



21 Dog Years: Doing Time @ Amazon.com

Mike Daisey

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Boy meets dot-com, boy falls for dot-com, boy flees dot-com in horror. So goes one of the most perversely hilarious love stories you will ever read, one that blends tech culture, hero worship, cat litter, Albanian economics, venture capitalism, and free bagels into a surreal cocktail of delusion. In 1998, when Amazon.com went to temp agencies to recruit people, they gave them a simple directive: send us your freaks. Mike Daisey -- slacker, onetime aesthetics major, dilettante -- seemed perfect for the job. His ascension from lowly temp to customer service representative to business development hustler over the course of twenty-one dog years is the stuff of both dreams and nightmares.

With lunatic precision, Daisey describes the lightless cube farms in which book orders were scrawled on Post-its while technicians struggled to bring computers back online; the fourteen-hour days fueled by caffeine, fanaticism, and illicit day-trading from office desks made from doors; his strange compulsion to send free books to Norwegians; and the fevered insistence of BizDev higher-ups that the perfect business partner was Pets.com -- the now-extinct company that spent all its assets on a sock puppet.

In these pages, you'll meet Warren, the cowboy of customer service, capable of verbally hog-tying even the most abusive customer; Amazon employee #5, a reclusive computer gamer worth a cool \$300 million, who spends at least six hours a day locked in his office killing goblins; and Jean-Michele, Mike's girlfriend and sparring partner, who tries to keep him grounded, even as dot-com mania seduces them both. At strategic intervals, the narrative is punctuated by hysterically honest letters to CEO Jeff Bezos -- missives that seem ripped from the collective unconscious of dot-com disciples the world over.

"21 Dog Years" is an epic story of greed, self-deception, and heartbreak, a wickedly funny anthem to an era of bounteous stock options and boundless insanity.

21 Dog Years: Doing Time @ Amazon.com Details

Date : Published June 17th 2002 by Free Press (first published June 4th 2002)

ISBN : 9780743225809

Author : Mike Daisey

Format : Hardcover 240 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Autobiography, Memoir, Biography, Humor, Business, Computer Science, Computers



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Aaron says

This book provided a kind of quick detour from the heavy stuff I've been concentrating on lately (including "A People's History of the United States). It's a good, quick, funny read about one of Seattle's best-known (and quite cultish) companies: Amazon.com.

The upshot? Joining Amazon is like joining a cult - only the members quote "Star Wars," sport college degrees in subjects like "aesthetics" and basically trade their souls for the enormous wealth promised by stock options. The book also provides a nice recap of the craziness of the dot.com years.

In a sense, the book also afforded me a look at how one might approach writing about a particular experience with corporate America. I've been thinking about writing about my experience in corporate journalism, and the structure of this book provides one possible path to follow.

MattA says

This book is an adaptation and expansion of Mike Daisey's original one-man show. It increased my appreciation of the book to imagine Mike delivering it as a monologue. I've heard several other pieces by Mike, and he's a great story teller. A decent author, too.

The book covers Mike's years working at Amazon.com, his years as a cubicle dweller. Reading it now -- ten years after publication -- it serves as a bit of nostalgia, looking back on the dot-com era of the late 90's. Mike almost seems to stumble through his time at Amazon, sometimes loving the company, sometimes hating it. As someone who has spent most of his own working life in cubes, I can appreciate his struggles to live within that environment, and admire him for his ability to finally break free.

I can see how his style might not appeal to some people. Give it a chapter and see how you like it.

P.S. I found it amusing that later editions of the book changed the sub-title from "Doing Time @ Amazon.com" to "A Cube Dweller's Tale". I wonder if that was required in order to get the book listed on Amazon.

Andy Park says

Casual but honest look at Amazon in its early days - having worked at an internet start-up centered around charismatic personalities, I can attest that the anecdotes and emotions the author shares are authentic - sad, humorous, and upsetting all at the same time.

Tech bubble will burst again and again as long as the business model continues, which probably isn't a bad thing over all as it constantly creates new jobs and weeds out the weak businesses, but you can't help but laugh at some of the jokes that people call "jobs" and "business" within the industry.

