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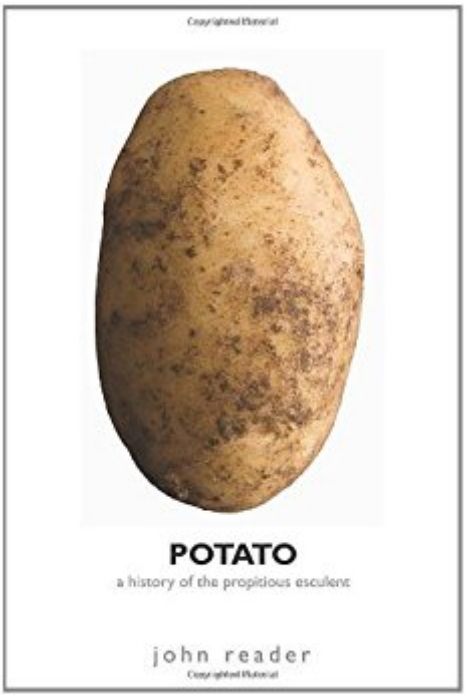
Potato: A History Of The Propitious Esculent



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Synopsis

The potatoâ ”humble, lumpy, bland, familiarâ ”is a decidedly unglamorous staple of the dinner table. Or is it? John Readerâ ™s narrative on the role of the potato in world history suggests we may be underestimating this remarkable tuber. From domestication in Peru 8,000 years ago to its status today as the worldâ ™s fourth largest food crop, the potato has played a starringâ ”or at least supportingâ ”role in many chapters of human history. In this witty and engaging book, Reader opens our eyes to the power of the potato.Whether embraced as the solution to hunger or wielded as a weapon of exploitation, blamed for famine and death or recognized for spurring progress, the potato has often changed the course of human events. Reader focuses on sixteenth-century South America, where the indigenous potato enabled Spanish conquerors to feed thousands of conscripted native people; eighteenth-century Europe, where the nutrition-packed potato brought about a population explosion; and todayâ ™s global world, where the potato is an essential food source but also the worldâ ™s most chemically-dependent crop. Where potatoes have been adopted as a staple food, social change has always followed. It may be â œjustâ • a humble vegetable, John Reader shows, yet the history of the potato has been anything but dull.

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Customer Reviews

Before I read this book, I knew that potatoes came from South America, that the Spanish brought them to the new world, that there was an Irish potato famine that drove many Irish to emigrate to America, and that french fries and potato chips aren't the healthiest foods. I have grown potatoes in my garden, so I know that there are different varieties to choose from, different sizes, shapes, colors, cooking qualities, tastes, and ripening times, and that one should not plant them in the same place repeatedly, although I've never had a problem, and they come up in the same place on their own the next year anyway. I knew about the role M. Parmentier played in popularizing the potato in France, and about the French potato dishes that bear his name today. But as for all the rest of the history of the potato...I had absolutely no idea. I found this book absolutely fascinating. We so take the potato for granted, that big bulging brown thing that we bake or mash or fry, or the red "new potato" that we boil and use for more delicate purposes. (The French have access to and enjoy a much wider range of nuanced varieties.) I did not realize the impact the potato has had on various societies, its importance all over the world, its development as a useful, modern crop, and the huge volume of potatoes grown today. I had no idea that the Chinese grew potatoes, as potatoes don't appear on Chinese restaurant menus. I had no idea of the extensive efforts to breed useful varieties, and to find solutions to the late blight that caused the Irish famine. I had never thought about wild potatoes and their characteristics. The more one learns about something, the more interesting it becomes. This book has given me tremendous respect for the potato and for all of the people that have contributed to making it the tuber we know and love today. Super book.

Most of my consulting clients are food companies. When I took on project management for an Idaho based food company I wanted to get smart on tubers. After reading the aptly named Reader's book I was not only smarter but highly entertained. This is a delightful book that puts the last 10,000 years of human history into perspective. I think the best part was Reader starting the book with the NASA research on sustaining life in space following a potato diet before Matt Damon figured it out in the Martian film.Reader takes us to colonial South America where we see early growers, agronomists, and scoundrels in action. Then potatoes come to Europe. Eventually they take over since they provide four times the calories per acre and are less likely to be disturbed by the marauding armies so prevalent in war-torn 18th century Europe. The impact of potatoes on social history is clear as the cheap calories swell the Irish population. Potatoes eventually go bad briefly in the 19th century leading to the Irish migration and the modernization of the English economy. And now today we have research under way on GM potatoes driven by claims of reducing potentially carcinogenic

component levels.

I guess I bought this because it was published by Yale Press, expecting a "scholarly" treatment and a serious book about the potato in history. It is not. The author is a professional pop science writer and that is what you get. But it is well done by the standards of the genre.It is a well written, often interesting, set of disconnected anecdotes and stories about all things potato. It begins with the origins in the Andes, spends a good bit of time on the Irish, and ends with pommes frites in China. There is a little bit on botany, a little bit of plant pathology, quite a lot on nasty Spaniards and Brits, and lots more. Was I bored? No. Did I have a sense that I had wasted my time. YES. Am I disappointed with Yale Press? You bet!

These kinds of food history books can be hit or miss. Sometimes you get a super technical explanation that is very dry, if insightful. Other times, you get poorly researched stuff that makes you question whether anything you’re reading is real. Reader’s book strikes the perfect balance, taking you through an intriguing tour of the potato’s history and how it has influenced civilizations from antiquity onward. Definitely one of the better food histories out there.

Pages would go on where I could hardly keep my eyes open. Then Id hit a sentence that was interesting, only to be shortlived, and a paragraph later I would be propping my head on hand for a nap.

A lot more interesting that I thought it would be, well worth reading. There’s a lot of good historical information, well researched, and it held my interest throughout. Who would have thought a book about potatoes would be this interesting?

An engaging and highly readable history of everyone’s favorite starch.

I bought this as part of a research project for a history class. When I presented my paper to the class, I received an ovation. The "propitious esculent" has a great history, and John Reader’s book is both entertaining and informative. Well worth the buy for anyone with an interest.

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