

## Recommended Reading: *Genius of Common Sense*

By Kim Smith

Shortly after writing my column “In the Wake of Godzilla,” the wonderful gift of *Genius of Common Sense: Jane Jacobs and the Story of The Death and Life of Great American Cities* arrived in my mailbox. The note attached from Sue Ramin at my publisher David Godine read simply, “Reading pursuant to ‘In the Wake of Godzilla.’” Written and illustrated by Glenna Lang and Marjory Wunsch, the book’s jacket was intriguing, with photographs of Washington Square in Manhattan, the Farmer’s Market, crowds holding protest signs, and an owl-faced stylishly dressed woman wearing over-sized tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses. The praise on the back jacket only added to my curiosity— “An inspiring story, deeply researched and beautifully told,” wrote Robert Fishman, Professor of Architecture and Planning, University of Michigan. Bernard Poulin from Toronto’s *Globe and Mail* added “The theories of Jane Jacobs should be in the curriculums of grades 7 and 8, her books should be must-reads in all high school, and her ideas should be discussed in all colleges and universities. *Genius of Common Sense* is not only a refreshing concept but also a delightful read... a little gem of a book on Jane Jacobs.”

For those of us not familiar with Jane Jacobs, she was an editor and writer on architecture residing in New York City in the early 1960s. She argued that powerful city planners and architects were destroying urban diversity and vitality. During the era when the urban renewal movement was at its most aggressive, Jacobs wrote and actively protested against the city planners who were replacing the aging housing of American cities with architecturally sterile and socially deficient structures. The bulldozing of homes, businesses, churches, clubs, restaurants, and shops was destroying whole communities and hurting the very people it was intended to help (Cape Ann residents: thinking also about the more subtle, yet equally as effective, potential destruction of our Main Street businesses brought about by the hideous big-box construction suburban-style shopping center, Gloucester Crossing).

Straightforward and clearly written, with beautiful pencil drawings by both authors, *Genius of Common Sense* is a thoroughly researched biography of Jane’s early formative years becoming a writer, the events leading up to and surrounding the writing of *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*, and takes us through her famous fights to prevent a planned highway ramp through Washington Square and the construction of the Lower Manhattan Expressway. The book is richly illustrated with photographs (some never before published), a chronology of Jane’s life, a list of books by Jane Jacobs, and selected bibliography of sources for finding out more about Jane and her world. Like all Godine books, *Genius of Common Sense* is made with great care and integrity, and is a thing of beauty in and of itself. I highly recommend this book as a gift for readers of all ages.

After reading *Genius of Common Sense* I was inspired to read *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Jacobs writes beautifully, sensibly, and knowledgeably. Thirty years after its publication, the *New York Times* wrote, “perhaps the most influential single work in the history of town planning... [It] can also be seen in a much larger context. It is first of all a work of literature; the descriptions of street life as a kind of ballet and the bitingly satiric account of traditional planning theory can still be read for pleasure even by those who long ago absorbed and appropriated the book’s arguments.” I wish Jacobs’s book was mandatory reading, not only

in the spheres of higher education as Bernard Poulin writes, but for all elected and appointed government officials (especially city planners), and all voting adults, for that matter. Thanks to Lang and Wunsch for bringing the inspiring story of Jane Jacobs to the fore once again. The greatest beauty of *Genius of Common Sense* is that it makes Jane Jacobs's ideas wonderfully accessible to the young people who are our future city planners and architects.

From the new forward for the 1992 Modern Library edition of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (written by Jane Jacobs thirty years after the first edition): "...We human beings are the only city-building creatures in the world. The hives of social insects are fundamentally different in how they develop, what they do, and their potentialities. Cities are in a sense natural ecosystems too—for us. They are not disposable. *Whenever and wherever societies have flourished and prospered, rather than stagnated and decayed, creative workable cities have been at the core of the phenomenon; they have pulled their weight and more* [my italics]. It is the same still. Decaying cities, declining economies, and mounting social troubles travel together. The combination is not coincidental."

*Kim Smith Designs* is an interior and garden design firm. Kim's first book *Oh Garden of Fresh Possibilities!* (David R. Godine, Publisher, 2009), which she wrote and illustrated, is available through your local bookseller and Barnes and Noble. She will be happy to respond to questions and comments at [kimsmithdesigns@hotmail.com](mailto:kimsmithdesigns@hotmail.com). For more information about *Oh Garden of Fresh Possibilities!*, butterfly gardening, current projects, exhibits, and events, please visit her website at [www.kimsmithdesigns.com](http://www.kimsmithdesigns.com).



written & illustrated by  
**GLENN LANG &  
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# GENIUS OF COMMON SENSE

JANE JACOBS and the story of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

