



The Taste of Many Mountains

Bruce Wydick

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The global coffee trade is a collision between the rich world and the poor world.

A group of graduate students is about to experience that collision head-on.

Angela, Alex, Rich, and Sofi bring to their summer research project in Guatemala more than their share of grad-school baggage—along with clashing ideas about poverty and globalization. But as they follow the trail of coffee beans from the Guatemalan peasant grower to the American coffee drinker, what unfolds is not only a stunning research discovery, but an unforgettable journey of personal challenge and growth.

Based on an actual research project on fair trade coffee funded by USAID, *The Taste of Many Mountains* is a brilliantly-staged novel about the global economy in which University of San Francisco economist Bruce Wydick examines the realities of the coffee trade from the perspective of young researchers struggling to understand the chasm between the world's rich and poor.

"Wydick's first novel is brewed perfectly—full of rich body with double-shots of insight." —Santiago "Jimmy" Mellado, President and CEO of Compassion International

"This wonderfully enlightening book describes the Mayan culture in Guatemala and some of the sufferings these people have survived." —*CBA Retailers + Resources*

Includes Reading Group Guide

The Taste of Many Mountains Details

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Author : Bruce Wydick

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From Reader Review The Taste of Many Mountains for online ebook

Bethany says

First off let me say I am utterly shocked that there are so many negative reviews of this book, I have to say that it really is one of the best books I have read in quite some time with so much substance and depth to it. I really feel like this book was like college class in economics that was fictionalized and written so the average person with very little background in economics can understand.

I loved how this book explored and explained the concept of fair trade and the coffee industry, showing where the money tends to go and how fair trade isn't really favorable to the growers.

I loved getting a glimpse into living conditions in South America and the turmoil that has been a part of their history. The flashbacks between the past and present added another fascinating layer to this already fascinating book.

I just loved how this book had so much more substance to it and really stayed with you long after you finish it.

I received a copy of this book in exchange for my honest opinion.

Harriet Smith says

I received an advance copy through NetGalley for my review. This is a novel interlaced with numerous facts about fair trade coffee and the lives that it impacts. A team of students visits coffee producers in Guatemala and besides learning all about the production chain, the authors weaves a touching story of one person's heritage, another's love, and the pain met by many. The only issue I had with this work was that at times, it sounded like an economics lesson, which makes sense as the author is indeed an economics professor. All in all, an interesting novel about an ongoing issue in the world.

Hilary says

This is a fictional account, based on true stories and research, of graduate students in economics following the progress of fair-trade coffee beans from the Guatemalan farmers to the consumer, calculating the profit at every stage and creating an impact study on fair-trade coffee.

Fairly traded goods attempt to guarantee the grower a minimum price in exchange for some labor and environmental compliance, so the question for these graduate students was simple: Why are the growers still in abject poverty? As they follow the beans through their journey, interesting discoveries and questions are raised along the way, but the answer, after month of research and questions and travel, was still shocking.

It lays out the economic and social issues in a narrative form, making it very accessible to the reader, as the different characters discuss a variety of theories amongst themselves. In addition, there was further exploration of the socio-political problems behind some of the poverty, and some good references at the end. You don't need any prior knowledge of economic theory to understand the issues, as the explanations are clear and concise.

Some of the facts discovered: (view spoiler)

My only criticism is (view spoiler)

If you're interested in fair trade, socioeconomic issues in Central America, or just want an overview of some economic theories, this is an excellent book. It's very readable, explains clearly the relevant problems, and discusses alternatives at each point. I just wish there were a better conclusion available.

