



The Coffee Trader

David Liss

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The Edgar Award-winning novel *A Conspiracy of Paper* was one of the most acclaimed debuts of 2000. In his richly suspenseful second novel, author David Liss once again travels back in time to a crucial moment in cultural and financial history. His destination: Amsterdam, 1659 — a mysterious world of trade populated by schemers and rogues, where deception rules the day.

On the world's first commodities exchange, fortunes are won and lost in an instant. Miguel Lienzo, a sharp-witted trader in the city's close-knit community of Portuguese Jews, knows this only too well. Once among the city's most envied merchants, Miguel has lost everything in a sudden shift in the sugar markets. Now, impoverished and humiliated, living on the charity of his petty younger brother, Miguel must find a way to restore his wealth and reputation.

Miguel enters into a partnership with a seductive Dutchwoman who offers him one last chance at success — a daring plot to corner the market of an astonishing new commodity called "coffee." To succeed, Miguel must risk everything he values and test the limits of his commercial guile, facing not only the chaos of the markets and the greed of his competitors, but also a powerful enemy who will stop at nothing to see him ruined. Miguel will learn that among Amsterdam's ruthless businessmen, betrayal lurks everywhere, and even friends hide secret agendas.

With humor, imagination, and mystery, David Liss depicts a world of subterfuge, danger, and repressed longing, where religious and cultural traditions clash with the demands of a new and exciting way of doing business. Readers of historical suspense and lovers of coffee (even decaf) will be up all night with this beguiling novel.

The Coffee Trader Details

Date : Published February 3rd 2004 by Ballantine Books (first published November 7th 2002)

ISBN : 9780375760907

Author : David Liss

Format : Paperback 384 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Mystery

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From Reader Review The Coffee Trader for online ebook

Susana says

(review in english below)

Há já algum tempo que tinha curiosidade em ler alguma coisa do David Liss e quando vi este livro na estante de uma amiga, não desperdicei a oportunidade.

Infelizmente, foi uma decepção. Li, algures, que a partir da página 100 a história ganhava vida, mas comigo isso não aconteceu. Não gostei da escrita, nem dos personagens, nem da história - quero lá saber se o Miguel consegue fazer fortuna com o café, ou se tem um romance com a cunhada!...

Acho que estou a ficar mais exigente - deve ser da idade... - e sem paciência para perder preciosas horas a tentar interessar-me por um livro que não me agarrou, sobretudo quando tenho dezenas de livros seguramente melhores que este à minha espera.

Assim, fico por aqui (pág. 129), sem arrependimentos e entusiasmada por ir começar uma nova aventura literária.

I'd been curious to read something from David Liss for some time now, so when I spotted this book on a friend's bookcase, I took the opportunity.

Unfortunately, it was a letdown. I'd read somewhere that the story picked up after page 100, but it didn't happen for me.

I didn't like the writing, the characters or the story - I couldn't care less if Miguel makes a fortune from coffee trading, or if he gets involved with his sister-in-law...

I think I'm turning more picky as I get older and I don't want to lose precious hours of my time trying to get interested in a book that didn't grab me, specially when I have dozens of books waiting for me, that are undoubtedly better than this one.

So, I'll leave it to that (page 129), with no regrets and excited to begin a new literary adventure.

Bettie? says

My particular edition is not available here on Goodreads

1841976024

9781841976020

Hardback

Large Print

Publisher WF Howes Ltd

Withdrawn from Oxfordshire Library Service

Opening: **Firmer than water or wine, it rippled thickly in its bowl, dark and hot and uninviting. Miguel Lienzo picked it up and pulled it so close he almost dipped his nose into the tarry liquid.**

Went from complete distaste to tepid enjoyment, however it never rose above that level. Not recommended.

1.5*

Joy H. says

Setting: The Netherlands in the 1600s

The story and the well-drawn characters kept me reading but the plot was a bit confusing to follow. Who was tricking whom? Things became convoluted after a while as the many characters wove themselves into the plot. Also, the stock trading manipulations made dull reading, especially because I didn't quite understand them.

The suspenseful atmosphere kept things interesting enough. The idea that coffee was a mysterious new product in the 1600s engaged my interest.

Gretchen says

It wasn't great. It wasn't terrible. If you find you want to read this book, I won't stop you but I will warn you there are other books out there. Books that are probably more deserving of your time.

The characters in this book were blah. They were just there because a story requires people. I didn't care what happened to them. They could have all tragically died at the end and I don't think it would have really bothered me.

