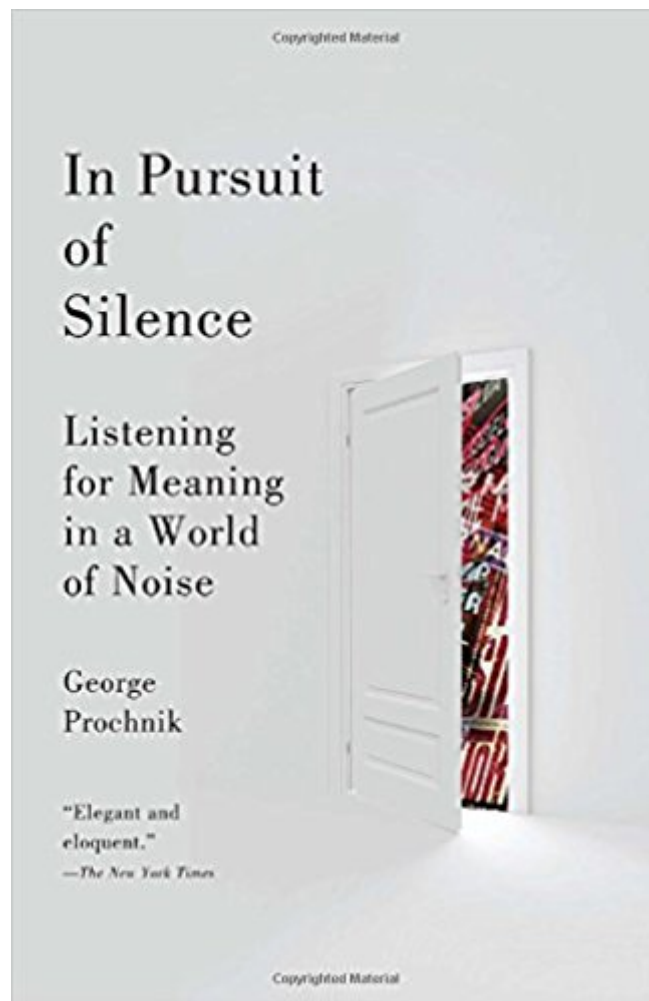




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In Pursuit Of Silence: Listening For Meaning In A World Of Noise



Synopsis

A brilliant, far-reaching exploration of the frontiers of noise and silence, and the growing war between them. Between iPods, music-blasting restaurants, earsplitting sports stadiums, and endless air and road traffic, the place for quiet in our lives grows smaller by the day. In Pursuit of Silence gives context to our increasingly desperate sense that noise pollution is, in a very real way, an environmental catastrophe. Traveling across the country and meeting and listening to a host of incredible characters, including doctors, neuroscientists, acoustical engineers, monks, activists, educators, marketers, and aggrieved citizens, George Prochnik examines why we began to be so loud as a society, and what it is that gets lost when we can no longer find quiet.

Book Information

Paperback: 352 pages

Publisher: Anchor; Reprint edition (April 5, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0767931211

ISBN-13: 978-0767931212

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.8 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.1 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 29 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #156,355 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #85 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Sociology > Social Theory #636 in Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Psychology & Counseling > Personality #773 in Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Psychology & Counseling > Social Psychology & Interactions

Customer Reviews

Exclusive: Lawrence Osborne Reviews In Pursuit of Silence Lawrence Osborne has written for The New York Times Magazine, The New Yorker, and other publications, and is the author of six books, including The Accidental Connoisseur and The Naked Tourist. His latest work, Bangkok Days, was published in 2009. Read his exclusive guest review of In Pursuit of Silence: At the beginning of George Prochnik's inquiry into the nature of silence and its perpetual nemesis, noise, he observes, "Something seems to have made us fall in love with noise as a society. It's a torrid, choppy affair that we are often in denial about, or tend to laugh off as a bass-heavy, summer night fling." It's a strange and delicious premise: to launch an extended essay into the obscure root causes of our culture's inability to be quiet, its self-saturation

with its own largely uninteresting cacophony. Are we becoming noisier? Prochnik argues that we are, and that as we become noisier we also lose touch with the many dimensions of silence itself, a silence which research seems to suggest is as therapeutic--as essential--to the human animal as antibiotics or uncontaminated food. Americans suffer enormously from noise pollution. Insomnia, aggression, heart disease, decreased longevity even...the side-effects of enduring other people's noise are detailed here with disturbing elegance. It's almost as if noise itself is a disease, a pathogen. But whereas a doctor or a "noise scientist" would have written a straightforward catalogue of this network of medical cause and effect, Prochnik goes for a more sinuous, open-ended literary method that enables him to cover a wider territory with less strain on the reader's capacity to absorb science. He is asking, after all, a philosophical question rather than a scientific one. Why do we love noise, fear silence and evade a stillness that demonstrably puts us in closer connection with things that give us happiness if we let them? Early on in his voyage Prochnik spends some time with a cop who is frequently called upon to intervene in domestic disputes. When he arrives he usually finds that the unhappy home is a raging cacophony of radios, TVs, music all playing simultaneously--layer upon layer of mad noise used to prevent silence from arbitrating between the combatants. The cop tells Prochnik that he merely asks the subjects to turn off the appliances and the near-homicidal atmosphere dissolves almost at once. They had, he says, been arguing with noise itself rather than with each other. It's a small anecdote that shows how counterintuitive much of our real relationship with noise and silence really is. This delightful book considers facet after facet of this relationship and does so from the perspective of someone who is, so to speak, a "noise sufferer" himself. It could so easily have been a Sedaris-y kind of tongue-in-cheek memoir about a succession of sonic mishaps and misadventures, but Prochnik--by virtue of a kind of pressing moral insistence born of genuine unease and even anger--weaves a more objective tale as he plunges into the exotic milieus of engineers, scientists, astronauts and sundry monks, ascetics and artists who struggle with the eternal duel of noise and silence. The end result is a book that you read--as I did--on long intercontinental flights with the roar of engines around you, aware suddenly of how peculiar the cultural pathology is but drawn in by the book's own measured stillness. It is not an easy feat to pull off. A Note from The Author I've always been a lover of silence, and this love is bound up with my passion for books. The writer Stefan Zweig once defined a book as a "handful of silence that assuages torment and unrest." For years before I began writing about the subject, I'd been feeling that silence was a diminishing natural resource. I wanted to understand whether this was more than a subjective impression. If so, why

