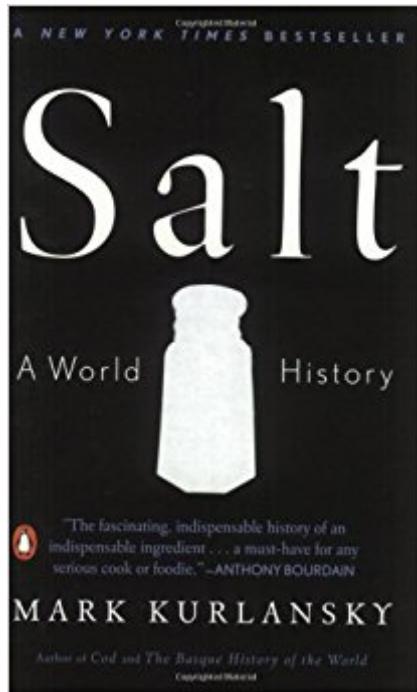


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Salt: A World History



Synopsis

An unlikely world history from the bestselling author of *Cod* and *The Basque History of the World* In his fifth work of nonfiction, Mark Kurlansky turns his attention to a common household item with a long and intriguing history: salt. The only rock we eat, salt has shaped civilization from the very beginning, and its story is a glittering, often surprising part of the history of humankind. A substance so valuable it served as currency, salt has influenced the establishment of trade routes and cities, provoked and financed wars, secured empires, and inspired revolutions. Populated by colorful characters and filled with an unending series of fascinating details, *Salt* is a supremely entertaining, multi-layered masterpiece.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It's become a party cliche to comment on our need for the results of combining a poisonous gas [chlorine] and a volatile metal [sodium]. Kurlansky passes quickly over such levity to seriously relate the role of sodium chloride in human society. While at first glance his account may seem overdone, a bit of reflection reveals that something so common in our lives is easily overlooked. Salt is essential to our existence. Our need is so strong and enduring that we tend to take its availability for granted. As a global history, this book is an ambitious attempt to re-introduce us to something we think common and uninteresting. It's immensely successful through Kurlansky's multi-faceted approach. He combines economics, politics, culinary practices, tradition and myth in making his presentation. About the only aspect ignored is the detailed biological one explaining why this compound is so necessary to our existence. Because our need for salt is so fundamental, its history

encompasses that of humanity. Salt was basic to many economies, Kurlansky notes. It's acted as the basis of exchange between traders, was the target of empire builders and even paid out to soldiers as a form of "salary" - hence the term. Venice, a coastal city tucked away from the main tracks of Mediterranean trade, bloomed into prominence when it discovered it could garner more profit by trading in salt than by manufacturing it. The Venetian empire and later renaissance was founded on the salt trade. Empires may be built on salt, but can be felled by misguided policies on its trade and consumption. One element leading to the downfall of the French monarchy was the hated "gabelle", or salt tax, which imposed a heavier burden on farming peasants than it did on the aristocracy. The reputation of tax evasion borne by the French relates to the resentment expressed over the salt tax. A British regulation on salt resulted in similar reaction leading to the breakup up their own Empire. It was a "march to the sea" led by Mahatma Ghandi to collect salt that galvanised resistance to British rule. Over a century after the French Revolution, the British were displaced from India for similar reasons - greed. While acknowledging the importance of salt in our lives, Kurlansky notes that determining how much is "too little" or "too much" is elusive. Many people today claim to have "salt-free" diets while remaining ignorant of how much salt is contained in our foods, both naturally and through processing. Yet, as Kurlansky records, salt has appeal beyond just the body's needs. He records numerous commentators from ancient Egypt, China and Rome who express their admiration for salt's flavour-adding qualities. Sauces based on various ingredients mixed with salt permeate the book. He notes that the salt dispenser is a modern innovation, supplementing the use of salt in cooking processes. Salt's decline in conserving food, which changed the amount of salt we consume directly, came about due to increased world trade, displacement of rural populations into cities, and, of course, war. "The first blow" displacing salt as a preservative came from a Parisian cook; a man so obscure that his given name remains disputed. Nicolas [Francois?] Appert worked out how to preserve meat by "canning". Adopted by Napoleon's armies, the technique spread rapidly. The technology of the Industrial Revolution led to effective refrigeration. Kurlansky gives an account of Clarence Birdseye's efforts to found what became a major industry. Although the topic seems overspecialised, the universal application and long historical view of this book establishes its importance. Kurlansky has successfully met an immense challenge in presenting a wealth of information. That he graces what might have been a dry pedantic exercise with recipes, anecdotes, photographs and maps grants this book wide appeal. He's to be congratulated for his worldly view and comprehensive presentation. [Stephen A. Haines - Ottawa, Canada]

