



# The World of Caffeine: The Science and Culture of the World's Most Popular Drug

*By Bennett Alan Weinberg, Bonnie K. Bealer*

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### **Editorial Review**

From The New England Journal of Medicine

This book covers the history and social effects of the principal beverages that contain caffeine, notably coffee and tea. Products of cacao, chocolate that is eaten and drunk, and the soft drinks that contain caffeine (principally colas) are also covered. The historical origins of coffee, tea, and cacao are described, as are the various fascinating ways they made their way into world culture. Some of the main features of this story are told with a theme of geographic spread and with a description of effects of the arrival of "the drug," as the authors often refer to caffeine, on existing cultures. How the different beverages were received (or rejected) by different cultures and by different strata and segments of each culture makes a rich and exciting story. Insights emerge as to how the various civilizations worked. The pleasure of reading is enhanced by the authors' eye for beauty and the many appropriate half-tone illustrations. The scholarship is impressive; many of the most famous figures of the past 500 and more years make brief appearances. Among them are Chinese emperors, Zen Buddhist monks in Japan, nameless Olmecs of Mesoamerica, and then Cortes and Montezuma and Charles V. The conquest of Europe by the drug from Turkish and African sources is also covered. The familiar names of great historical figures appear on almost every page, tying this account in with our knowledge of history and making it more real. The text is rich with information, yet it is easy and pleasant to read.

Social factors are discussed. For example, there are comparisons of the tea culture of England with that of Japan and comparisons of both with the coffee culture of the United States. The duality of the culture of coffee (as in coffee houses) and the culture of tea (as in tea shops, tea gardens, and afternoon tea) is emphasized and illustrated with a list of more than 30 word pairs. One word in each pair is labeled the "coffee aspect" and the other the "tea aspect." The list of coffee aspects starts with "male," "boisterous," and "bohemian" and ends with "Balzac," whereas the list of tea aspects starts with "female," "decorous," and "conventional" and ends with "Proust." Cola beverages are said not to have a long enough history to have features as well differentiated as these, but they do have distinctive associations, such as "youth, high energy, America, pop culture, and 'good clean fun.'" Although the authors emphasize that all these popular beverages contain the drug caffeine, the diversity of the cultures associated with the different beverages suggests that caffeine is only one factor leading to their consumption.

True to its title, the book has little to say about alcohol, but the authors do make the important point that, at least in Europe and North America and at least in the large towns, raw water was not fit to drink until late in the 19th century. The increase in tea and coffee drinking offered an alternative to the usual beverages: beer, gin, and rum. The authors credibly associate this shift with a decrease in alcohol intake, to the benefit of society.

In the second half of the book, the nature of the story changes. The urbane historical perspective gives way to more recent concerns, including a discussion of what might be called huckstering by purveyors of caffeine products. Almost the final third of the book is devoted to the chemistry, pharmacology, and medical aspects of caffeine. I do not think that in a book of this size it is possible to present enough of an understanding for readers to reach their own conclusions on adequate grounds about the health and safety aspects of caffeine, and in many instances the original sources must be scrutinized for the adequacy of the evidence. In addition, there are errors. For example, a woman is said to have had a serum caffeine concentration of almost 300 mg per milliliter, which is many times the solubility of caffeine. Readers can remain confused, they can accept the often implicit conclusions of the writers, or they can opt out and simply trust the Food and Drug

Administration (FDA).

A number of minor matters follow. Pure caffeine is variously described as "highly toxic" or "extremely toxic." An agent that can be ingested in amounts of several grams with relative impunity would not customarily be considered very toxic. A number of common foods -- dry mustard, horseradish, or cayenne pepper, for instance -- would not go down well as boluses of several grams. The poison of the puffer fish, whose flesh is eaten in Japan, is highly toxic, being hazardous in quantities thousands of times smaller than ordinarily consumed quantities of caffeine.

Finally, the authors aver that the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) was founded to help forestall efforts to regulate caffeine. But the FDA was regulating caffeine long before the ILSI was formed. The Caffeine Technical Committee of the ILSI was formed by interested companies to sponsor research on questions on caffeine raised by the FDA and others. It is prohibited from lobbying.

