



# The Billionaire's Vinegar: The Mystery of the World's Most Expensive Bottle of Wine

*Benjamin Wallace*

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## **The Billionaire's Vinegar: The Mystery of the World's Most Expensive Bottle of Wine Details**

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# From Reader Review The Billionaire's Vinegar: The Mystery of the World's Most Expensive Bottle of Wine for online ebook

Nenia ? Queen of Literary Trash, Protector of Out-of-Print Gems, Khaleesi of Bodice Rippers, Mother of Smut, the Unrepentant, Breaker of Convention ? Campbell says

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I love wine - *love* it - but I honestly don't get this fascination with drinking 50+ year old bottles. And I'm saying this as someone who lives in California and drinks good wine all the time. As I sort of alluded to in another book about wine I reviewed, *HEDONIST IN THE CELLAR*, I think there comes a point where it stops being about the wine and more about the moolah. Perhaps an eighteenth century bottle of wine tastes amazing (I can barely force myself to drink milk that's a week too old, so I am the wrong person to judge). Considering how much those bad boys sell for, it's unlikely I will ever find out. As this book points out, there is a science to the aging process, but a lot of it also seems to be showboating with your money and agreeing with people whom you consider to be generally superior and "in the know" when it comes to wine knowledge. Think "Emperor's New Clothes" except instead of, "Wow, that guy is naked" it's "wow, that guy is naked *and* drinking fresh-poured Scam Wine™."

THE BILLIONAIRE'S VINEGAR is a delightful comedy of errors about innocent and perhaps not-so-innocent people (we never really know for sure) who end up getting Scam Wine™ instead of the miraculously well-preserved historical wine they thought originally belonged to Thomas Jefferson. When a well-preserved wine cellar is unearthed in France bearing many popular old wines from the 19th century, everyone is excited and quick to bid. But then the taste of the wines and the look of the bottles is called into question and suddenly, everything comes down like a house of cards and friends become enemies, and trustworthy wines become Scam Wines™. Benjamin Wallace crams the whole sordid saga in here, starting with the wine's high octane auction, descriptions of lavish wine-tastings and food-pairings, *why* people buy old wine (spoiler: bragging rights), what these people are like (spoiler: rich), the quest for the wine's provenance, and then, lastly, a quiet epilogue.

I honestly had no idea that wine forgeries were such an issue. I guess it makes sense, though. Anything high in demand is usually in short supply, so there's a temptation to artificially manufacture additional copies of these high price items and cash in. It was fascinating to read about how Scam Wine™ is made, and the lengths people go to make them look authentic, some going so far as to stain the labels and pit the glass and then coat them with convincing artificial dust (Scam Dust™). I also enjoyed learning about the history of some of these wines. For example, prior to reading THE BILLIONAIRE'S VINEGAR, I did not know about the great French wine blight. For those of you who do not know, an aphid called phylloxera attacked the roots of many French grapes in the late 19th century, causing many of the plants to die. American grapes were apparently immune to the aphids, so the roots of these American grapes were grafted onto the French plants, changing the taste of the grapes - some say for the worse (Scam Grapes™?). So apparently, pre-phylloxera wines are a class of their own and many people seek them out as being more "pure" than modern

strains of grape.

It's been a while since I read a good nonfiction book about history and THE BILLIONAIRE'S VINEGAR was the perfect return to that type of book. The writing style is great - colorful and vivid, but not veering into sensationalism and remaining relatively impartial at most times. It's like reading a very fun journalistic piece that continues for almost 300 pages, except wine is involved and you get to experience it vicariously. I read the gripping climax with a glass of petit verdot in hand (read: violet notes), and as I was reading, it occurred to me that the oldest wine that I have ever put into my mouth was only about twelve years old, and even that was *almost* too strong. When I was telling one of my friends about this book and the old wines mentioned inside, and asking rhetorically what they might taste like, she made a hilarious face and said, "I bet it would taste like balsamic vinegar. I would cook with it." I said, "I bet that would legitimately make someone cry."

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4 stars!

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### **Samantha says**

So I recently spent a few days in the hospital with literally *nothing* to do so I packed oodles and oodle of books (I had a bag just for my books) because I am currently too poor to purchase a Kindle. Barnes and Noble had recently had a Summer Reads "Buy Two, Get One Free" Sale and I found this book's blurb intriguing...I should have picked something else to buy...at least I keep telling myself it was the "free" book so I didn't pay any money for it. It wasn't a terrible book...if you love wine beyond life itself and know virtually everything there is to know about it. If you don't, this book was a total snore. The "mystery" of the Thomas Jefferson bottles of wine (are they? aren't they?) wasn't even enough to help me find interest in the book. Miraculously, I did finish it constantly hoping it would get better and peppered with many, many naps, but in the end I was unable to find the passion I should have felt for the history of wine nor the manufactured drama of the Jefferson bottles of wine. The book was about a long (*long*,) history of wine.

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### **John says**

This is a great little non-fiction mystery. It tells the story of a flamboyant, gregarious wine dealer who claimed to have purchased a cache of old wine, found in a walled up cellar in Paris. The bottles dated from the 1780s and were etched with the initials Th.J. One sold for 150 thousand dollars, on the assumption that it once belonged to Thomas Jefferson. But then, as the years go on, this wine dealer finds more and more old wine, incredibly old and rare bottles. How is this guy finding all this wine? And why isn't anyone able to back up his stories of his finds? And how come the people at Monticello say this is probably all baloney? I can recommend this to anyone who wants to throw a little non-fiction into the their reading mix. It'll make you want to buy some wine though, all the talk of tastings and wine-making. I can't understand how people can buy thousands, even millions of dollars worth of wine and then stick it in their cellars for decades and never drink it. What's the point of keeping a wine for a hundred fifty years? I can see aging it for a decade or two if you're into that, but if the thing has been sitting there for a century, drink the damn thing already.

