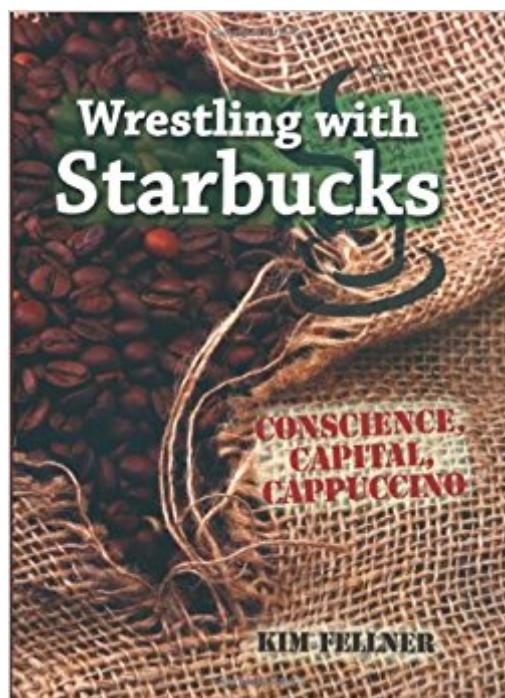


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Wrestling With Starbucks: Conscience, Capital, Cappuccino



Synopsis

You can find a Starbucks coffeehouse almost anywhere, from Paris, France to Paducah, Kentucky, from the crowded streets of Thailand to shopping malls in Qatar. With nearly 200 of them in New York City alone, this coffee retail giant with humble beginnings has become an actor and icon in the global economy. As we sip our cappuccinos, frappuccinos, and our double half-caf venti low-fat mochaccinos, many of us wonder if Starbucks is a haven of civilization or a cultural predator, a good or bad employer, a fair trader or a global menace. In this entertaining and provocative ramble through Starbucks's ethos and actions, Kim Fellner asks how a coffeehouse chain with a liberal reputation came to symbolize, for some, the ills of globalization. Armed with an open mind and a sense of humor, Fellner takes readers on an expedition into the muscle and soul of the coffee company. She finds a corporation filled with contradictions: between employee-friendly processes and anti-union practices; between an internationalist vision and a longing for global dominance; between community individuality and cultural hegemony. On a daily basis Starbucks walks a fine line. It must be profitable enough to please Wall Street and principled enough to please social justice advocates. Although observers might argue that the company has done well at achieving a balance, Starbucks's leaders run the risk of satisfying neither constituency and must constantly justify themselves to both. Through the voices of Central American coffee farmers, officers at corporate headquarters, independent cafÃ© owners, unionists, baristas, traders, global justice activists, and consumers, Fellner explores the forces that affect Starbucks's worth and worthiness. Along the way, she subjects her own unabashedly progressive perspective to scrutiny and emerges with a compelling and unexpected look at Starbucks, the global economy, our economic convictions, and the values behind our morning cup of joe.

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Customer Reviews

Kim Fellner is a longtime progressive organizer and communicator. She earned an M.S. in Communications from the University of Pittsburgh. She lives in Washington D.C.-a short walk from nine coffee joints.

First of all, let me say that I don't care for Starbucks coffee. I have no particular bone to pick with the company, I just don't enjoy the coffee. I find it too acidic. It always tastes burnt and all the varieties taste the same to me. I love coffee, just not theirs. That said, I am thoroughly enjoying this book. It's well-written in addition to being scrupulously researched. Tagging along with the author as she carries on her quest for the Ultimate Truth About Starbucks and Life is a whole lot of fun. The style is breezy and conversational, yet precise and cogent when it comes to the facts. It's an easy way to learn a lot of technical stuff. You don't have to be a caffeinista to find a visit to a coffee plantation or the commodities trading floor enlightening and enormously entertaining. And you don't have to be a social justice organizer to find the stories of the small coffee growers and workers in Central America fascinating and compelling. Fellner has managed to take what could be a very polarizing issue and turn it into a rich, textured and satisfying exploration of the complex social and business implications of our morning brew.

