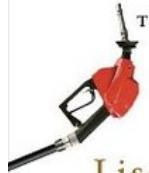


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"If you drive a car, you must read this book,
but please not at the same time." — MARY ROACH, author of *Stiff*

OIL ON THE BRAIN

ADVENTURES FROM THE PUMP
TO THE PIPELINE



Lisa Margonelli

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Oil on the Brain: Adventures from the Pump to the Pipeline

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Mark says

In the summer of 2006, Spokane had some of the highest gas prices in the nation. Consumers howled. Exxon had the largest profits of any corporation ever. "Price gouging" was a term frequently heard. Governmental representatives from the local, state and federal levels promised investigations. OPEC, oil refiners, U.S. auto makers, oil investors and traders, oil companies, governments, environmentalists and consumers came together, stood in a circle, and pointed as many fingers as possible to explain the high prices. Floating above the shouting match is Lisa Margonelli, dolling out droll insight into the myriad costs associated with getting oil out of the ground and into our gas tanks.

Manuel says

"Every oil price is made up of stories."

An upstream journey from gas station, to distribution, refinery, drilling rig, NYMEX Oil Market, and finally to four producing countries.

The chapters involving US businesses are about what you'd expect, all parties hustling to make the most profit from the oil as it passes through their facilities. But I did learn some interesting trivia, most notably the history of the service station. Also, some demystification of the Strategic Petroleum Reserve.

For me the most eye-opening chapters were about the NYMEX Exchange, Venezuela, Iran, Nigeria Chad and China. Geopolitics, dictators, corruption, human rights. A threat from one warlord's phone call can cause the world's oil prices to fluctuate wildly and result in higher gas prices all the way up the chain.

The China chapter is a nice bonus, it very briefly looks into the energy economy there and what they are poised to do in the next few decades.

Oil is far too huge a subject to cover all in one book, so you have to sacrifice depth and choose sides in terms of whose story you tell. The author did a good job of adding to the discussion. It's written from a sociological perspective--how the industry affects people.

And props to the author for, as a woman, going headfirst into a good 'ol boy industry, visiting mysognistic cultures and traveling to some very dangerous-sounding places.

Ashley says

It took me a bit longer to finish this one than I expected. The earlier chapters were more interesting, I thought, than the latter ones which focused on Venezuela, Chad, Iran, Nigeria, and China. The book, while copyrighted in 2007, is still a bit outdated since the oil market changes so rapidly.

Some interesting facts I did read, though:

- * Oil-exporting countries spend between 2 and 10 times more on their militaries than other developing countries
- * A Stanford professor/researcher who analyzed Venezuela's economy during the 70s and 80s showed that countries whose economy is dominated by oil exports tend to experience shrinking standards of living
- * Of 97 developing countries, those without oil grew 4 times as much as those with oil
- * Regression studies show that governments who export oil tend to become less democratic over time
- * Oxford regression studies show that oil and mineral exporting countries have a 23% likelihood of civil war within 5 years compared to less than 1% for non-dependent countries
- * Exxon, aided by the US government, signed a contract with Venezuela's nearly illiterate dictator Gomez. In Chad, Deby (a former warlord, no less) didn't even read the contract (with Exxon and again aided by the US government), netting the country only 12.5% of the royalties from the oil. This compared to 60% for Angola and 80% for Nigeria.

The chapters on Venezuela, Chad, Iran, and Nigeria were utterly depressing; the way Margonelli portrays the US's dealings with those countries, it appears that we went in under the guise of treating the oil as "purely business". Of course, though, oil is never just business and politics, money, and power always creep in. The China chapter was also sobering, but for entirely different reasons: in 2000, there were 16 million cars in China. By 2010, there is estimated to be around 56 million. "For the first time, the US has to consider a rival energy consumer as hungry as itself, though not as rich."

Overall, an ok read. It was a bit dry at times - I seem to have missed most of the humor that the blurbs on the back of the book promised, though I did especially like this: "He's usually wearing his weapons uncomfortably, looking like a a chubby kid who's accidentally ended up at the Special Forces summer camp instead of the one for video gamers." This in reference to Asari, an important political figure in the conflict-torn Niger Delta region of Nigeria. I'm glad I read this one, though, if nothing more than to learn more about this topic.

