

A Visit to Vanity Fair, by Alan Jacobs

reviewed by [James Calvin Schaap](#) in the [October 17, 2001](#) issue

Because of his uncommonly fine use of language and the gracious character which emerges from his work, Alan Jacobs, who teaches English at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, has always struck me as someone who could be both entertaining and enlightening on almost any subject. This book certainly supports that evaluation.

On topics ranging from the life and times of Bob Dylan to the comparative value of "Bible dowsing" (seeking spiritual direction from a Bible haphazardly opened), Jacobs wanders through ideas drawn from a number of recently published books, and along the way creates engaging digressions of his own.

Most of these essays were originally book reviews, which may be the reason for the book's most significant weakness. Too often an essay's range seems circumscribed by the requirements of evaluating the book, or books, Jacobs has read. At best, however, the work he reviews (many of these review essays were originally published in *First Things*) becomes the occasion for his own novel ramblings on related issues of our time and culture.

The book includes a centennial retrospective of the work of C. S. Lewis; an acerbic indictment of American feel-goodism; a gracious defense of Harry Potter; a personal look at the English poet Donald Davie; a challenge to publishers and readers/parents not to excise R-rated narratives from children's Bibles; and a moving meditation on a balloon at the bedside of a dying friend. This and more--much more.

Jacobs wants to call these forays into our culture "moral essays," in the tradition of Samuel Johnson, Joseph Addison, Richard Steele and, later, George Orwell and C. S. Lewis--all of whom believed, as Jacobs does, that "there is a moral code that all human beings should, and almost all do, recognize."

Jacobs likes the word "moral" but eschews "moralism" or "moralistic"; he does not intend to preach, in part because of the nature of the essay form itself, "with its intrinsically exploratory character, its reluctance to say the last word on anything." The essay is perfectly suited for intellectual wandering, structured, as it is, like an afternoon's excursion into ideas and issues, an exploration into what we see around us and know within.

Almost by definition, the moral essay is a slow and contemplative medium, almost dinosaur-like in an MTV world. Nonetheless, *A Visit to Vanity Fair* makes abundantly clear what Steven Spielberg's films have shown: dinosaurs can be remarkably fascinating. Jacobs does much to reestablish an endangered species, in part because it is simply a blessing to be in the company of a writer whose expansive interests are expressed so gracefully.

"I suspect," Jacobs says at the end of his preface, "that in the right hands [the moral essay] can become the ideal vehicle for moral reflection in a postfoundational age." He hopes his book will prompt others to "read these scattered pieces and find in them a few tools appropriate to this great task."