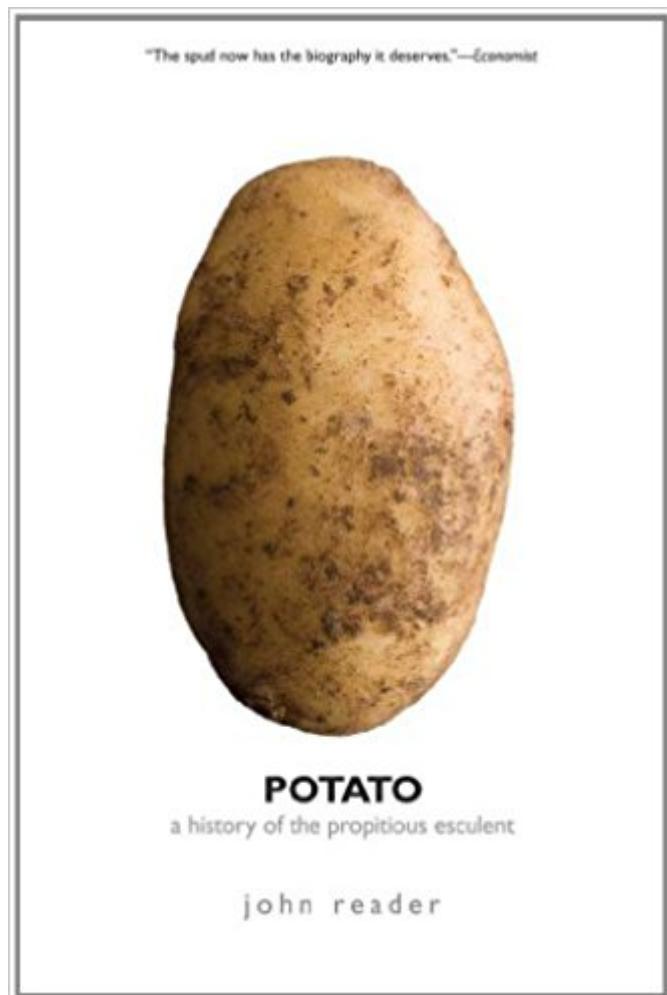


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Potato: A History Of The Propitious Esculent



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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The rather pompous subtitle, "A History of the Propitious Esculent" provides a bit of a warning up front. (It means "favorable edible thing", so you don't have to look it up.) This is not a book that draws you along, or really achieves a sense of story. But if you are interested in potatoes there is

interesting information that can be extracted. The author manages to start the book with Mars, asserting that astronauts will take potatoes with them when they go. He then moves to the Andes, from whence potatoes originate. Ancestral potatoes were toxic, and people in the Andes bred non-toxic varieties. The author discusses this as well as he can, but there is little direct evidence of how it was done. He then launches into a discussion of Andean civilizations and then the fall of the Inca to the Spanish. Acceptably done, but if you want a great account (of this and more) look at "1491" by Charles C. Mann. The potato then makes its way to Europe, and slowly gains acceptance. (Including tales of fraud and the like.) Then comes Ireland, population explosion, and blight, death, and emigration. The discussion of the blight, how it happened, and what the consequences were is good. There is also much discussion of the politics of the time, and the fight over the Corn Laws ("corn" meaning grain, in the British use), which applied tariffs to keep out cheap foreign grain to protect British farmers. It also helped the Irish starve when the potato crop failed, and thus the blight contributed to ending a long political fight. [Side note: I ordered the UK edition of this book based on a review in The Economist. The Economist was founded in opposition to the Corn Laws ...] The story then moves back to the potato in Europe, especially in England.

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