This book is well and absorbingly written by a labor activist and coffee lover who explores Starbucks from the main office to the coffee growers' life and provides a comprehensive and generally supportive view of the effort to change a small brand into a reliable dispenser of high caffeine drinks.

This is a great book. It is about so much more than Starbucks. It is about work life and the labor movement, globalization, culture, international trade, corporate branding, community activism, social justice, gentrification, and of course coffee. Fellner is a talented writer, with a sense of humor and a way with words that make this read like a novel. Yet the book is packed with information that goes down like a cool cup of coffee on a summer day. She has done her homework, including first-hand on-the-ground research in Costa Rica and Guatemala, and Seattle -- with the people who run Starbucks, the corporation, and Starbucks, the neighborhood coffee shop, and with those who

protest against it. There is much food for thought here, about how we treat farmers in the global south and how to organize workers in the global north, and what really matters to workers in the 21st Century. Fellner avoids cliches and this book will likely infuriate those who see the world in black and white, (bad corporations and good workers, good unions and nasty bosses, etc.) But that is what makes this book so important. Anyone concerned about globalization, the labor movement, work-life in America, and environmental protection needs to read this book. *Wrestling with Starbucks* is an apt title because Fellner wrestles with the reality and complexity of Starbucks -- and how it shows up in the world. This is a must read for organizers, activists and anyone concerned about our world today and where it is headed.

Kim Fellner, long-time progressive organizer and journalist, is open-minded, engaging, and immensely intelligent. Several years ago she saw a window smashed by an anarchist at Starbucks and didn't like it. "What is Starbucks?" she, a latte lover, wondered. Should it be stoned, boycotted, organized, or supported, even emulated? She started poking around, became a barista for a day, grilled CEO Howard Schultz three times, chatted with coffee pickers in Costa Rica and Guatemala, asking absolutely everyone all the right questions, blowing the whistle on the Fair Trade folks who claimed they were doing better by the workers than Starbucks, blew the whistle on Schultz over his handling of the Ethiopian growers, blew the whistle on Oxfam over its excesses in the affair. We learn from roasters about what makes good coffee, we learn from a young African American "partner" what makes a shop that works. We learn from Kim, her seamstress mom and opera conductor dad and dozens of friends and professional colleagues what works economically and what doesn't. We get an inside look at the labor movement, where Fellner has worked for years, both devotedly and critically, and see some common ground between its progressive edge and Starbucks. "*Wrestling with Starbucks*" is a surprising, entertaining, informative romp through a difficult subject, one that'll not only benefit students of business and labor, but the casual reader who was -- or is -- mysteriously mesmerized by Starbucks and wonders what that's all about.

Did you know that Starbucks buys less than four percent of the world's coffee as compared with the biggies (Nescafe, Folgers, et al.) who buy 60 percent? Did you know that Starbucks spends nearly as much money on milk (for lattes, frappacinos, and the like) as it spends on coffee beans? These are among the fascinating details that Kim Fellner's informative, balanced, and engaging book, *Wrestling with Starbucks*, provides. My first thought, upon completing the book, was this would make an excellent text for business schools around the country. Among other things, it is a case study of

Starbucks and examines the organization's origins, personalities, economics, sociology, growth and expansion, corporate culture, international cultures, and local cultures. The book also sheds light on the internal dynamics and demographics of Starbucks stores in the US. As a social scientist, I was intrigued by references to Starbucks as a "Third Place" between home and work. I tend to think of the "Third Place or Space" as civil society where people come together to effect change or discuss alternative solutions to various problems created by the other two places: business and government. But I can see how Starbucks indeed provides that place. Oftentimes the second floor of my neighborhood Starbucks is occupied by a non-profit group holding a meeting! Starbucks is clearly more than coffee and Kim uppacks this for the reader in an enjoyable and thought-provoking way.

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