



Sweet and Low: A Family Story

Rich Cohen

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"Sweet and Low" is the amazing, bittersweet, hilarious story of an American family and its patriarch, a short-order cook named Ben Eisenstadt who, in the years after World War II, invented the sugar packet and Sweet'N Low, converting his Brooklyn cafeteria into a factory and amassing the great fortune that would destroy his family. It is also the story of immigrants to the New World, sugar, saccharine, obesity, and the health and diet craze, played out across countries and generations but also within the life of a single family, as the fortune and the factory passed from generation to generation. The author, Rich Cohen, a grandson (disinherited, and thus set free, along with his mother and siblings), has sought the truth of this rancorous, colorful history, mining thousands of pages of court documents accumulated in the long and sometimes corrupt life of the factor, and conducting interviews with members of his extended family. Along the way, the forty-year family battle over the fortune moves into its titanic phase, with the money and legacy up for grabs. "Sweet and Low" is the story of this struggle, a strange comic farce of machinations and double dealings, and of an extraordinary family and its fight for the American dream. Rich Cohen is the author of "Tough Jews," "The Avenger"s, and "Machers and Rockers," and the memoir "Lake Effect." His work has appeared in "The New Yorker" and "Vanity Fair," among many other publications, and he is a contributing editor to "Rolling Stone." He lives in New York City. A "New York Times" Notable Book of the YearA "Chicago Tribune" Best Book of the Year"" "Sweet and Low" is the story of an American family and its patriarch, a short-order cook named Ben Eisenstadt who, in the years after World War II, invented the sugar packet and Sweet'N Low, converting his Brooklyn cafeteria into a factory and amassing the great fortune that would destroy his family. It is also the story of immigrants to the New World, sugar, saccharine, obesity, and the health and diet craze, played out across countries and generations but also within the life of a single family, as the fortune and the factory passed from generation to generation. The author, Rich Cohen, a grandson (disinherited, and thus set free, along with his mother and siblings), has sought the truth of this rancorous, colorful history, mining thousands of pages of court documents accumulated in the long and sometimes corrupt life of the factor, and conducting interviews with members of his extended family. Along the way, the forty-year family battle over the fortune moves into its titanic phase, with the money and legacy up for grabs. "Sweet and Low" is the story of this struggle, a strange comic farce of machinations and double dealings, and of an extraordinary family and its fight for the American dream."A rollicking, utterly compelling family saga that is part detective story, part morality tale, part tragedy and part farce. It is a story peopled with eccentrics and naifs and scoundrels, and a story recounted with uncommon acuity and wit . . . Mr. Cohen . . . writes about his family with a mixture of affection, outrage and bafflement, startled and often in awe at the strangeness of his relatives and the bizarre trajectory of their lives . . . He has not settled for writing a simple, straight-ahead memoir, however. Instead, he's intercut the story with tart and highly entertaining asides about everything from the history of Brooklyn to the history of the sugar business, from the legacy of the immigrant experience to the big business of diets and weight loss . . . [Cohen has] managed to turn his family's rancorous history into a gripping memoir: a small classic of familial triumph, travail and strife, and a telling--and often hilarious--parable about the pursuit and costs of the American Dream."-- Michiko Kakutani, "The New York Times"" "Do not disinherit a man who makes his living with a pen. He may exact revenge by splashing the family's boils and foibles in black-and white on the pages of a spectacularly entertaining book. That is the misfortune of the family of the late Benjamin Eisenstadt, self-made scion behind those ubiquitous pink packages of fake sugar piled in bowls on restaurant tabletops the world over. But it's a riotous reading experience for the rest of us, who get to enjoy Rich Cohen's roiling, boisterous, hysterical and weirdly scholarly remembrance of his messy, badly behaved Jewish clan in "Sweet and Low."--Michael Ollove, "The Baltimore Sun"" "" "How decadent . . . to indulge in Rich Cohen's

