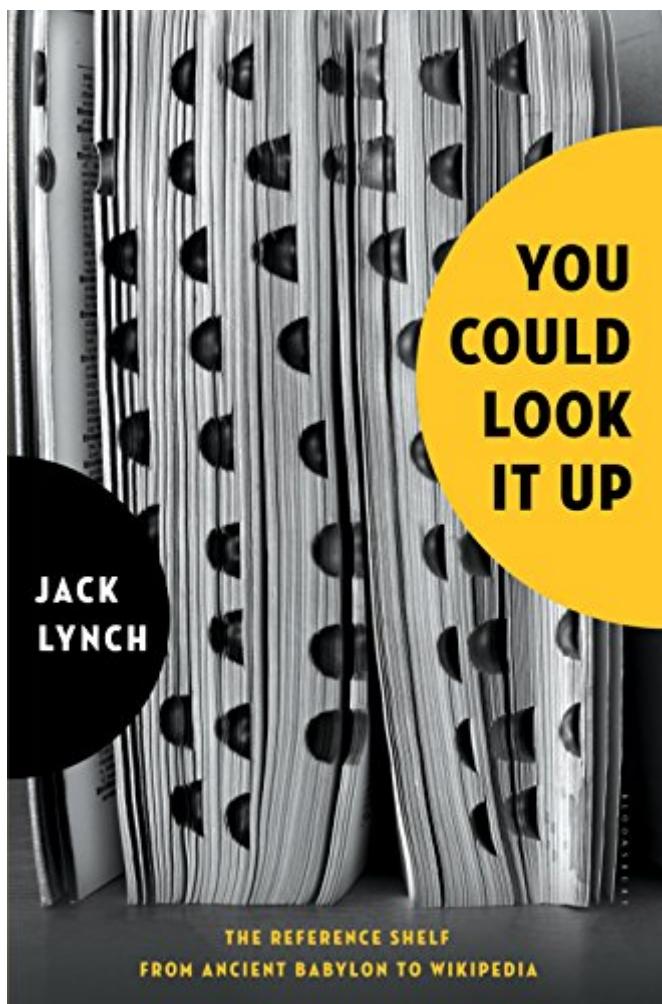


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You Could Look It Up: The Reference Shelf From Ancient Babylon To Wikipedia



Synopsis

"Knowledge is of two kinds," said Samuel Johnson in 1775. "We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it." Today we think of Wikipedia as the source of all information, the ultimate reference. Yet it is just the latest in a long line of aggregated knowledge--reference works that have shaped the way we've seen the world for centuries. You Could Look It Up chronicles the captivating stories behind these great works and their contents, and the way they have influenced each other. From The Code of Hammurabi, the earliest known compendium of laws in ancient Babylon almost two millennia before Christ to Pliny's Natural History; from the 11th-century Domesday Book recording land holdings in England to Abraham Ortelius's first atlas of the world; from Samuel Johnson's A Dictionary of the English Language to The Whole Earth Catalog to Google, Jack Lynch illuminates the human stories and accomplishment behind each, as well as its enduring impact on civilization. In the process, he offers new insight into the value of knowledge.

Book Information

File Size: 1452 KB

Print Length: 444 pages

Page Numbers Source ISBN: 080277752X

Publisher: Bloomsbury Press; 1 edition (February 23, 2016)

Publication Date: February 23, 2016

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B015JJ8TP4

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Not Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #261,731 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #85 in Books > History > Ancient Civilizations > Mesopotamia #106 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > History > Historical Study > Reference #356 in Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources > Reference

Customer Reviews

You Could Look it Up is an engaging history of the most important and influential reference books in history, from ancient to modern times. Though important and influential, many of the works Jack Lynch describes are quite obscure. He has a delightful style, and brings up the most fascinating facts about these books and of the sometimes quirky people who created them. When we think of reference books, we do not think of fun reading. Dr. Lynch, now head of the Department of English at Rutgers University, Newark, makes them fun. He pointed up some facts that I did not know about one old reference book I use frequently as a historian of Spanish colonial Florida, a Spanish dictionary dating from the 15th century. This perspective made my use of this particular reference book more practical as well as enjoyable. You Could Look it Up is not just for scholars, it can also provide much enjoyment to lovers of books and of words, as well as to history buffs.

Excellent background, history. Title implies a reader knows HOW to look it up. Overall a useful reference.

Excellent overview of universal source material

As an English language enthusiast and lover of words, word origins, dictionaries and philosophy, a book like this expands my point of view in all of those fields and more. I found myself making notes on some of the books mentioned to track them down for further reference and enjoyment. I highly recommend this book to any and all who are inquisitive about what we know and how we came to know it. One of my favorite and most entertaining reading experiences in a very long time.

A snapshot of reference works which have affected our society and technology. Not critical knowledge, but some interesting trivia about how access to information changes the scope of human inquiry.

A great read. Fascinating facts presented in a very readable style.

Better than the praising review I read.

This book may be a 3-star or 4-star depending on the reader's fascination with books, especially reference books, and with writing and scholarship. This book is a collection of essays on the different types of reference books and their utility. It includes the Code of Hammurabi and the

'Corpus juris civilis' (the Civil Code of Justinian - though not written by Justinian). Why are reference books of interest when they 'have a natural life cycle: most have their day and no more; the lucky few still fill a niche and catch on' (as Lynch tells us)? Lynch writes about the history of some interesting dictionaries, such as 'The Oxford English Dictionary', and also the story about the historical dictionary of the Dutch language. He has a chapter on reference books of quotations and fables. There he writes about John Bartlett's 'Collection of Familiar Quotations' in which he gives us glimpses of Bartlett himself, and how, at the age of three, he could read the Bible to his mother. There is an interesting chapter on 'What determines the contents of a reference book?' under the title, 'Who's Who and What's What: Making the Cut'. Dictionaries, especially 'are forced to be selective'. There is, Lynch writes, 'no such thing as "unabridged"'. The chapter, 'Tell me how you organize your books' is a delight, perhaps because of the stories of how famous writers deal with their dictionaries. Lynch himself reveals why he keeps his dictionaries on the floor, away from the top shelf. Naturally, for reference works, much cutting and pasting may be involved, and so, a chapter on 'Plagiarism: The Crime of Literary Theft' sits in chapter 61/2 as a reminder of what plagiarism is and where the temptation for it might arise. Can there be a book about reference books that does not discuss libraries? Probably not. In Chapter 21 Lynch writes on libraries and their catalogues of books. It is a book worth keeping for leisurely browsing  even in the bathroom.

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