Salt is one of those things that turned up all over the place in my high school studies. It turned up in chemistry (sodium chloride), in biology (the amount of salt in our bodies and what we do with it), in history and English (check out the root of the word: "salary"). So sure, salt's important. But does it merit its own entire book about its history? Turns out the answer is both yes and no...I like these small, focused histories (as you've probably guessed if you've read any of the other reviews I've written). I've read many of them, including another one by Mark Kurlansky, *Cod* (which I rather enjoyed). So when I ran across *Salt*, I was certain I wanted to read it. I liked Kurlansky's style, and I already knew that the subject matter would be interesting. And it was. In *Salt*, Kurlansky walks through both the history of salt and the influence of salt on history, presenting a wide and varied picture of one of the [now] most common elements in our modern world. And he does this in the same engaging fashion that he used in *Cod*; although, with fewer recipes. So why not give it five stars? Well, it has a couple of noticeable flaws that tended to detract a bit from the overall presentation. The first flaw was in the sheer number of historical snippets that were included. While I'm certain that salt has been important in the broad span of human history, there are a number of these historical anecdotes where he was clearly reaching to demonstrate the influence of salt. Salt may have been involved in these incidents, but it was peripheral at best, and the overall tone sounds too much like cheerleading. Cutting a few of these out would have shortened the book without detracting from the presentation at all. The second flaw was the meandering path that he takes through the history of salt. He generally starts early in history, and his discussion moves along roughly as history does as well; however, he has a tendency to wander a bit both forward and backward without effectively tying all of this together. I'd have preferred to either walk straight through history while skipping around the world (effectively comparing the use and influence of salt around the world) or to have taken more time to discuss why we were rewinding (effectively following one thread to its conclusion and then picking up another parallel one). To me it made the presentation a little too choppy. There have been other criticisms as well; for example, the chemistry is incorrect in a number of places, but if you're using this as a chemical reference, then you've got serious issues with your ability to library research. Of course, that begs the question of what errors are in there that we didn't catch. And it does tend to be a bit repetitive in parts; although, this could have been used to good effect if historical threads had been followed a bit more completely. While I had a few dings on the book, overall I liked it. The fact that I read it end-to-end and enjoyed the last chapter as much as the first is a testament to my general enjoyment of it. It wasn't the best book I read last year, but I'll certainly keep it on my bookshelf. So, back to my original question: does salt merit its own book? Yes, it does, but perhaps in a somewhat shorter form.

Yes, Kurlansky is worth his salt as a writer, researcher and uncoverer of unknown facts about odd subjects. As he did with his previous non fiction books he has woven strands of information into an interesting tapestry, equal parts - enthralling history lesson and cultural voyage. The only problem is - at 450 pages and 26 chapters, with numerous visits to different cultures, countries, eras and rulers in an attempt to cover as many of the 14,000 uses that salt is known for - finishing SALT: A WORLD HISTORY leaves you in a brine of facts, but also very thirsty for a unifying theme or story and a more memorable read. Certainly my knowledge of historical trivia is now seasoned with tidbits such as: the Anglo-Saxon word for saltworks being 'wich' means that places such as Norwich, Greenwich, etc, in England were once ancient salt mines; Ghandi's independence movement in India began with his defying the British salt laws, and the French levied taxes on salt until as recently as 1946. A common theme in Kurlansky's books is that food is seen as a topic of historical interest. Here we learn about the role salt played in preserving cod, whale, ham, herring, caviar, pastrami, salami and sausage, and as it was with COD and THE BASQUE HISTORY OF THE WORLD this book is sprinkled throughout with recipes. Salt is certainly an interesting subject; cultural history buffs will love this book and Kurlansky still has a humorous, easy, and very readable writing style; it's just that he probably could have salted away some of the facts without us missing much and he should have developed a flowing theme rather than one that was so saltatory.

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