weekly, starred review). 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, peppered with Kreider's signature cartoons, 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. This edition also includes the sensationally popular essay "The Busy Trap," as seen in the *New York Times*.

"Tim Kreider's writing is heartbreaking, brutal and hilarious—usually at the same time. He can do in a few pages what I need several hours of screen time and tens of millions to accomplish. And he does it better. Come to think of it, I'd rather not do a blurb. I am beginning to feel bad about myself." (Judd Apatow) "A remarkable collection . . . I found myself nodding in agreement and wondering how [Tim Kreider] could so consistently express my feelings, and express them so much better than I ever could." (Nancy Pearl NPR.org) "In a political atmosphere as angry as this, [Kreider's] oblique, self-deprecating commentary may be the only angle to which party loyalists on either side are likely to respond. *We Learn Nothing* should be their required reading." (Willamette Week (Portland, Ore.)) "Kreider is as compelling a writer as he is a visual satirist. His essays tend toward the 'elegiac,' as he puts it—something that cannot be said of his cartoons—but the same delightfully brutal honesty underlies both. Kreider's descriptions are often simultaneously surprising and resonant . . . self-effacing and funny." (City Paper (Baltimore)) "Amazing . . . Any thinking person with a sense of humor will find *We Learn Nothing* provocative and delightful, reminiscent, in varying ways, of David Foster Wallace, James Thurber, David Sedaris, and Susan Sontag." (Jennifer Finney Boylan author of *She's Not There*) "Kreider is a superb essayist, a funny and fluent storyteller who wears his cultural literacy lightly . . . To read "The Creature Walks Among Us," "The Czar's Daughter," "Escape from Pony Island," or "An Insult to the

Brain” is to appreciate a mordant but affectionate observer of life’s rich pageant, and a craftsman who almost never puts a word wrong.” (Johns Hopkins Magazine)“Kreider locates the right simile and the pith of situations as he carefully catalogues humanity’s inventive and manifold ways of failing.” (Publishers Weekly (starred review))“Earnest, well-turned personal essays about screw-ups without an ounce of sanctimony—a tough trick.” (Kirkus s)“Tim Kreider may be the most subversive soul in America and his subversions—by turns public and intimate, political and cultural—are just what our weary, mixed-up nation needs. The essays in *We Learn Nothing* are for anybody who believes it’s high time for some answers, damn it.” (Richard Russo Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Empire Falls*)“Whether he is expressing himself in highly original cartoons that are hilarious visual poems, or in prose that exposes our self-delusions by the way he probes his own experience with candor, Tim Kreider is a writer-artist who brilliantly understands that every humorist at his best is a liberator. Because he is irreverent, makes us laugh, ruffles the feathers of the pretentious and the pompous, and keeps us honest, *We Learn Nothing* is a pleasure from its first page to the last.” (Charles Johnson bestselling author of *Middle Passage*)“*We Learn Nothing* articulated, for me, more human truths than any book in recent memory. When you’re done with it, it almost feels like finishing a textbook: you actually feel like you understand how things work a little better.” (PublishersWeekly.com)About the AuthorTim Kreider has written for *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker* online, *The Week*, *The Men’s Journal*, and *Nerve.com*. His popular comic strip, *The Pain—When Will It End?*, ran in alternative weeklies and has been collected in three books by Fantagraphics. He is the author of two collections of essays, *We Learn Nothing* and *I Wrote This Book Because I Love You*. He divides his time between New York City and the Chesapeake Bay area.Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.Reprieve Fourteen years ago, I was stabbed in the throat. This is kind of a long story and less interesting than it sounds. A lot of people have told me about their own near-death experiences over the years, often in harrowing medical detail, imagining that those details—how many times they rolled the car, how many vertebrae shattered, how many months spent in traction—will somehow convey the subjective psychic force of the experience, the way some people will relate the whole narrative of a dream in a futile attempt to evoke its ambient feeling. Except for the ten or fifteen minutes during which it looked like I was about to die, which I would prefer not to relive, getting stabbed wasn’t even among the worst experiences of my life. In fact it was one of the best things that ever happened to me. After my unsuccessful murder I wasn’t unhappy for an entire year. Winston Churchill’s aphorism about the exhilaration of being shot at without result is verifiably true. I was reminded of an old Ray Bradbury story, “*The Lost City of Mars*,” in which a man finds a miraculous machine that enables him to experience his own violent death over and over again, as many times as he likes—in locomotive collisions, race car crashes, exploding rocket ships—until he emerges flayed of all his Christian guilt and unconscious longing for death, forgiven and free, finally alive. I can’t claim to have been continuously euphoric the whole time; it’s just that, during that grace period, nothing much could bother me or get me down. The horrible thing that I’d always dreaded was going to happen to me had finally happened. I figured I was off the hook for a while. In a parallel universe only two millimeters away—the distance between my carotid and the stiletto—I had been flown home in the cargo hold instead of in coach. As far as I was concerned everything in this life was what Raymond Carver, in writing of his own second chance, called “gravy.” My friends immediately mocked me out of my self-consciousness about the nerve damage that had left me with a lopsided smile. I started brewing my own dandelion wine in a big Amish crock. I listened to old one-hit wonders much too stupid to name in print. And I developed a strange new laugh that’s stayed with me to this day—a raucous, barking thing that comes from deep in the diaphragm, the laugh of a much larger man, that makes people in bars or restaurants look over for a second to make sure I’m not about to open up on the crowd with a weapon. I don’t laugh this way all the time—certainly not when I’m just being polite. The last time it happened was when I told my friend Harold, “You don’t understand me,” in mock-wounded protest at some unjust charge of sleazery, and he retorted: “No, sir, I understand you very well—it is you who do not understand yourself.” The laugh always seems to be in response to the same elusive joke, some dark, hilarious universal truth. Not for one passing moment did it occur to me to imagine that *God Must Have Spared My Life for Some Purpose*. Even if I’d been the type who was prone to such silly notions, I would’ve been rudely disabused of it by the heavy-handed coincidence of the Oklahoma City bombing occurring on the same day I spent in a coma. If there is some divine plan that requires my survival and the deaths of all those children in day care, I respectfully decline to participate. What I had been was not blessed or chosen but lucky. Not to turn up my nose at luck; it’s better to be lucky than just about anything else in life. And if you’re reading this now you’re among the lucky, too. I wish I could recommend the experience of not being killed to everyone. It’s a truism that this is why people enjoy thrill-seeking pastimes, ranging from harmless adrenaline fixes like horror movies and roller coasters to what are essentially suicide attempts with safety nets, like bungee jumping and skydiving. The trick is that to get the full effect you have to be genuinely uncertain that you’re going to survive. The best approximation would be to hire an incompetent, Clouseauesque hit man to assassinate you. It’s one of the maddening perversities of human psychology that we only notice we’re alive when we’re reminded we’re going to die, the same way some of us appreciate our girlfriends only after they’ve become exes. I saw the same thing happen, in a more profound and lasting way, to my father when he was terminally ill: a lightning, an amused indifference to the nonsense that the rest of us think of as the serious business of the world. A neighbor was suing my