Stephen says

Every moment, oil is surging up wells, being chemically sorted in vast refineries, sloshing its way across continents in pipelines, and being dispersed throughout the country in trucks to keep over three hundred million Americans mobile. The same miracle is effected in other nations across the globe. In *Petroleum on the Brain*, Lisa Margonelli begins at her local gas station and backtracks the supply line – riding with truckers, touring refineries, standing in the pit of oil exchanges, and filling her hands with ancient dirt that hasn't seen sunlight in millions of years at the edge of a drilling operation. Although beginning with the American market, Margonelli's travels take on a geopolitical message as she scrutinizes oil's role in the destabilization of Africa and the middle east, and looks to the future in China. Although slightly dated (researched and written in 2004-2005), the majority of the book's information remains relevant, and is delivered in humorous style. *Petroleum* brims over with personality, as Margonelli connects with lives across the globe, and demonstrates through her travels how our lives, too, are knit together with those whose livelihood

Although gas stations are where most consumers of gasoline/petrol enter the market, and absorb the scorn of disgruntled drivers who see the price continuing to climb, the seemingly ubiquitous c-stations are the low men on the supply line, in control of nothing and making only a marginal profit on their gasoline during the best days. As witnessed by Margonelli as she spies fleets of trucks from different companies pulling up to the

same pipelines, gasoline sold in the United States is fairly uniform. Some companies add a detergent, but pricing varies more depending on the location and the market than the product. Given how much oil is being produced, refined, shipped, and sold every hour, the pace of activity becomes frenetic as Margonelli travels further up the supply line, encountering harried supply dispatchers and middlemen. Although her book is about the oil industry, it's a personal encounter with time invested in relationships on Margonelli's part. For her, the gas station owner, the driver, the genius wildcatter in Texas -- they are men and women of passion and intelligence, whose story is bound up with their profession.

Its beginnings scratch idle curiosity as to how the petroleum industry works, but Margonelli spends more time researching, her text develops broader appeal, examining the role oil plays in U.S. foreign policy. Here the book threatens to show its age: having virtually exhausted its home reservoirs of oil, she writes that the United States has to secure new supplies across the world, and to that end has been involved in a series of wars, directly or indirectly. A chapter on Iran sees her chat with both American sailors and Iranian oilmen regarding an incident during the Iraq-Iran war, in which half the Iranian navy was sunk by an American fleet despite the United States' official non-combatant status. Margonelli also visits petro-states in South America and Africa, where corruption is apparently immortal; some of the tribal warfare in sub-Saharan Africa has its roots in villages receiving unequal shares of the loot when oil companies discovered their untapped potential. Ultimately, Margonelli believes we must look beyond petroleum, to cleaner and less volatile energy sources. In her final chapter, the story moves to China, where a then-ascendant economy was not only gobbling up coal, but dumping money into clean energy programs in the hopes of expanding China's consumer fleet while not further destroying what little clean air remains.

The oil market has continued to evolve in the ten years since this book was originally, first doubling the highest price marked in her original next and then falling beneath it. The United States has become again (however temporarily) a net oil exporter, thanks to technological advices that make extracting oil in harder to reach places easier. Oil's volatility underscores its continuing importance to the world economy and political dramas; in the middle east, the swinish mob that is ISIS finances itself partially through the oil market. Given that oil won't be bowing out to competition anytime soon, learning its cost and vagaries is utterly helpful for citizens of any country, and Margonelli's account offers entertainment value to boot.

Related:

Uncommon Carriers, John McPhee

Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet, Michael Klare

Coal: A Human History, Barbara Freese

Coralie says

This was an informative book, although it was slow reading. The author did her best to add funny and interesting tidbits, but the subject didn't give her much to work with. The most interesting chapters were about petrostates, developing countries that have oil. These countries lose ground in developing democracy and infrastructure as more oil is exported. This is disappointing but not surprising. The most surprising chapter was about China. In China, there are huge disparities in modernization. In some parts of China, people work and live like slaves, but in other parts of China, scientists and engineers are using cutting edge technology to develop new energy sources, and new ways to use old energy sources more efficiently. Pretty interesting.

Ushan says

An American journalist decides to figure out, how gasoline gets into the American car. She interviews a gas station owner, a fuel truck driver and a dispatcher; she goes into a refinery in L.A. where she feels like an ant in a rat maze. She spends some time near a drilling rig in Texas and sees the crew replace a worn-out drill bit from over 10,000 feet below the ground; the guards at the Strategic Petroleum Reserve tell her about a local predatory bird that stockpiles its kill, like the U.S. government stockpiles petroleum. Next, she goes abroad. In Venezuela, which suffered from the Dutch disease before the Netherlands did, a supporter of Hugo Chávez swears that he will fight for the president, who promised to share the oil revenues with the poor, presumably with one of the 100,000 AK-47s Chávez imported from Russia. In Chad, oil exports do little to reduce the abject poverty of most citizens; teachers quit schools and students quit college to work as security guards at an oil patch. In Nigeria, 80 percent of the oil revenue goes to 1 percent of the population; the oil-producing Niger delta is polluted, and its inhabitants do not have electricity, running water or jobs. China is getting richer, and its citizens also want to drive cars like Americans do, though electric bicycles and electric scooters are also becoming very popular. Overall, the well-to-pump industry is a huge machine that operates according to rules that are totally illogical. When a refinery in California pollutes the air, it has to pay. When a car does so, the driver doesn't. Neither does an oil company flaring oil-associated natural gas in the Niger river delta. This is how global capitalism works; there is nothing oil-specific about the big picture. If the United States switches to electric cars, the big global commodities will be lithium for the batteries and rare-earth metals for the magnets instead of oil; wind turbines also need large permanent magnets and batteries. The world's biggest lithium mine is located in Bolivia. Who knows if its economy will be as distorted during the 21st century as the economy of oil-exporting Venezuela was during the 20th.