had the world become louder, and what could be done to reinstate silence as a value in our culture? Living in New York City, I couldn't help being aware that almost everyone I knew hated the city's noisiness. But if everyone despises noise so much, why is there so much of it? And why do so many noise-haters also spend hours of the day with iPods in their ears, sleep next to loud air-conditioners, turn on televisions the moment they walk into a room, and crank up their car radios the moment they sit down behind the wheel? We're never going to make progress toward creating a quieter world until we learn to understand our secret love affair with noise. Part of what we have to recognize is that noise is a compelling stimulant. This noise-high can be addictive and adding your own din into the mix can become a way of exerting control. Stepping back from all the stimulation is not easy, but it can be done. Rather than cutting out stimulation, I went searching for the kinds of sonic wonders that only become audible when we manage to quiet down the world around us. Instead of being against noise, I think we need to begin making a case for silence. This means getting imaginative about expanding our understanding of silence in ways that develop associations between silence and a vibrant, fulfilling life. Anti-noise activists often compare noise pollution to air pollution. But unlike smoke, lots of noises are good, at least some of the time. Instead, we might frame noise as a dietary problem. Most of us absorb far too much sonic junk. We need to develop a more balanced sound diet in which silence, and sounds we associate with quiet states of mind, become part of our daily regimen. My hope is that by making positive experiences of silence more broadly accessible, more people will be tempted to cultivate silence of their own volition. Who knows? If we manage to recover more quiet in the world, maybe people will even begin reading more books again--rediscovering what can be contained in a handful of silence.

--George Prochnik --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Silence is golden, but noise is more stimulating in this smart if occasionally overearnest rumination on our modern soundscape. Prochnik (Putnam Camp) is at his best investigating the culture of noise--the traffic, TV, and iPods--that ravages our hearing and peace of mind. He tunes in with a sprightly mix of science--babies, it seems, have evolved to squall at pitches the human ear finds maximally annoying--and reportage, visiting a designer who concocts soundtracks that make Abercrombie & Fitch patrons spend (loud, strong, fast beats pump energy--and social conformity into soldiers and teen shoppers alike) and the subculture of competitive loud car-stereo tournaments. (I didn't hear sound, the author observes of one window-shattering system. I just experienced my bones and heart bursting apart through my skin.) Prochnik's explorations of silence--visiting a Trappist monastery, searching for oases of

quiet in Manhattan – are more muted, veering between health advice (meditation improves the brain) and muzzy spirituality. (The more we hear nothing, the more nothing we hear, intones a sniper.) Silence is good for falling asleep, but Prochnik's attentive take on noise keeps us wide awake. (Apr.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

To some, this book may seem like making a great deal of noise over the virtues of silence. Although this book might have been more effective if it had been edited down to an essay, there may be something in the patience required to gradually absorb the details and anecdotes Prochnik expresses in his book. The plot, so to speak, is simple - the world is growing noisier and we are being distracted and rendered less effective by the constant noise all around us throughout the day. He points to research that indicates that unnecessary background noise affects the young in their effort to learn language. This failure to learn the language effectively is one of the causes of increasing numbers of autistic children in modern times. Physical soundproofing is getting more effective (and more expensive) but we can learn, less expensively, to block noise, and maintain a healthy diet of sound each day. Prochnik recommends that we learn to experience the quiet of the Zen garden and the Japanese tea ceremony which require silence and thereby, help one to appreciate the value of noiseless thinking.

I chose this book for our book club discussion group. I am glad I did because I now understand that those of us who are in pursuit of silence can actually find it. We can do that on a personal level or we can do it on a social level where, as this book demonstrates, we can create or find spaces where silence exists amidst all kinds of surrounding noise. For those of you who seek silence, especially those who live in noisy metropolitan areas, I strongly recommend this book.

Absolutley loving this book, cannot put it down. beautifully written, amazingly well researched, entertainig and extremely informative.

Very interesting book, very glad that I purchased it.

Thanks

good

I'm still working on this one but he reinforces my own pursuit of silence. I believe that noise is driving us all slightly crazy.

A thought provoking book, but disappointing in that the reader reaches the crux of the subject under discussion only in the last part of the book. There is (in my view) too much padding and the frequent description of interviewees is overdone, such as; '... has an auburn beard, sideburns razored close to his sharp cheekbones, and eyes that gleam with a striking pale-blue light'. Where was the publishing editor? Excessive noise is a serious matter and requires an in-depth analysis. The author has done extensive research, unfortunately he has not presented a conclusive case that may counter this everyday noise intrusion. I would rate the book at 3.5 stars, but this is not available.

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