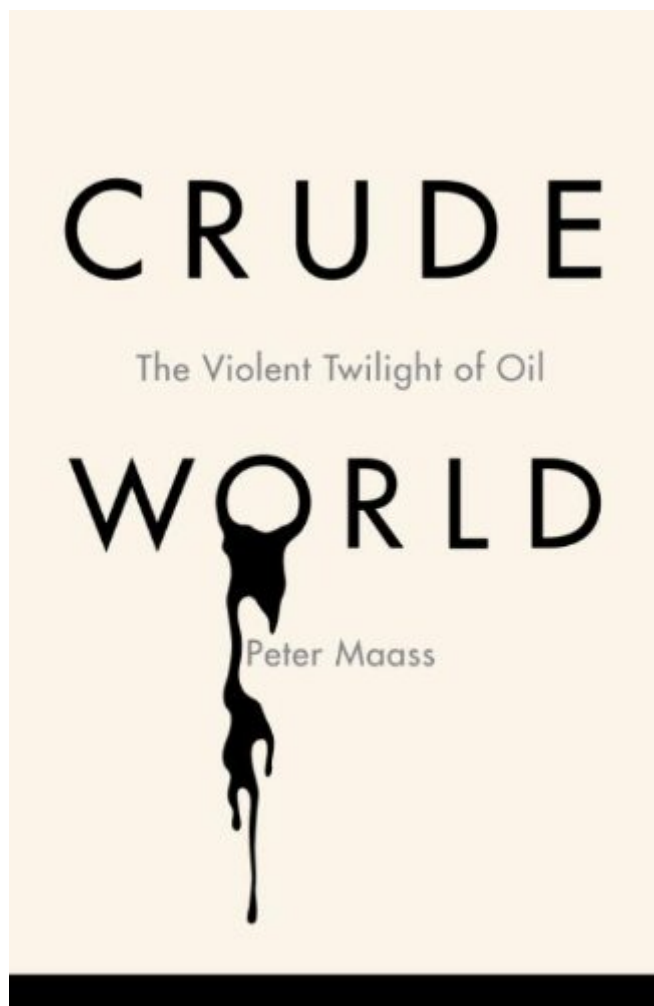


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Crude World



Synopsis

The catastrophic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has brought new attention to the huge costs of our oil dependence. In this stunning and revealing book, Peter Maass examines the social, political, and environmental impact of petroleum on the countries that produce it. Every unhappy oil-producing nation is unhappy in its own way, but all are touched by the “resource curse” – the power of oil to exacerbate existing problems and create new ones. Peter Maass presents a vivid portrait of the troubled world oil has created. From Saudi Arabia to Equatorial Guinea, from Venezuela to Iraq, the stories of rebels, royalty, middlemen, environmentalists, indigenous activists, and CEOs – all deftly and sensitively presented – come together in this startling and essential account of the consequences of our addiction to oil. From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

Maass does a great job explaining the Curse of Oil, the Paradox of Plenty, the Dutch Disease, or whatever name you want to call the effect of extractive industries on countries without much economic diversification and even less political transparency. He says little or nothing about Peak Oil, and how recent advances in drilling technology such as fracking, may have moved the doomsday clock of scarcity back a generation. Maass takes us on a journey from country to country where the oil companies have raped the land while getting rich extracting and selling the black gold found underneath the land. The effects of unsupervised oil production are not pretty. Polluted waterways, birth defects and corruption are just a few of the side effects which happen when oil companies cut costs and corners in production, because they can, because their competitors do, and because the individual governments allow them to. Maass describes all of this in an interesting readable style, but he is more of an observer than a problem solver. He does not propose solutions to the curse. Is that solution an end to drilling? Is it better regulation? Is the solution industrial development to provide an economic counterweight to the money the drillers bring to a country? Maass does not really tell us. He describes the problem, but not the solution. Maass's introductory quote John Paul Getty, however, may give us a hint as to what Maass thinks should be done. According to Getty: "The meek shall inherit the Earth, but not the mineral rights." Maybe Maass is telling us that we bear some responsibility for permitting First World companies to treat Third World nations like the Wild West where First World Rules don't apply and all that matters is power and greed. Maass may also be hinting that a little less meekness from the people who live where oil is found may help turn the Curse into a prayer.

