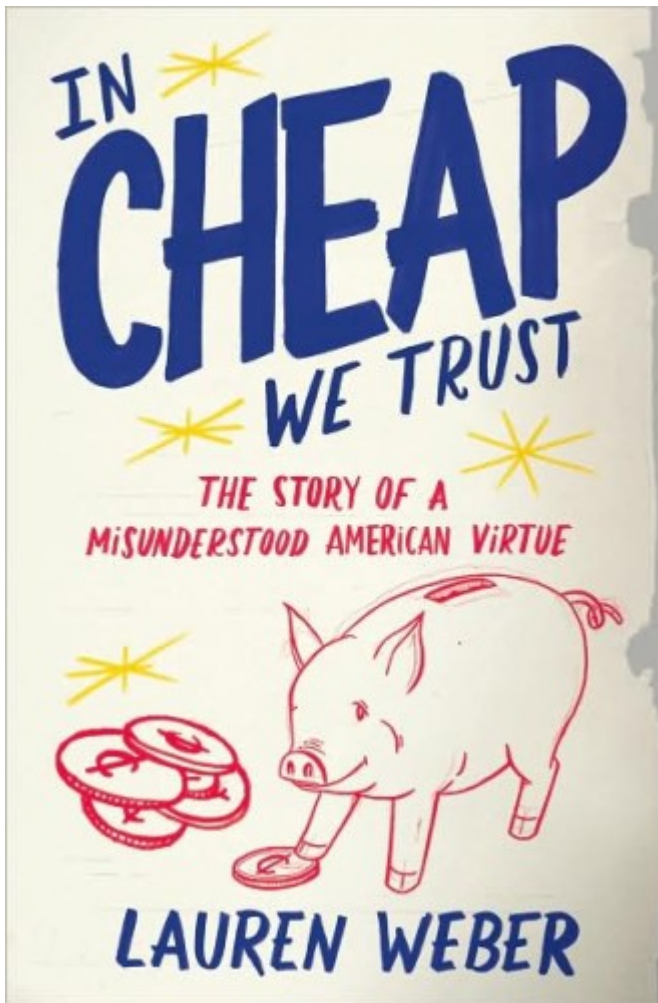


A review of In Cheap We Trust and The Cheapskate Next Door

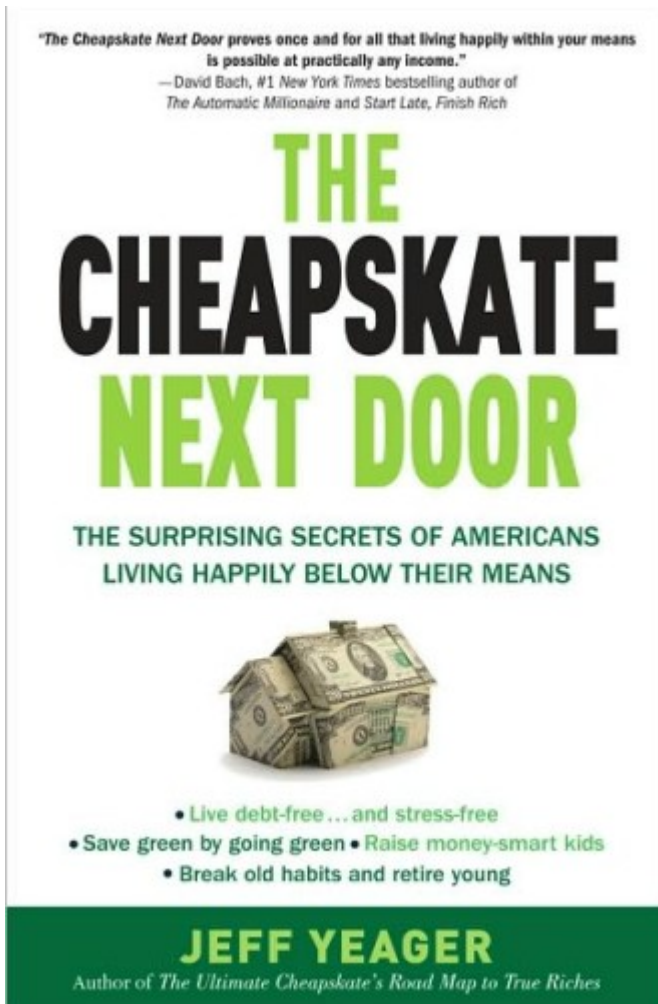
reviewed by [Valerie Weaver-Zercher](#) in the [October 19, 2010](#) issue

