



Sweets: A History of Candy

Tim Richardson

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In *Sweets*, Tim Richardson takes us on a magical confectionery tour, letting his personal passion fuel the narrative of candy's rich and unusual history. Beginning with a description of the biology of sweetness itself, Richardson navigates the ancient history of sweets, the incredible range and diversity of candies worldwide, the bizarre figures and practices of the confectionery industry, and the connection between food and sex. He goes on to explore the role of sweets in myth and folklore and, finally, offers a personal philosophy of continual sweet-eating based on the writings of Epicurus.

A delicious blend of anecdote, history, and investigative reporting, *Sweets* is the perfect gift for anyone who loves candy.

Sweets: A History of Candy Details

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Author : Tim Richardson

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John says

More of a global focus than (the American) "Candyfreak" - gets kind of bogged down in historical detail, but rallies at the end for a view of "sweets around the world".

^ says

I love both making sweets, especially toffee, fudges, flavoured fondant creams (esp. chocolate coated), and Edinburgh rock; but I struggled with this disappointing history. Maybe a sweet of the past elicits only sadness of that which is gone forever; so the only good sweet is a confection of the present?

I suspect too that chocolate is a very personal taste. Like fine wine, somebody else's tasting notes on chocolate are utterly useless to me, because we clearly do not share the same childhood conditioning to the product of the cocoa bean, the same taste buds and sense of smell, or the same exposure to well-tempered chocolate by generous aunts, uncles, and grandparents?

What, exactly, am I expected to do with information such as "One study claims that the release mechanism for phenylalanine is faulty in some people, and that a chocolate binge can redress an imbalance of emotion." That sounds too much like psychobabble to me; rather than a wheeze to get a National Health Service prescription for a weekly bar of Suchard. But who knows, maybe in the next game I play of Trivial Pursuit (provided I can find anyone else to play it with), I shall be grateful for the knowledge that a Lady Leicester in the eighteenth century had her own recipe for Hollow Gumballs. Sounds like a dental nightmare, doesn't it?

My difficulty with this book is that Mr Richardson takes what is on the surface an interesting subject and then tries, unsuccessfully to my mind, to knit together any and every conceivable morsel of dry and useless information and written opinion on the subject. I don't doubt that the author has extensively researched his subject; his bibliography contributes firm evidence of that; but like riding a horse or swimming a lake in winter, sharing and eating sweets is an enjoyable activity best carried out hedonistically, and definitely without too much thought and analysis.

April says

I picked this up at a library book sale and was very pleasantly surprised. I love the author's wit and humor. I found myself laughing a lot. There was just enough detail without it being overdone and boring. He covers the very beginning of candy or "sweets" 100's of years ago, right through to the present day. He covers sweets from almost every continent in detail including some bakery-type sweets.

Because the author is British, he wrote a lot about British candies (rhubarb and custards, rock, etc.), a lot of which I've never heard of, but now I'm curious to try.

He also addresses the origins of chocolate and the chocolate industry in the present day. One topic that I wasn't expecting is the fact that slavery was/is used in chocolate growing and harvesting overseas. A lot of the slaves are children, which is terrible. I had never heard that before and I was shocked and saddened.

I learned a lot of things that I didn't know about candy/chocolate in America: Milky Way was the very first candy bar created in the world, and it was invented in the US. The Kit Kat bar was invented in England not the US as most believe (myself included). How the M&M name was invented. I could go on and on. He wrote a depth about the Hershey company and the big strike that they had in the last century which sounds brutal.

I was surprised to learn that the author doesn't really love chocolate, which surprised me. To each his own but I don't understand how you can be that into sweets in general (he is VERY into his candy) and not love chocolate.

The author could have neglected to add in the little part about him doing drugs. That was of out-of-the-blue and unnecessary. He was talking about how illegal drugs today are given candy-like names, but I really didn't want to know about his own sordid past.

The author asserts that there is no scientific evidence to prove that sugar is bad for the body (except for rotting the teeth). Now, the book was written 10 years ago, but seriously, we all know that sugar isn't good for us. He seems to want to back up his own candy eating habits by proclaiming that sugar isn't bad for you (as long as you have good dental hygiene), that it makes you happy and helps friendships along. Nice theory, but sadly lacking in truth. Unfortunately (or fortunately?) reading this book made me want to eat more candy and chocolate.

I think I want his job as a International Confectionery Historian, especially the taste testing part.

Richard Howard says

This is a charming read, packed full of information. Sometimes the author's enthusiasm for his subject results in an excess of detail, which led me to skim-read some chapters but I was never bored.