Karen says

If it's possible to be scared straight from using oil, this is the book that could do it. I found the whole trek from gas station to supplier to refinery to oil well to be fascinating. The chapter on the strategic petroleum reserve was especially an eye opener. The "travel" chapters about the oil producing countries, such as Venezuela, Nigeria, Chad, Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, contain just enough information to make you want to ride a wind sail to the office each morning. Groan. I wish there was an obvious and easy way to get off oil. As it is, with every tank full, we create, school, and fuel many international enemies.

Andrea Fortwendel says

The front of the book states, "A must read for anyone who drives a car." I would say, "A must read for anyone who uses energy." It is an eye-opener that will have you examining your own consumption and attitude towards oil. In an election year where we have an entire party yelling "Drill Baby Drill!", there is no more important topic than oil. All aspects of oil were fascinating, but the stunners were the chapters on Venezuela, China, Nigeria, and Iran. I read the chapter on Iran twice. It left me angry about my own ignorance and frustrated with our leaders' decisions in the Middle East. It reshaped my image of Iran. Oil on the Brain is empowering especially in a time where energy technology should be the name of the game.

Steven says

Excellent, readable book on the oil industry. This is a great layman's introduction to the energy business, filled with facts that will interest and amuse even the most experienced oilman. How do gas stations make money? At the pump? Certainly not. That's just the lure. The money is inside—in "the Vault," i.e., the giant, stainless steel and glass refrigerators filled with beverages. If you hope to get rich with your gas station (a million-dollar investment), the VAULT is where the magic happens.

This book is filled with such interesting details, from finding oil, to refining it, to delivery at the pump. I began reading this book while working as an oil and gas landman in Midland, Texas, but I found it particularly helpful a few years later while teaching a course entitled INTRODUCTION TO THE OIL AND GAS INDUSTRY at the University of Houston (oil and gas capital of the world!). While I did not use OIL ON THE BRAIN as the text book, I often referred to it and passed out copies of key passages to the undergrads taking the course. This was by far the most interesting material they read this semester! I particularly liked the author's travels, her interviews, intriguing stories both about a West Texas oil field and about the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (in nearby South Louisiana). Her adventures in Nigeria and her analysis of the "Oil Curse" and its impact on oil-rich, but otherwise impoverished third-world nations was fascinating. Finally, and equally useful were her discussions of China and its forays into future technologies, particularly fuels derived from Hydrogen.

Aharon says

It's about OIL, so how could you not love it? But there's a little too much about the people involved, and not quite enough about the sweet, sweet crude itself. Less time with convenience store cashiers, more in the bowels of the delayed coker!

Richard says

This is a breezy, light-hearted history of oil from the first discoveries in the mid-nineteenth century to just a few months ago. Starting and ending with a neighborhood independent gas station, Ms. Margonelli travels the world to learn all about exploration, discoveries, extraction and delivery of what one of the guards at the secret Strategic Petroleum Reserve storage area disregards with: "Oil? It smells bad and comes out of the ground. What more do you need to know?"

Actually, it would be good to know if this controversial deposit of 700,000,000 barrels of oil is actually there. If it is, how much can we get out? How fast can we retrieve it and where would we put it once it was above ground again? Will increasing this safety net to 1 Billion barrels make us safer?

With a down to earth attitude, Ms. Margonelli gets across some difficult concepts and provides real insights to many aspect of oil that have people on both sides of the question claiming the other side is wrong.

This is an interesting book. It could have been shorter, although at 300 pages it surely doesn't tell the whole story. I also would have appreciated some photos.

Jose says

For most of us filling up at the neighborhood gas station is one of those mundane rituals of daily life. Most of us spend the idle minutes spent pumping gas thinking about the 1,000 things we need to do on any given day, or pass the time brazenly gabbing on a cell phone (in spite of the placard on the pump clearly admonishing us not to, lest we spontaneously combust)... but have you ever stop wondered where gasoline actually comes from? Not in the abstract- we all know oil comes out of the ground. (Duh.) But out of the ground from WHERE exactly? And pulled out of the ground by WHO? And how does it make the long trip from aforementioned hole in the ground to the local neighborhood gas station? Author Lisa Margonelli wondered, and took the trouble to find out. The stories she discovered were so compelling she decided to write a book about it.