rollicking account of his family and the business it built, a book that aims mostly to settle old scores, air dirty laundry and answer decades of petty insults from relatives . . . He paints vividly, and not flatteringly . . . [Cohen] has a terrific eye for detail, the little things that affix people and places in our memories, the gestures and miscues that shape family history . . . Reading him savage his family, you sometimes wonder, is he allowed to do this? It's a guilty pleasure--sort of like sugar without the calories."--Kate Zernike, ""The New York Times Book Review"" "A wildly addictive, high-octane narrative. Cohen sashays with boisterous panache from the history of the sugar trade to grandmother Betty's brooch . . . Cohen moves from journalistic objectivity to the intensely personal with ease, enjoying the kind of access that historians almost never get . . . Is Rich Cohen, the grandson who got squat from the Sweet'N Low millions, taking revenge? No; this book is about his mother, and the way that her family--the whole saccharine-sticky lot of them--were truly and unnaturally awful to her, a woman who makes but brief appearances in the narrative and is never eulogized. A woman who could have survived her vile relatives only through a tremendous inner strength. It is this strength which, subtly, gloriously, Rich Cohen celebrates."--John Barlowe, ""Washington Post"" "The rollicking saga of Grandpa Ben's business, 'taken over and stripmined by hooligans.' The battle over his vast family fortune leads to feuds between siblings, corruption, lawsuits and the ultimate disintegration of the clan. It is Cohen's good fortune to be on the side of the family that was disinherited. Sweet revenge is the energy behind this glorious book."--Andrea Sachs, "Time" "Alternately delicious and sour . . . All these characters are portrayed with elegantly phrased detail, along with Cohen's insightful eye for the larger picture. "Sweet and Low" might as well be a Balzacian 19th-century novel complete with a crisis, a contested will and a tragic resolution . . . "Sweet and Low" is never less than fascinating reading, both for what it says and what it doesn't. Hell hath no fury like a writer deprived."--Melvin Bukiet, ""Los Angeles Times Book Review"" ""Sweet and Low" is a wondrous evocation of an era and character types that won't be seen again."--Ron Grossman, "Chicago"" Tribune" "The book is not just about settling scores . . . Mr. Cohen aims higher, writing not only about his family but also about the first Jewish settlers in N

Sweet and Low: A Family Story Details

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From Reader Review Sweet and Low: A Family Story for online ebook

Carrie says

Couldn't make it to the end. This memoir about the family who brought us Sweet and Low was funny in parts, but way too heavy on history lessons for my taste. Along with the story of this family, which I think is pretty interesting, you also get pages and pages about how New York neighborhoods evolved and all kinds of background about inventions that have only a tangential connection to the story at hand. My suspicion is that the writer promised a book of a certain length and did the college-kid scrabble to fill space with anything he could.

Troy says

I found this book fascinating, in multiple ways. Since moving to Brooklyn, I love walking the streets of Carroll Gardens with the impressions stories of Brooklyn have given me. This is true for both of Jonathan Lethem novels, and now I'm happy to add to that with this wonderful story of small pink packet, and how it impacted the rise and fall of a truly Brooklyn family.

Most of us are divided either by our love of sweet, or savory. It's as strong as politics or religion. You have to side, and you have to decide. Sweet and Low forces you to assess which side of sweet or savory you are on, whether or not you are a purist or not, and whether or not you believe Rich Cohen's side of the family or not. But as demanding as this is, it's presented with enough charm for you to laugh your way to your decision. I loved this book to the end. Through the chemistry of a product and the chemistry of a family. For me, I can't wait to walk the waterfront and see the Cumberland Packing Company, hopefully hear the rumble of machines, and maybe even catch a 'walk and talk'.

This is why I love Brooklyn.

Holly McIntyre says

This is an uneven but oddly interesting book, or rather a book with several sub-books, written by a disinherited heir of the man who created the little pink packets of artificial sweetener. Book one is the story of grandpa, Ben Eisenstadt and grandma, Betty Gellman, the story of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 20th century and the Brooklyn they lived in. This book I found fascinating. Book two is a brief history of what humans have used to sweeten their food, both natural and artificial. Grandpa Ben's role in this history was 1) to modify a tea bag filling machine to make the first individual sugar packets, and 2) to participate in creating the formula for Sweet N'low and the iconic pink packaging, thereby cashing in on the dieting craze that began in the 1950s. This, too, is interesting reading. Sub-books three and four were less so. The decline and fall of Sweet N'low due to the twin blows of Uncle Marvin's (un?)knowing association with some swindling mobsters and the rise of other non-saccharin-based sweeteners did not hold my interest so well. Nor did book four, "how-grandpa-shafted-my-mom." My suggestion is to read what interests you and skim the rest. That's what I did.

Julia says

I had high hopes for this book buoyed by favorable reviews on Amazon. I invested time in what I thought was a pretty good method of potential book research, but this time it hit a snag. I had to make a new bookshelf for this book - unfinished by choice books. That probably says it all for me.

