

Goodell, Jeff. (2006). *Big Coal: The Dirty Secret Behind America's Energy Future*. New York: Houghton Mifflin. ISBN 0618319409. 352 pgs.

Reviewed by Isaac Songik, April 2007

Author Jeff Goodell offers an amazing overview of coal's past, present and future role in human affairs, focusing closely on the environmental, health and safety impacts of coal mining in America. *"Big Coal has thrived largely because the costs of air pollution, miners' safety, devastated mountains, and global warming are invisible to us as consumers of electricity," he argues.*

He emphasizes the historical development that led to reliance on coal, acknowledges its crucial role in modern economics, and clearly respects workers who work in the coal-related industries. Goodell makes it clear that he is not simply writing about the coal mining industry. He explains in the introduction that he uses the phrase "Big Coal" as "shorthand for the reliance of coal mining companies, coal-burning utilities, railroads, lobbying groups, and industry supporters that make the coal industry such a political force in America.

The book is not simply a work of energy politics, however. Rather, it presents clear political and economic analysis, historical background, technical and scientific discussion, and portrayals of the lives of people who work in, or are otherwise affected by, coal and its use.

The book is divided into three sections of roughly equal length. The first, "The Dig," deals with coal mining and transportation. The second, "The Burn," focuses on electric utilities use of coal. The third, "The heat," is about coal's huge and growing role

in global warming. While the book is mainly about US, a final chapter in the global warming section deals with the expanding use of coal in China.

For all readers, 'Big Coal' provides useful subject whose importance will certainly grow in the years ahead. At the end of this book, he recognizes that coal will continue to be mined and burned for many years to come but urges a dedicated effort to use it wisely while hastening the move towards alternatives. He concludes in the epilogue, titled "Empire of Denial:"

In the coming decades, the great danger is not that the world will burn more coal- that's a given- but that we will burn it badly, cheaply, exploitatively.