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Casting Copper as a Villain

An overly impressionistic look at the metal on which the modern world is built.

By MARC LEVINSON

It all began in summer school, the year after I finished the sixth grade. At a junior high school near my home, I and perhaps 20 other kids spent every morning in front of manual typewriters learning what was called "touch typing." Over and over, we practiced "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog," a phrase famed, back in those days, for using every letter in the alphabet. With our eyes on a book—never on the keyboard—we typed paragraphs or even entire pages while the teacher kept time, then counted up how many words we had typed in five minutes and how many errors we had made. My willingness to endure such rigors, I suppose, tells you that even back then I had it in my mind to be a writer.

Did you need to know this? Does a snippet of an author's personal story really help you understand and interpret the author's words? Does it make you more interested in what the author writes? Apparently publishers think so, for they keep pumping out nonfiction books that, whatever the ostensible subject, are light on serious research and heavy on Me. This is a regrettable trend on two counts. It conflates experience with understanding, as if dropping by for a visit or meeting a local were all it took to become an expert. And it produces books as ephemeral as magazine articles, hardly worth keeping on the shelf.

Boom, Bust, Boom

By Bill Carter

Scribner, 273 pages, \$26

Bill Carter's "Boom, Bust, Boom" is, according to its subtitle, "a story about copper, the metal that runs the world." But open to any one of its 248 pages and the chances are two in three that you'll come upon the word "I," used in reference to the author. The story of the copper industry could be an epic—it is truly the metal on which the modern world is built. But Mr. Carter is less interested in telling us the truth about copper than in telling us about his search for the truth about copper.

The story begins at Mr. Carter's home in Bisbee, Ariz. Back in the day, Bisbee was a great mining center; the Copper Queen, first worked in 1878, yielded millions of tons of copper and hundreds of millions of tons of ore



Peter Ginter/Science Faction/Corbis

Molten copper being refined at a mine in the Atacama Desert of Chile.

before it closed in 1975. Waste from the mines was used to level the sites for houses, and arsenic, lead and copper emitted by a smelter rained on the town for decades. When the mine's current owner, Freeport-McMoRan Copper & Gold, had the soil from the Carters' yard tested, the results showed dangerous levels of arsenic and lead. While Freeport's contractor replaced their tainted dirt, Mr. Carter and his wife debated whether Bisbee was a safe place to raise their daughters.

Face to face with environmental risk, Mr. Carter determined to learn more about copper. He quickly stumbled upon a paradox: Copper mining may be an environmental disaster, leaving behind mountains of waste laced with heavy metals and polluting rivers with the remains of the chemicals used to separate copper from ore, but it is also an environmental necessity. The technologies on which a clean and healthy world depends, from plumbing to electric cars, depend overwhelmingly on copper. Copper's malleability and the fact that it will not rust make it the material of choice for water pipes, and no other relatively inexpensive material conducts electricity as well. Your

computer, your telephone and your car radio would not function without it.

This sounds like the raw material for a fascinating book. Unfortunately, Mr. Carter, a journalist for magazines like *Rolling Stone* and *Outside*, chooses to pursue it as a reporter chasing an adventure story. He shoots pool with a miner in a company town; has his car towed by a man who once drove a truck in a mine; eats chorizo and tortillas with striking miners in Cananea, in northern Mexico; and sits in front of computer screens with a hyperactive futures trader in New York. He flies to Alaska, where he once spent summers as a commercial fisherman, to take us inside an angry dispute over a proposed copper mine that could decimate a salmon fishery. He visits Superior, Ariz., where a drunken retired miner offers his opinion about plans by two huge foreign companies to build a mine at a place called Oak Flats. His research leads to the conclusion that we are stuck, satiating our need for copper at a high price in terms of health, the environment and the welfare of the communities where it is mined.

Mr. Carter is clearly a sociable soul who enjoys finding colorful characters to populate his story. But while his impressionistic I-was-there journalism makes for good reading, it is far less satisfactory as the basis for a business book. The author shies away from the documentary research that might have allowed him to weave his interviews into an authoritative discussion of the copper industry. The bibliography includes plenty of news articles extracted from the Internet but lists few printed sources and almost no scholarly literature. Mr. Carter does not seem to have spent much time in the library, and he isn't concerned with what others have written about his subject. "Boom, Bust, Boom" is the equivalent of a military history written after shooting the breeze with the guys down at the VFW: While such interchanges might provide anecdotes about life at the front, adding interviews with generals and defense ministers and scavenging in the archives might yield a richer, more credible story.

There's nothing wrong with firsthand reporting. Many of the best nonfiction books being published today rely heavily on interviews—see Katherine Boo's "Behind the Beautiful Forevers" or George Dyson's recent history of computing, "Turing's Cathedral"—and Robert Caro, in researching the life of Lyndon Johnson, seems to have traveled everywhere the former president set foot. But skillful authors understand the dangers of simply spilling their reporter's notebooks onto the printed page. Reporting alone is rarely enough to carry a full-length book.

Freeport is rumored to be reopening the old mine in Bisbee. As the book concludes, Mr. Carter and his wife move their family north to Flagstaff, having decided that the health risks from being in copper country outweigh the other pleasures of living in Bisbee. Some readers might care. Those who want to know less about the Carters and more about copper are likely to feel shortchanged.

—Mr. Levinson's "The Great A&P and the Struggle for Small Business in America" is just out in paperback.

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