Thus begins an illuminating journey that begins at an independent gas station in San Francisco, tracing a barrel of oil backwards all the way to origins as disparate and far flung as East Texas, Venezuela, and Western Africa. Consistently even handed and objective, *Oil On The Brain* examines multinational "Big Oil" corporations and independent "Little Oil" wildcat operations in equal parts. At each step in the world petroleum supply chain Margonelli introduces the reader to people all over the globe that are involved with or affected by the international petrochemical industry, documenting the ripple effects of US oil consumption as the viscous black stuff flows "downstream" out of the ground from oil wells to refineries to tanker trucks ... all the way to the convenience station gas pump... effects that are as multifaceted and labyrinthine as they are eye opening and thought provoking. Read this book and you'll never take the act of filling up for granted again.

Steve says

While I listed this book under "fun", it was only fun at first and got steadily less so as I made it through the book. Not that it wasn't interesting -- it was very interesting throughout. But, with the possible exception of the men on the oil derrick (well, in this case, natural gas rig), there's not really anything happy about this book: whether it be the gas station owner who can't really make any money selling gas to the distributor who is always watching the market or any one of the "petrostates" that are simultaneously awash in money and misery of some form or another. Of course, oil isn't the first desirable resource that turns the hinterlands into colonies of the center, and it certainly won't be the last.

My biggest problem with the book is one I've seen before: to make the numbers and the stories palatable, Lisa Margonelli has approached this subject as a journalist and is looking for the "stories" in the chosen subject rather than the subject itself (as she even puts it in the end, the oil industry is to her now a collection of stories); I guess the intent is to illuminate the subject -- but these 'stories' end up being the subject rendering the book oddly ineffective. I vividly remember the characters she meets while going to check out the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, which tends to overshadow her claim that the SPR is basically a big white elephant: simultaneously too small (to really be useful for its primary purpose) and too big (we've apparently never tested the infrastructure enough to know if it will even work, and an oil release from the SPR is likely to overwhelm the pumping infrastructure anyways, so it can't get out to consumers quickly anyways). There are a lot of sad stories about the oil industry in various countries (Venezuela, Iran, Chad). There are bits here

and there where she touches on the history of oil (it was the 'alternative energy' of the 19th century) and on the future of oil -- but in the end it's a bunch of stories that seem to obscure more than illuminate.

It's an interesting and worthwhile book; it just could have been so much better.

Rogue Reader says

Three days and two nights in Midland and Odessa, Texas compelled me to learn more about oil.

West Texas is flat, dry and wide-open, peopled every couple of miles by pumping wells. It was hot - 111o, and nobody walked anywhere.

There's pumps outside the Holiday Inn Express, the movements lubricated, thumping me softly to sleep. There's the smell of grease at the pump, and other smells at the collection centers - it's the smell of money, they tell me. Life revolves around oil, from the Kenyan cabbie who was sure that someday he's be rich thanks to oil, to help wanted signs everywhere. KDs barbecue has man-sized meat portions sizzling in the heat but nobody's fat because people work hard here in West Texas. Everybody knows about oil. After my short stay in Midland, Texas, I wanted to know more.

Margonelli's Oil on the Brain was a great read, not only to learn more about the Texas oil fields, but also about the world economics of oil. She starts with what she, and I, know best - the corner gas station and moves on to California refineries and the pipelines. Margonelli reviews the EPA requirements forcing new technologies on US refineries that increased capacity and reduced costs. She follows oil from the New York stock exchange to oil fields in Texas, Venezuela, China, Chad, Nigeria and Iran with personal and ever so human perspectives on each. Margonelli's explanation of how OPEC and non-OPEC countries manipulate oil prices through supply and demand is reasonable, and her exploration of the Strategic Petroleum Reserve brings clarity to presidential politics over the last 30 years.

The closing chapters resound: that natural resources are limited, conservation is needed and alternative energy sources are necessary. Innovation in technology and economics are shaping a new world future.

--*Ashland Mystery*

Jason says

From the back cover: 'Americans buy ten thousand gallons of gasoline a second. Where does it all come from? Lisa Margonelli's desire to learn took her on a hundred-thousand mile journey from her local gas station to oil fields half a world away.' My review: This book is an absolute masterpiece!!! Americans tend to think of the 'price of gas' as how much they pay at the pump, but there are so many other environmental, social, and political costs on top of that. This book lays them bare. You will learn how gasoline is retailed, distributed, and refined. The author visits an oil drilling rig, the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, and the NYMEX Oil Market before traveling to Venezuela, Chad, Iran, Nigeria, and China. The writing is consistently insightful and has the magical quality of painting a large picture with a minimum of brush

strokes. This is a very important and timely book.