Disclaimer: I received a free copy from Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

Felicity Gibson says

The Taste of Many Mountains,
Bruce Wydick
Read 16th August 2014

Living in India makes me aware of many things at grass roots level. The coffee trade is one of them. I am familiar with coffee at all stages of its growth and the height required for coffee plants. In my garden I have an un-pruned coffee bush which is 25 foot high! I have a deep interest in all things which are grown. For me reading about the botanical aspect of coffee, the history of coffee and then the economics of selling coffee was so interesting. Having the four graduate students was an excellent idea, despite the fact that at times their interaction was slightly forced and stilted. I enjoyed reading details of the research and the debates expressing ideas for effective and ineffective ways to help the poor. There was adventure and romance in this book with fascinating details about coffee growing in the indigenous population of Guatemala. An excellent book for a school to stock in the library – High school economics would benefit from reading such a book. I award this book 4 stars.

Tiffany Bradford says

This book moved me. It isn't a beautifully written book, the writing style is average and sometimes clumsy, but the content is powerful. I finished this book and sat thinking about what it means to be an American and what it means to not be an American. I kept thinking about the quote from the Spider-Man movie, "With great power comes great responsibility.". That quote has almost become a punchline, but this book made me think about how much power Americans have, power we are often oblivious to, the power we wield over whole families just by drinking coffee. So, even though the writing is sometimes clumsy this book impacted me deeply.

Eliana says

The Taste of Many Mountains

Rating: 3.5/5 stars

Author: Bruce Wydick

I WAS GIVEN A FREE COPY OF THIS BOOK FROM BOOKLOOKBLOGGER.COM IN RETURN FOR AN HONEST REVIEW.

Plot: This book is about the coffee market, that is the process of coffee production in Guatemala and the free trade market. In the book we follow the story of a few graduate students who work on a project on how the money is distributed throughout the different stations in the process of coffee production.

The whole book is more economics than about being a book of fiction. The story focuses a lot on the economy and the people in Guatemala that are producing the coffee. The book itself in this regard is much closer to an actual account than a fictional book. The economic theory is, in a sense, predominant throughout the story.

As an economics student, I actually enjoyed that, but for people who are not as familiar with economics terminology this might be a throw off. On the other hand, I feel like even for those people, it will be an enjoyable read, and the content of the book will be fairly easy to understand, even without a background in economics.

Characters: The characters in this book come from several diverse backgrounds (European, American, Guatemalan), which effects their view of the free trade coffee market. Personally, I feel like there are people in the book, like Angela who are looking at real economics, statistics and numbers and others, like Alex who are more interested in normative economics and the humanitarian aspect of the coffee market. In general though, all the characters offer a different perspective on free trade, and that adds value to the book.

Overall, the book is a very easy and enjoyable read. But, for people who are not interested in books about economics, or in books that are closer to being real-life accounts, then this might not be a good choice for them. Nevertheless, the book is very well-written, the language is beautiful and very easy to follow, and it is undoubtedly a very pleasant read. The book gives quite an accurate depiction of the relationship between the rich and the poor countries and people, and it offers great inside on the coffee market. Although I enjoyed this book, I wouldn't say it was my cup of tea, but don't let that stop you from picking it up.

Jay Williams says

This is a fascinating discourse on the economics of poverty among the coffee growers of Guatemala. It included many interesting actions and interactions among all the characters and used a variety of emotional hooks to bring the characters to life and get the reader emotionally invested. Some of the pedantic discussions of the economic principles involved were difficult to follow, and I have an MBA with concentration on quantitative analysis. Wydick uses debates between the scholars to express and develop his case for effective and ineffective ways to help the poor and it works well. He includes adventure and romance to keep the reader interested, and supplies a very interesting discussion of the development of coffee growing in the indigenous population of Guatemala. An educational and entertaining book for the reader willing to plow through the economic arguments.

Ven says

Your enjoyment of the book will depend on what you are looking for. Interested in Coffee, economics, Guatemala, and global trade? This book is for you.

I understand the criticism -- this is not the best fiction. It is more of an illustrative parable with world-class research backing it up. The characters serve to help the reader empathize with groups of people they may not have met, such as coffee growers. They also give voice to diverse opinions and theories.

I enjoyed this as an audio book. The narrator's voice adds character. After a few chapters, I found the plot slow, and I turned the playback speed up to 1.5x. I could still keep up at that speed, and considered 2x.