What did save this book was the obvious knowledge the author has of 17th century Amsterdam. The look at how the "stock market" worked before Wall Street was excellent but it wasn't enough to make a great book.

Amber says

This was an interesting thriller/historical fiction novel about Amsterdam's commodities exchange in the late 1600s. The main character Miguel Lienzo took refuge in The Netherlands after living as a Secret Jew in Portugal where the force of the Inquisition had become too great a threat. Although Miguel was initially successful in Amsterdam's markets, the novel begins with him juggling debts to his self-righteous brother as well as others in the community. Having lost his fortune in the sugar market, Miguel was eager to find a new commodity that would help him repay his debts and regain sufficient financial status to move out of his younger brother's cellar and find a wife. Through surreptitious dealings with a cunning Dutchwoman, Miguel learned about coffee, a product still only used for medicinal purposes in most of Europe. They developed a plan to use her capital and his business savvy to create a monopoly on coffee in Europe. As Miguel navigates this risky venture, he must avoid the attention of his trading adversaries as well as the watchful eye of the Ma'amad's spies who would have him excommunicated for doing business with gentiles.

Kirsten McKeown says

Multiply the business plotting of "Mad Men" by 10, put it into a Vermeer painting, take away the brandy sniffers at working lunches and insert a mysteriously alluring brew called "coffee,"--and voila, you have the beginning scenes to a masterpiece stock exchange mystery set in Amsterdam in the 1600s. If you have read the Benjamin Weaver series by David Liss, this book predates those London hijinks--showcasing his father's fortunes as a Portuguese Jewish trader exiled by the Inquisition. Miguel has problems--an evil and disloyal brother, an entirely-too-hot sister-in-law, a cougar-with-brains business partner with an inconveniently brutish henchman at her service, several spies nipping at his heels, and, of course, innumerable business enemies popping up like tulips in April. Everyone is holding their breath, waiting to see whose fortunes will be made and lost when a long-awaited boat load of coffee finally comes to port...

Elizabeth (Alaska) says

I enjoyed this historical fiction. It doubles as a mystery/thriller, though that didn't kick in until the latter half. David Liss does a fine job with the setting of 1659 Amsterdam. The main character, Miguel Lienzo, is a Portuguese Jew. He and the others in his community fled their country and the Inquisition.

The presentation of the story is somewhat unusual. Most fiction is told in the third person, and so is most of this. However, many of the chapters conclude with a section "from The Factual and Revealing Memoirs of Alonzo Alferonda" and, being a purported memoir, is told in the first person. Alonzo knows things that the other characters do not and it is with Alonzo that we are privy to some of the intrigue.

The beginning drew me in immediately, but then seemed a bit flat. Then it picked up, an then again was flat. In other novels, I might call this uneven, but I have decided this was just the nature of this story. Not every person's life can be exciting every moment. Miguel had to take time to think, and it was the thinking that drove the thriller rather than the villain as in most thrillers. He is not the villain of the piece and the story is never told from the perspective of the villain.

I am happy I have purchased another David Liss when it was a sale item for my Kindle. I don't know how soon I'll get to it, but it won't lie languishing for years, I think. This one slips into the 4 star bracket (from 3) because of the last 75 pages. It has neither the superb prose nor characterizations which I want for my 5 star reads.

Lyn says

Surprising depth and very entertaining.

The complexity of the group dynamics and of what was undoubtedly a well researched book was impressive. Liss creates a setting wherein he draws the reader and his sometimes complicated characterizations are spot on and approachable. Set in 17th century Amsterdam, this is also a fascinating historical fiction and the author crafts for the reader a time and place of exceptional detail. We also see the distinctions drawn between various cultures and religions and the often overwhelming rigidity of class and religious boundaries.

This finishes with an unsettled denouement and with some questions left unanswered, but overall a very

enjoyable story.

Suzanne says

“It rippled thickly in the bowl, dark and hot and uninviting. Miguel Lienzo picked it up and pulled it so close he almost dipped his nose into the tarry liquid. Holding the vessel still for an instant, he breathed in, pulling the scent deep into his lungs. The sharp odor of earth and rank leaves surprised him; it was like something an apothecary might keep in a chipped porcelain jar.”

David Liss is fast becoming a rival to my top historical fiction authors. I sat down with this book (luckily on an airplane where I had no children to interrupt me), and by the time I looked up I had plowed through 240 pages.

