

In praise of mess

A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder—How Crammed Closets, Cluttered Offices, and On-the-Fly Planning Make the World a Better Place. By Eric Abrahamson and David H. Freedman. *Little, Brown*; 327 pages; \$25.99 *Weidenfeld & Nicolson*; £12.99

- 1 **T**HIS book may not change your life. But if you have a tendency to be messy, it will certainly make you feel better about your natural inclinations. Untidiness, hoarding, delaying things and improvisation are not bad habits, the authors argue, but often more sensible than meticulous planning, storage and purging of possessions.
- 2 That is because the tidiness lobby counts the benefits of neatness, but not its costs. A rough storage system (important papers close to the keyboard, the rest distributed in loosely related piles on every flat surface) takes very little time to manage. Filing every bit of paper in a precise category, with colour-coded index tabs and a neat system of cross-referencing, will certainly take longer. And in the end, it may not save any time. Your reviewer's office is easily the most untidy in *The Economist* (not entirely his own work, it should be said, thanks to the heroic efforts of his even untidier office-mate). But when it comes to managing information, there seems to be no discernible difference in the end result.
- 3 The authors of this book explore the furthest reaches of psychology, management studies, biology and

physics to show why a bit of disorder is good for you. Chiefly, it creates much more room for coincidence and luck. Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin because he was notoriously untidy, and didn't clean a Petri dish, thus allowing fungal spores to get to work on bacteria. He remarked ironically on visiting a colleague's spotless lab: "no danger of mould here".

- 4 Delaying things makes sense too. America's Marine Corps, the authors repeat several times, never make detailed plans in advance. Leaving important things to the last minute reduces the risk of wasting time on things that may ultimately prove not important at all.

- 5 The authors are fiercely contemptuous of the false comparison between tidiness and morality – for example in corporate "clean desk" policies. Disorder and creativity are so closely linked that any employer who



penalises the first sacrifices the second, they argue. America's professional organisers, a lucrative bunch of tidiness coaches, are merchants of guilt, not productivity boosters.

6 It's all fine, up to a point. But the book has two weaknesses. One is that it

overstates the case. The case for tidiness in some environments – surgery, a dinner table or income tax returns – is really overwhelming. The other is that the book is a bit repetitive and disorganised. Even readers who love mess in their own lives don't necessarily like it in others'. ■

Tekst 3 In praise of mess

Kies voor het beantwoorden van vraag 4 tot en met 7 steeds één van de onderstaande uitspraken.

- 1 Being untidy leaves more opportunity for unexpected findings.
- 2 By postponing tasks one can avoid activities that turn out to be irrelevant.
- 3 Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today.
- 4 People who are forced to be well-organised may produce less inspired or original work.
- 5 The state someone's desk is in has definitely been proven to reflect their personality.
- 6 Tidying up systematically leaves one less time to spend on the actual job.
- 7 Without a proper filing system some information is bound to get lost.
- 8 Workers who are methodical tend to suffer less from stress.

- 1p 4 Welk van de bovenstaande uitspraken geeft het argument weer dat aan de orde komt in alinea 2?
Noteer het nummer van deze uitspraak.
- 1p 5 Welk van de bovenstaande uitspraken geeft het argument weer dat aan de orde komt in alinea 3?
Noteer het nummer van deze uitspraak.
- 1p 6 Welk van de bovenstaande uitspraken geeft het argument weer dat aan de orde komt in alinea 4?
Noteer het nummer van deze uitspraak.
- 1p 7 Welk van de bovenstaande uitspraken geeft het argument weer dat aan de orde komt in alinea 5?
Noteer het nummer van deze uitspraak.
- 1p 8 What does the author finally conclude about the book under review?
A It is a potential bestseller, despite some minor flaws.
B It is somewhat unbalanced and unstructured, repeatedly presenting the same matter.
C It is unsuitable for people who work in hospitals or restaurants.
D Only chaotic people will be able to fully appreciate it.

Bronvermelding

Een opsomming van de in dit examen gebruikte bronnen, zoals teksten en afbeeldingen, is te vinden in het bij dit examen behorende correctievoorschrift, dat na afloop van het examen wordt gepubliceerd.