

The Power of Gold: The History of an Obsession

By Peter Bernstein
John Wiley & Sons, 2000

UNLIKE STEEL, gold can't be used for automobiles, locomotives, or other practical purposes. Yet for centuries, man has venerated this essentially useless metal and given it a fundamental role in the economic and political development of our world. Peter L. Bernstein, author of *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk*, illuminates the role of gold in the history of the West in his second bestseller, *The Power of Gold: The History of an Obsession*.

Bernstein correlates notable events from the past with man's unrelenting reverence and insatiable desire for gold. From the legend of King Midas to the European quest for the source of African gold, Bernstein gives extended treatment to Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and finally the Modern Era, charting perceptions of gold over time.

Used as an iconic symbol in the ancient world, gold became a sought-after metal as much for its aesthetic qualities as for the stability of its value as a commodity.

"The wonderful thing about gold," Bernstein writes, "is that its achievements in its critical role as the prototype of wealth and money did nothing to diminish its equally vital role as adornment and a radiant form of beauty. Unlike other forms of money, gold has never lost its poetic quality. It has always been both sacred and profane."

As indicated in the book's title, Bernstein illustrates how man's lack of restraint inadvertently allowed gold to control him, overriding his moral capacity. Consequently, man's passion for possessing gold incited some of the grossest atrocities against humanity:

"... When the Portuguese began to exploit the huge gold resources of Brazil, the death rate of the Indians was so high that the native population was decimated and great numbers of African slaves had to be imported to take their place."

Bernstein's story challenges the reader to be mindful of an ultimate purpose in the world that extends far beyond a socially constructed desire for material things.

While Bernstein focuses on man's bizarre and crippling fixation with gold, he also leads his readers to understand the role of gold in the world's economic systems and the turning away from the gold standard. As to the future role gold will play, the author leaves this open to debate. Bernstein writes: "[Gold's] return to its traditional role as universal money is unlikely, however, unless the time should come when the dollar, the euro, and the yen have failed to function as acceptable means of payment across international borders."

The book speaks to a broad audience and isn't saturated with specialized jargon. Bernstein's fascinating discussions of coinage, minting methods, currency administration, and banking are detailed but not too intimidating for the lay reader.

— Angie Moore

Stormy Weather

By Carl Hiaasen
Alfred A. Knopf, 1995

How could any book dedicated to hurricanes Donna, Camille, Hugo, and Andrew be anything but a great, wild ride? Originally published in 1995, Carl Hiaasen's *Stormy Weather* still roars through like a blow straight out of the Caribbean.

Let's be clear about it from the start: *Stormy Weather* is an airport novel. But of that genre, it's one of the best. Plot dominates, yet Hiaasen pursues themes—the toll of burgeoning development in south Florida, for one—that give his book moral heft. And while some of the characters are broadly drawn (and thinly sketched), there's no end to how funny Hiaasen is in his descriptions of them.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew, an odd assortment of people are drawn



into an insurance scam concocted by ex-con Lester Maddox Parsons and Edie Marsh, a woman who would rather be seducing a Kennedy for fun and profit: "... she had quickly met two Shrivvers and a distant Lawford, but to Edie they would have been borderline ... She was saving her charms for a direct heir, a pipeline to old Joe Kennedy's mother lode."

The two hapless plotters quickly draw into their net an odd collection of characters. These include a corrupt housing inspector, an equally corrupt salesman of prefab trailers, newlywed New Yorkers on their honeymoon, and an ex-governor of Florida whose tenure in office had been swiftly truncated after he announced a goal of negative population growth. (The governor's pronouncement, Hiaasen writes, "couldn't have caused more of an uproar had he been preaching Satanism to preschoolers.")

As the plot unfolds, the body count rises, but in a surprisingly playful way. Characters who are larger than life meet ends that seem, somehow, smaller than death. There is Ira Jackson, for instance, a retired mobster out to avenge the death of his aged mother who was killed when her city-inspected trailer blew apart in the hurricane. Busy trying to kill Avila, the corrupt building inspector, Jackson becomes the surprised victim—and breakfast—of a lion blown free from the cages of a wildlife import business by the same storm.

"From marks on the ground, it appeared that (Jackson) had been jumped from behind, swiftly done in, and dragged to the dry weedy patch where the lion now sat, possessively attending the disemboweled, disarticulated corpse. Ira Jackson's gold chain dangled like spaghetti from the cat's whiskered maw. It disap-

peared with a flick of the tongue.”

Hiaasen’s highly developed sense of the absurd shows on every page. There’s the Grand Kleagle, for instance, accidentally torched at a Klan rally but saved from death by the spritzing of many well-shaken cans of Schlitz beer. Or the transformation of Avila, who is found floating on driftwood in the Florida Keys and is mistaken for a rafter fleeing political oppression in Cuba.

“He was held in Krome for nine days, until a Spanish-language radio station sponsored his release. In return, brave ‘Señor Gomez’ agreed to share the details of high-seas escape with radio listeners, who were moved by his heart-wrenching story but puzzled by his wildly inaccurate references to Cuban geography.”

Hiaasen, who was born and raised in Florida, began his career as an investigative journalist for the *Miami Herald*, and he knows Miami’s underside intimately. He takes no prisoners as he skewers corrupt government workers, rapacious developers, and all the opportunistic riff-raff who drift into town in the aftermath of natural disaster.

It’s in this dismay with human folly, as much as in the occasional passages describing the vanishing beauty of South Florida, that Hiaasen tips his hand. He writes about a place he knows too well, yet loves abundantly: “People come here because they think it’s better than where they were. They believe the postcards, and you know what? For lots of them, it is better than where they came from, whether it’s Long Island or Des Moines or Havana. Life is brighter, so it’s worth the risks. Maybe even hurricanes.”

— Linda Mallon

Risky Business: An Insider’s Account of the Disaster at Lloyd’s of London

By Elizabeth Luessenhop, with Martin Mayer

An exposé of the corruption and incompetence that undermined Lloyd’s of London, the world’s most famous insurance market, reveals how mismanagement cost the institution \$12 billion in 10 years and led to worldwide ramifications.

The Managed Care Blues and How to Cure Them

By Walter A. Zelman, Robert A. Berenson

A clear-headed analysis of managed care, both its strengths and weaknesses. The authors argue that critics of the new system overly romanticize the old one and disregard the considerable savings that are one result of the change. However, they also suggest needed reforms to improve quality of care and consumer empowerment under the managed care system.

Frequently Asked Questions:

All About Selenium

By Richard A. Passwater, Ph.D.

How this vital antioxidant protects the immune system by preventing the formation of free radicals and aiding the production of antibodies. The guide offers reliable answers to the questions surrounding this much-discussed but still confusing topic.

Jem (and Sam)

By Ferdinand Mount

A fictional look at the 17th-century London of Samuel Pepys, in which the title character without the parentheses learns firsthand the dangers of underwriting insurance risks in a dockside coffeehouse.

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