In *The Coffee Trader*, Liss transports his reader to Amsterdam in the year 1659. The protagonist, Miguel Lienzo is a trader bound to make his fortune on the commodities exchange. Fast paced, fascinating and with more than a little suspense, Liss creates a entertaining and engaging novel. At the same time, the history shines as we learn how Lienzo, a Portuguese Jew, must navigate a world of prejudice and politics. Fantastic book! I can't wait to read more novels by David Liss!

Rebecca Huston says

The first time that I read this book, I didn't make it past page 20. But when I picked it up last year, I found myself sitting up late at night to find out what would happen next in a tricky world of coffee, dutch merchants, money, and a string of half-truths. Recommended for anyone who wants their historical fiction to be a real challenge -- in a good way.

For a more complete review, please go here:
<http://www.bubblews.com/news/4281063-...>

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Allie Riley says

This isn't quite on a par with *A Conspiracy of Paper* (his first book), but it very nearly is. The action focuses

on the grandfather of Benjamin Weaver (the central character in the aforementioned novel), Miguel Lienzo, a Portuguese Jew living in Amsterdam. At the opening of the novel (May 1659) he is seemingly on the verge of ruin and survives only because of the charity of his brother Daniel, in whose cellar he lodges. But then he gets wind of a wondrous new drink called coffee and it seems as if his luck may be about to change...

Liss shows that his talent for plotting has not diminished since his debut and, likewise, that he is still able to create a cast of wonderful characters to enjoy. The atmosphere of the time was very well evoked (as far as I could tell - not being wholly conversant with the history of 17th Century Holland) and the suspense never let up. Just who was in league with whom and what the truth was appeared to be in a constant state of flux. Yet Liss brought it to a satisfactory and logical conclusion.

I found this a swift, enjoyable read and recommend it wholeheartedly.

Carol says

Sometimes I'm wrong about a book though I hate to admit it. I was almost 100 pages into The Coffee Trader and moaning that I wasn't enjoying the read but had to finish it as it was a book group choice. I knuckled down finally and was pleasantly surprised when very quickly the story just popped off the pages. When all was said and done I thoroughly relished the book, even going back to re-read parts of the beginning.

I honestly think what threw me is that The Coffee Trader is about commodity trading. This concept muddles my mind. Don't ask me how the stock exchange works cause it blows my mind. The Coffee Trader takes place in an exchange, albeit in mid-1600's in Amsterdam, and its coffee, not cash, but trading none-the-less.

The main character, Miquel is seeking to make his fortune in a scheme to corner the market on this new wondrous product of coffee. He enters into partnership with a mysterious woman, Geertruid and tries to keep the venture secret from his brother, Daniel and the villain of the story, Solomon Parido, a wealthy member of the Amsterdam Jewish community and the Ma Maad, The Portuguese Jewish community plays a large role in the whole and brings about happenings that would otherwise not be if not for the religion and culture. Though there are other vivid characters, none appealed to as much as Joachim Waagenaar, a gentile and Dutchman who loses all, his money, standing, face, in a deal with Miquel.

There are twists and turns in abundance and the outcome tickled me except for one aspect.

I enjoyed reading the author's note that explains his use of coffee vs. tulips or art to set the tone of trading in Dutch commerce of the mid 1600's. Also, I love this quote by character Miquel:

"He loved the money that came with success, but loved the power more".

How true of many powerful persons.

I'm so glad our group chose The Coffee Trader for this month's discussion and I'm really glad I stuck with it. A solid historical read. Now it's time for a cup of coffee.

Dawn says

In the interest of full disclosure, I did listen to an abridged version of this story. It was in no way on purpose, there was nothing on the CD's or box that said it was abridged. Nothing until the end of the last CD actually. Highly annoying, I should have paid more attention.

I think I may have enjoyed the story more if I had the full version but as it was I only thought it okay. It was a whole lot of boring (which is saying something as I obviously got all the exciting parts) and then the end just left me thinking he was an idiot. Maybe if he'd come across as purposefully successful instead of mean and petty.....

The few items that made this an okay instead of hated it book were the second story, told by Alfonso (I hope that's how it's spelt) and the stock market. Both aspects of the story that I found quite interesting.

Abby says

"I guess I'll read this one. It can't possibly be as good as his other two. It's about coffee. Who can write this much about coffee?"

"Uggggggghhh it's about stocks in coffee. It's not even about coffee coffee?"

"It takes place in Amsterdam? Weed."

"So far this is better than I thought it would be."

"This main character is kind of a douche."

"So is everyone else in this book."

