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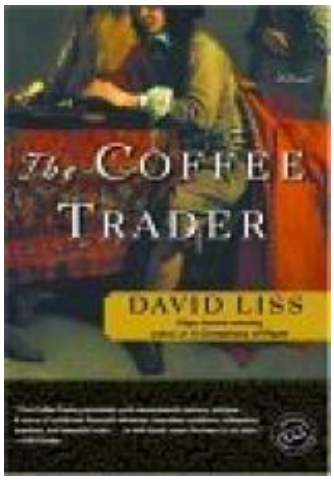
The Coffee Trader

by David Liss



About the Book

Amsterdam, 1659: On the world's first commodities exchange, fortunes are won and lost in an instant. Miguel Lienzo, a sharp-witted trader in the city's close-knit community of Portuguese Jews, knows this only too well. Once among the city's most envied merchants, Miguel has suddenly lost everything. Now, impoverished and humiliated, living in his younger brother's canal-flooded basement, Miguel must find a way to restore his wealth and reputation.

Miguel enters into a partnership with a seductive Dutchwoman who offers him one last chance at success?a daring plot to corner the market of an astonishing new commodity called "coffee." To succeed, Miguel must risk everything he values and face a powerful enemy who will stop at nothing to see him ruined. Miguel will learn that among Amsterdam's ruthless businessmen, betrayal lurks everywhere, and even friends hide secret agendas.

Discussion Guide

1. The Coffee Trader is a novel in which moral, ethical, and emotional choices are often bound up with monetary and financial choices. How do financial dealings shape or define character? Does this novel suggest a relationship between financial dealings and morality?

2. Miguel, the novel's central character, often makes some questionable choices even though he regards himself as essentially honest and upstanding. Do you think he is a good person or a bad person? Why do you think so? What about Geertruid?

3. Given the degree to which **The Coffee Trader** depicts merchants tricking and deceiving one another, do you think trade on the Amsterdam Exchange inherently deceptive, or is it simply trade in which some people choose to behave deceptively? How do the activities on the Exchange influence the lives of traders when they are off the Exchange? Can merchants effectively rope off financial deception as one aspect of their lives and behave ethically elsewhere?

4. How does the setting of this novel?Amsterdam and its various communities and locales?affect the novel? How does the setting influence the events, the characters? Is the setting familiar or alien to you? In what ways are the lives of people in seventeenthcentury Amsterdam familiar to you, and in what ways are they unlike people today? What surprised you most about the way people lived?

5. There are a number of people in **The Coffee Trader** who are out to harm Miguel, or at the very least trick and manipulate him toward their own ends. Given that virtually no one is truly trustworthy, do you think that this novel has a central villain? Who? How should villainy be defined?

6. Is Hannah a modern character in a pre-modern situation, or do you think her view of herself, the world, and her options are rooted in a particularly seventeenth-century perspective? What exactly are her goals? How would a contemporary woman in her situation respond?

7. Discuss the role of the Ma'amad in Amsterdam's Jewish community. What is the relationship between the Ma'amad and the Inquisition in Portugal?

8. In his interview, the author mentions that this book was originally going to center on chocolate instead of coffee. How do you think it would have been different if chocolate had remained at the center?

9. Discuss Miguel's commitment to religious observance. What motivates his devotion? Do you think of him as being particularly religious? Does his attachment to worship and the Jewish community affect how you feel about him?

10. Reviewers have called this novel a thriller, though it lacks many of the traditional characteristics of one?no one gets killed, people are rarely placed in physical danger. Is this novel a thriller? How does it work to keep the reader anxious about the fates of the characters?

11. Discuss the novel's ending. Why do you believe the author made the choices he did in the various resolutions of the plot threads? Do these characters get what they deserve? Why or why not?

12. How is the kind of financial deception in **The Coffee Trader** like or unlike what we see in our own times? Is what happens on the Amsterdam Exchange similar to scandals like Enron or World- Com? Is the difference just a matter of scale?

Author Bio

David Liss is the author of THE WHISKEY REBELS, THE ETHICAL ASSASSIN, A SPECTACLE OF CORRUPTION, THE COFFEE TRADER and A CONSPIRACY OF PAPER. He is also winner of the Edgar Award for Best First Novel. He lives in San Antonio with his wife and children.

Critical Praise

"UNUSUAL AND DIVERTING . . . Sometimes, as the book demonstrates with a nice twist, sincerity can be the greatest means of deception."

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