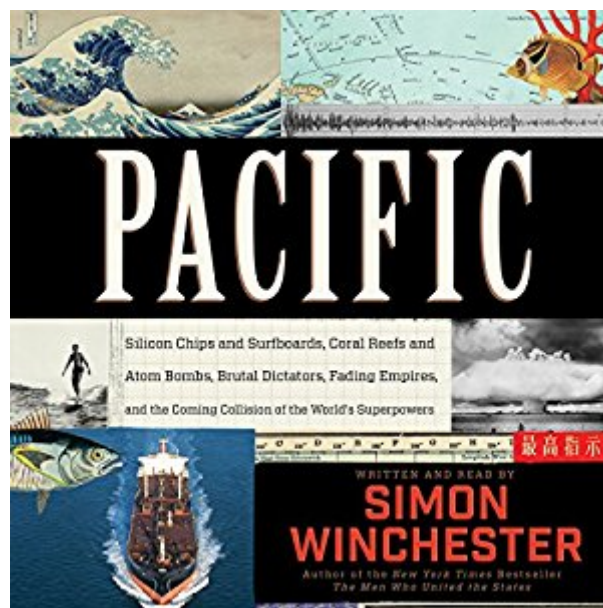


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Pacific: Silicon Chips And Surfboards, Coral Reefs And Atom Bombs, Brutal Dictators, Fading Empires, And The Coming Collision Of The World's Superpowers



Synopsis

Following his acclaimed *Atlantic* and *The Men Who United the States*, New York Times best-selling author Simon Winchester offers an enthralling biography of the Pacific Ocean and its role in the modern world, exploring our relationship with this imposing force of nature. As the Mediterranean shaped the classical world and the Atlantic connected Europe to the New World, the Pacific Ocean defines our tomorrow. With China on the rise, so, too, are the American cities of the West Coast, including Seattle, San Francisco, and the long cluster of towns down the Silicon Valley. Today the Pacific is ascendant. Its geological history has long transformed us - tremendous earthquakes, volcanoes, and tsunamis - but its human history, from a Western perspective, is quite young, beginning with Magellan's 16th-century circumnavigation. It is a natural wonder whose most fascinating history is currently being made. In telling the story of the Pacific, Simon Winchester takes us from the Bering Strait to Cape Horn, from the Yangtze River to the Panama Canal, and to the many small islands and archipelagos that lie in between. He observes the fall of a dictator in Manila, visits aboriginals in Northern Queensland, and is jailed in Tierra del Fuego, the land at the end of the world. His journey encompasses a trip down the Alaska Highway, a stop at the isolated Pitcairn Islands, a trek across South Korea, and a glimpse of its mysterious northern neighbor. Winchester's personal experience is vast and his storytelling second to none. And his historical understanding of the region is formidable, making *Pacific* a paean to this magnificent sea of beauty, myth, and imagination that is transforming our lives.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Let me start by saying that this is Winchester's best book. As in all his books (at least the four I have read) this means a story well told, thoroughly researched and informed by extensive personal experience traveling in the places he writes about. Now, I need to add that some, perhaps many readers, will be puzzled by the structure of the book and by its tone. His chapter on American treatment of Pacific islanders is one that should shame Americans, but may rile some readers because of its rather anti-American policy tone (but not fundamentally anti-American; do remember he is British). The book also powerfully evokes change, in particular what academics might term a loss of hegemony--the French loss of Indochina, the British retreat from Asia, the rise of Chinese power sufficient to challenge the United States. The book is also hopeful of the growth of respect and understanding (the last few pages articulates this sense, using the story of the Hawai'ian ocean-going canoe Hokole'a. The book is somewhat chronologic, but the intent is to give a sense of complexity and interconnection, because a literal history would be at minimum several volumes. Winchester covers history rather well in a backstory sense, but the book starts with January 1, 1950. This is the defined date for the "present," in the sense that a date of say 3,000 BP now means 3,000 years before 1950. The chapters start with short historical or human stories and segue into larger topics. For example, Chapter 10 starts with the eruption of Mt Pinutubo in the Philippines, destroying two major US bases, then segues into another volcano, growing Chinese economic and military strength, including the extremely effective Chinese strategies now unfolding in the seas adjacent to and extending from China's coast.

Simon Winchester's "Pacific: Silicon Chips and Surfboards, Coral Reefs and Atom Bombs, Brutal Dictators, Fading Empires, and the Coming Collision of the World's Superpowers" signals via its title that this companion book is radically different from the same author's book on the Atlantic Ocean. That earlier study, published in 2010, opened hundreds of million years ago with the formation of the world's oceans and continents, the first movement of ancient man down to life by the seashore, and the early navigation of blue waters. In contrast, as Winchester explains in an author's note, the start line for "Pacific" is 1 January 1950, the dawn of the thermonuclear age and the first of ten events chosen for the subject matter of the book's ten chapters. As is typical in Winchester's books, "Pacific" benefits from fine, and occasionally even poetic, prose. Its organization, however, is more than a bit puzzling, for creating a list of ten events provides no guarantee of thematic relevance. In this case, the book moves back and forth from a concentration on the ocean itself and countries that sometimes just happen to be located in the Pacific basin. In "Atlantic," Winchester's organizing

theme was Shakespeare's Seven Ages of Man, which paralleled the book's chronological flow and mankind's progressive mastery of the Atlantic. Less successful is Winchester's use here of the event-driven hook which gives the impression that "Pacific" is a compilation of ten separately conceived and delivered lectures. Chapter 1 addresses the thermonuclear age, but then follow a study of Japan's development of radio technology and the pleasures of a laid-back lifestyle in Hawaii.

Simon Winchester is the prolific polymath whose books include *THE PROFESSOR AND THE MADMAN*, *KRAKATOA* and *THE MEN WHO UNITED THE STATES*. In *PACIFIC*, he tackles a gargantuan subject --- 64 million square miles of it --- in the period between 1950 and 2014. He chose the first date because before January 1, 1950 the atmosphere was radiochemically pure, but after that it was sullied as a result of the massive numbers of nuclear tests conducted in the area beginning in 1945. That date is now known as BP, or Before Present. The end date, he admits, was when his manuscript was due. If that seems arbitrary, so do many of his choices. This will frustrate some readers and delight others, but his fascination with so many topics, all of which are handled deftly and often with personal anecdotes (has the man been everywhere?), won this reader over. Winchester's rationale for tackling the history of an expanse of water in this timeframe is that, with the rise of Asia and the importance of what transpires between the east and west, "The future, in short, is what the Pacific Ocean is coming to symbolize." A recent book by Bill Bryson, *ONE SUMMER: America, 1927*, tells the social history of the U.S. in the early 20th century through that brief time lens. Not everything began or ended then, but a nice epilogue satisfied the reader's curiosity about people and events described in the book. Winchester has trouble sticking to his 65-year time frame, and his claim that he is focusing on 10 singular events is also a bit of a stretch.

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