Marnie says

This book seems to be a lesson on economics, packed into a fiction story to get people to read and understand the fair trade versus free trade debate. This story is centered on coffee and its path from the fields of Guatemala to the cups of coffee lovers in the Pacific Northwest. Graduate students Angela and Alex, the main characters, join researchers Sophia and Rich to start at the source in Guatemala. Angela was adopted from Guatemala as a baby and this is her first trip to her homeland. She finds a kinship with the growers and appreciates that opportunities that were provided to her because of her adoption. Alex is "for the people" and needs to consider the math of the economy to learn to make an informed decision instead of an uninformed, heart decision. Lots of facts and details were included, but it lends authenticity to the book in that this was a real research topic for some graduate students. It brings to life why the growers toil in poverty/low standard of living conditions. And, it helps the reader understand free trade versus fair trade.

Thanks to Thomas Nelson Publishers for providing me a copy for a review in my own words.

Maureen Tumenas says

Thanks to NetGalley for the copy of this book.

I wanted to like this book and there are many redeeming pieces, but it did not work well for me as novel.

First, please do not spend 15 introductory pages telling me why you wrote the book. I stopped reading after 5 and almost stopped reading the book.

The novel is actually much more of a stage for a lecture/debate on free trade vs fair trade with a graduate students in a strange land leitmotif. I don't drink coffee and actually did not have a good idea of exactly what the whole fair trade movement is. So, in that respect, I learned something, but as I said, this was a lecture disguised as a novel.

If you are looking for a novel way to introduce this topic to your students, this may work for you. If you are looking for a novel- not so much.

Sasha says

I received an ARC of *The Taste of Many Mountains* through NetGalley. I was intrigued when I came across it because I read a lot of histories that focus on a specific commodity, such as diamonds or chocolate or aspirin, and I was interested to see how this type of book would play out in novel form. The format had potential: Telling the story of the coffee industry as it becomes revealed to a team of graduate students immersed in a research project. At the same time, the reader would theoretically become emotionally involved in the lives and emotions of the characters.

Unfortunately, though, both elements fell flat. While the book does contain many interesting details and revelations about the coffee industry, free trade, and fair trade, it loses something due to the way in which the information is relayed mostly through (somewhat forced) conversation among the students. Likewise, the character development of the students loses something due to the way in which so much focus is given to the details of their research. It became difficult to engage with either the characters or the historical/economical/industrial content, as the two aspects of the novel were competing with rather than complementing each other.

I would have loved to read more about the lives and motivations of each of the four graduate students. Even more, I would have loved to read more about the history and nuances of the coffee industry. Either of these could have been successful in their own right, but integrated into a single tale were somewhat less so.

Angie Fehl says

**I was provided with a complimentary copy of this book from BookLookBloggers.com & Harper Collins Christian Publishing in exchange for an honest review.

The concept of this book really intrigued me and the idea of four graduate students traveling through Guatemala seemed like there might possibly be a decent adventure story included. Meh, not so much. The author in his introduction explains that he was inspired to write this novel (which was inspired by an actual research project that was done on fair trade coffee, where a bag of coffee was followed from its source all the way to the coffee shop, documenting how much money was made at each stage of the process) to hopefully bring the information, in an entertaining way, to a wider range of readers than just budding economists. I applauded the idea and thought this would be a gripping, thought-provoking read on the chasm between the rich and poor classes. Good Lord, this book was a freakin' snoozefest. None of the graduate student characters were all that interesting and their dialogue was so wooden, sounding like their speech was pulled directly from an economics textbook! It reminded me of those educational films you had to watch in school, where the actors are made to look like the student viewer's age, but their stilted speech patterns clearly give away that they're reading fact-laden cue cards. You just want to scream "No one talks like that!". The writing had such a detached tone, it felt like it just threw a wet towel over any sense of touching humanity the story might have otherwise offered.

