



Bitter Chocolate: Investigating the Dark Side of the World's Most Seductive Sweet

Carol Off

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Award-winning author and broadcaster Carol Off reveals the fascinating – and often horrifying – stories behind our desire for all things chocolate.

Whether it's part of a Hallowe'en haul, the contents of a heart-shaped box or just a candy bar stashed in a desk drawer, chocolate is synonymous with pleasures both simple and indulgent. But behind the sweet image is a long history of exploitation. In the eighteenth century the European aristocracy went wild for the Aztec delicacy. In later years, colonial territories were ravaged and slaves imported in droves as native populations died out under the strain of feeding the world's appetite for chocolate.

Carol Off traces the origins of the cocoa craze and follows chocolate's evolution under such overseers as Hershey, Cadbury and Mars. In Côte d'Ivoire, the West African nation that produces nearly half of the world's cocoa beans, she follows a dark and dangerous seam of greed. Against a backdrop of civil war and corruption, desperately poor farmers engage in appalling practices such as the indentured servitude of young boys – children who don't even know what chocolate tastes like.

Off shows that, with the complicity of Western governments and corporations, unethical practices continue to thrive. **Bitter Chocolate** is a social history, a passionate investigative account and an eye-opening exposé of the workings of a multi-billion dollar industry that has institutionalized misery as it served our pleasures.

Bitter Chocolate: Investigating the Dark Side of the World's Most Seductive Sweet Details

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Tracy says

Carol Off is a good writer, making history seem tangible and accessible. She's able to call people corrupt, greedy liars without ever really using those words, instead using their words to say it for her. Her opinions on issues are apparent without being didactic. Although the book focuses on the the history of the cocoa bean, and the capitalism it's rapped up in, it's also a study in globalization through a particular product. It was a fascinating read.

The reason I only gave it 3 stars is because she makes reference to several books and gives direct quotes from historical figures without giving a list of citations anywhere. She lists the journalistic sources for each chapter, but doesn't usually cite any of the books/articles/etc. that she takes material from. Given the nature of the book, it's pretty important that others be able to verify the sources she uses to build her thesis.

Jackie says

Well written and researched, but depressing. I had a difficult time finishing it.

Jason says

Could not finish. The author's preachiness turned me off. I get it: eating chocolate is bad news. Cacao bean farmers use slaves and are at the root of all evil. I got it in the first few chapters. By the middle of the book, I think I had the point and returned this one to the library.

Jacqui Pegg says

I thought this was an excellent book. I appreciated the thorough history of cacao and chocolate, from its first known cultivation and use, through centuries of export and trade, colonialism, world trade, cash cropping, slavery, industrialization, corporatization, post-colonial West African power, wealth and politics, and so on. I was very interested in the link to the Quakers, efforts to develop model communities around chocolate factories, the origins of all the great chocolate mass-producing companies in England and the US, the story of the world's first fair trade organic chocolate bar, and that of Hershey Pennsylvania -- it was my childhood dream (unrealized) to visit there!

I think this book is thorough, well-rounded, and very interesting. I already knew Carol Off as a radio reporter who I greatly admire and enjoy -- this book added a whole new element to my esteem for her.

Catherine Thompson says

I love chocolate. It's the one thing I crave, when I crave anything. But after reading this book, I'm reconsidering my love affair with the cocoa bean.

CBC journalist Carol Off digs deep into the history of chocolate, from its use as a stimulant and an offering to the gods by various Meso-American tribes to its introduction to Europe, to the modern incarnation as a symbol of love. She also examines the problematical way cocoa trees are farmed, the labour practices in many of the areas where cocoa is grown. She discusses the politics of big chocolate business, and the politics of cocoa in general.

This book is about a decade old, but I suspect that things haven't got much better in the last ten years for cocoa farmers in Cote d'Ivoire, which supplies (or did supply) most of the cocoa beans used in chocolate manufacture in Europe and North America. Off delves deeply into the use of child labour, specifically "indentured" labour that amounts to slavery. She examines the way the transnational food conglomerates pressure farmers, force the price of cocoa beans down, and end up starving out the people who are actually growing their product. Most children in cocoa-growing areas have never seen a chocolate bar, let alone eaten one. Something that First-World children take very much for granted is a luxury beyond dreaming of for the Malian boys who work on the farms in Cote d'Ivoire.

This is an excellent jumping-off point if you want to learn more about the geopolitics of food. You'll never look at a KitKat the same way again.

Erin Seidemann says

This book gave a great and clearly well-researched history of chocolate. I've read other books on chocolate, but I still learned a lot from this one.

