



# Everything but the Coffee: Learning about America from Starbucks

*Bryant Simon*

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## **Everything but the Coffee: Learning about America from Starbucks** Bryant Simon

*Everything but the Coffee* casts a fresh eye on the world's most famous coffee company, looking beyond baristas, movie cameos, and Paul McCartney CDs to understand what Starbucks can tell us about America. Bryant Simon visited hundreds of Starbucks around the world to ask, Why did Starbucks take hold so quickly with consumers? What did it seem to provide over and above a decent cup of coffee? Why at the moment of Starbucks' profit-generating peak did the company lose its way, leaving observers baffled about how it might regain its customers and its cultural significance? *Everything but the Coffee* probes the company's psychological, emotional, political, and sociological power to discover how Starbucks' explosive success and rapid deflation exemplify American culture at this historical moment. Most importantly, it shows that Starbucks speaks to a deeply felt American need for predictability and class standing, community and authenticity, revealing that Starbucks' appeal lies not in the product it sells but in the easily consumed identity it offers.

## **Everything but the Coffee: Learning about America from Starbucks Details**

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## From Reader Review Everything but the Coffee: Learning about America from Starbucks for online ebook

### Jason S says

From everything to complicity in the Rwandan genocide, to the environmental impact of the paper cups, this book takes a scholarly and thorough look at the making (and unmaking?) of the Starbuck empire and what it means for America. A wonderful read, and although a bit repetitive in spots, a very good work of contemporary social commentary

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### Emily says

I read this book as part of my research on coffee culture, particularly the opposing cultures of Starbucks and Dunkin' Donuts. I'd give the first half of the book, which offers a fascinating socio-cultural study of Starbucks as an icon of American aspiration, a five and then the latter half, which focuses on how wasteful and unjust Starbucks is a two-three, so the overall rating averages out to 3.5ish.

It's certainly not an unbiased account, which Simon explains a bit in his afterward, but I still enjoyed it and think it will be very helpful to me in my research. I'd definitely recommend the first chapters, especially the one that refutes Howard Schultz's claim that Starbucks is a third place.

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### John says

Simon is a little too smugly bemused, even for an academician.

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### Becky says

The author related impressions and experiences from traveling to many different store locations as well as international travel research. Much of what he talks about is visible from the outside as a patron, but the information about fair trade coffee and the realities of farmers in Latin American countries and African countries is insightful. I appreciate the author's time and efforts to take us backstage in this industry.

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### Liam says

"Just by carrying a Starbucks white up encased in a brown java jacket and speaking the company's made-up Italianesque lingua franca, customers identified themselves as belonging to, and got the value of membership in, a group of successful people with hip, urbane tastes; an understanding of the finer things in life; and concern about the planet, the less fortunate, and the global order. For much of the Starbucks moment, customers believed that their grande lattes demonstrated that they were better than others -- cooler, richer, and more sophisticated." (7)

"Starbucks was 'a place for people who want to be alone, but need company for it.'" (quoting Alfred Polgar, 119)

"What they really get, and what Starbucks really sells, is not so much answers but a washing of the hands, what I would call innocence by association." (178)

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### **Madeline says**

Everything but the Coffee is an expose-like examination of Starbucks and its many different aspects as a company. While the amount of time and painstaking research is obvious between the lines of the text, I feel like Simon struggled to find a thesis/lacked conclusions about the weight of the MEANING of what all of this research set out to do in the first place (arguably, Simon admits to this in the afterword, and states that he struggled to find a start and end to the project in addition to finding a sense of directionality in the book).

I feel a little torn about this one...I feel like for me, there were little nuggets of gold in here (the entire chapter about Starbucks' exploitation of the "fair trade" coffee bean movement in and of itself is deplorable – for me, this was easily the most compelling and high quality chapter of the entire novel); ultimately, I felt Simon made many claims which were bold, to say the least. I didn't feel that some of these claims were completely unfounded, but rather, shoddily put together and oftentimes (admittedly) contradictory. I'm speaking specifically about the entire chapter about Starbucks attempting to become "a third space". While I understand what the Simon was trying to say, I ultimately felt that he made bold claims that were punctuated by frantic jumping up and down. I feel that he should either: go back and get solid evidence to fully support his claims, or omit the chapter completely.