*Peter B. Dews, M.B., Ch.B., Ph.D.*

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From [Booklist](#)

Readers who, like Prufrock, measure out their lives in coffee spoons will appreciate the background on their drug of choice provided by science writers Weinberg and Bealer. The authors wander through caffeine's history, exploring coffee's Arabian origins, tea's roots in Asia, and chocolate's background in the Americas. They consider how these different forms of caffeine found their way to Europe, and how they were accepted in different countries, ultimately suggesting a nexus between this drug and reliable clocks as essential contributors to the Industrial Revolution. In examining "caffeine culture," Weinberg and Bealer discuss three nations--Japan, England, and the U.S.--where caffeinated beverages are particularly popular, and then discuss the role of these beverages as the new millennium begins. The book's last two sections shift from history and anthropology to chemistry and biology, considering the nature of caffeine and its relatives and by-products, and the effects, positive and negative, of caffeine on specific organs and on mental function. Includes photographs and cartoons, charts and graphs, and a number of useful appendixes. *Mary Carroll*  
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Review

[A] marvelous new book. -- Malcolm Gladwell, *The New Yorker*

With a flavor reminiscent of Daniel Boorstin's *The Discoverers*, *The World of Caffeine* tells an intriguing history of a drug that many people seem unable to live without. The book's engaging, easy style allows readers to zip through it like a jolt of good java, or savor it slowly like a good cup of tea. -- *The Washington Post Book World*

The alchemists of old only dreamed of turning dross into gold, but the scientists who followed them succeeded in converting caffeine into ideas. In this new information age the conversion continues at an even faster pace, and this very useful book helps us to understand how it all happened. -- James Trager, author of *The Food Chronology* and *The People's Chronology*

This well-researched and entertaining book, *The World of Caffeine*, contains a wealth of fascinating cultural and historical anecdotes and scientific facts which provide a unique perspective on the world's most commonly used psychoactive drug. -- Roland R. Griffiths, PhD, a leading caffeine researcher, John Hopkins University School of Medicine

With impressive felicity, Weinberg and Bealer marshal the forces of history, chemistry, cultural anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and even a little religion to tell caffeine's complicated story. -- *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*

...a magnificently researched book filled with revelations about what has become, for many of us, a routine

part of each day's consumption. -- *The Wall Street Journal*

Readers who, like Prufrock, measure out their lives in coffee spoons will appreciate the background on their drug of choice provided by science writers Weinberg and Bealer. -- *Booklist*

A savory and spirited cultural history of caffeine...Well- researched, briskly written, full-bodied, and flavorful. -- *Kirkus Reviews*

From early warnings against the evils of caffeine to curiosities about coffeehouse culture, this book holds everything we ever wanted to know -- and then some -- about the drug that helps many of us keep up with the fast pace of our lives. -- *Boston Herald*

[Weinberg and Bealer] make the most of their learned backgrounds to ponder all manner of facts and fictions about the bean and beverage. -- *Toronto Star*

This well researched book examines the myth of caffeine and gives an excellent insight into this fascinating product, its origins and history. -- Thomas Meinl, President, The Julius Meinl Group, Vienna

[Weinberg and Bealer] remind us in their marvelous new book . . . there is no drug quite as effortlessly adaptable as caffeine, the Zelig of chemical stimulants. -- Malcolm Gladwell, *The New Yorker*

The text is rich with information, yet it is easy and pleasant to read. -- Peter B. Lewis, PhD, *New England Journal of Medicine*

Weinberg and Bealer provide an in-depth scholarly work that is remarkably readable and informative. *The World of Caffeine* will provide something for nearly everyone. -- T.D. DeLapp, *Choice*

I love coffee, I love tea, I love the book on its history... a fascinating look at caffeine in its various forms, and very effectively shows its popularity in a historic, social, and pharmacological context. -- Jock Murray, *Comptes Rendus*

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

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#### **Arthur Pascual:**

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