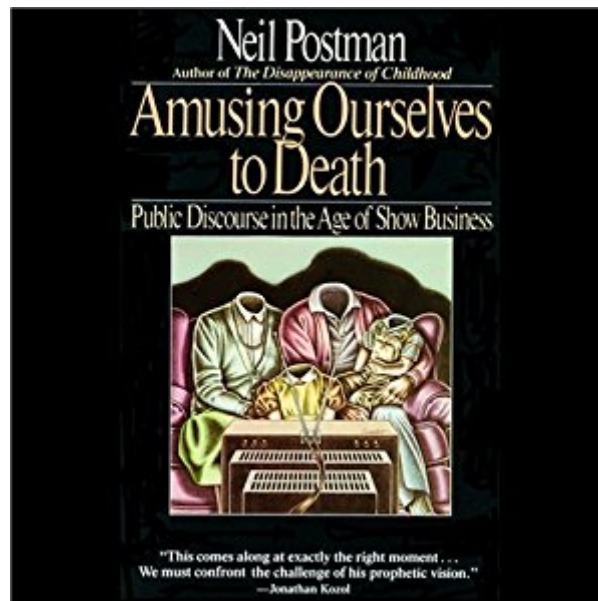


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Amusing Ourselves To Death: Public Discourse In The Age Of Show Business



Synopsis

A brilliant powerful and important book....This is a brutal indictment Postman has laid down and, so far as I can see, an irrefutable one. --Jonathan Yardley, Washington Post Book World. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Occasionally one stumbles across a work which perfectly summarizes an era. For example, we hail the muckracker novels, primarily "The Jungle," as a brilliant picture of the late 19th century in America; likewise, any Jonathan Edwards sermon captures the essence of Puritan New England. But Neil Postman, in "Amusing Ourselves to Death," has created not a picture, but an exposition of the state of America today. That it is an exposition, is extremely important. Postman's thesis in this brief but articulate book consists of two tenets: (1) The form of communication, to some extent, determines (or is biased toward certain types of) content; (2) Television, as our modern-day uber-form of communication, has biases which are destructive toward the rational mind. TV teaches us to expect life to be entertaining, rather than interesting; it teaches us to expect 8-minute durations of anything and everything (anything else is beyond our attention span); it teach us to be suspicious of argument and discussion, and instead to accept facts at face value. Furthermore - and, by far, the most important discovery Postman makes in this book - TV teaches us to live a decontextualized life. Just as a TV program has nothing to do with anything before or after it, nor the commercials inside it, we learn to view life as a series of unconnected, random events which are entertaining at

best, and bear no significance toward any larger picture. As a culture, America has lost its ability to integrate experiences into a larger whole; and Postman's explanation for part (not all) of this problem's development makes perfect sense. It certainly is true that the vast majority of Americans are perfectly happy not to develop any sort of framework or philosophy; life is simply life, and one doesn't need to consider it.

Postman's book is a harsh diatribe against the television industry and its effects on intellectual discourse in the United States. Postman argues that television, especially when compared to the written word, cannot foster deep, rational thought in its viewers, because it requires absolute passivity from them. Television can only be about entertainment, and its cultural dominance, Postman argues, has had negative effects on education, politics, and religion. The first half the book dedicated to Postman's updating of the famous Marshall McLuhan postulate, "the medium is the message." Postman agrees, but takes it even further, stating in chapter one that "the medium is the metaphor." What he means by this is that our language -- how we communicate -- is only a metaphor for reality. We describe as best as we can what we see and know, but our method of communication circumscribes how and what we can actually communicate. Postman argues that whichever mode of communication we chose to communicate with -- be it oral, written, or televisual -- each comes with its own set of limitations. That is to say, "the form excludes the content." Some ideas simply can't be expressed by certain forms, which should be obvious to anybody who has tried to write a sarcastic email without the appropriate smiley face at the end. Postman then guides the reader through a history of communication, laying out eras where oral, print, or visual communicative forms were culturally dominant. For Postman, the print era (or "age of typography"), which he dates roughly from the Reformation to the 19th century, is when rational argument reached its pinnacle.

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