Compelling and interesting overall for a solid informative read, but undeveloped and slightly too emotionally charged to be taken seriously the entire time.

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### **Leanna says**

The afterword of the book describes why the author chose to write this book and his reasons for writing the book are exactly why I wanted to read it. The sociological part. I thought that the author kept an open mind in shining the light on Starbucks. It is not a book about slamming a big business (anyway - not the first major portion) and that's what was interesting to me. He spent another part of the book researching their claims regarding fair trade and the environment, which had the entire book been about this, I probably would have lost interest after the point was made. He had a good balance. All in all it was to my liking.

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### **Daniel Farabaugh says**

I loved this book. It does a great job of capturing the sense of how people regarded the meaning of shopping at Starbucks and how they viewed themselves. The sociological chapters about behavior were as well done as the sections on corporate policy. The way that Starbucks pretended to be green were especially eye opening. All around a great read, very similar and on par with The Walmart Effect.

## John says

The history and theory behind Starbucks was covered better in Taylor Clark's *Starbucked* and the sociological aspects of why people go to Starbucks was what drew me to the book. Unfortunately the sociological aspects ended up playing second fiddle to the author's feelings towards Starbucks. The author jumps from enjoying the Starbucks experience to disillusionment to anti-corporate feelings within the course of a few chapters. This leads to an uneven reading experience and a distrust of the author's writing as all chapters seem to be heavily influenced by the author's relationship with the company at the time. I was hoping for an academic book that looks at the Starbucks phenomenon with a clear eye and non-judgmental.

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## dara says

The first 172 pages remain the most faithful to the author's original intent for the book (examining the appeal of Starbucks), but they're also rather redundant and at times downright boring. Although the book strays from the purely sociological viewpoint from pages 173 and onward, I'd argue that those pages are the most important. Learning about the company's greenwashing or the poor living conditions of the African coffee-plantation workers might not be what some readers are expecting when they pick up this book, but it's what made the book worth reading.

"Pretty quickly, I stopped seeing the company as an engine of community. Instead, I saw it as a mythmaker offering only an illusion of belonging and meeting its customers' desire for connections in form, maybe, but surely not in substance. Once I came to this conclusion, I started to dig deeper into the company's other promises--great working conditions, musical discovery, fair treatment of farmer, and concern for the environment. Every time I went excavating, the stories turned out to be more complex, more heavily edited, and more ambiguous than I had first thought. Each time, it became clear that Starbucks fulfilled its many promises only in the thinnest, most transitory of ways and that people's desires went largely unfulfilled."

The few positive steps Starbucks has made were the result of activist pressure and these efforts were half-assed, at best. Smaller coffee shops with less to spend have committed far more to the greater good of the environment and the global market. Only 5-6 percent of the coffee beans purchased by Starbucks are fair-trade; meanwhile, the company would love to capitalize on the *stories* of helping the small farmers and their communities. They purchase their coffee from middlemen, instead of co-ops, doing very little for small farmers. Their own standard--CAFE Practices--allows workers to live in hovels smaller than most Starbucks bathrooms, on wages of two dollars a day, with no compensation for when it rains or the months between coffee harvests. Similarly, Starbucks talks a good game about being "green," but doesn't recycle or take decent steps to encourage people to lessen their use of single-serving cups (which cannot be recycled in most facilities due to the plastic lining). They boast about how many trees they've saved with their reusable mug, but the amount accounts for only 1% of their business. After all, why discourage the wasteful use of Starbucks paper cups when it's free advertising?

