

## Book Reviews

### **The Taste of Many Mountains**

Bruce Wydick. 2014. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson. ISBN: 978-1-4016-8992-6. \$15.99 (paper).

*Reviewed by Geri Mason, Seattle Pacific University*

**I**n *The Taste of Many Mountains* Bruce Wydick takes the reader on a dual journey, simultaneously following the story of a young Mayan woman in the midst of the Guatemalan civil war (1983) and a set of young researchers investigating the coffee industry in today's Guatemala. The narrative develops the two stories in parallel, integrating them into a common outcome as the researchers return to the United States to complete their analysis of the coffee supply chain in the retail markets of San Francisco. The bulk of the narrative takes place in rural Guatemala, unfolding in the same region for both the young woman of a generation before and the researchers from the U.S.

This novel is a masterful symphony of the various and relevant economic concepts prevalent in the markets and lives of ordinary people across nations and incomes, making it both an interesting read and a useful teaching tool. Wydick poses tough questions through the characters, questions that will begin conversations among readers seeking answers beyond the book's cover. Themes of these questions include exploitation, the role of hope and aspirations in a person's life, globalization and globalization guilt, the reality of poverty traps, the responsibilities of wealthy market participants, and the overarching question, "What is causing poverty?" These themes harbor both economic and spiritual components, and in many cases represent an integration of the realms of faith and economics. It is important for readers to face these questions on an individual level, in the context of their faith and of their knowledge; the added dimension of creating discussion through reading groups or in classrooms magnifies the importance of this novel and the themes it introduces and grapples with.

The book is particularly significant for Christian economists, both for sparking personal introspection and for integrating faith into a classroom exploration of Wydick's themes. The gospels clearly exhort Christ's followers to serve the poor. Wydick calls the quest for solutions to the problems introduced in the book possibly "the most critical research problem in social science" (p. xv). These issues run deeper than social

science: to steward resources in service to the poor, to oppose injustices, including economic injustice, and to put those with less above our own consumption desires is indeed a part of the core calling of Christians. The ideas in *The Taste of Many Mountains* will push Christians to evaluate how they are acting on these central manifestations of their faith. Wydick challenges the behavior of simply giving money to a good cause to allay guilt; the book clearly calls for sophisticated action on the part of those truly moved by the dichotomy of the poor who cultivate coffee and the privileged who consume it in wealthy economies. As Christians called to act on behalf of the poor, the narrative advocates for thoughtful solutions and a rigorous evaluation of our choices, behavior, and willingness to accept the status quo of poverty in our world. Furthermore, the book pushes the Christian reader to consider the role of the poor in the reader's own spiritual life. The poor coffee farmers are portrayed—to the dismay of the researchers—as having a living and active faith—resulting in joy and faith displayed in the face of poverty and hardship, and acceptance of difficulty without questioning God's purposes or blaming God for their struggles. The Christian reader struggles through these issues alongside the characters mired in poverty, and must reconcile these realities with her own faith and experiences.

As a novel, this work is well-written with clear prose and thoughtful diction. The storyline is both complete and compelling, with enough foreshadowing to put the reader at ease but not so much that the intrigue is lost; the organization provides structure without being predictable. Wydick weaves together a history of the Guatemalan civil war, a particular Mayan community affected by that civil war, and a later generation of researchers from the United States investigating the Guatemalan coffee industry and the impacts of fair trade on the starting point of the supply chain for a multi-billion dollar retail industry: coffee. A note from the author delineates the history and spread of coffee cultivation, beginning with a goat herder and a monk in Ethiopia and following a solitary coffee plant on a French ship across the Atlantic to become the source for Latin American coffee cultivation in 1726. The story line picks up this history at a point when coffee cultivation is well established in Guatemala (and other Latin American countries) in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and follows the coffee beans all the way to a cup in Berkeley in the present.

The constraints and economic realities faced by coffee farmers in Guatemala today are revealed as the researchers interview coffee farm-

ers, discuss their findings, and plan their subsequent research. As they investigate the market for green coffee beans, they come to understand that the idealism of the consumer of fair trade coffee is not translating into benefits for those farmers. One of the student researchers, Alex, begins the research journey idealistic and with an anti-corporate perspective, certain that corporate greed and blindness are responsible for the ills in Guatemala and other developing countries. He firmly believes in Fair Trade as a system and is convinced that paying an extra \$0.50 for his coffee is making a difference for the coffee farmers that grew the beans for his daily coffee.

One of the core questions of both the research project and the narrative is this: Does Fair Trade impact coffee farmers, and does it impact them positively or negatively? One of the primary conclusions of the research team is that the income gains are negligible for the Fair Trade coffee farmer; the higher per pound price paid to the farmer barely covers the extra costs of participating in a Fair Trade program. Although there are some gains in technology transfer and market access, this leads the research team (and the reader with them) to question whether fair trade is a solution to the poverty they see in their field research. The bigger question of what causes poverty compels them to look at multiple facets of the problem, from health and education constraints in Guatemala to the cost of labor and the willingness to pay for a social good in the U.S.

One of the realities uncovered by the research team is that labor values have much more impact on coffee farmers than retail prices in U.S. coffee shops. Chapter 13 explains that the availability of jobs, the ability of the coffee farmer to diversify his/her income sources, and the opportunity cost of labor locally all have far greater impact on the profitability of coffee farming. This is true in all contexts, not just rural Guatemala. The project concludes that most of the profit gains from the Fair Trade system accrue to roasters and retailers that operate in markets with the highest labor costs.