Mamta Valderrama says

An excellent, well-researched and thorough look at the cocoa supply chain. Off addresses every aspect of the issue and her prose had me sucked in. Vivid writing. Bitter Chocolate was published more than a decade ago, and true to Off's assessment, the issue has not improved, in fact, it may be worse with more child slaves harvesting cocoa. The only thing left unaddressed that I would like to know is what do the children who do not work on the cocoa farms do? If school is not an option due to a lack of them, is there other safer work for the children? In her book, Carol talks about a diplomat in west Africa who saved dozens of boys, maybe more. Their families were happy to see their boys back home, but upset they returned without any money. What do those children do after they return home? School doesn't seem to be an option due to a lack of them. Are there safer jobs than cocoa harvesting for children?

Amanda Vollmershausen says

What a fantastic account written by a Canadian journalist. This book tackles many sub-topics of the chocolate industry seamlessly. The chapters are well organized and the information is easy to follow, even as it descends into political and bureaucratic chaos. The beginning of the book was least interesting (I must admit I skipped a chapter) as the ancient, ancient history of chocolate felt a bit all-of-the-same to me, and I

was much more interested in the contemporary issues. The last third, however, takes a miraculous turn. I found the summary of a journalist's disappearance in Côte d'Ivoire after he'd been investigating the corruption within the government surrounding the chocolate industry enlightening, fascinating and even shocking. The book then follows into a company that tackles the fair trade and organic sector of chocolate in a tiny African country - all very interesting and enlightening. The beauty of this book is how relevant it is by taking a huge topic (exploitation of the developing world) into a smaller one, focusing on the chocolate industry, then focusing in on some key and some smaller players and issues in that sector. Highly recommended for anyone with an interest in human rights or food politics.

Michael Riversong says

Since this medical condition has come along i've been craving chocolate a lot more than ever before. It seems to have some stabilizing effect on my whacked-out blood sugar. But i've seen rumors that chocolate production involves horrible slavery and corruption.

Carol Off, a Canadian writer (of course) went into the entire history of how chocolate production has worked. From early times, it has always been associated with elitism and slavery, even during the Aztec Empire. Now there are problems worldwide as modern production methods require intense chemicals which farmers can't afford. At the moment slavery occurs mainly because young boys in neighboring desert countries know they will starve for sure if they stay home. Thus they are willing to take a dangerous journey to war-torn Ivory Coast and work extremely hard for the remote possibility they might actually see some pay eventually. That's probably the worst of it, but there's plenty of corruption to go around, both in history and today. This book presents carefully researched facts, interviews with key players, and plenty of good writing in between.

Feroz Hameed says

A well researched and documented story on one of the universal luxury of our time ~ chocolates . The sweetness of every chocolate bar you indulge at a price comes with bitter truth of child Labour and poor compensations for the actual producers of coca. The 21st century slave system continues at the expense of these workers at the coca farm on west coast of Africa which is sadly a reality ignored.

Sean says

Wow.

I had a fairly good idea that chocolate, like coffee, had a history steeped in blood, violence and slavery. As with coffee (and reading *Coffee: A Dark History*; <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/3...>) , I didn't realize just how bad those problems continued to be into modern times.

The biggest thing I guess I take away from this is that I need to do a bit more research into what I am buying. I have long been a purchaser of fair trade coffee and chocolate, but perhaps not as religiously as I need be. There is also the issue of just how much of a product is Fair Trade (for example, only a percentage of Starbucks coffee can be said to be fair trade). If I see a Fair Trade logo on a mainstream chocolate bar, is it

the same case? I have noticed Tim Horton's claiming that Fair Trade is flawed and that their method is better. Truth, or corporate spin?

The global distribution of wealth is bad enough without contributing to its perpetuation by ignorance and the pursuit of a cheaper cuppa/candy bar. Corporations need be brought to account for their part in condoning human inequity in the pursuit of higher profit. With their pre-existing infrastructure, they could incorporate Fair Trade practices while increasing the costs of their products to the consumer by acceptable amounts. Or, even crazier, take a small hit in their billion dollar profits in order to better the lives of the people who provide them the raw materials of their livelihood.

Crazy.

Kristianne says

I have never been a big chocolate consumer. According to some people I know, this is my most glaring character flaw. It is only that I don't have much of a sweet tooth and would prefer some salty cheese and a glass of red wine over a bit of chocolate any day. It wasn't until a year or two ago that I realized some of my chocolate avoidance came from just never being exposed to the right kind of chocolate. My friend Rachael began my education with some creative picks she found at our local natural food market. Like many products at the market these candy labels had long checklists of eco consumer requirements: organic, recycled packaging, proceeds donated to animal rights causes, and etceteras. Only a few of the products sported that black and white Fair Trade label I was so familiar with from my coffee packaging.