Out of curiosity, I checked the Starbucks Facebook page: "Starbucks has an unusually human approach to business. We always figured that putting people before products just made good common sense. Our relationships with farmers yield the highest quality coffees. The connections we make in communities create a loyal following. Our ability to accomplish what we set out to do is based primarily on the people we hire - we call each other 'partners.' We are always focused on our people." Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit!

Whether or not it was the author's intent, I've decided that Starbucks in an "affordable luxury" that I can do without.

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### **Sandra says**

As someone who loves sitting in coffee shops and avoids Starbucks coffee, I found this book very interesting. The author covers the beginnings of Starbucks and the marketing of the current corporation. Sometimes the chapters were a bit repetitive, but on the whole I learned a lot and found the book readable.

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### **Ed says**

Don't waste your time - the author spends none of his time "learning about America" and all of his time trashing Starbucks.

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### **Peter Twist says**

Simon presents us with an insightful piece of scholarship that reads more like a meditation on consumerism and Starbucks' role in shaping our buying habits. This far-reaching book traces Starbucks' modest beginnings in Seattle, its meteoric rise to become the darling of the NASDAQ, and its eventual downfall. Along the way, Simon weaves in discussion of social capital, labor, conscientious consumerism, environmental impact, and a host of other topics that are all wrapped up in the behemoth that is Starbucks.

It is Simon's personal touch that makes this book a pleasure to read. Skirting the academic's tendency to present an impartial view of his subject, Simon frequently refers to his own experiences as a Starbucks customer and as a consumer in general. And how many academic works do we get to read that include mention of your college friend who knew about every band that ever existed? This book covers a lot without getting bogged down.

I would love to see an updated edition that examines Starbucks' more recent history. Simon refers to the period discussed here as "the Starbucks Moment," which spans from about 1992 to 2007. The Starbucks Moment includes the aforementioned rise and fall of Starbucks. How would Simon characterize Starbucks' resurgence in recent years? Has it moved away from catering to the bobo set and found its zone of comfort serving yuppies and main streamers? Was there ever a difference between these groups? How would Starbucks consumers define themselves today?

If you find yourself fascinated by conspicuous consumerism and would like to peer behind the Starbucks curtain, this book is right up your alley.

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### **Stacey says**

Who knew a book about Starbucks could tell you so much about modern American society? The author, as he himself admits, can get a little heavy-handed in his disappointment with Starbucks, but it's a minor flaw. If you, like me, find yourself quoting the ideas of Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* all the time, you need to

read this book for an updated perspective on the concept.

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## **Fangfangxx says**

There is nothing new to use (conspicuous) consumption to symbolically communicate class and social standing (Simon 2009:2), what is interesting in the Starbucks case is how their branding and marketing strategies rode on the public discourses, on a transnational scale. Starbucks' boom is fueled by the change in the bigger social context of soho (small office home office), corporation downsizing/outsourcing, the wide-usage of laptop and wifi techniques, as well as a heightened awareness or social consciousness for company's political gesture (14). Sadly the founder's early ambition to resist standardization, to promote natural and real food, to emphasize on knowledge and freshness (24) were eaten by the capitalist system. The consumers Starbucks currently cater to no longer look for authenticity in genuine, but in upscale lifestyle and personal control (38). They are not looking for a community, but a sense of community, which Starbucks finds no difficulty to provide. It creates a fake third place (97) because in Starbucks people don't talk to each other, but only to staff. It is a community built between individual customer and Starbucks, only between them there exists constant conversation. The notion of a workplace (87), a third place, freshly-roasted coffee etc. are the innovations created by Starbucks but corrupted and lost through its expansion. However, it did set the trend and pave the road for later independent coffee shops to burgeon. The predictability (59) and treat to oneself (123) are hardly new when we think about McDonalds or Tiffany. The ups and downs of Starbucks indicate that there is a fine line between versatility and trying too hard. The bigger financial system is not that easy to please, when even they take public concern, media rhetoric into consideration, for example, "buying to make a political statement, support the struggles of others (204)".

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