At one point in the book (Chapter 19), the team visits a microfinance project led by another researcher. Microfinance provides financial capital for entrepreneurs, allowing them to diversify their income sources and create jobs by hiring their neighbors and community members. Such non-coffee-enterprise development, even at the micro level, may increase the value of labor eventually, creating an incentive for surplus labor to leave the coffee farming industry for more lucrative prospects.

As noted by the market intermediary for the Fair Trade organization *TransFair* with which the team is working, “the best thing that could happen to all coffee growers would be for there to be fewer of them and less coffee” (p. 184). A decrease in the supply of coffee (even due a natural disaster, as explained in Chapter 18) is the best thing that could happen to coffee producers in terms of the price they receive for their product. Microfinance is creating incentives for this outcome, by providing the financial capital necessary for coffee farmers and others to expand into new forms of income generation.

Microfinance and employment creation, and the income gains that result, are crucial to addressing the problems of child labor and low education levels that the team encounters in their visits to various coffee plantations. Still connected to the low value of labor in Guatemala, families elect to have their children work rather than attend school in order to supplement the family income. In many of the cases encountered by the researchers, the children work on the family farm alongside their family members, but the issue of child labor in factories and sweatshop labor is eventually debated (in Chapter 29). The impacts of banning multinational companies that pay extremely low wages are balanced against the implicit conclusion that people accepting these conditions have no better option—to deny them the work will drive them into an even worse situation. While the context is not completely analogous to coffee farming, the value of labor and the need for enterprise and employment creation emerges as a theme, and counters the more idealistic solutions of banning economic activity and controlling prices. Fair Trade falls under such blanket solutions, and the realities of the market cause the gains to accrue where bargaining power and labor costs are highest (roasting and retail), not where the gains are most needed (the coffee farmers). By the end of the narrative, even idealistic Alex recognizes that extreme attempts to control the market not working, and that “in some cases imposing simplistic solutions could make matters worse” (p. 256).

While integrating economics throughout, the book never reads like an economics text. Much of the disciplinary jargon is left aside for simple and straightforward explanations of the situations, markets, and systems. Even the statistical analysis presented by the researchers in the latter part of the novel is integrated into the narrative flow and explained without the confines of much statistical language. Concepts from opportunity cost to development theory (and much in between) are present through-

out, while not explicitly named or explained. This makes the novel ideal for student exploration and discovery of these concepts in an intriguing and relevant context.

Wydick leaves some questions unanswered in the end, inviting the reader to confront the questions of poverty, its causes, and our role in it on his own terms. This is a valuable contribution by the novel to the thought and discourse of the reader. The author doesn't demonize any one group, but invites careful interrogation of the ideas and realities presented through the narrative. Another major theme that emerges from the narrative is that ignorance is the true enemy. Thoughtless implementation and ideology are no substitutes for the meticulous analysis and design of development interventions. An understanding of the causes of poverty is essential before anything can be done to have a lasting effect in combatting it.

The novel provides an excellent opportunity for use in a classroom setting. Class discussion around basic economic concepts can be framed by the narrative. Wydick subtly embeds the most basic lessons in economics within the narrative. Beyond these, discussions of development theory, agricultural economics, gender issues, labor and human capital, migration, microfinance, international trade, game theory, price floors, fair trade, intentions, and markets are all embedded into the context, conversations, and narratives of the novel. The questions the novel leaves unanswered are perhaps the most useful of all in a classroom setting. A discussion, or an entire case study, can be designed around different ideas introduced in *The Taste of Many Mountains*. While leaving readers to contemplate significant questions, Wydick does not leave them wandering aimlessly. References are provided for each chapter (pp. 289–294), and the topics of trade, fair trade, globalization, and the history of coffee cultivation are particularly well covered. For any economic concept or issue raised, Wydick offers at least one solid reference to begin to enhance the reader's understanding. Sources include original research as well as summative publications, and are useful for independent exploration as well as structured engagement by a class or reading group.

For instance, the exploration of alternative solutions to the poverty of coffee farmers in Guatemala would make an excellent discussion topic. At one point midway through the story one of the researchers suggests that "Perhaps the best development programs for coffee growers might not involve coffee at all" (p. 184). The discussion involves the prisoners'

dilemma, a well-known component of game theory that is introduced in many principles textbooks. In this context, the novel can be used to stimulate classroom discussion and a paradigm shift in how to look at a problem and its connection to a larger system, using game theory and the circumstances introduced in the narrative.

While the connection to discussion of development challenges and concepts may be readily apparent, the context of the novel can also be used to fuel discussion around household behavior in the United States and other wealthy nations. According to another of the characters, “the reasons people give to the poor are mostly unrelated to what actually helps” (p. 273). This idea invites discussion of consumer and household behavior, the not-for-profit sector and fundraising challenges, intrinsic motivations for giving, and the trade-offs between altruism and self-interest inherent in economic discussions of markets.

The economic context of the novel may be taken even further in the classroom. A case study requiring students to identify the key issue(s) and propose a solution, or an analysis of fair trade in another market, would be interesting applications for more advanced students. Whether one thinks of a case study or of classroom / reading group discussion, a pedagogical setup is present in *The Taste of Many Mountains*. The detail of the story line, the economic concepts embedded within it, and the tight weave that holds it all together make it an ideal starting point for an individual seeking to encounter larger questions about poverty. Furthermore, the probing questions, and the absence of answers to some of the most important questions, are excellent catalysts for informal and formal group discussions. The intertwining stories continually steer the reader back into the complexity of poverty, and resound with the importance of well-informed decision-making and policy design in the face of the most important questions: What causes poverty, and what can be done about it? ■