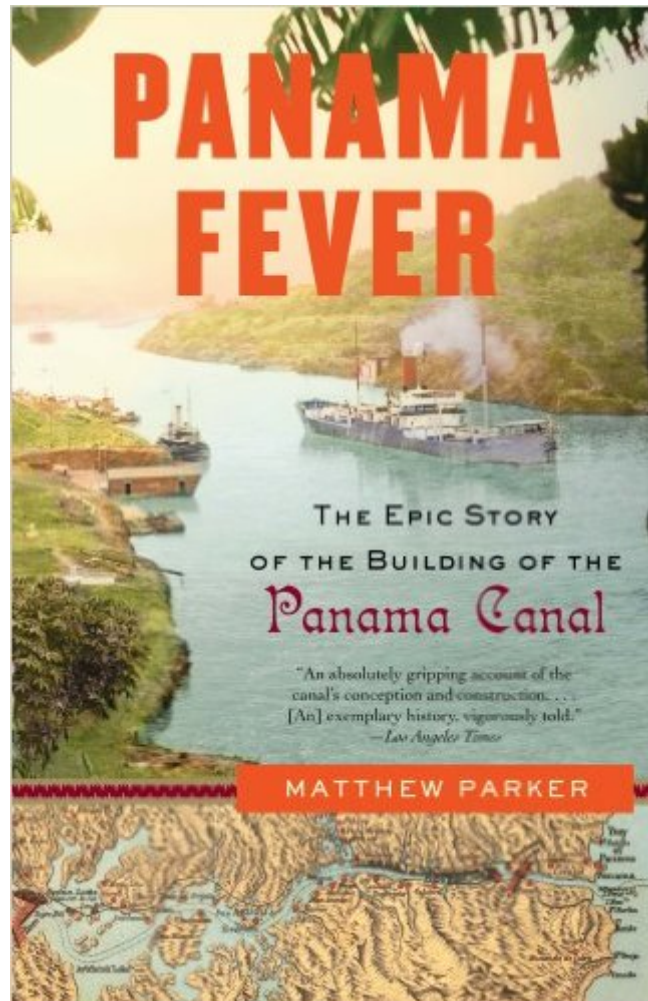


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Panama Fever: The Epic Story Of The Building Of The Panama Canal



Synopsis

The Panama Canal was the costliest undertaking in history; its completion in 1914 marked the beginning of the "American Century." • Panama Fever draws on contemporary accounts, bringing the experience of those who built the canal vividly to life. Politicians engaged in high-stakes diplomacy in order to influence its construction. Meanwhile, engineers and workers from around the world rushed to take advantage of high wages and the chance to be a part of history. Filled with remarkable characters, Panama Fever is an epic history that shows how a small, fiercely contested strip of land made the world a smaller place and launched the era of American global dominance.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I have to admit I really enjoyed this one. I know this because I couldn't put it down and even stayed up late on some nights to read it. And, keep in mind, I did this despite the fact I've read a wide variety of books on the Panama Canal, and some obscure historical studies, because of a personal interest driven by my nearly eight years living in Panama courtesy of three tours with the US Army. Parker's book is a great companion to "A Path Between the Seas." (Which I also seriously recommend.) What makes "Panama Fever" so interesting is that it's a history told through the eyes of the people that created and built it. Parker draws heavily on letters, diaries, and interviews to tell a very personal history of how it was built. These real-life "characters" draw you into the book and make you care as much as they did about building the Panama Canal. These days we take it for granted; but given the obstacles (engineering and medical) that had to be overcome you can begin

to appreciate the dedication these people had -- from the engineers to the unskilled laborers. And what a massive undertaking it was. The book does not shy away from the negative; the thousands that died due to disease and industrial accidents -- at a rate we cannot begin to comprehend in today's safety-conscious world; or the racism of that era that underlay the structure of work and benefits. Or the sheer hardships imposed on the early builders; even in the early years of the American effort. "Panama Fever" also seriously addresses the French efforts in the late 1800s; this makes up almost half of the book. Unlike some that treat the French effort as background to the American's success, Parker spends time talking about how the French effort evolved and why it failed.

There are a lot of books out there that describe the epic building of the Panama Canal 100 years ago, but most of them focus on facts, the engineers, have lots of pictures or are in fact straight historical works. If you want to only focus on the tremendous history and effort that went into the construction you should read David McCullough's *The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal 1870-1914*. *Panama Fever* is different. It does cover the basic facts of the building of the Canal, but rather than focusing on the timeline, facts, medical, and engineering feats, *Panama Fever* focuses more on the workers who toiled behind the scenes in this great endeavor. Tens of thousands of normal people worked on the construction of the Panama Canal. They came from the United States and many of the Caribbean Islands. The pay was good, the work was hard and especially in the beginning the risks from disease were huge. Thousands died during the construction from both disease and accidents. I grew up and worked in the Panama Canal Zone from 1947 to 1972. I loved my time there and have a large collection of historic books on Panama most of which I have read. *Panama Fever* is the first book, especially published recently, that covers the stories of the workers rather than the engineering. It is fascinating and well worth the read. You will appreciate the tremendous effort and sacrifices made by the workers on the line during the construction and next time you take a cruise through the Canal have a much deeper understanding of how difficult it was to actually build the Canal.

"Panama Fever" emphasizes more of the human tragedy in building the Canal than David McCullough's *"The Path Between The Seas"*. By human tragedy I mean death and injury in the thousands due to diseases and accidents. Another reviewer also noted this human tragedy. But David McCullough deals with this issue also. "Panama Fever" relates much more than David McCullough of the feelings via the writings of the lowest paid laborers, who were overwhelmingly

West Indians. David McCullough discusses the US congressional hearings and the two lobbyists, William Nelson Cromwell and Philippe Bunau-Varilla, more than "Panama Fever" does. Both books are very good. There is a lot of overlap in these two books. Both authors point out the racism that took place during the construction of the Panama Canal. "Panama Fever" deals with this issue more than "The Path Between The Seas." The greatness of constructing the Panama Canal is reduced by the poverty of the West Indian workers and the unfairness shown to the West Indians because they were dark skinned. The Americans were treated much better (they were fed much better) than the West Indians. This reflected in the much lower mortality rates for the Americans versus the West Indians. I am somewhat surprised that Doubleday, the publisher of "Panama Fever" agreed to issue this book after David McCullough's success in writing "The Path Between The Seas." Matthew Parker refers to "The Path Between The Seas" in several or more endnotes. If I had to choose one I would read "Panama Fever". "Panama Fever" is somewhat shorter with slightly larger print (I read a hardcover copy from the library) than David McCullough's book (I read a used softcover copy I purchased from .com).

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