The importance of choosing fair trade products is becoming more common but the information never spreads fast enough. Carol Off's book is important for just this reason. She constructs a smart and captivating investigation of the chocolate trade. She moves us from the ancient Mayan production and uses of chocolate though the massively destructive rise of chocolate business and all the lives compromised or outright destroyed in its wake and then back again to the Mayan chocolate farmers and this time with a small glimmer of hope as premium chocolate makers help transform a little town by adopting a Fair Trade approach to the chocolate business. Off uncovers the fascinating history of the mammoth Hershey, Cadbury and Mars companies and the gruesome business of cocoa growing from child slavery to disappeared journalists. She sees the chocolate world as a powerful entity with power to make and break governments, economies and people but she also provides us with some hope as consumers that perhaps we can have some influence.

Dan says

One of my favorite movies as a kid was Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory (1971). What child did not want to win the golden ticket? Who didn't want to see the mysteries hidden behind the tall walls of the factory? Who didn't feverishly ride their bikes to the Penny Candy Store at every chance and buy sweets with grubby hands and hungry eyes? Isn't this why we worked for our allowance money? It was not until 15 years later in college that upon watching the film again after many years that I realized the film was actually about imperialism and colonialism. That while I was taking out the trash and mowing the lawn for 5 dollars a week, other children in the Cote d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Cameroon, Mexico, Ghana and elsewhere were literally slaves and worked to death by the thousands for those same chocolates. In fact, most do not know what they are harvesting or what it is used for.

Cocoa was first used by the Olmec in Mezo-America as a drink, so highly prized, that the Mayans and Aztecs later used cocoa beans as currency, not gold or silver. Cocoa pods are the size of butternut squash, containing grey-purple seeds the size of almonds in tan-colored pulp. The pods are split and the seeds left to ferment and dry before being roasted. The Spanish first developed a triangular trade bringing weapons and salted cod to Africa, African slaves to the Americas (12-15 million) to work the cocoa plantations, and chocolate to Europe. It was Spanish priests and monks after Cortez conquered the area that began adding sugar and later spices to the brew. Chocolate's pharmaceutical properties are thought to include theobromine and caffeine that stimulate and dilate blood vessels; Phenylethylamine which stimulates sexual drive; Serotonin, a mind-altering chemical that can relieve depression; and perhaps antioxidants. Up until the 1800s, Europeans still bought cocoa in pharmacies.

Until 1828, the cocoa butter content, so highly valued and warred over by the Aztecs and Mayans, was routinely thrown out by Europeans who found it unpleasant on the palate. They tried everything to reduce the cocoa butter content, but it was still 50% fat. Dutchman C.J. Van Houten invented a hydraulic cocoa press to squeeze the grease from the roasted beans. He later determined the right fat content to easily emulsify it for home preparation. In 1840, Quaker Joseph Fry attached a steam engine to Van Houten's press. He also began to mix back some of the cocoa butter into the cocoa powder, and the resulting mass could then be molded into the modern "melt in your mouth" chocolate bar. Quakers were integral in the chocolate trade, because unlike other commodity production, they did not find it sinful. Another Quaker, Cadbury created the first box of bonbons in the 1860s, intimately linked chocolate to Valentine's Day, and in 1875 introduced the first chocolate Easter Egg.

English investigative reporter Henry Woodd Nevinson began investigating the cocoa trade about this time. The Portuguese-controlled islands of Sao Tome and Principe (Cameroon) were both the leading producers of cocoa, as well as the location of some of the worst abuses. The Portuguese brought slave labor from Angola, none of whom ever returned home. The British Government turned a blind eye to the Portuguese practices because they did not want dirt dredged up about their own use of slave labor in the gold and diamond mines of South Africa. Twenty years after the first reports, neither the British Government nor the supposedly socially-concerned Quaker chocolate magnates had done a thing to stop the slavery. Cocoa production was not the only commodity based on slave labor, nor was the worst abuses in this sector, but Cadbury, Rowntree, Fry, and others had made chocolate special, a symbol of joy, an innocent pleasure; but in reality it was made with blood, death and slave labor. Because of chocolate's symbolism, people expected a higher corporate and moral standard from chocolate companies than the diamond and gold pillagers.

In 1887, Swiss Henri Nestle blended milk with cocoa solids to create milk chocolate. Hersey later used condensed and powdered milk to the same effect in the US. Meanwhile, UK companies moved their operations to Trinidad and Jamaica, partly because their plantations in Africa were being decimated by disease, but also to avoid scrutiny. Corporations imported slave labor from China and elsewhere to work the new plantations. In 1910, the US passed a law prohibiting the import of cocoa produced with slave labor. However, US companies controlled sugar production in Cuba, a major component in chocolate, with slaves from China and Africa.

In the 1930s, Forrest Mars introduced the Milky Way (Mars Bar in UK), Snickers and Three Musketeers candy bars, using solidified malted milk drink and nougat coated in chocolate. Rowntree introduced the Kit Kat, Black Magic and Aero about the same time.