Light read - don't expect to learn any serious life lesson from this book.

Bryan says

This book is a little tricky because (if I understand correctly), it originated as a one-man show, and he then lengthened the work to turn it into memoir/book form. Because it wasn't originally intended as a book, I do think it can be a little rough around the edges.

Primarily for the above reason, I'm giving it four stars. Nevertheless, I am interested in Daisey as a performer, and I wanted to get a feel for his work. As this is his only published (sort of) play (and because I don't live anywhere near where he is currently performing "The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs"), I plunged into this, and I wasn't disappointed. According to Amazon, some of his earlier plays are set to be published in May of 2012, which, since my birthday is also in May, I consider to be a birthday present from Mike Daisey himself.

In short, if you're interested in Daisey, this is worth a read (I imagine this is small percentage of the population). If you're interested in knowing what the early days of working at Amazon.com were like, this is worth a read. And if you, like me (and Daisey), consider yourself something of a dilettante, this is definitely worth a read.

Dana says

I first saw Mike Daisey in 2005 at the Portland Center Stage performing 21 Dog Years, or Doing Time @ Amazon.com as a one man show. The performance was excellent and I still remember him using the analogy of a three legged dog. (a dog with its leg in a trap chews it off and lives to escape but it still loved because who doesn't like dogs even if they have only three legs). He made me realize that I too could escape a job that I truly hated and I also did a geographic cure. I have a photo of a one legged dog in my wallet to remind me of my escape. The book elaborates on his skit and provided a look into the run up of the 90s and dot com's behaving badly and the greed of the time on both sides of the employment desk (door ala deck top). Living in Portland at the time we heard about the travails up in Seattle at Amazon all the time but did not really know what was going on inside. This spells it out with all the warts. The writing is a bit juvenile but I gather that Mike Daisey is a bit juvenile as well. The one man show was much better but I highly recommend the book even though it is getting a little out of date as the years go by.

Garrett says

After seeing Mike Daisey's monologue about his travels to Vanuatu at the Woolly Mammoth theater, I was really excited about this book. In the show he presents a very nuanced view of capitalism and western culture, raising provocative questions about "value" and why we behave the way we do.

Unfortunately the book doesn't extend the ideas or offer anything close to the same level of analysis. Though it explores the connection between capitalism, society and wellbeing, it feels like a juvenile first draft of what he ended up writing for his performance.

Recommendation: Go see Mike Daisey in person as soon as you can. Think twice before reading this book.

Jennifer says

This book is a sarcastic, funny and caustic account of the author's stint as a customer service representative at Amazon.com. He worked there in 1998 so I'm assuming a lot has changed in that time. However, it is a pretty biting view of what it was like inside Amazon during the beginning years. I read it quite a while ago but remember enjoying it and feeling like the author was probably violating some kind of workplace confidentiality agreement. Perhaps his former employee agrees because, although you can buy this book on Amazon, you'll find that the subtitle is changed to "A Cube Dweller's Tale." Kind of funny.

Punk says

Non-fiction. Mike Daisey is the epitome of Gen X: bachelor's degree in aesthetics, background as a professional temp, and a hundred casual Superman references tossed into his speech. It's 1998 and Seattle is churning out disaffection and coffee like it's the new world order, and Daisey has just gotten hired as a customer service representative for Amazon.com.

The day of his first interview with Amazon, Daisey walked out of the building and was confronted with a Seattle Weekly newspaper box on the sidewalk. The headline was *How I "escaped" from Amazon.cult* by Richard Howard. That should have been Daisey's first sign that something stank in the city of Seattle, but he ignored it.

Daisey's story makes Amazon.com into a religion and its founder Jeff Bezos the charismatic leader they'd all willingly, happily, drink poisoned Kool-Aid for. I felt sorry for Daisey, for his earnest stupidity and his bare desire to believe in something, while at the same time I could understand how glamorous and seductive Amazon must have been back in the late nineties.