In Review



In Cheap We Trust

By Lauren Weber
Back Bay



The Cheapskate Next Door

By Jeff Yeager
Broadway Books

As part of a tradition noted for its thrift, I can be a little sensitive about the word *cheap*. One friend swears she remembers her missionary parents receiving some of the proverbial used tea bags, and I too have been known to regift. But while washing out plastic bags or shopping at thrift stores is one thing, believing that weak chamomile water constitutes a gift is another. So is cheapness closer to thrift or to parsimony? And can cheapness live peaceably with generosity, or does it devour and digest it instead?

Two new books—one a cultural history of thrift and the other a handbook of tips on living frugally—both parse the meaning of *cheap*, although they offer different exit ramps off the highway of consumption. One is the route of the financial journalist

who carefully examines the historical data and values nuance rather than broad strokes. The other is the cheeky path of one who calls himself the "Ultimate Cheapskate" and revels in proclamations such as "The Joneses can kiss our assets." Both suggest that the faster we can get ourselves off the road of profligate consumption and waste, the better. And both claim that cheapness can indeed coexist with generosity, stories of used tea bags aside.

In *The Cheapskate Next Door*, a companion to his 2007 *The Ultimate Cheapskate's Road Map to True Riches*, Jeff Yeager packages the results of his ten-page questionnaire, which was filled out by hundreds of self-identified cheapskates. Added to this data are anecdotes he collected during visits with cheapskates across the country as he toured to promote his previous book. Yeager teases out the commonalities he finds among the cheapskates he surveyed, such as "A cheapskate values time more than money" and "A cheapskate is brand blind and advertising averse." His chapters focus on various aspects of life on the cheap: transportation, housing, eating, raising kids, bartering and recreation. He includes quick tips called "Cheap Shots" that he claims could save more than \$25,000 a year. Aside from this rather inflated claim, let's just say that some of his tips are more helpful than others.

Yeager writes only marginally of what motivates people to become cheapskates, although he does note that more than nine out of ten cheapskates he surveyed said that their decision to live frugally "really isn't about money at all; their frugality and attitude toward money are rooted in higher values or beliefs they hold." These may be religious commitments or environmental ethics or other belief systems, but he is clear that a majority of respondents link their thrifty ways to a longer chain of reasoning about the world. Few of them are cheapskates for cheap's sake.

Yeager's prose is conversational, quirky and easy to read. At times it also feels a little cartoonish or canned. Not that either of those adjectives is necessarily negative—especially when applied to the Simpsons or homemade salsa. But the word play (the chapter titled "*Bon Appe-cheap!*" for example) and waggishness ("My underwear could qualify as a national historic site") may wear thin for some readers. It's all part of Yeager's schtick, of course—he calls himself "America's Cheapest Man" and has been a guest correspondent on the *Today* show—and it likely communicates to an audience who yawned through Al Gore's inconvenient truth about polar bears. This is frugal, green living for Red State America, and as such, it's a good thing. Just know that you'll need to go to other books for sustained, informed analysis of thrift as a cultural phenomenon.

One of the books you'll want to go to is Lauren Weber's *In Cheap We Trust*. Her narrative history of frugality details the schizophrenic messages we receive about spending and saving (think fiscal stimulus packages that encourage Americans to spend even while personal finance experts tell us we're pathetically ill-prepared for retirement) and discusses the way cheapness has waxed and waned as a desirable trait in American culture. She chronicles Americans' "troubled, complicated relationship with frugality" from the arrival of the Puritans to the present. Some of her findings—such as the fact that postwar prosperity sidelined thrift as a hallowed American virtue—feel a little obvious. But most chapters—including one on ethnic stereotypes of "cheap Jews and thrifty Chinese" and one on women and thrift in the 19th century—are unique in their scope and fascinating in what they reveal.