If you really like a lot of history with your books, you will likely love this book. The author included a purposefully dated Xerox copy of an obituary that encapsulated Sweet and Low's founder and the company's progress through the years. I liked the novel, promising start. Then book began by describing the writer's history - directly related to the company's founders but cut out of any inheritance. Despite a diagram included at the beginning to help you when you get confused (and you will) with the large network of family members, I still had a hard time keeping everyone straight.

The history lessons started out germane to the story, but I wished the book concentrated more on developing the characters. I stopped about half way through because I just couldn't get into it anymore. A person with a voracious appetite for history will probably devour this book with its extra history. Just not my favorite kind of reading.

Liz says

"IN THE WEEK AFTER THE SACCHARIN BAN, CONGRESS RECEIVED MORE THAN A HUNDRED THOUSAND LETTERS, MORE THAN RECEIVED IN ANY COMPARABLE PERIOD DURING THE VIETNAM WAR."

I have officially lost all of my faith in mankind, except for Rich Cohen. Cohen manages to fit all of fake sugar's (saccharin, cyclamate, aspartame, sucralose) history into a few pages--although I was constantly wondering why scientists kept discovering these chemical compounds by licking their fingers . . didn't we learn in 5th grade that that's a huge no-no when it comes to working in the lab?!

But seriously, his commentary on the history of fake sugar (and real sugar!) is totally fascinating and written with a detailed yet tongue-in-cheek tone. It's great social commentary on human greed, slavery, and the modern diet. But when he starts talking about his family it turns into a whiny, weepy mess. He got screwed out of a will - boo hoo - he is not the only person this has ever happened to.

Erin says

I thought I would like this book since I like non-fiction with some drama and a bit of teaching involved. But I found the whole thing rather uninteresting. The family really had no redeeming features. The history of Sweet and Low (and the diet revolution) also was tiresome. I sped through to the end to see why the author's family was disinherited and ended up not caring.

Charly says

In my first house I owned- a tiny bungalow that has since been abandoned -the neighbors had some outrageous family fights. These weren't your typical domestic violence dealies between a man and his wife. Instead, it seemed the entire extended family would partake. Over time, I began to enjoy the theatrics. I would sit on my stoop, drink beer and giggle uneasily as this cast of characters humiliated themselves. So, it's no wonder I enjoyed Sweet and Low by Richard Cohen.

Cohen is jaded over his immediate family being screwed out of their inheritance from his G-pappy's Sweet and Low fortune. So, through brilliant prose (I thought he was an awesome writer), Cohen gives us an entire history of the artificial sugar industry. I have since read reviews by people complaining about Cohen's use of a macro, sweeping history of things like Brooklyn and sugar to get his point across. For my two cents, I love that stuff. It's probably why I can watch Forest Gump over and over again. I find irresistible the passage of time, the stream of decades rolling by as a story seems to hang on time's coat tails. I am, after all, a history major.

As I already mentioned, Cohen seems to think his uncle and aunt and spiteful grandmother and a handful of mobsters screwed him. (I blame the writing style of Cohen for all those "ands" I just used). It's hard to feel sorry for the whiny Cohen. At first I thought it wasn't about the money. It was simply the insulting gesture of being left out that hurt him so much. But nay, nay. As the song goes-it must be the money!! After Cohen's grandmother dies, Cohen's parents are still raising hell for cash. Perhaps I'm dealing with a little class envy, but it's just impossible for me to give a damn about inheritances. Inheritances are un-American. They are for wimps who tie on their yellow sweaters by the sleeves or powder faced British aristocrats fanning themselves. While I had no pity for Cohen, I found the break down of his family fascinating. The description of a family owned business that hits it big was cool. And, of course, I love stories about wise guys and corruption. I thought this book was going to be a kind of Royal Tennenbaums type comedy. Instead it's about a rich Jewish guy snitching on his family for revenge. This brings me to my next point. Sweet and Low is like pornography for anti-Semites. The book pretty much lives up to every stereotype of the New York Jew in the same way that white racists crack up at sitcoms such as Sanford and Son or What's Happening. If I ever get arrested in a drunken stupor and, God forbid, publicly go off on an anti-Semitic rant, I blame the influence of this book.

****Disclaimer: Charly Streetgang is not an anti-Semite and is aware that the book Sweet and Low is by no means an honest representation of the diverse population of Jewish Americans

Carole says

I wanted to love this book, being a Brooklyn resident and appreciating the historical aspects of the family's history here.