While cocoa plantations in the Americas were in turn destroyed by disease, and companies relocated to Africa again, Mars and Herseys joined forces to produce Smarties and M&Ms. The Gold Coast (Ghana) in turn became the world leader cocoa production, but were then surpassed by the Ivory Coast in the 1980s. Benevolent dictator Felix Houphouet-Boigny converted the country's economy and bet the country's future on cocoa in the 1960s. But by the 1990s, the country had descended into poverty, chaos, war and child

slavery. Child trafficking from Mali and Burkina Faso to the cocoa plantations in the Ivory Coast assisted the country in continuing to supply over 50% of the world's cocoa. "Child slavery had become the secret ingredient in chocolate." UNICEF and the US State Department estimated that more than 15000 child slaves worked the plantations in 1998. Children in the thousands were being enslaved and abused - for CHOCOLATE. The Mali Government did very little to stem the practice, since the country depended on trade with its neighbor.

US Congressman Eliot Engel introduced a law in 2001 that would have created a "slave free" label for chocolate like the "dolphin safe" label for tuna fish. Senator Tom Harkin joined him in the fight. However, the Senator had already learned that there was a fine line between human rights and economic necessity. Harkin had introduced the Child Labor Defense Act in 1992 that boycotted goods manufactured with child labor. Bangladeshi garment manufacturers panicked and 50000 children were fired, who then took on even more dangerous jobs like rock crushing to help support their families. The balance is to "find a way to take the hazards out of the work, not the child out of work."

Big Chocolate hired Bob Dole and George Mitchell to lobby against the bill. The resulting wrangle produced an industry voluntary agreement called the Harkin-Engel Protocol that delineated six points to eliminate child labor in the cocoa chain by July, 2005. However, the protocol was voluntary, and did not include provisions for a fair wage, or a fair price for the beans.

In 2002, the protocol was adopted by Big Chocolate worldwide, becoming the International Cocoa Initiative. Simultaneously, an industry-funded investigation found that while there was no slavery, 284000 children worked in hazardous conditions on cocoa farms in West Africa, two-thirds of these in the Ivory Coast. The International Labor Rights Fund rejected the protocol and filed suit using a 1930 US law that prohibits the import of goods made by slaves.

Big Chocolate did not make the 2005 deadline - not even close. They are now setting up a small pilot project in Ghana, now the biggest producer of cocoa along with Indonesia. The International Labor Rights Fund filed a class action suit against Nestle, Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland for trafficking, torture and forced labor on behalf of former child slaves.

Smaller chocolate producers took the lead in "slave free" or socially-conscious chocolate, later integrated into the Fair Trade system. Green & Blacks became the first Fair Trade chocolate in 1994, its signature product being the Maya Gold chocolate bar. High school enrollment for farming families supplying Green & Black have gone from 10% to 70%. If farmers are paid, they normally get around 25 cents/lb., whereas in the Fair Trade system they are guaranteed a minimum of 89 cents/lb. plus premiums.

Fair Trade started in The Netherlands in 1988 with the Max Havelaar brand. Fair Trade is a system in which:

- Trading partnerships are based on reciprocal benefits and mutual respect
- A fair price is guaranteed to small farmers and producers for their products
- Prices paid to producers reflect the work they do
- Workers have the right to organize
- National health, safety, and wage laws are enforced
- Products are environmentally sustainable and conserve natural resources

Easter marks one of the biggest shopping days of the year when it comes to chocolate. By purchasing organic and Fair Trade chocolate, your money will no longer be going towards toxic pesticides, child slavery, and farm worker exploitation. For Easter, buy something made with hope and love, and help small farmers in the Third World break out of the cycle of poverty.

Alison Perry says

Yes, it reads like a very long newspaper article. But get past that and you've got one entralling true story on your hands. If it doesn't move you to think about your next grocery store purchase, whatever it may be, you might want to consider the idea that you're dead inside. Read it.

Alan says

This book is half history, half bitter condemnation of "Big Chocolate." As a chocolaholic myself, it did make bitter reading. Apparently, the international chocolate industry is fueled by the cruel exploitation of child labor in Africa. These children are treated no better than slaves. Others who are complicit in the many sins of this industry include the Europeans and American companies who profit from it, the IMF and World Bank who impose impossible conditions on producer nations, the corrupt leaders and officials in the countries themselves who cynically exploit their own citizens and of course we, the consumers.

I learned from this book that it has always been thus. Major companies like Cadbury and Rowntree were founded by Quakers devoted to the ideals of treating their employees well and did so -- in England. But they turned a blind eye to the horrible slave-like conditions of those who grew and picked the crop in Africa. Likewise, Milton Hershey was an enlightened though paternalistic employer in America -- but did not care about the poor Africans who actually produced his raw materials.

It's an interesting, though depressing book. I guess I'm weak. I still like chocolate occasionally. I guess I'll try to find "fair trade" and "organic" products in future.
