



Where Underpants Come From

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This is a wonderfully funny and insightful look at the new China, the factory of the world - tracing an ordinary pair of underpants from their purchase in New Zealand back to where they were made.

Where Underpants Come From Details

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Author : Joe Bennett

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Eliza says

I picked this up at the library because it looked like an interesting premise. It is an interesting premise, but I'm not sure how I feel about the execution. While his perspective on both the Western view of China and China's view of the racial and cultural minorities within its borders are very interesting, the author got a little fuzzy-weird and introspective at the end. I'm sorry his dog passed away while he was in Thailand, but it has no bearing on how underpants are made.

Apparently I really like for someone to pick a thesis and stick with it.

Justin Gaynor says

The author professed to know nothing whatsoever about China before beginning his investigation into where and how his underwear was made. I assumed this was a rhetorical statement, and that in fact he was going to use the pursuit of his underwear manufacturer as a springboard from which to launch a more thorough explanation of the Chinese economy.

But no. He really did appear to know nothing at all about China or the Chinese -- declaring, at one point, that he'd never heard of Guangzhou, a city of 14 million people and one of the closest to New Zealand, where he lives -- and did not really deviate from the specific story of his pair of underwear. I guess we're supposed to giggle about the fact that he's investigating underwear and give him a free pass on all the journalistic paths he failed to follow up on.

The tone of the book was light, conversational and easy to read, but there's just too little here to justify the four or five hours required to read it.

John Jung says

An impulse read, and a terrific treasure. The topic may strike you as a bit on the weird side, but this is a legitimate topic that is "covers" more than the bare facts, and in a witty style. You learn a lot about the global economy by his personal trek to the factory in China (much to the suspicion of the managers that he was a spy) to observe first-hand the process from manufacturing the underpants to marketing them at Wal-Mart. I definitely plan to read some of his other books

Jeanne says

I'll admit it, the title was intriguing, and was probably what made me read this. I don't know what I expected, but it exceeded whatever that might have been. Think Bill Bryson in China. The writing was a pleasure to read, he has a great turn of phrase. I didn't laugh out loud quite as much as I do with Bill, but I still found it

very amusing. The subject matter was fascinating. 'Made in China' is something I just take for granted, and have never thought really deeply about. His aim to delve into it and in the process reveal so much about Chinese history and contemporary life really worked.

Hmy says

Joe Bennett's style is clear and entertaining. There is no dirt digging here he simply wanted to know more about the production of clothing and China's increasing domination of manufacturing. An interesting book and an easy read.

Erin says

I love books like this. this book looks at every single step the parts of a simple pair of undies made in China go through. Bennett visits factories of all kinds, shipping ports, and farms. One of those make you think books, easy to read. would highly recommend it.

Perry says

I picked up this book expecting it to be more of an insight into Chinese economy, but I was disappointed in the fact that it was more of a travel essay of unsuccessful attempts to trace a pair of underwear backwards to the farm. It was mildly interesting because I recently traveled to Shanghai and I enjoyed reading his interpretations of things I recently saw myself in Shanghai, but the book was not what I hoped it would be.

Fiona says

I wanted it to be a really insightful exposé on supply-chain issues, sweatshops, pricing conundrums and environmental costs...but it just wasn't. It's more a travelogue mentioning all the red-tape and cultural issues that created road-blocks for the author in his quest to trace a pair of department-store undies right back through manufacturing processes to source materials. I think I was just looking for a different kind of book.

Dale Stonehouse says

This book had promise in the first visits to Shanghai but bogged down when the author went in search of thread and rubber in Thailand, where the culture was more the subject than the source materials for underpants. If you like the same sort of jokes over and over you might stick with it. I got bored, but I appreciate the effort and there are things to be learned from his account.

Michael says

This past year I read "Country Driving: A Journey Through China from Farm to Factory" and "Larry's Kidney: (Being the Story of) How I Found Myself in China with My Black Sheep Cousin and His Mail-Order Bride, Breaking Chinese Law to Get Him a Transplant--and Save His Life." The first was written by a fairly knowledgeable young writer who is clearing becoming an expert on China, the second by someone who made zero claims to knowing anything about the country but seemed to make some interesting observations nevertheless.

Here Joe Bennett knows nothing about China to start and learns little worth passing on, in my view. He visits Shanghai and several other areas in China and also Thailand.

I'm sorry his dog died while he was traveling to do his research for this book but that doesn't excuse the poor result.

Kuang Ting says

3.5 stars.

This is the second book I read by Joe Bennett. He traveled to China to do research on the underpants. He didn't know much about this industry. When he was buying a pack of underpants in New Zealand, it occurred to him that writing China on such a topic would be nice. He hoped to unveil how underpants were made, transported, and sold to Western worlds. He went on with the idea and this was the result.

I had to admit it was less insightful than I thought. I liked his book 'Hello Dubai' more. Maybe it is because I know more than the author since I am from Taiwan. I found some paragraphs redundant. Joe seemed to jot down many tedious observations. Having said that, these descriptions might be vivid to Westerners. To some extent, I live in a similar environment, so it's boring to me. However, Joe's writing was humorous. He knew how to make fun of everything.