Deborah J. says

First of all, in spite of the fact that I don't eat too many sweets anymore, and I have a low physical tolerance of sugar, I am very envious of the the journey Tim Richardson had taken to 'research and test' - and later write about - sweets.

I had originally bought the book thinking it was the history of sugar, or maybe even desserts, but it's actually about what we Americans refer to as 'candy'. Nevertheless, in spite of my weak relationship with sweets, I found the topic interesting enough to buy a book about.

I got enough info about it to look at a candy or chocolate display differently, next time I see one.

My interest REALLY peaked once I got to the 11th chapter - the last one - about the different sweets all over

the world. (I would have preferred to read a book based on the theme of this chapter alone, but still got quite a bit out of this one.) He did his best to cover most of the globe, and it was surprised to find out how Indian sweets bowled him over. I'm very curious to try those!

I found that last chapter so interesting that I plan to seek out the different sweets in the countries that I travel to and sample a bit of at least two varieties.

The book also basically gave me a bit more information on a question that had always been popping up in my mind: Why are almonds so prominent in desserts and sweets all over the world?

I still would like to find a book about the mighty almond.

I'm glad I finally read it. It had been sitting in my bookshelf for five years!

Sarah says

I am a candy store owner, and as such, I try to read at least one candy-themed book a year. This was my candy book for 2013. I was a bit wary, due to some of the more negative/critical reviews here, and I recall (but can't specifically find) a less than glowing mention on The Candy Blog. However, I did not realize until I physically had the book in hand, that the author was British. His candy world view is therefore a bit different from we Americans'. I did not notice a problem with commas, or lack thereof, as mentioned by another reviewer, but I was bothered by Robinson's overuse of the word "nice." As in things tasting nice. That is not something Americans typically, or maybe ever, say. We say things taste good. "Nice" has a connotation of sarcasm or belittlement. I was also annoyed by Robinson's use of "sweetie" for candy or sweet, and he uses "sweet" and "sweetie" interchangeably, even in the same sentence a few times. Another was the "Lucky Dip," the author's name for the little bonus bits of information about different types of candy at the end of each chapter. If someone British can explain how that makes sense here, please do.

I am sorry to say that I was rather bored with this book. I am most interested in the last 100 years or so of candy history, and that is not the focus of this book, which mainly covers pre-history through the early 1900s. But that's not why it was boring. Instead of being captivating to read, it read more like a text book or a series of encyclopedia entries than a book one would read for fun and entertainment. The author makes some attempts at humor: "munchurian candying candidate" (351) was pretty bad. Others are actually funny, but not enough to redeem the whole work, and there some phrases that I just didn't get, which I will blame on them being lost in the cultural translation. I am rating it a 3, not because I can really say I liked it, but I give the writing and presentation a 2, and the sheer amount of research (the bibliography is the longest I've ever seen at over 4 pages) a 4, averaging a 3. I don't like the book, and I was glad to be done with it, but I respect it, and the staggering amount of work that must have gone into it.

For a more amusing and entertaining look into American candy, I highly recommend Steve Almond's *Candyfreak: A Journey through the Chocolate Underbelly of America*

Rory says

This was..dare I say...kinda boring. And way too British for an American candy-lover (candy's something that, if you love it, you also love the vocabulary of it...and you want the cultural details to match up!).

Brandy says

If I retain even half the information in this book, I'd be surprised. He spends a long time on the history of the sugar trade and the early uses of it, which gets a little dry and repetitive, but then it picks up again once he starts getting into the chronology of candy.

Biggest quibbles: how impressed the author was with himself (how many times did he refer to himself as an "international confectionery historian"?), and the lack of serial commas. I understand that this book was published in England, where their laws of punctuation are apparently more lax than here, but his lack of serial commas led to a number of sentences of the "I'd like to thank my parents, Ayn Rand and God" type (not to mention lists that were strung together as "X, y and z and a and b").

It hardly seems fair to downgrade his rating based on a style point on which his country and I disagree, but it's my rating and I can. Though his "I'm so important; I'm the only international confectionery historian in all the world" irked me, too. But his information was good. 3.5 stars, if I could.

Aaron Fust says

Sweets: A History of Candy was an educational and entertaining nonfiction work about, and also written by, Tim Richardson, a so-called candy connoisseur, who traveled around the world and explored the origin of candy. Richardson starts by examining sweets at the molecular level and what makes them appealing to people. In addition to this, there is also an uncovering of where and when candy originated, the differences in candies throughout the world, and how distinct candies became popular. Then the book is wrapped up by a psychological connection between candy and happiness, along with a personal anecdote.