There were just a few brief exceptions to this that convinced me to give this book two stars rather than one:

- 1) The flashback scenes involving the Guatemalan community in the 1983, where they are being overtaken by soldiers -- these scenes presented the gripping tone I was hoping for for the rest of the novel! So much so, that it actually felt like these passages were written by someone else entirely!
- 2) The story of Lourdes was really sad, especially after reading the author's note at the end of the story,

revealing that that character was inspired by a real person he knew who suffered the same fate given to Lourdes in the novel.

3) The bit about Angela revisiting the Guatemalan community after the project had ended and discovering she has a more personal tie to the village people than she ever realized. That moment was pretty touching.

Aside from those brief moments, I was mostly just bored to tears with this one, which is a shame because I think the discussion on fair trade is an important one that many readers can benefit from -- but this isn't the first book I'd recommend for that education.

Whitney Jo says

Just finished this tonight. A story written by an economics professor, based off of a research project regarding fair trade coffee and coffee plantations in Guatemala. As a novel, it doesn't read well. Very light\ sometimes cheesy, the dialogue is stilted & it's hard to get into. But as far as subject content, it's well informed & important information. Still pondering.:) Would recommend not as a pleasure read, but for anyone who is interested in learning more about the connection between the coffee we drink and what kind of impact that's making, negative or otherwise. I would love to read the real research project.

Elena says

This book is well written with its unique creativity in economics. It was a bit shocking in some parts of the book the way the scenes are described in Guatemala. I had to read this book for my economics class and overall I enjoyed the characters and I got to know them a bit more.

Janet Sketchley says

A team of graduate students from California travel to Guatemala to trace coffee beans from site of origin to final destination, identifying the profit at each stage. Their questions: Does globalization make things better or worse? Does Fair Trade actually help the farmers? What about organic certification? And if the coffee industry is booming, why are the farmers living at subsistence level—or below it?

Their findings might surprise you.

This book is fiction, but it's based on an actual assignment given by the author to some of his students. Many of their experiences made it into the novel. The author's stated purpose is to share the findings of this study in a more engaging manner than a dry report. To that end, he succeeds.

It's very fact-heavy, and although those facts come out in the sort of natural dialogue that graduate students would have about such things, this average reader confesses to skimming some of those sections. There's far more information than a casual reader is ready to process. As such, the novel might be best suited to entry-level students in the areas of international trade and development, economics or global studies.

Angela and Alex and their teammates are engaging, original characters, although somewhat overshadowed by the novel's focus. The reading level is often higher than fiction readers expect, for example,

"Governments at peace with their people are much alike, but genocidal governments are each maleficent in their own way." [p. 1] Personally, this language level is a pleasing stretch for me until it hits the details of areas of study.

There's some fine description, though: "The sun rose in the sky and as the shadows grew shorter, the line of sweat down the middle of Fernando's back grew longer, reaching down toward his belt." [p. 49] And the author includes just enough Spanish to flavour the dialogue without losing non-Spanish speakers like me.

A few of the characters are Christian, and faith occasionally comes into their discussions, but in a natural, non-preachy way.

I love the cover of this book. It suits the story perfectly, down to the burlap background reminiscent of the bags that transport so many coffee beans. I learned from my reading that high-end beans are now shipped in vacuum-sealed plastic, but that wouldn't make for such a good visual. Plus, the beans likely still leave the coffee farmer in the traditional burlap.

The Author's Note proves that Bruce Wydick is a fine and engaging writer of non-fiction. He has created interesting characters and a plot with nicely-interwoven subplots. As many novelists do, he wrestles with complex truths that the wider world needs to hear. I think this book was a great idea, but what it needed was a co-writer to make the fiction shine (and a willingness to go much lighter on the facts so that readers could absorb the ones highlighted).

Author Bruce Wydick is a professor at the University of San Francisco (economics and international studies).

[A review copy was received from the publisher in exchange for an honest review. I was in no way compensated for this review.]
