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Author : John McPhee

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From Reader Review Oranges for online ebook

Annie says

John McPhee is a national treasure. This enjoyable little book contains perhaps more than you ever wanted to know about oranges.

Myles says

(3.9/5.0) If you've ever devoted more than a few hours to your local public access woodworking program, getting acquainted with the different block planes and varieties of stains and oils, you'll know how the bracingly dull can still sometimes draw your admiration, even your surprise. In that he's a pensive, soft spoken bearded man with the patience to resolve challenging and thankless issues of craft, John McPhee is akin to master carpenter Norm Abram. Here, as he does with the rest of his writing, McPhee uses a simple subject to launch into a deep, almost meditative focus before swirling off to more rewarding digressions. Yes, we learn all about citriculture in 1967 ("picking negroes" and carcinogenic chemicals abound). But, in addition to its smooth, ear-pleasing prose, what makes *Oranges* a model for social history and creative reporting is its forays into storytelling with these long, playful concatenations of historical events triggered by the title fruit's movement across cultures and time.

From page 2:

The day is started with orange juice in the Colombian Andes, and, to some extent, in Kuwait. Bolivians don't touch it at breakfast time, but they drink it steadily for the rest of the day. The "play lunch," or morning tea, that Australian children carry with them to school is usually an orange, peeled spirally halfway down, with the peel replaced around the fruit. The child unwinds the peel and holds the orange as if it were an ice-cream cone. People in Nepal almost never peel oranges, preferring to eat them in cut quarters, the way American athletes do. The sour oranges of Afghanistan customarily appear as seasoning agents on Afghan dinner tables. Squeezed over Afghan food, they cut the grease.

Lillian says

John McPhee's *Oranges* is just what it sounds like: a book about oranges. The pages are filled with everything the average person would ever wish to know about the fruit, but it doesn't read like a textbook; on the contrary, it sweeps you up and doesn't set you back down until the end (which, I admit, was incredibly abrupt).

When I finished *Oranges*, I had a large dose of the familiar feeling that comes at the end of a really good book. If you're here on Goodreads, you probably know what I'm talking about: that sense of loss, and a sudden regret that you devoured your book at the speed you did. To have a really good book, in my opinion, it needs to flow, and McPhee understood that. Somehow, he made a book about fruit read like a fantasy novel.

Kazen says

John McPhee was tasked with writing a magazine article about oranges. He went down to Florida, did some research, and came back with a 160 page book instead.

In large part this is because oranges, from their history to their cultivation and processing, is so gosh darn interesting. The book fills your brain with trivia and "did you know"s.

"The taste and aroma of oranges differ by type, season, county, state, and country, and even as a result of the position of the individual orange in the framework of the tree on which it grew."

"Carvone, a synthetic spearmint oil which is used to flavor spearmint gum, is made from citrus peel oil."

Originally published in 1967, McPhee caught the industry at a turning point where American consumers started to prefer orange juice concentrate over the fresh stuff. Concentrate is consistent in taste and texture and doesn't go bad, making it a hit in mid-century homes. He talks about the manufacturing process, the technical discoveries that allow concentrate to actually taste good, and how it was starting to change the industry. I think it's especially interesting because we have since turned back to fresh orange juice, and out of all the "how it's made" videos on Youtube I can't find one that shows concentrate being made.

The writing is light and easy and often Bill Bryson-esque, though without his self-deprecating humor. There are still funny bits, though. When a farmer picks McPhee up by helicopter to show him the groves:

The helicopter was yawing and swaying in a gusty head wind, and Adams - a youthful man wearing an open-necked shirt and a fiber hat with madras band - was having trouble keeping it on a true course. The problem didn't seem to bother him. "Isn't this thing great?" he shouted.

"It sure is," I said. "How long have you had it?"

"Almost three months."

"What did you fly before that?"

"Never flown before. There's nothing like it!"

I liked these adventures and profiles best - talking with scientists at the University of Florida's Citrus Experiment Station, walking the groves with growers, and visiting an orange baron who was born in a town that wasn't affected by cold snaps, so much so that it was named Frostproof, Florida.

That being said the middle part of the book, covering orange history, dragged me down. He gives example after example of anachronistic oranges in Renaissance paintings, details the introduction of oranges into different regions over time, and lists their myriad uses over the centuries. There were interesting facts in there but the list-y nature bored me. And do know that this book is a product of its times, so expect some casual and fleeting racism towards native peoples and African-Americans.

Oranges is good for the next time you want a light, interesting, fact-filled read, especially if you need a break

from heavier stuff.

Michael Whitehead says

Fabulous writing that documents the history of the orange and the impact of the citrus industry on Florida up to the 1960s, when this book was compiled from a series of essays written for THE New Yorker.

Howard Krosnick says

Beautifully written. Huge amount of fascinating information in a short book.

Increased my knowledge about and love of oranges.

Made me wonder what changes have taken place in the orange world since the book was originally written in the 60's.

Dawn Betts-Green (Dinosaur in the Library) says

Interesting if outdated read (published in 1967). I will say that it ended incredibly abruptly, but I definitely want to check out some more of McPhee's work. Excellent narrative nonfic.