"Finally, there is friendship. Sweets are made for sharing, and they can be used to shore up relationships or make new friends. With sweets, you can quickly and easily improve other people's lives, as well as your own."(page 326) This quote embodies the motive for writing the book. It explains why Tim Richardson wrote this; to gather and share knowledge on some of the simplest yet impacting molecules of sugar in world. Similarly, the book is about a history of something that most people would never care to imagine, yet it gives insight into human nature and candy's impact on society. It is a roller coaster through candy's own universe and its overly complex and secretive society. After reading Sweets I like that the author started from the beginning of sugar-made goods, not necessarily classified as "candy". This showed me the origin and ideas that created what I now find in vending machines and grocery aisles across the world. In contrast to that, something I did not like was that the author focused a lot more on European and Asian sweets, and I feel that this neglected modern candy development in North America. In general, people who have an intense enjoyment for candy or its culture would be ideal to read this book because it opens up more than anyone could think about a simple treat. The knowledge presented in this history book is not as important as some others, so the reader must really have a passion for the topic. Something interesting that I learned from this book was that candy has lasted millennia because it is an evolutionary trait for human beings to crave sugar. Furthermore, there are not many lessons learned from reading this book but a connection between something small, like candy, and true happiness was made. It teaches that anything can make a person happy no matter the size, prize, or origin.

Meave says

Charming and informative, adorable!

Jennifer Quail says

Everything you ever wanted to know about candy! While it probably loses something for an American reader, as much of the history is Anglo-centric, it's still a fascinating trip through humanity's love affair with sugar. Though it did lead to my ill-advised attempt to recreate Scottish rock at home. (Hint: Bad idea if you have an only-moderately-accurate candy thermometer and no patience.)

David Hebblethwaite says

I'm partial to a bit of quirky social or cultural history; so much the better if, like Joe Moran's *On Roads*, it can reach a little deeper than its immediate subject. *Sweets* is not on the same level as Moran's book – perhaps inevitably, given that its subject matter is rather frivolous – but it is fun and interesting.

Tim Richardson takes a broadly chronological approach, with brief asides to focus on particular kinds of sweet. I find the book's account of the early history of sweets a little dry in places, a little too heavy on detail; more engaging and lively are the anecdotes and insights on contemporary sweets – though the chapter on nineteenth-century confectioners and their 'benevolent tyranny' is fascinating. But Richardson's enthusiasm is apparent throughout; and his closing whistle-stop tour of the world's sweet cultures leaves me curious to know what some of the products he mentions taste like.

Susannah says

Perhaps I have very high standards both for food writing and for historical writing, but this was disappointing. I started it years ago and put it down and then picked it up again as bedtime reading. It's a weird mixture of personal anecdote/opinion, history and description. Normally I would like such a grab bag of genres but I lost the chronology in the mix and the 'story' wasn't compelling enough to create its own thread. The parameters of his topic seem very fuzzy and I sometimes wasn't certain what was in his purview and what wasn't. Or perhaps the problem was simply that the author is British and makes no attempt to give American nomenclature for various sweets. A little glossary would have been nice, especially since he does seem to assume that a few Americans might be reading it. All in all, there were bits that were Willy Wonka exciting and mouthwatering and I learned a fair bit about sweets history and manufacturing, but I wish it had been better written.

Allison says

This book was pretty dull and not very well organized. A few pictures to depict the candies and sweets he was describing would have been helpful. It's repetitive and took me a long time to get through because of it. My favorite factoid was that someone invented what was called a "Borne Sucker Machine" :)

Emily says

This should have been called either: 'A History of Sugar' or 'A History Focused on British Candy'. It was soooooo boring. I, a person who loves loves loves candy/sugar/chocolate and books about such, was bored out of my mind. The book had detailed lists of how much sugar was taken on trips by kings in the 1600s and other blah blah blah stuff.

I think that if I was British or had ever been to England, that maybe I would have been more intrigued. But when the author goes on and on about wonderful, childhood-memory-invoking treats such as 'rhubarb & custards', 'rock', and 'marzipan' and I have never experience any of them...it just did not make me interested. I still am unclear as to what 'rock' is. I was pretty sure it was cocaine, but in the context of this book I don't think that is what he is referring to. And, I do actually know what marzipan it, I just have never eaten it and so I have no emotional energy attached to it.

Two candy books that I LOVED were 'The Emperor's of Chocolate' and 'Candy Freak'. I loved them because they were about candy that I had actually eaten and liked. So, if you are American, read those books instead.

The other problem was that the author was a little uppity, continually referring to himself as the first 'international confectionary historian'. I never was quite sure if he was kidding. There were a bunch of places in the book that I think had little jokes interjected. The problem with the jokes is that I only THINK they might have been jokes.