Joe tried to contact some exporters and manufacturers and successfully convinced a few of them to let him visit the spots. He did show readers some superficial knowledge he gained from the visits. If you want to learn more, you should check out Peter Hessler's books, where you would learn a lot more.

One thing stood out in my reading. That was the gray color of China. Joe constantly referred to the dismal environment. China boosted the economy at the expense of pollution. The sky was not blue but dark gray. He showed concerns for the nation. No wonder so many Chinese wanted to emigrate simply because of the poor living quality.

It's expected that Joe stumbled on several obstacles. Firms normally would't let a stranger just come and go. Therefore, Joe's account was far from complete, yet he did showed us some less seen places in China. In sum, if you like to read diary-like travelogue with some close look-up on China, this book would be fine. Otherwise, you may feel a bit disappointed.

Phil says

Written by a Brit living in New Zealand. Puportedly an examination of how China has become such a manufacturing power, through the process of following the source of a pair of mens' briefs (and their components) made in China. Most of the manufacturers won't give him the time of day. What evolves is a travel essay (that's what the author writes), that tries to study the people of China's rural and manufacturing centers. All he seems to do is piss people off. Bennett doesn't really exhibit much sensitivity. Can he imagine a Chinese journalist that speaks not one word of English showing up in a New Zealand sheep farm and expecting to get the royal treatment?

Teri says

Buying a pair of underpants in New Zealand, the author contemplates how they got from China to his store and can be sold for \$2.99 or even a 5 pack for \$4.37. He sets out to trace the journey of his underpants; he visits factories in China, the huge port in Shanghai, remote villages in the Uighar region tracking down all the steps involved. Part idiosyncratic travel log and part global economics, this is wholly fascinating and entirely readable.

James says

Realizing I know next to nothing about China, this immediately caught my attention. And it was worth the buy. China is impossibly large and complex, so no single work can hope to capture it all. This book doesn't even try, instead choosing a simple approach - from genesis to shelf, where to underpants come from? In reality it is a travel book. Bennett spends most of his copy looking at the culture in China - the people, the food, the attitudes, the small things you cannot fathom on television or in movies.

His writing is reminiscent of Bill Bryson: full of dry humour and witty observations, though with far more anecdotes. It's a light read and easy to cut through. It also serves as a great first stepping stone in demystifying this country. Bennett does not cover it all - and he never claims to try. Instead he focuses on a single purpose and through that manages to create a wholesale impression of a country few of us understand.

Elevate Difference says

It's absolutely astonishing to realize how much junk people in North America consume only to throw away. Most of it is from China. When I started to read *Where Underpants Come From*, I picked up various objects in my office—from the mechanical pencil I write with to my iPod—and I discovered that yes, everything had been made in China. Author Joe Bennett, who is based in New Zealand, does a fantastic job of describing his experience of traveling to that far off land to discover the process of how his cheap underpants were manufactured. The idea is absurd, but he runs with it anyway.

China is the cheapest bidder on manufacturing most of the convenient items we consume at an exhausting rate. It comes as no surprise that the giant nation is, as a result, driving its peasant labor force for meager wages and polluting the air, land, and water at an even faster rate. Statistics aren't necessary; just take a look

at the dirty grey-brown clouds of smog that hover over Chinese cities.

Bennett does more than observe the grainy air; he physically visits various places in China to see for himself what the industrial giant has created in order to keep the Western materialist appetite satisfied. It isn't pretty, but his encounters are often humorous. As other journalists (such as Anderson Cooper, in the *Planet in Peril* series) have pointed out, China's bid to create the cheapest industrial production of everything from underpants to machinery is creating environmental destruction on an astronomical level.

Chinese citizens are also just as disposable. When I was a little girl (in Canada) during Mao's time, I became interested in not only American Vietnam War veterans, but in the Vietnamese and Chinese soldiers who—as the National Geographic displayed them—were left rotting in dilapidated vet hospitals. Bennett's descriptions of countless health and safety hazards and substandard machinery show that while Mao may have died in 1976, the view that Chinese workers are easily replaceable has not.

Bennett's account gets past the stats and much-repeated talk of China as an economic giant. He offers readers glimpses into people's lives. He goes where the Chinese won't—places like Urumqi south, where Muslim populations exist—and tries to communicate with the locals. His angle lends compassion and a sincere urge to understand all sides. He admits to his own prejudices against China and its peoples before he actually arrives and notes that people are people everywhere.

As I sit here and type my review on my 'Made In China' laptop, the darkness is lit by my 'Made In China' lamp, and I drink Chrysanthemum tea (grown and harvested in China) from my 'Made in China' glass, I hope that people will take the time to read Bennett's work. Despite the pollution and slack labor laws and high rate of labor deaths, Bennett finds the people he encounters to be generally happy. Yes, they are driven, but they take time to live for the sake of living and family takes care of family. We Westerners monetarily benefit from the fruits of their hard work, but materialism has only left us miserably wealthy, fat, and insecure.

Review by Nicolette Westfall
