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## Review: 'Starbucked' author Taylor Clark analyzes coffee empire

Julie Foster

Sunday, November 4, 2007

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### Starbucked

#### A Double Tall Tale of Caffeine, Commerce, and Culture

By Taylor Clark

IMAGES



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**LITTLE, BROWN & CO.; 304 PAGES;\$25.99**

Entertaining, illuminating and reflective are not qualities usually associated with corporate histories.

But Taylor Clark, former Willamette Week alt-weekly journalist, Dartmouth College graduate and Portland resident, has written a story about one business that's all of these.

Several years ago while sitting outside a neighborhood cafe with friends, Clark found himself "wondering out loud how far one could possibly get from the nearest Starbucks store while still staying within the city limits." His friends laughed, but Clark was serious.

As he began to think about Starbucks and its impact on our culture, he concluded that the idea had the makings of a great story. His editors disagreed. He reframed his story, and soon it had legs. His revamped notion - examining whether or not Starbucks was really as bad as its detractors claimed - happened to coincide with an attempt to burn down a local Starbucks.

"Starbucked: A Double Tall Tale of Caffeine, Commerce and Culture" is the eminently readable result. Clark explains that his purpose in writing the book was "to tell the story of how a major corporation, peddling a simple, age-old commodity, influences the daily life and culture of the world."

Clark dissects the mystery of how Starbucks and coffeehouse culture grabbed America during the mid-1990s and still hasn't let go. He touches on coffee history and why American coffee was nearly undrinkable during the 1960s and '70s. And how "in 1987 a housewares salesman from Brooklyn could hook America on four-dollar Italian espresso drinks and build a handful of oddball coffeehouses into a global empire." In the second section of the book, Clark leads the reader through the thorny ethical issues stalking Starbucks as it continues on its way to its stated goal of 40,000 stores.

A sampling of the tasty tidbits Clark offers up will surely give readers something to contemplate while waiting behind the prima donna who orders a "decaf single grande extra vanilla 2 percent extra caramel 185-degree with whipped cream caramel macchiato." According to the Starbucks Gossip Web site, a Seattle woman orders this drink every day at the height of the morning rush.

The average Starbucks customer comes in 18 times a month; the average store attracts more than \$1 million in revenue a year. The largest Starbucks in the world is a five-story

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mega-store in Seoul that has 200 seats. And Clark reveals the Starbucks switch from a manual espresso machine to a hyper-efficient automatic one. Think of a vending machine operated by a smiling barista in a green apron. This translates into shorter lines and happier customers.

But Clark does more than just regurgitate statistics and snippets of trivia. Along with his first-rate reporting, he conducted more than a hundred interviews and spent "countless hours of research into the work of other writers." It paid off.

Clark delivers the goods by dipping a little deeper into the story of what has become essentially coffee theater, as conceived and delivered through the wonders of Starbucks' marketing and design department. Wright Massey, who previously designed Disney stores for malls, now develops the packaged layout of all Starbucks stores. Every location gets one of the standard motifs, either the Classico, the di Moda or the faux Middle Eastern design called Origins.

Clark wades into the issue of how Starbucks treats its employees, or partners, as they are called, and presents a more complex picture than might be expected. For instance, Starbucks now pays more each year (\$200 million) to insure its employees than it spends on raw coffee beans and every day adds 300 jobs. He explores why labor unions might never be feasible at Starbucks and what that says about employment in the United States.

He uncovers the confusion over the little understood and guilt-driven policy of Fair Trade coffee that just might not be so fair after all.

"What, exactly, is the difference between 'shade-grown' and 'bird-friendly' coffee? Do I have to decide if I feel more of an affinity for shade or for birds? If coffee is 'eco-friendly,' is it good for both parties? Or do birds not like the shade?"

He succinctly explains how coffee growers are squeezed in the "brutal intersection of power politics and the open market." And he reveals the real villains in the continuing exploitation of coffee workers. Finally, he explains what an individual can do about all this and still enjoy a cup of coffee.

Clark fesses up to his ambivalence toward the "culinary cultural conformity" spawned by the proliferation of Starbucks, admitting how hard it is to say exactly what the real harm to our society is when so many people want what it offers. Yet with "Starbucked," Clark provides as intelligent an answer as any I've heard yet.

*Julie Foster is a member of the National Book Critics Circle and also reviews for Publishers Weekly.*

*This article appeared on page M - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle*

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