



It's a Minefield: A Prejudiced View of the Mining Industry from the Inside

Robert Horn

FriesenPress (Feb 19, 2015)

Softcover \$26.99 (344pp)

978-1-4602-5885-9

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It's a Minefield: A Prejudiced View of the Mining Industry from the Inside, by Robert Horn, presents a geologist's evaluation of the many facets of mining.

For many, mining brings up images of old-timey, backwoods men emerging from the earth covered in soot. This image belies the modern-day prevalence of mining and its intimate ties with daily life. Even more accurate modern portrayals tend to show only one part of the complexity—ecology or human rights or politics—casting a clear right and wrong. But Horn shows a broad view of the industry as a whole—including politics, public image, and economics—and a micro view of daily life in a mine—from technological advances and processes to hazards like pollution, terrorism, and nuclear radiation. The result is a fully nuanced discussion of the ethics of mining.

The subtitle reads like a warning that a rant is coming, but the early pages prove that the book will have much more depth than a tirade. There are poetic epigraphs (a particularly lovely one from Wilfred Owen) and elegant descriptions:

Early morning. A mine head frame, one hundred metres high, with its brilliant, red aircraft-warning lights; a black skeleton against the pale-blue eastern sky. Bright lights shine from a large engine house at the base of the frame, which contains the hoisting equipment with its powerful electric motor.

There are also keen yet simple insights: "Like agriculture, mining goes back to the beginnings of human evolution. We classify our early history of Stone, Bronze, and Iron Ages based upon the products of mines." The tone is welcoming yet academic, inviting people in to learn without presuming they already know what Horn knows. The author's voice guides these learners, over the course of several hundred pages, through the insights Horn has gleaned over many years.

While Horn's decades-long, worldwide experience in the mining and metal exploration industry provides the bulk of the book's content, he doesn't rely solely on his own perception and point of view. It's clear he's a voracious researcher across disciplines. As a result, Horn gives a thorough, intelligent understanding of the mining process and the industry that starts at square one without disrespecting the intelligence of the audience.

While Horn's arguments are open-minded and multifaceted, his conclusions are clear: There is rampant injustice in the mining industry ("Freedom works for the few but comes at the expense of the many") and change is needed ("Either we build more giant mines to provide for more and more humans, or we persuade or coerce people to control their procreation"). The book has clear implications for those in the mining field, but it's also very applicable to a broader audience, from investors to naturalists to activists to anthropologists to politicians at all levels.

It's a Minefield offers deep understanding of an industry of great importance to modern life that few people give much thought.

MELISSA WUSKE (April 14, 2015)

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