

Aphorisms From A to Z: A User's Guide to Life

Jay Friedenberg

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“What is an aphorism? In brief, it is a short saying that states a general truth.” In his book, Jay Friedenberg, chair of the Psychology Department of Manhattan College, pursues one of his many interests: the exploration, definition, and creation of aphorisms.

Friedenberg begins by dividing aphorisms into classic categories, with examples of each: the chiasmus, in which two parallel clauses are reversed; the definition; the joke; the metaphor; the moral; the observation; the paradox; and the pensée (thought). There are short interviews with other “contemporary aphorists and aphorist scholars.”

The author composed all the aphorisms in the volume, over two thousand in all, and states that they came from either spontaneous inspiration or purposeful concentration; some are reworkings from older sources. Friedenberg groups them alphabetically, including such unusual classifications as “Cinema” (“Don’t judge ... a movie by its trailer”) and “Inflation” (“The best monetary policy is no monetary policy”). An offering under the heading of “Wonder” is especially enjoyable: “Wow! What would it take to make you say this?”

Certainly this book represents great industry on Friedenberg’s part. The text is set in attractive fonts, and the author makes good use of spacing and bulleting. The cover art—the title set in a field of aphoristic phrases—is quietly appropriate. Though many aphorism collections exist across ages and cultures, the sheer number composed by one person here is impressive, and some of the compositions are sterling: “There’s no expiration date on justice,” and “Not all bygones can be bygones.”

However, some of Friedenberg’s creations fall flat: “If you keep throwing things away, eventually you are left with nothing.” Others are too derivative, as with this version of the March Hare’s line: “Say what you mean and mean what you say.” “Still water quickly turns foul” seems needlessly to overturn the pleasant, classic “Still waters run deep,” with no new inspiration. Some aphorisms seem merely churlish: “If opportunity knocks on the door, don’t answer. It could be a Jehova’s witness [*sic*].” And though the author states that he has “endeavored to make all of these sayings unique,” this is surely not the case with “Home is where the heart is.”

There are some obvious defects in the book, such as the misspelling of “Imitation” as “Immitation” for one of the category headings. And there are not just a few ungainly constructions. For example, Friedenberg writes, “Even when people are honest there are still circumstances beyond our control that require the need for enforced contracts.” There are no offerings for the letters X or Z—no “Xenophobia,” no “Zeal.” These anomalies indicate a less than total dedication to the polishing of the work, as though the author grew tired of the task toward the end.

Friedenberg’s students and fellow aphorists will probably comprise the audience for this book since it is, more than anything, a hobbyist’s fancy.

BARBARA BAMBERGER SCOTT (June 12, 2013)

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