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**The Fabric of Our Lives**

Reviewed by *Ira Berlin*  
Sunday, March 6, 2005; Page BW03

**BIG COTTON**

How a Humble Fiber Created Fortunes, Wrecked Civilizations, and Put America on the Map

By Stephen Yafa. Viking. 398 pp. \$25.95

As the nation-state fades into history's rearview mirror, muscled out of the express lane by corporations that can move money faster than governments can make policies, natural disasters that know no national boundaries, and religions that claim higher authority, historians look for new ways to understand the past. One that has lately drawn attention is the commodity. During the past decade, books on the potato, the cod and even salt have attracted big audiences by offering new ways to think about history. With *Big Cotton*, Steven Yafa adds another to the list, employing a playwright's sense of drama to show how cotton was woven into the American experience.

With wit and intelligence, Yafa demonstrates how a good deal of history can be learned by following a single thread. While his puns -- like that one -- are generally unfortunate, his ambitious narrative energetically summarizes the approximately 5,000 years from cotton's domestication to the latest genetically modified boll. Just about "everyone on the planet," he rightly notes, wears cotton and, in its various by-products, eats cotton, sleeps on cotton, sweats in cotton, washes with cotton and lives in cotton. We talk cotton -- spinning yarns, weaving plots and knitting brows. We even spend with cotton -- as cotton-based paper has become the standard upon which modern currencies are printed. The American greenback is some three-quarters cotton. After noting that cotton "truly belongs to the world," Yafa turns his attention to the United States.

Beginning with 17th-century English settlements, Yafa moves quickly from the fields to the spinning wheel and then from the factory floor to the department store. He pauses briefly in the middle of the 19th century to view the role of King Cotton in the coming of the Civil War but then quickly moves on to the transformation of plantation hands and yeoman farmers into sharecroppers who grew the cotton and lintheads who spun it into cloth. He bows to the boll weevil, curtsies before the bobbins, salutes the mechanical cotton picker, and hurries off to the laboratories, which developed new seeds, fertilizers and fabrics.

But *Big Cotton* is more than a breathless tour through the American

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past, where endless vignettes about the fleecy white tufts bracket equally endless enumerations of bales grown and bolts sold. Yafa peoples his history with the larger-than-life Arkwrights, Whitneys, Cones and Strausses. The critical innovations these men, their families, and business associates made to the cultivation, manufacture and marketing of cotton transformed gossypium and humanity with it. Leadbelly, James Dean, Ogilvy & Mather and countless others make cameo appearances, by turns singing about cotton, wearing cotton and selling cotton. Yafa also imbues his narrative with moral weight. Cotton provided some men and women with previously unimagined wealth and power and reduced many more to grinding poverty and even more dismal servitude. The conflicts these distinctions set in motion between workers and bosses, masters and slaves, can hardly match their grim consequences. Seventy percent of the first workers to enter the cotton mills in Lowell, Mass., died of respiratory illness, later diagnosed as byssinosis, or brown lung disease. Their contemporaries who labored in the cotton fields of Alabama and Mississippi had no need to fear such lingering deaths, as their end came more swiftly and often more violently. Whether they worked for the lords of the loom or the lords of the lash, men and women -- not to mention millions of children -- who worked in the cotton industry were driven to an early death after a short, harsh existence. Later, the terms changed between those who sucked in lint in the factories and succumbed to brown lung and those who absorbed DDT in the fields and perished from multiple carcinogens, although their demise was equally certain. Yafa emphasizes that cotton was not simply a matter of wealth and poverty; it was life and death.

But having bound the American past in the ubiquity of cotton, Yafa overextends its power, suggesting that cotton's special properties distinctively endowed the human, the American and even his own personal experience. Since cotton is "too valuable . . . to inspire only noble behavior, and too easily grown to invite self restraint, [it] lends itself to greed, opportunism, hypocrisy, irrational passion, attempted murder, and episodes of brilliant creativity." For Yafa, cotton encouraged the special openness, extraordinary inventiveness and rambunctious opportunism that once elevated his native Lowell to wealth and prominence and then dispatched it to the depth of poverty and marginality.

Yet much the same can be said of every other commodity from sugar to tulips, for they too -- at one time or another -- inspired greed, irrationality and brilliant creativity. Like them, cotton has no volition. Contrary to Yafa's title, cotton did not create fortunes, wreck civilizations or put America on the map. Rather -- like the potato, the cod and salt -- cotton was indifferent to human desires, whether high or low. If homespun rubbed some raw, it inspired others. If percale soothed some, it irritated others. The motor of history cannot be found in cotton, no matter how dense the thread count. •

Ira Berlin is a professor of history at the University of Maryland and author of "Generations of Captivity: A History of African American Slaves."

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