"How the hell does one pronounce Oude Kerk? Is Dutch hard? Think I could learn it? Do I want to learn it? I heard the Netherlands is nice. Should I move there? Would I have to learn Dutch? Is Dutch hard?"

"Dude, this guy has gotten himself in some real trouble with money. I hope he gets out of it."

"Dude, this guy is a tool. He keeps borrowing money he doesn't have. I hope he goes to jail."

"Yikes, I'm glad my name isn't Gertruid."

"I'm going to read this one until I'm done with it. I can't focus on any of the other books."

"Dammit, boyfriend, leave me alone, I'm trying to read."

"Wait, so is Gertruid betraying Miguel? Is Alfonso? Is Parido? Is Miguel going to do it with his brother's wife or not? Is that servant going to get bitchsmacked like she should? So many questions I can hardly stand it..."

"Well I sure hope this ass doesn't win in the end. he is NOT a good guy. But then again neither are these other people. I don't know who to root for, the good guy or the bad guy. But wait, who is the good guy? Is there a good guy? Is anyone truly good or bad? Is Dutch hard?"

Terri says

I waited a long time to read this book. It sat on my 'to read' list for a year or so and I took it off, put it back on, never quite sure if I wanted to fit it into my reading schedule.

While I am pleased to have finally conquered the book, finally got it read, I was bitterly disappointed by it. I don't know if it was the great cover or not (as I have always regarded the cover of this edition as one of my favourites even before meeting the book in the flesh), but I really expected much more poetry in the writing style. A much better prose work offering than what I got.

Perhaps even more passion and animation in the writing too.

And yet, having read this book as a Group Read with others, I discovered that not everyone felt the same as I about the boring nature of the book, so I certainly would not ever discourage anyone from reading it.

I did give it 3 stars of 5 and to me that means 'I liked it and nearly enjoyed it' which I kind of didn't so I should be giving it 2. However, after giving it much thought, I decided that 3 stars because I liked it enough to get through it and not give up on it. I found a story within its pages that was mildly entertaining. So 3 star it is.

The day I started this book I brewed myself a pot of coffee, wanting to make the reading experience broader than just the act of reading words on pages. And it worked for a while as the book gets off early with your protagonist, Miguel, a broke, womanising, sex obsessed (don't expect lots of sex scenes though, just references to women he sees and women he has 'done') trader being introduced to coffee for the first time.

It takes a while to come back to the Coffee as the story moves into character developments and the strange and the unexpected presence of a memoir called The Factual and Revealing Memoirs of Alonzo Alferonda. I was ambling along, quite liking the story early on. Getting my head into this Amsterdam world, when hold the bus, everything stops and the book completely changes style to include a first person narrative from the memoir mentioned above. I honestly think that if I had known they were coming I would have been better prepared and I would not have lost my connection with the book.

Not everyone has trouble with sudden changes like that. Where there is actually two books in the one. Others I read this book with did not have the issue I had and they admit to finding the Memoir was the best part of the book. Whereas I regarded them as the worst. They got in my way. Shattered the Amsterdam world I had been building in my head.

The book goes on to be full of bitter, twisted plots and back stabbing. Manipulations and ulterior motives. It all got a little much for me and I started craving some pleasantness. Some smiling faces and well meaning interactions. But that is not what this book is about.

Think a book full of Edmund Dantes in Count of Monte Cristo and you might be close to what was going on here. All the characters are plotting and planning and scheming.

But I guess when you have an environment where there is big overnight profit to be made. Where people can be filthy rich in a matter of days on the backs of others, you will always have this kind of atmosphere and they are atmospheres that I am not comfortable with.

I have to tell you not to base your choice to read The Coffee Trader off my opinion. People's opinions on this book are so diverse that I honestly believe that you must ignore others - to a certain degree - and try it for yourself with a mind totally unobstructed by other peoples opinions.

Which is how we should go into every book that we read I suppose, only where would be the fun in that!

Sariah says

For the most part I really enjoyed reading The Coffee Trader by David Liss. The main protagonist is Miguel, a Portuguese Jew, living in Amsterdam, and working as a broker in the emerging stock exchange. Miguel and a Dutch woman, Geertruid, scheme to corner the coffee market. Hampering their efforts are Solomon Parido, a wealthy member of the Jewish community, who harbors a grudge against Miguel, and Joachim Waagenaar, a Dutchman who lost everything in a financial deal Miguel brokered for him. Joachim holds Miguel responsible for his financial losses and harasses Miguel throughout most of the novel.