The book is easy and uncomfortable to read. Daisey has a sense of humor about his experience and he's willing to laugh at himself, but there's also a genuine sense of confusion and disappointment in the company. Daisey had fallen in love with Amazon.com, but Amazon was merely toying with his feelings. Their breakup isn't pretty.

Three stars for a look at Amazon from a guy who loved it, hated it, and stole office supplies from it.

Angie Miller says

Meh. I thought it would be funnier, but it really wasn't. It had its moments, but I just didn't care that much for the writing. It seemed to lack flow. I almost quit reading it a few times.

Brett Nordquist says

Just don't. I'd rather watch Carrot Top than read this book again.

Tania says

quotes#346980 from my notebook

In some ways it was the curse of talent; there was a whole list of things in which I showed great promise. But there is a hell of a gap between "talented" and "successful," and to bridge it you need something called "will." My teachers begged me to dedicate myself - just a little - and said I would really blossom. I dug in my heels and refused. I feigned scorn and indignation but really I was just too scared to apply myself. I was afraid I would discover my limitations. Better not to know. Better to be free and easy and cultivate an air of smug accomplishment. Nurture my talent. Read another book. Play some more Nintendo.

But I miscalculated. p4

[chosen for its philosophical bent:]

But "beat" in what context? B&N still has all its physical stores, and even if the website isn't growing at a staggering rate it's not as if B&N's physical store sales have been crippled by Amazon. People still like going to bookstores, which strangely is considered more romantic than spending an evening alone in your underwear staring at a website. p67

[hubby and I often frequented a B&N after a meal out - alas we no longer have that luxury:]

Miko Lee says

Totally blown away by Mike Daisy's This American Life story about Apple Computers made in China, I searched for as much material on him as possible. Sad that I missed his productions at Berkeley Rep, I thought I'd opt for this book based upon his years at the start of Amazon.com. At the same time my daughter is applying to be a scholar with the Bezo Foundation - aka Amazon founder Jeff Bezo's foundation. This books seemed like it would be great. Sad to say that I was very disappointed. Though it was at times funny and I can clearly hear his voice, I was bored by the amazon world. It didn't open up a mystery to me. It was a shrug. Oh well. Still would love to see the guy perform.

Amanda says

I love Mike Daisey, and if you've ever seen one of his shows, they're great. I found myself reading aloud several parts of this book to my fiance, and we'd chuckle along. However, I found the book to have a very quick drop-off at the end, and less of a lead-up to his final days than I would have liked. Additionally, I would have loved to have had a (even if it were fictional) Amazon-sidekick to compare the two lifestyles in order to glean from the text what was making Mike unhappy during these times. It was definitely worth the read.

Cathy says

I went to see Mike Daisey perform a one man show at a local theater a few months ago, and it was terrific, so I looked forward to reading this book about his years working at Amazon.com in the late 90s. Maybe my expectations were too high, but this wasn't the funny and poignant portrayal I thought it would be. Instead, it dragged on and focused more on the author's own self-deprecation than real insight into working at dot-coms in that period before the bubble burst. I did enjoy the mock email messages to Jeff Bezos (Amazon.com's founder) scattered throughout the book, however, so I'm giving it three stars instead of two.

Maddie says

21 Dog Years is the chronicle of author Mike Daisey's brief time at start-up Amazon.com

21 Dog Years because like dogs, the years (especially the earlier ones) seem to age you faster at Amazon than in the real world.

Daisey details how he was a shiftless "dilettante" few ties before he broke down and joined the freak show of the customer service team. The Amazon.com he describes is like a cult - and was apparently covered so in some of the media at the time - with a message and figurehead that was meant to inspire and completely absorb the drones.

Daisey drank the Kool-Aid to the very end in love with the company and the found, the amazing Jeff. However, eventually the dilettante (with a major in aesthetics) wins out.

Discussing this book with my friend who lent it to me, he revealed that recently Daisey came under fire when a report he did for NPR's This American Life on FoxConn was discovered to be "partially fabricated." At the end of the story he states that some facts were harmed but the truth remained whole - but it does cause one to wonder. I read the book as creative non-fiction taking a grain of salt with each story but wondering where the kernel of truth lay.