Tony says

Here's what I learned about oranges, or citrus generally:

-- *Citrus does not come true from seed. What this means is: If you plant an orange seed, a grapefruit might come up. If you plant a seed of that grapefruit, you might get a bitter lemon.* To get oranges, specifically, you have to graft the orange to the rootstock of some other citrus tree. Sweet Florida oranges are grown primarily from bitter orange and sour lemon root.

-- *Columbus himself brought the first oranges to the New World.*

-- *An orange grown in Florida usually has a thin and tightly fitting skin, and it is also heavy with juice. Californians say that if you want to eat a Florida orange you have to get into a bathtub first. California oranges are light in weight and have thick skins that break easily and come off in hunks. The flesh inside is marvelously sweet, and the segments almost separate themselves. In Florida, it is said that you can run over a California orange with a ten-ton truck and not even wet the pavement.*

-- *A citrus fruit is, botanically, a berry.*

-- When you buy a lime to add to your gin and tonic it is generally seedless, which is certainly accommodating for the serious drinker. But it's a problem for pomologists confronted with a virus to an orchard. *The most common way to create a virus-free strain of a citrus fruit is to plant a seed, since a parent's virus is not transmitted to its seedlings.* So, what to do with the seemingly seedless lime? Two researchers cut up eighteen hundred and eighty-five Persian Limes and found no seeds at all. They next went

to a lime concentrate plant and filled up two dump trucks with pulp from the tens of thousands of Persian Limes that had been turned into limeade. *Picking through it all by hand, they found two hundred and fifty seeds, and planted them. Up from those lime seeds came sweet oranges trees, bitter orange trees, grapefruit trees, lemon trees, tangerines, limequats, citrons--and two seedlings which proved to be Persian Limes.*

-- The modern fruit we recognize as an orange almost surely developed in China.

-- The word "orange" evolved from the Sanskrit. It was *orange* first in France.

-- *In fifteenth-century Breslau, there was an annual orange shoot . . . during which marksmen spent happy hours shooting oranges off one another's heads. In Switzerland, the legend of William Tell was recorded in the same century, and since there seems never to have been a William Tell, it is possible that the Swiss borrowed the idea from the Breslovians, and that the fruit on the head of Tell's trusting son might well have been an orange.*

-- Harriet Beecher Stowe bought an orange orchard in Florida in 1868. A Southern newspaper expressed satisfaction "that Mrs. Stowe has done this little to repair the world of the evil for which she is responsible in the production of Uncle Tom's Cabin."

-- Many societies believed that the worst thing to happen to an orange tree was the touch of a woman. This superstition was especially persistent in Germany.

-- Oranges appear frequently in the paintings of the great masters of the Italian Renaissance.* *Not having seen the Holy Land, they glibly set their Annunciations and Resurrections in Italian villas and on Italian hills. Crusaders, among others, had long since reported that orange trees flourished in Palestine, so, as a kind of hallmark of authenticity, the painters slipped orange trees into masterpiece after masterpiece, remaining ignorant to their deaths that in the time of Christ there were no orange trees in or near the Holy Land.*

This book was written in 1966 and does seem a little dated, especially with a large focus on orange concentrate. I don't even know anyone who buys concentrate anymore unless they order it in a chain restaurant for breakfast and it comes gurgling out of one of those machines. I googled my suspicion and, surprisingly, did not get an answer to my specific question. What I got instead was bombarded with links telling me that orange juice is no good for me, with titles like "Why Orange Juice is Slowly Killing You". So, being health-conscious as I am, I will have my vodka straight.

And now you know what I know about oranges.

*After a quick look, I didn't find any oranges in the fruit bowls but I did find many, many orange *trees*, for instance, in *Madonna of the Orange Tree*:

And, nothing conceals like orange leaves:

Bert says

You may not know this about me but I have a fruit phobia. Yep. So this was an unusual (and big-boy brave) choice of book for me. I've never eaten an orange, or even held one. But reading about them didn't gross me out too much (admittedly citrus is pretty far down my hierarchy of fruit grossness), and this lovely book from 1966 was actually really interesting, had a casual charm and made excellent bedtime summer reading.

Ryan Williams says

They say a good writer can take anything as his subject, no matter how ordinary, and leave you wondering if you have ever looked at it before. McPhee took the simple household orange as his subject, intending to produce a one off article. Once he got going, his curiosity burned ever brighter - and his enthusiasm is contagious. The result was this book - a classic work of non-fiction, and a marvel of reportage. Coming from the country that gave the world Joseph Mitchell, Gay Talese, Joan Didion and Hunter S. Thompson, that is high praise indeed.

Kathrin Passig says

Frauen kommen nur ganz am Rande als leichtgläubige, dumme Supermarktkundinnen vor. Alle Interviewten, alle Erwähnten, alle handelnden Personen sind Männer. Aber so waren sie wohl, die 60er. Die Faktensammlung hätte mir vielleicht in Prä-Internet-Zeiten Freude bereitet, aber jetzt wirkt sie ein bisschen wie Wikipedia-Abschreibeleratur.