However, as much as I laughed at Cohen's telling of family tales, his repetitiveness became not only annoying but confusing. I struggled to keep track of all the family members and which generation they belonged to, and ultimately could care less what happened to them.

I have too many other books waiting to be read to continue plodding on with this one.

Oriana says

So I've been doing a crazy amount biking lately, which may I please just say is the best goddamn thing ever. I've gotten a little obsessive about it; like zero to biking everywhere, every day, all the time, inventing faraway errands to run just so I can bike to them, or only making plans in other neighborhoods because biking around Williamsburg isn't good enough, or just getting on the bike at midnight and zipping around because I can. I didn't bike in the hurricane (this guy did, though), but I have developed a little fiveish-mile loop that I do when I just gotta gooooo and have nowhere particular to be.

That loop, in case you care about Brooklyn geography, goes from East Williamsburg to Greenpoint, then along the coast of Brooklyn down through Williamsburg, the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and around into Dumbo, ending at Brooklyn Bridge Park, which happens to be the most beautiful spot in Brooklyn, and therefore the most beautiful spot in the world, right in between two huge bridges, the East River in front of you reflecting the whole sick slick glittering city, Dumbo and its upscale lofts at your back. It's so gorgeous, in fact, that you can't sit in the park for five minutes without a wedding party traipsing by like a bevy of tricked-out birds, fluffing their plumage as their harried photographer, laden with props, stumbles along behind.

ANYWAY. The middle of this ride, as I said, is the Brooklyn Navy Yard, a massive sprawling little secret port town that is mostly locked up to the public because it's being used for important things like making warships and unloading massive shipments of cargo and who even knows what all else. Much of it is wild and abandoned and overgrown, but I think parts of it have been continually active since white people came here and started fucking shit up—or probably long before that, I guess, but the visitor's museum doesn't trace the Yard's history back before the Revolutionary War. There's all sorts of industry that needs to be by the water, obvs, and the Navy Yard is home to some iconic Old Brooklyn factories still.

Like the Sweet and Low plant. (You never thought any this was going to be relevant to the book, did you?)

Sweet and Low was invented in Brooklyn three generations ago, and is still made & packaged & shipped in the same factory in the Navy Yard that it's been in for decades. The building has the Sweet and Low logo painted three stories high on its side, and after biking past it a few hundred times, I finally registered both that that's what it was and also that I had this book sitting on my shelf from god knows when I ever thought to pick it up.

It's a pretty fascinating story—components include Old Brooklyn immigrant grit, the mafia, embezzlement, tax fraud, family drama worthy of the most melodramatic soap opera (including a shut-in cripple who ties her drug-addled octogenarian mother to a chair), a contested will, disinheritance, and probably more that I forgot. It's a long book.

Our narrator is the grandson of the inventor of Sweet and Low, whose mother was the one disinherited. (On the back of the book it says, "To be disinherited is to be set free.") So he's got pretty unique access to a pretty complex tale. He did a *lot* of work to try to tell all sides of the story, but some of it becomes a little transparently trying-too-hard. I mean, you can tell exactly who he thinks is right (his poor disinherited mother) and who he thinks is evil or insane (just about everyone else). And he clearly expects you to agree with him, but instead of ever coming out and saying it, he presents all the evidence piece by piece by piece, detail after incriminating detail, with a sweeping show of bravado, as if to say, "How could you possibly *not* come to the same conclusions I have?" He attempts to disguise his very strong bias by working really hard to

appear unbiased, but it never works. It's always totally obvious what he's leading you to.

That said, I can't say that I'd have done anything different. He's the one writing the story, after all, the one screwed out of his share of a multi-million-dollar family business, so no one could expect him to actually be impartial. And he does a very good job of interspersing the crazy family drama with a lot of history and cultural context. He goes down a bunch of different rabbit holes, from the chemical makeup of artificial sweetener to the ins & outs of fraud litigation, from the slave trade vis-à-vis sugar to the intricacies of industrial packing machines.

It's a very very full book, written by a veteran journalist with a keen eye for pacing and detail, who also has a great sense of how to structure a pretty complex saga. I liked it a whole lot.

Hannah says

This is the story of the Sweet and Low company, as written by the extremely bitter, disinherited heir. Almost impossible to get through due to HORRENDOUS writing, despite seemingly fascinating subject matter and fabulous cover design. A huge disappointment!

