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## Books

# How the World Hangs by a Thread

By DAVID M. SHRIBMAN

Chambray is an indigo-dyed, plain-cotton weave often used in shirts and womenswear. Chintz is a plain-weave fabric with a lustrous finish. Cretonne is a printed fabric, heavier than chintz. Got that?

Good. Because you need to understand cotton if you are going to understand the world, and I don't mean only the modern world, where nothing gets between Brooke Shields and her Calvins. I mean the ancient world, too, and colonial America and the industrializing world, to say nothing of the fashion world, because before he is done, Stephen Yafa, the author of "**Big Cotton**" (Viking, 398 pages, \$25.95) has a lot to say about all of them.

Mr. Yafa is a screenwriter, playwright and novelist, but here he has written cotton's biography, and let me say from the outset that it is a heroic biography of the old-fashioned kind. This is one strong fiber, able to tie the globe together or pull the world apart. It made an inland empire of the South, and it prompted a war between American states. It has been the subject of ferocious lobbying, strong passions, import quotas, price supports and, in the long struggle against the boll weevil, countless pesticides. Plus (and you knew this without giving it a thought) it makes some darn fine denim, a fabric that, like the old Pittsburgh Paint commercial, covers the world.



*Planted, picked, spun,  
fashioned, fought over,*

"Big Cotton" is a history and a tribute, but no tribute in history is quite as remarkable as the one delivered by Sen. James Henry Hammond of South Carolina. It came in 1858, three years before the beginning of the Civil War, whose seeds after all were in the cottonseed itself. "Would any sane nation make war on cotton?" Hammond hollered. "Without firing a gun, without drawing a sword, should they make war on us, we could bring the whole world to our feet. The South is willing to go on one, two, or three years without planting a seed of cotton.... What would happen if no cotton were furnished for three years? England would topple headlong and carry the whole civilized world with her, save the South. No, you dare not make war on cotton. No power on earth dares make war on cotton. Cotton is

*profited by -- behold one mighty fiber.*

As rhetoric that is terrific, though as prophecy it is not quite as potent. No matter. You get the point. John Diefenbaker, the Canadian prime minister, once bellowed that the story of Canada was the story of wheat. Mr. Yafa amply fills almost 400 pages arguing that the story of America is cotton.

He makes a persuasive case, and a captivating one. Thomas Macaulay, the British historian, once wrote that cotton was more important to the history of the U.S. than Peter the Great was to the history of Russia. From the fields of the Piedmont to the mills of Lowell to the factories of Levi Strauss, cotton has clothed the American story. As a New Englander, I am drawn to the power of maize, particularly in the hands of the Native Americans, and as a resident of Pittsburgh I am not unaware of the power of the tomato, particularly in the hands of H.J. Heinz, but I have to hand it to Mr. Yafa. Cotton rules.

It shaped the lives of the slaves who picked it, of the planters who reaped its profits, of the factory girls who spun it, of the merchants who sold it, of the farm women (and later the couture houses) who fashioned it, of the people who wore it and of the politicians (and between 1861 and 1865 the soldiers) who warred over it. Its role in the textile mills of the newly industrialized world inspired Marx. Its importance in the imperial world of Britain inspired Gandhi, for whom "cotton and Indian pride were so closely linked as to be inseparable." Mr. Yafa writes: "Kings are mere mortals; they die and the world keeps turning. This plant, by contrast, has eternally rewarded and punished with the haughty abandon of a capricious god."

OK, so sometimes the language is a bit grandiloquent. But in truth it is difficult to overstate how cotton has shaped the world. The story of how this agricultural product in the South was harnessed by industrial power in the North is well known, as are the tensions between the two -- between, let us remember, the slave-owners who provided the raw materials and the factory owners who profited from slave labor even if they preferred not to see it that way. This is the spine of the American story through the middle of the 19th century.

But the American story isn't only political and economic. It is social as well. Is there a more important feature of American popular culture, besides perhaps the automobile and the telephone, than a pair of jeans? We are what we wear, and jeans are what we put on to go to the field and factory, and increasingly to restaurants and office suites.

Mr. Yafa tells us an awful lot about denim, the fabric that more than any other seems to fit the American spirit. "No matter what your faith, as the 20th century unfolded, work became the true religion of America, and cotton, particularly in the form of jeans, became the chosen fiber of a God-fearing national labor force," he writes. True enough. America is a country that needed, in fact and in metaphor, a good pair of work pants. You can thank cotton for that and for a lot else.

*Mr. Shribman, executive editor of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, won the Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on American political culture.*