

Powered by Clickability

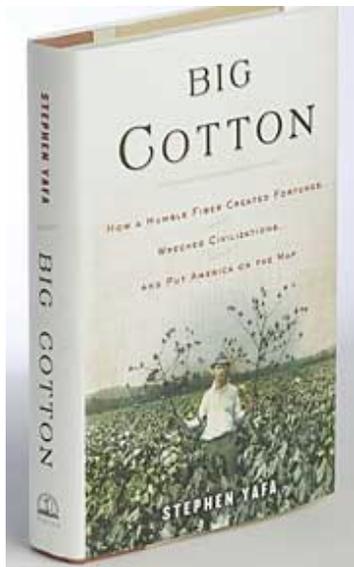


[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

## Weaving a fascinating historical tale

By Lyn Millner, Special for USA TODAY

Did you know that dollar bills are made mostly of cotton blue-jean remnants? That ice cream is thickened with cotton's ground-up short fibers? That cottonseed, in its natural state, is poisonous? That gossypol, cotton's toxic pigment, has been used as a male contraceptive in China?



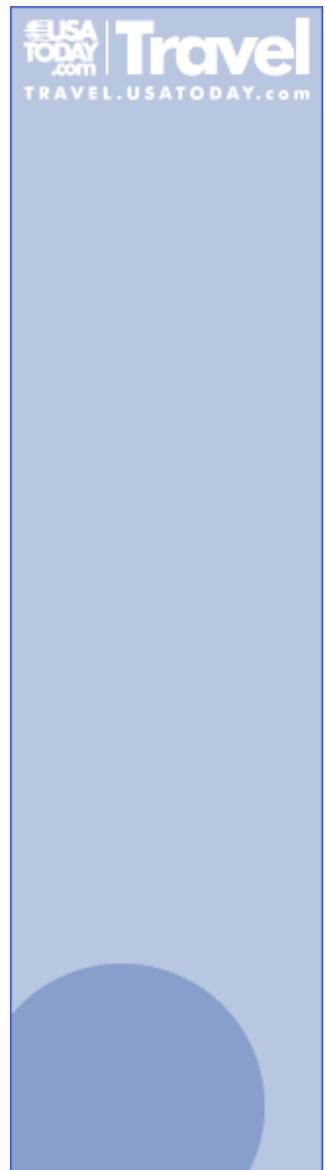
'Big Cotton: How a Humble Fiber Created Fortunes, Wrecked Civilizations, and Put America on the Map,' by Stephen Yafa; Viking, 398 pages, \$25.95.

These and other surprising facts begin *Big Cotton*, Stephen Yafa's history of a fiber we rarely stop to consider even though, chances are, each of us is touching something made of cotton right now. (Excerpt: ['Big Cotton'](#))

How did cotton become the so-called fabric of our lives? The story begins 5,500 years ago, when people in South America, Asia and Africa domesticated the plant and arrived at the process for cleaning, spinning and weaving it. They did so independently in cultures isolated from one another. Centuries later, when Columbus arrived in the New World, this contributed to his major miscalculation. He saw people wearing cotton cloth and took it as further evidence that he was off the coast of India. (As any European could have told you then, there was plenty of cotton in India.)

While cotton played only a bit part in Columbus' story, it was much more influential in other ways. This "gangly shrub," Yafa writes, helped the colonies achieve financial independence from Britain. It sparked the Industrial Revolution in England, enslaved blacks in America and fueled hostilities that led to the Civil War. The creation of cotton mills in America in the early 1800s provided jobs for single women who were able to earn incomes and leave home for the first time. In India, spinning and

Advertisement



weaving one's own cotton was a protest led by Gandhi to undermine British rule.

Yafa brings this biography to life by describing the many inventors, rogues and opportunists who fill cotton's history, describing not only their contributions but their quirks, failures and successes.

Richard Arkwright made a fortune by automating the spinning process and creating the first factories. A ruthless social climber, he stepped on his co-inventor and original investor on the way up. His obsession with his work so angered his wife that she destroyed some of his prototypes.

In England, mobs fed up with losing their jobs to industrialization attacked the places where machines were in use, prompting one inventor to disassemble his "mule," an improved spinning machine, at the end of each day and secrete it in his loft.

Eli Whitney, Yafa recounts, never profited from his "gin" (engine), which separated cotton's seeds from fiber. Misguided by business partners, Whitney tried to charge farmers a third of their profits for the use of his invention. Not surprisingly, most farmers kept their profits and pirated the machine's simple design.

*Big Cotton's* faults are minor. Yafa skips forward and backward in history, which can be confusing. A timeline would have been helpful. His section on blue jeans begins interestingly but is overlong and dwells on pop culture facts covered many times. His spotty discussion of blues music, which is directly related to cotton, misses an opportunity to illuminate a rich and soulful chapter of history. Finally, the puns he uses for headers and chapter titles ("Looming Conflicts," "Spinning Yarns," etc.) wear thin (oops) and detract from an otherwise compelling narrative.

In later chapters, Yafa tackles present-day problems. The shirt on your back, he writes, "got there quite possibly by cheating some poor West African ox-plow cotton farmers out of a fair price for their meager harvest. ... It was probably spun from a blend that included genetically modified fibers, embroiling itself in debates about health, safety, and bioethics. ... Woven into the shirt, too, is a definitive manual for special interest groups on how to get what you want from people who matter in the halls of Congress."

Government subsidies keep many U.S. cotton farmers in business, resulting in a market glut and trade imbalance. In the 20th century, the crop became one of the heaviest users of toxic pesticides on earth. Workers in China (now the largest grower and manufacturer of finished cotton) toil under harsh conditions, recalling those that once existed in Britain and America.

Yet Yafa finds hope. "For every problem in its past, we found a solution." Perhaps a little too neatly, he suggests that the answer to cotton's ills lies in tapping the ingenuity that led to its success. He acknowledges the story of cotton is both "a tribute to man's remarkable ability to achieve" and "a cautionary tale." His comprehensive and often surprising history proves it.

**Find this article at:**

[http://www.usatoday.com/money/books/reviews/2005-01-23-cotton\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/money/books/reviews/2005-01-23-cotton_x.htm)

 [Click to Print](#)

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

	<b>Teachers - Click here for drug prevention resources</b>	
---	--	---