Anita Smith says

I thought this book sucked. I basically skimmed it in an attempt to find all this "family drama" that I never actually found. Hell, my family had more drama than this last week. And that was a light week for us.

Thank God I only paid a dollar for this at a library book sale. Although I still feel like I overpaid.

Ashley says

Not a huge fan - this was supposed to be an interesting look at the invention of Sweet 'N Low, how it created a family fortune, and the legal/mafia troubles that befell the company as told by a disinherited grandson. What it actually was, was a rambling history of Brooklyn, family squabbles, complaints about being disinherited (though the author makes it perfectly clear that of course his family didn't *need* the money, what with the chartered flights, player pianos, and Concorde jet rides he and his family is accustomed to).

There was a little info about how Sweet 'N Low came to be: Ben Eisenstadt gets frustrated with crusted over sugar dispensers and unsanitary open sugar dishes that everyone dips into with their own spoon and turns his factory in Brooklyn that used to package tea bags into one that manufactures and packages sugar packets. The name is from a Tennyson poem cum 1863 song by Sir Joseph Barnby. Coen touches on the struggles artificial sweeteners have had to endure - various bans and health concerns that have arisen over the years. He also briefly (like one line per product) tells how various sugar substitutes were invented - all except for sucralose (Splenda) were discovered when a scientist, carelessly fiddling around in his lab, somehow ends up with his fingers (or cigarette, in one case) in his mouth and realizes they taste sweet. Weird.

Overall, I found Coen's tone irritating - he does a lot of jumping around in time and ascribes motives to other family members seemingly at random. He whines about his mother's side of the family being cut out of the

inheritance but the writing is just weird. It didn't flow. I came away with the distinct impression that Coen was hoping writing this book would make someone feel A) sorry for him about he whole being disinherited thing and B) that he's a really talented writer. Hopefully this someone has connections in the publishing world and can atone for all the wrongs committed against Coen. Not a fan of this one. The whole thing was just random and disjointed.

Landismom says

It's hard to imagine that this book would have been published if it hadn't been about a family connected to Sweet N Low. Moderately interesting, though the inter-family problems are either not clearly written or just not that serious. A light, entertaining read.

Kirsti says

Memoir of estrangement from a dysfunctional family + history of sugar and sugar substitutes + history of New York corruption = surprisingly compelling read. I actually laughed out loud a couple of times.

"There was an ancient form of primogeniture at play in the family; as the son of the oldest son, Cousin Jeffrey was golden. One week, Grandma Betty decided that a grandchild would, for no particular reason, have a party thrown in his or her honor, complete with cake and gifts. While standing in my aunt's room, Betty wrote the names on a slip of paper and dropped the slips in a hat. A winner was drawn: Jeffrey. Since Jeffrey seemed to win many such contests, my brother grew suspicious. When he picked up the hat, Betty said, 'Don't look!' Unfolding the slips, he had the great shock of his early life. Every ballot was marked 'Jeffrey.'"

About Grandma Esther, from the non-disinheriting side of the family: "She took an afternoon to tell a story that could be told in five minutes, then wound it up by saying, 'That's it in a nutshell.' . . . I once heard her ask a woman in her condo complex, 'Why do you hate me, fatso?' I once heard her say to a Holocaust survivor, 'You are one that Hitler should not have let get away.' When she took me and my sister to see *Yentl*, she asked for three tickets, one senior, two children. My sister was thirty, I was twenty-two. The three of us saw *Yentl* for four dollars."

"It wasn't enough for them to leave her nothing,' my sister explained. 'They also wanted her to say that it was okay that they had left her nothing.'"

"We are what we eat, and we don't know what that is."

"To be disinherited is to be set free."

I did not realize that we have canned food and condensed milk because Gail Borden was so horrified to read accounts of the cannibalistic Donner Party.

One thing the author does not make clear is why, if his grandfather was such a clever lawyer, he did not apply for a patent for the sugar-packet machine.

The author is the son of the Herb Cohen, author of the excellent nonfiction book "Negotiate This!" I wonder if he would agree that some things are not negotiable.

Brooke says

The writing was not particularly interesting or good but the historical fiction element was enjoyable and I suppose the family dynamics were somewhat interesting, but there didn't seem to be too many likable characters to be rooting for and they seemed a little flat. It's definitely a story and setting driven book.
