

Coal: a human history



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Coal: A Human History was written by Barbara Freese to focus on the history of coal and how mankind has used it as part of their lifestyle. Ever since the times when early nomads used the slash-and-burn method, coal has been around acting as jewelry for the Romans and as fuel for peasants and the noble class in Britain. Coal was in such high demand that many inventions were utilized for the convenience of retrieving it from intolerable conditions such as vacuums and the construction of more efficient underground tunnels. The book gives insight of how this small stone has been so vital to humans that they were able to adapt to the ways coal best functions.

Freese wrote this non-fiction book to inform how coal has affected humans socially, economically, and medically. As an Assistant Attorney General of Minnesota she has helped enforce the major pollution laws of her state.

Freese suppose that the public need to know how to contain themselves and use coal in moderation, unlike our prior generations. It is thought by Freese that if humankind continues to act greedy with coal, the planet will only continue to get abused by the actions of humans.

The book explains in vast detail how a greasy lump of fertilized plant and soil has given many opportunities for human growth to prosper. Offering heat as an energy source, coal has made a lasting impression on what humans are today. It is stated in the book that without the use of coal many inventions would not be around due to the facilitation of its connection to coal and life today would be most certainly different. As humans first discovered coal, like every other commodity on Earth, there had to be experiments before the best use for it was found. Freese illustrates the introduction of coal and the great lengths human civilization went through to find this use.

While the Romans named the stone Britain's Best Stone, they used it to carve jewelry from it. The use of expensive jewelry soon lost its value due to mass quantities of coal was discovered. The use of it as diamonds gave some wealth at first for the Romans the jewels were no longer made after 150 years. The term "jet-black" comes from the jewels which were named jet. While the many uses of coal led to various attempts for improvement, there was only one true use for coal that proved to be worthy and beneficial. The use of coal which is most common today started in the 700's CE and it is the use of coal as an energy source.

Though not officially used as a heat source until the 1100's CE, many methods of burning it for protective smoke were used. While the use of coal for heat was cheaper than wood, the side effects of it shortly began to show. As the mass used of coal came to be, the price of it rose sharply as up to ? of lower class family wages were used only for the minimal amount of coal needed to survive harsh cold months. London also grew dependent on coal and many signs were showing just why this statement was true.

The coal smoke smudged the city and thick black clouds could be seen from miles away surrounding London. These plus other negative effects of coal explains how the misuse of coal led to more negative occurrences than positive and beneficial use it gave. The immediate danger of coal was not the pollutants it let out but the process of which coal was mined. After the top layers of coal were all used up by civilization, the real challenge has been finding new methods to get to the coal. Many gasses such as carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide crept up and killed unprepared miners and eventually the use of dogs was established to protect the lives of the humans. Along

with the deadly gasses, many steep and dark tunnels killed workers with unexpected chasms and occasional flooding.

These deaths and injuries called for better safety for all working and many well-organized methods of getting rid of the gasses with flames and creating paths for water to leave the mines were thought up for more efficient coal mining. Inventions such as giant vacuums were used to rid of flooding water and one-man tunnels used for both mining and creating paths for water to go into a nearby river. Without a doubt coal mining was the most dangerous job in the early part of its life, killing around 1/3 of workers and causing permanent damage to bones and brains to around 60% of actual miners. This book proves to be very purposeful for the use in the AP curriculum. The best suited unit to use this book in would be Chapter 30: The Making of Industrial Society. When the use of coal was finally discovered and made flawless, the industrial revolution began in Europe where the most efficient and cheapest energy source to run all the machines was coal.

In *Coal: A Human History* Freese provides many examples of early civilizations and the use of coal for heating ovens for food and ironsmiths and the process in which coal ran the hearts of the engines in all aspects of industrialization. Within the writing there are illustrations and photos along 8 pages in which visualizes the use of child labor in cotton factories to the use of children in coal mines. To get a better understanding of the industrial revolution and societies in Europe would be the best contribution *Coal: A Human History* makes. The use of this book could be valued very important to a better understanding of how coal came to be part of human civilization and the great lengths mankind went in achieving greatness from this

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commodity. To teach the unit this non-fiction writing would be a wonderful source to use with its fact-filled pages. As students read about industrialization in a textbook the use of this book would be very beneficial due to the detail put in just to describe all the wonders coal has given to mankind and how the industry business fully relied on an abundant supply of coal to run either the cotton mills or the steam powered locomotives.

The use of coal has truly impacted and shaped the industries of yesterday to form the ones today, and that would be the most important message students would grasp by using this book in the curriculum. This book focuses on coal and how the use of it has altered the lives of humans. For that, much of the reading lags and seems dull. Many sections of the book describe how coal is actually formed and explains the noble class use of it with their wealth. These two parts are examples of how a book about a commodity can, for the most part, not become an interesting read.

This source of material will lag behind in parts containing much detail, however the book is not a story so one can read sections of the book that do intrigue them for a well rounded understanding of coal and its history. Even though this book contains monotonous sections, there are positive aspects of it which do interest the reader to a better understanding of coal. This aspect makes the overwhelming dryness of the book forgetful as the fascinating parts take over the reader's mind. With many tidbits of information along the entirety of the book, a reader actually has the desire to become part of the book and the message it brings. Freese proves a great point in how has effected both society and nature.

This is written with interesting points which allows the complex understanding of coal to be understood in a recognizable manner. As I read this book many thoughts ran through my mind on the excitement and boredom this book brought. These thoughts ranged from “ wow this is intriguing” to “ how much longer until class is over? ” The constant change of interest was most likely the reason for my accomplishment of the entire book. While reading this non-fiction writing I realized how much effort Freese put into making a successful book. Many non-fiction writings about historical events or valued items can include so much detail that the message of the book is lost in the confusion and complication of the book’s syntax and diction. However, Freese put a lot of work into with limited amount of dull historical facts to intrigue the reader and allow them to be a part of the book itself.

From the very beginning of the first chapter to the last pages of the book, I was connected with the main reason it was written. With much detail I learned a few compelling points that allowed my brain to gain new information as well as being intrigued. The process in which coal goes through to become what humans use as the actual fuel is quite spectacular. It is made of broken down molecules of plants and small organisms which have been forced down hundreds of feet below the Earth’s surface. With the natural pressures of our planet, these stones were learned to be exceptional for the use in burning it. Coal: A Human History has changed my point of view in the way I see and value coal.

Like stated in the book, coal is thought of as a sign of poverty and weakness. However after Freese explains this statement and how it is not true, I began

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to understand how important coal was for molding the lives we know today. Though this book would not be one which is read for enjoyment, there are overwhelming amounts of detail and descriptions which makes it a valid source of information. From the early stages of jewelry to heating houses to fueling locomotives, coal has been around as a strong and reliable source. This is a commodity which has truly stood through the test of time and its vast powers will allow it to prosper even more. It is safe to say that without coal the lives of humans would not be operating as currently known to civilization, due to the path it paved in all aspects of a society.