father over some property dispute during his illness, but if you tried to talk to him about such practical matters he'd just sing you old songs like "A Bird in a Gilded Cage" in a silly, quavering falsetto until you gave up. He cared less about things that didn't matter and more about the things that did. It was during his illness that he gave me the talk that all my artist friends have envied, in which he told me that he and my mother believed in my talent and I shouldn't worry about getting "some dumb job." Maybe people who have lived with the reality of their own mortality for months or years are permanently changed by it, but getting stabbed was more like getting struck by lightning, over almost as soon as it happened, and the illumination didn't last. You can't feel crazily grateful to be alive your whole life any more than you can stay passionately in love forever—or grieve forever, for that matter. Time makes us all betray ourselves and get back to the busywork of living. Before a year had gone by, the same everyday anxieties and frustrations began creeping back. I was disgusted to catch myself yelling in traffic, pounding on my computer, lying awake at night worrying about what was to become of me. I can't recapture that feeling of euphoric gratitude any more than I can really remember the mortal terror I felt when I was pretty sure I had about four minutes to live. But I know that it really happened, that that state of grace is accessible to us, even if I only blundered across it once and never find my way back. At my cabin on the Chesapeake Bay I'll see bald eagles swoop up from the water with wriggling little fish in their talons, and whenever they accidentally drop their catch, I like to imagine that fish trying to tell his friends about his own near-death experience, a perspective so unprecedented there are no words in the fish language to describe it: for a short time he was outside the world, he could see forever, there's so much more than they knew, but he's glad to be back. Once a year on my stabbiversary, I remind myself that this is still my bonus life, a round on the house. But now that I'm back in the slog of everyday life, I have to struggle to keep things in what I still insist is their true perspective. I know intellectually that all the urgently pressing items on our mental lists—our careers, car repairs, the daily headlines, the goddamned taxes—are just so much noise, that what matters is spending time with the people you love. It's just hard to bear in mind when the hard drive crashes or the shower drain clogs first thing in the day. Apparently I can only ever attain that God's-eye view in the grip of the talons. I was not cheered to read about psychological studies suggesting that most people inevitably return to a certain emotional baseline after circumstantial highs and lows. How happy we can hope to be may be as inalterable and unfair as our height or metabolism or the age at which we'll lose our hair. This is reassuring news if you've undergone some trauma, but less so if your own emotional thermostat is set so low it makes you want to phone up the landlord and yell at him. You'd like to think that nearly getting killed would be a permanently life-altering experience, but in truth it was less painful, and occasioned less serious reflection, than certain breakups I've gone through. I've demonstrated an impressive resilience in the face of valuable life lessons, and the main thing I seem to have learned from this one is that I am capable of learning nothing from almost any experience, no matter how profound. If anything, the whole episode only confirmed my solipsistic suspicion that in the story of Me only supporting characters would die, while I, its first-person narrator and star, was immortal. It gave me much more of an existential turn when my vision started to blur. I don't know why we take our worst moods so much more seriously than our best, crediting depression with more clarity than euphoria. We dismiss peak moments and passionate love affairs as an ephemeral chemical buzz, just endorphins or hormones, but accept those 3 A.M. bouts of despair as unsentimental insights into the truth about our lives. It's easy now to dismiss that year as nothing more than the same sort of shaky, hysterical high you'd feel after getting clipped by a taxi. But you could also try to think of it as a glimpse of reality, being jolted out of a lifelong stupor. 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.