Oil seems to be bad news. The BP Deep Horizon disaster is a timely illustration of the point: the company, with cavalier disregard of safety issues lobbied strenuously against a variety of blowout containment measures. BP has a long record of disregard for facilities maintenance. BP has had several fatal disasters. BP has a dismal environmental record. BP is unlikely to clean up the mess in the Gulf of Mexico and has consistently and deliberately underestimated the extent of the damage. BP probably will not compensate the fisheries industry, tourism, homeowners and others for their losses assuming irreparable damage to the ecosystem and the Gulf economy has not already occurred. BP is emblematic of the problems inherent in the extraction and marketing of petroleum products and journalist Peter Maas very compellingly and cogently addresses the entire sorry mess in this book. "Crude World" is not intended to be a comprehensive history of the petroleum industry and its captains: "The Prize" by Peter Yergin best fills that role. Instead, it is a trenchantly argued polemic and indictment: witness the chapter titles ("Scarcity", "Plunder", "Rot", "Contamination",

"Fear", "Greed", "Desire", "Alienation", "Empire", "Mirage"). Maas uses copious examples which illustrate the book's premise. The author adroitly places editorial commentary to illustrate the facts which are seemingly self-evident. Maas argues that petroleum corrupts and defiles the countries from which it is extracted. For example, he asserts that the government of Equatorial Guinea, with its inherent corruption and maniacal violence has been materially worsened by the presence of copious amounts of petroleum and the oceans of cash that it has garnered. He further claims that the brutality, inefficiency, avarice, disregard for the welfare of the population and the environment are all further exacerbated by petroleum-related wealth regardless of the country of origin, with the apparent exceptions of the UK and Norway. While Maas is doubtlessly correct in that assertion (witness the corruption and coziness between governments in the "developed countries" like the U.S. and major oil companies), he tacitly notes that its human nature to serve one's self-interest first: his explanation for the Norwegian phenomenon is that Norway is an advanced democracy. It seems to me that, were the principals of good government and rule of law already part of the social compact, petroleum would advance rather than retard development in other countries, as well. Prior to the discovery of oil, Norway already had a diversified economy and an intelligent, well-educated and cohesive electorate. Other countries., in contradistinction, repeatedly fall prey to oil company machinations. Perhaps it is because most lack a diversified economy, many have ideologically motivated governments and fearful, atomized populations. So, oil lubricates not only machinery, but corruption and other bad traits, as well. Not terribly surprising. There are other looming problems for a fossil-fuel dependent world. In general, oil is located in ever more remote and inaccessible regions. Of equal importance, it seems to be concentrated in politically unstable areas. Alternative fossil-fuel sources (coal, oil shale, tar sands) are environmentally devastating, both in their extraction and in their combustion byproducts. Climate change is upon us and, at this stage can hardly be reversed. So, what does Maas advocate? Promotion of "social values", "Publish What You Pay" (transparency in government and corporations), enforcement of current laws are some proposed solutions. Education and incentives for developing alternatives are others. Maas draws appropriate attention to the fact that petroleum extraction, while it provides money does not provide many jobs nor does it serve as an adequate basis for a self-sustaining economy. Witness, for example, the economic dead zone that exists in Iran and Saudi Arabia: minus petroleum revenue, there isn't much there. Maas also notes (but does not concentrate on) the environmental depredation caused by oil drilling, citing, for example, the debacle caused by Chevron in South America. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, when Chevron departed, the Equadoran national petroleum company simply perpetuated and ignored the matter. In "Crude World", Maas makes a

compelling and readable argument against the petroleum industry and its "Black Plaque". I see the matter somewhat differently: rather than creating a dichotomy ("us vs. them"), the problems associated with oil are more like Walt Kelly in "Pogo" characterized it: "We have met the enemy and he is us". Its time to do something. Maybe reading this book will help convince the "unconverted".

Curiously this book starts out discussing the issue of how much oil is left, specifically in Saudi Arabia but then switches gears to document a whole series of cases studies in which oil has been a negative influence rather than a positive one on many of the countries where it has been found. Examples include Equatorial Guinea, Ecuador, Venezuela, Russia, Some of the Former Soviet Republics, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and others. Books like this that required field research by authors often produce very interesting anecdotes and stories about places many people never hear about, and in that sense, this book definitely doesn't disappoint. Sadly, many of the stories about graft, despotism, theft of national resources, bribes and accidents in the oil industry will probably not be much of a revelation to most readers. It is at the same time a triumph of the book and a shortcoming that the author has managed to present such an emotional view on the evils of oil. It certainly helps personalize it for many people who probably fill up their car without any thought or knowledge of where the oil comes from. On the other hand, his characterization tends to present a gloomy, almost dystopian view of many of these countries. I think the book is most definitely a useful primer on the seedier sides of oil production, but I would hope that readers of it would not take the vignettes presented here as a general characterization of the countries in question. In some cases, such as Equatorial Guinea, oil may actually be more or less the only show in town. In others, such as Venezuela or Russia, oil is only a part of multifaceted and complex cultures and economies. Overall, I really liked this book and found it to be a real page turner as well as one of those books that points out a lot of clever ways of viewing things. Oil production is a topic that is starting to get a bit saturated in the book industry, but this one still manages to be fairly fresh.

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