Karen Lu says

i came across this book in a used bookshop many years ago and remembered it. i bought it recently and was unusually excited to read it. i now know more about oranges than is reasonable for the average human. but the beauty of a book such as this one is how it reminds you how much of the world is known to others and unknown to you. experts on oranges exist, and McPhee gives us ordinary people a glimpse into their world.

Annie says

*He turned around with a look of recognition and said to me, "You come from apple country."
In one sentence, he had defined the dimensions of his own world, the utterly parochial nature of it, its disciplined singleness.*

A brief but mildly interesting story of oranges. Their cultivation, their history, and their uses all get examined here.

-----ANACHRONISMS-----

This book was written in the 1960s, and it's interesting to compare then to now. For instance, McPhee notes that for most people, real oranges are "a thing of the past" for the most part. Eating a fresh orange is "old-fashioned." Most people who consume oranges do so through frozen cans of orange juice concentrate. See, today, I think in a lot of ways those cans of frozen concentrate are themselves old-fashioned, a relic of the 60s-90s. Three times the author is given concentrate labeled "fresh orange juice" in stands in Florida. He asks for fresh orange juice in restaurants in Florida, and none have it.

Today I would guess most people who consume oranges do so through those bags of clementines, like the brands Halo or Cuties. Or through non-concentrated orange juice. Lots of restaurants sell fresh orange juice. And I can't imagine a Florida orange stand selling concentrate these days. There would be rioting.

There are also other anachronisms, like talking about spraying parathion (a deadly nerve agent used in WW2 warfare) on oranges. "The hazard to the consumer is practically nil." Lol. Parathion has been banned for use on fruits because it's a carcinogen.

-----FAV ORANGE FACTS-----

1. **Sweetness.** The sweetest oranges come from high up, not low to the ground. Fruit on the outside of the tree is sweeter than fruit closer in to the trunk. South-side oranges are the sweetest, then east and west, and north are the least sweet. The blossom half of the orange is always sweeter than the stem end.
2. **Colour.** Oranges can be green and still be perfectly ripe. The colour of an orange depends not on ripeness but on temperature. It turns orange because the weather gets cooler, as it does in, say, Florida or California in the winter. In Thailand, by contrast, it never really gets even somewhat cool, and the oranges are green. The ideal nighttime temperature for an orange grove is 40 degrees. That's why the best oranges in the world are grown on Bermuda, where it typically reaches right around there at night. Hence Andrew Marvell's poem Bermudas, describing the oranges on that island hanging "like golden lamps in a green night."
3. **Roots.** The roots and lower trunk of a citrus tree are usually one fruit, and the upper part, branches, and fruit another entirely (I did know this, as my dad used to grow fruit whose stems he would splice together). For instance, in Florida most orange trees have lemon trunks/roots, and in California most lemon trees have orange roots!
4. **Etymology.** The word orange comes from the Sanskrit word naranga (the prefix of which meant fragrance), which developed into Neo-Latin "arangium" which became naranja (Spanish), arancia (Italian), and orange (French/English).
5. **Uses.** Until the 1500s, oranges were grown for ornamental reasons (their "golden orbs" were considered beautiful), fragrance, or as a spice. They weren't commonly eaten.

Also, oil from orange peels is used to flavor concentrated orange juice to return the flavor of fresh oranges to it. Also, Coca-Cola contains oranges in the form of peel oil.

John says

You get done with this book and say "I just read an entire book about oranges?!"

Ruth says

I came to this book with two misapprehensions. First, I thought it was a new book. Second, I thought it would be about California.

I own a whole string of McPhee books, but lately my enthusiasm for his writing has been in need of a transfusion. A new book seemed the thing to do it. This turned out to be one of his first books. How come I never heard of it until now?

I have lived for the major portion of my life in the middle of the orange groves. (McPhee says Californians speak of orange “orchards.” If so, I’ve been living in a bubble for 70+ years.)

The subject of orange trees takes me back to the smell of orange blossoms on moonlight horseback rides in the San Fernando Valley; to standing in black adobe mud, tending the irrigation ditches in the acre of so of orange grove my family owned; to the smell of the peel when you dig your fingernails into it on a hot summer day; to fresh-squeezed orange juice in a round glass pitcher on the top shelf of the refrigerator; to row after row of glossy green globular trees stretching across the valley in geometric rows; to the warnings to young girls to “stay out of the orange groves” if you didn’t want trouble; to roadside stands today, selling fresh, tart-sweet Navels for \$3 a bag; to the sound of Rainbirds chk-chk-chking all night long.

I have to admit that the things I like about McPhee are still there. His ability to dig into something and come up with all kinds of interesting facts you didn’t even know you didn’t know. His personalization of these facts through his interaction with others. His clean, clear prose.

But I was unable to get over my disappointment that California is mentioned only in passing. The book should have been called Florida Oranges.

Oh, and remind me never to drink orange “juice” made from concentrate again. I always knew it tasted funny. Now I know why.