One of Weber's most helpful points is her rebuttal of the characterization of recent consumer belt-tightening as a "return to thrift." This is a false construction for several reasons, she writes. For one, what we consider the old-fashioned thrift of years gone by "was more the result of circumstance than virtue"; fond reminiscing about erstwhile frugality, in other words, might be misplaced nostalgia. "In every era," she writes, "Americans have indulged the temptation to live beyond their means." Rather than viewing the history of thrift as a linear progression from frugality to profligacy, which is the most common take on thrift and the one to which Yeager seems to subscribe, Weber writes that commentators would do well to view cheapness with historical cynicism. "History shows us that in hard times, we hunker down and make do with less," she writes. "It also shows that as soon as the danger passes, we cheerfully reset our appetites a notch or two higher than before."

Both authors explore the irony that Americans' voracious consumer appetites have now enveloped the environmental movement. Weber even chooses the verb *hijacked* to describe what fashion has done to ecological concern. "Canny marketers know a good opportunity when they see one," she writes, "and they understand that Americans these days aren't especially interested in sacrifice. We want our organic spelt cake and we want to eat it." Yeager calls the consumption-fueled green movement a "*cause de stuff*" and writes that many of the cheapskates who answered his survey look askance at the green products that are now big business. Many cheapskates are adherents of the environmental movement, Yeager writes, but just as many are what he calls "accidentally green."

At the end of his book, Yeager optimistically claims that "thrift is back, and hopefully here to stay." Weber is less sanguine about the permanence of thrift as a cultural

value; "if there's anything my research has taught me," she writes, "it's that these adjustments in favor of frugality are often temporary." Weber does say, however, that the recent trend toward thrift might have a longer lifespan than previous iterations because of increasing awareness of climate change. Whereas in the past, thrift became a necessity disguised as a virtue because of economic constraints, this time around the virtue view of frugality might stick because of ecological considerations. In an era in which the end of nonrenewable resources is within our sightline, frugality might ooze around and fill up cultural corners simply because its alternative—wanton excess—no longer can.

So what would happen if cheap became chic not only in ghettos of countercultural thought or economic necessity but in the cultural mainstream? Weber addresses the common prediction that, were this to occur (and let's be clear: if it did, it would be a miracle of titanic proportions), the economy would sink and we'd all be marooned until we started whipping out our credit cards again. This objection shows the extent to which "we've internalized the postwar creed that consumption amounts to a civic duty," Weber writes.

It also overemphasizes the power of consumer spending as a driver of economic growth. Consumer spending is just one component of the GDP, Weber says; "even if millions of Americans cut back their consumption, whether by choice or by circumstance, the economy will remain stable as long as government or business spending . . . rises to make up the difference." She calls on the examples of the New Deal and the 2009 stimulus package and writes that in the end "deficits are a better option than asking consumers to load up their credit cards and take on more debt." A recent *Salon* piece by Robert Reich affirms this perspective. "Growth is different from consumerism," Reich points out. Growth is about the ability of a nation to produce what its citizens need and want—and that includes "better stewardship of the environment as well as improved public health and better schools."

Weber is also courageous enough to go where few proponents of thrift have gone before: to the materialism that is the hidden muscle of frugality. This is not materialism as in Lady Gaga hedonism or Neiman Marcus shopping sprees, but materialism in the sense of valuing the meaning that adheres to the objects around us. So while those who pride themselves in their frugal ways look askance at the materialistic ways of their mall-hopping neighbors, the better choice may be to reclaim and refurbish the term *materialism*.

Investing meaning in the material world means taking care of objects rather than discarding them. It means that we value that old dresser enough to rehab it rather than buying a new one, and that we take enough joy in the mug made by a friend that we glue it when it cracks rather than tossing it into the trash. "The great fault of the selective bookkeeping we call 'the economy' is that it does not lead to thrift," writes Wendell Berry. "Day by day we are acting out the plot of a murderous paradox: an 'economy' that leads to extravagance. Our great fault as a people is that we do not take care of things."

The items of the Eucharist may be instructive as we seek to understand the enigma of a frugal and material faith: that by truly caring about things, we cease to need more of them. Most of us are cheap in our consumption of the Lord's Supper, celebrating it only once a week or perhaps a few times a year. Yet our eucharistic thrift implies a great care for the elements contained in the basket and the chalice. We can afford to take just one small wafer and one slight sip of wine only because we believe in the extravagant meaning contained in each. The task ahead is to translate the economy of the small serving from our communion in church to our consumption at home. The task, Weber and Yeager remind us, is to learn and relearn that less does not necessarily signify lack, and that *stingy* is not the only synonym for *cheap*.