

**Schlefer, Jonathan. The assumptions economists make. Harvard, 2012. 356p bibl index  
afp ISBN 9780674052260, \$28.95**

"Assume a can opener" is the punch line to an old economics joke about how to open a can of beans if stranded on a desert isle. The Assumptions Economists Make is not nearly as funny, and the title is misleading. The book is not about the usual suspects or assumptions economists make, such as homo economicus's setting out to maximize utility or profits in a methodical, well-informed, rational manner, a straw-man characterization behavioral economists have tried to exploit. Rather, Schlefer (research associate, Harvard Business School) provides basically a mixture of history of macroeconomic thought and policy prescriptions from Smith to Keynes and contemporary dismal-science scholars, with a critique of economic assumptions regarding the current environment (e.g., the financial crisis, unemployment, increasing inequality). It is not for those without a significant baptism in economics or who might be allergic to an author's whining and biases (all scientific theory--not! just in economics--is built upon assumptions that probably do not reflect reality). But Assumptions is a valuable book for readers who like to argue, reflect, and advance knowledge. A substantial 30 pages of endnotes, 15 pages of references, and a whopping 25-page index conclude the volume. Summing Up: Highly recommended. Upper-division undergraduate through faculty and researchers. -- A. R. Sanderson, University of Chicago