One of the interesting things about the story is as Miguel schemes and plots to corner the market in coffee trading, he sees schemes and plots being hatched against him, which causes him to misinterpret the actions of others. Another interesting things about the novel is that most of the characters are either manipulating someone, or being manipulated in turn. This contrasts nicely with all the manipulation going on at the Exchange.

I found the references to the Ma'amad, the Jewish self-governing body controlling all aspects of community life, interesting. Many of the Ma'amad's rules stem from residual fear of the Inquisition, and the expulsions from other European countries. Amsterdam has only recently become a safe place for Jews to live and the Ma'amad fears having too much contact with the Dutch. So, even though they are free to practice their religion in Amsterdam, the Ma'amad has forbidden the Jewish community from having close contact with the Dutch/gentile community. Keeping this in mind, I found the number of Jews with Dutch servants a bit puzzling. Miguel spends a great deal of time worry that another Jew will seem him talking to his Dutch associates, yet he sleeps with the Dutch maid in his brother's house. Liss never makes it clear if the Ma'amad has forbidden all contact with gentiles (which would then make the Dutch servants against the rules) or if the injunction is specifically referring to brokering, or doing business with them.

I was a little unhappy with the way the book portrayed women. There are only 3 important women in the novel. Hannah, Miguel's sister-in-law, while an interesting character, spends most of the novel victimized by her maid and ignored by her husband (she finally stand up for herself at the end of the novel but by then I had come to find her passivity annoying). Geertruid, Miguel's business partner, is supposed to be "mysteries" but I guessed fairly quickly what the big mystery was (or at least I'd figured out where she got her money for the coffee trade rather quickly). Hannah's maid, a rather nasty piece of work, lacks any real motive. Time and again I asked myself why is she behaving that way? Only Liss never offers an explanation, so the reader is forced to assume her behavior stems from jealousy or spite. At the end of the novel Geertruid's actions are not at all believable; she is way to forgiving. These women seem to lack (or have really weak) motivations. I realize that in a novel set in the 1650s you won't find any "modern" women, but Liss could have done a better job of making the ones he had more three dimensional. Geertruid's only motivation seems to be money, Hannah has no motivation at all (she is acted upon and then reacts), and the maid is cruel, end of story.

But this is really a small complaint since most of the book concerns Miguel and his attempts to get rich on the Exchange. All together this was a pretty good book and I recommend it to anyone interested in 17th Century history.

Cheryl says

The first third of this book was interesting, but then it got bogged down with the daily life of the main character and his financial debts. I found myself skimming it, then decided to abandon it just past the half-way mark. Perhaps the pace picks up later, but I'm not interested enough to stick around and find out.

Richard says

This book was fantastic on so many levels. Liss does an excellent job portraying 17th century Amsterdam, providing a view of a culture that has been considered famously tolerant - and shows the limit of that tolerance. This is an issue that has been famously re-examined recently, about how the Dutch really behaved during The War. And in the past decade, that famous tolerance has been stretched to the limit with the wave of Arab/Muslim immigrants. It's an issue that the Dutch have had to deal with for at least 500 years.

Liss also depicts a nascent commodities exchange, which would lead ultimately to the stock markets that are in use today. By choosing the coffee market, a new commodity, he is able to weave the vagaries of trade into the tale. Fortunes rise and stereotypically fall on the hint of a rumour. Liss shows the stress that these prospects bring.

The plight of the Jews, so recently evicted from the Iberian peninsula, is the crux of it all. Looking for a homeland, looking for a place to simply rest their heads, the Jews found tolerant Amsterdam a refuge from Spain and Portugal. Yet the Dutch are not all open-armed, and Amsterdam's Jews needed to tread lightly. Worse still, it's not the Dutch that are the worst enemies.

If you enjoy financial history, Jewish history, Dutch history or just a good story that weaves all that together, this is the book for you.

Will says

This book is one of the best I have read, however I will say it fit my tastes as well if not better than any book I have picked up in a long, long time.

I enjoy the markets, love coffee, and these two interests played out very well in this story.

It's a historical look at the markets, and if you don't understand puts, calls, you may not enjoy as much. If you are a commodities trader I think you will be thrilled by this book.

However there is some anti semitic history in this book based on the period that it is set. If it would rub you the wrong way, I would say you need to stay away from it.

It seems like other readers of this book enjoyed the author's other book, The Conspiracy of Paper, more than this novel and for that reason I will go in search of that one.