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### **Kirsti says**

Nonfiction that reads like a thriller. Carefully researched and well paced. People insult each other in various languages by saying things like, "The oak tree is not concerned with the pig that is scratching its back against the roots."

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### **Elizabeth says**

What a fun read. I didn't know much about the central characters before I dived into this nonfiction book, so each page was a surprise. I also learned an enormous amount about wines, how they age, and which brands are the most hoity-toity; I could probably pretend to be a terrible snob now. Unfortunately, several years ago I took a vacation that included several visits to wineries and sadly determined that although I can (sort of) tell the difference between a 10 dollar wine and an 80 dollar one, that's about it. Anything aside from the cheapest wines seemed to taste the same to me.

My most high brow experience from that trip was probably the glass of (relatively cheap) Chateau Margeaux that tasted velvety soft with all sorts of berry and woodsy flavors commingling in one glass--a very cool sensory experience. Mostly all I remember is how mean all the other wine aficionados were. On one tour, an American couple asked a question about the "toast." I did not know what that word meant and piped up, "What's toast?" before enduring their withering glares. The tour guide was happy to educate, but the other guests were put out. I often think that learning is a life-long adventure if you can side-step all the know-it-alls that try and protect the currency of their knowledge. I guess that's what good books are for.

Speaking of which, the book read a bit like a suspense novel, with more and more allegations piling up to condemn various members of the inner circle. It's too bad that most of the pivotal characters were men, except for the despised Serena Sutcliff and the ignored woman from Monticello, but I did get a peek into the strange world of wine super collectors. This book also made me interested in reading more about Thomas Jefferson, whose meticulous attention to detail is awe-inspiring, among his many, many other awe-inspiring qualities.

I strongly recommend this book to wine drinkers, connoisseurs, and fans of movies similar to *Catch Me If You Can*.

Cheers!

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### **Bookmarks Magazine says**

Benjamin Wallace's magazine background helps him keep the many narrative threads in *The Billionaire's Vinegar* tight and engaging. In addition, Wallace exhibits a sharp eye for detail and character: Hardy Rodenstock, in particular, comes across as deliciously deceptive. Exploring what Jefferson's European tour of 1787 must have been like will likely interest even readers without a taste for wine, though connoisseurs will savor the author's descriptions of the clubby (and sometimes comically extravagant) society of high-dollar wine collectors. Wallace raises questions about the wine's authenticity that will linger on the palate, despite a perhaps unsatisfying ending. Or, as collector Ed Lazarus wrote of his experience with the discovered cache,

"I had never experienced anything remotely similar in an older Bordeaux, or in fact anywhere else, except perhaps at a Baskin-Robbins."

This is an excerpt from a review published in Bookmarks magazine.

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### **Karen says**

A fascinating read. A great cast of characters that expose you to grand egos, a new depth of greed, big boy playground bravado and a desire to possess the best and rarest, no matter what the cost.

On a broader stage, I think it serves as a parable of how the current economy meltdown didn't only happen in the housing market. Build the hype, create a competition, snag the greedy, and leave before the clock strikes midnight.

The plan was pure genius... How can you judge something to not be what you think it is, when you have nothing to compare it against. What does a wine from the 1780s taste like anyways. That, and if there was a crime, the evidence is now gone, drunk the night before. On the other hand, could it have been from the famed lost wine lot of Thomas Jefferson? Hard to tell, hard to prove. Will those who have done wrong get caught? Did they do wrong?

I learned a lot about rare wine and the world of high-stakes auction houses from this book, as well as family relationships and that famous truism of P. T. Barnum.

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### **Rade says**

I "read" this book. Seriously, I did not finish it.

I read about half of this book and decided it is not for me. While it is well written, the entire book mainly consists of wine and rich people names thrown at me that it made it bit of a slow read. I did not know who is important and besides the Forbes' and Thomas Jefferson, I did not know any of the other people being mentioned.

Jefferson was apparently a huge wine fan, taking trips all around the Europe and sending big boxes of wine back home to himself and to the other fathers of Deceleration of Independence. Besides the notes on his journeys, the majority of the book consisted of rich people or wine shop owners opening random old bottles of wine and recording their taste, smell, texture, look, etc. I did not find this very fun as I will never have a chance to try such a luxury as a \$10,000 bottle of wine so I gave up on it.

I also heard the ending is quite abrupt, finishing a story without any sort of a buildup to a climax. I feel like I did not miss much by giving up on this book.

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### **Christopher Rex says**

This book proved to me several things I've always believed....one, that nobody should ever take wine too seriously. Two, people can be fooled into believing almost anything. Three, people that take wine too seriously take themselves too seriously and that's the problem. Anyway, a good read about an amazing con, wine collecting and the "inner" workings of elite wine-tasting. Some people just have too much money for their own good. Easy to read and intriguing. It will remind you to buy wine that YOU think tastes good, not something that is based on the price-tag or somebody else says is "good". If it comes in a box and you like it, then it's good. Otherwise, become a wine-snob and get ripped off like the dips in this book.

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### **Sandie says**

I'm left wondering what the outcome was. Did Koch prevail against Rodenstock to prove fakery? On the author's website is an ad for the paperback "with a new epilogue." Oh, the intrigue. The book was most enjoyable in its first two thirds, but a little flat on the finish. The high-end wine collectors seemed so boring and austentatious. Really, why collect tens of thousands of bottles of wine? It's such a boy's club of bigger, richer, better that the issue of value seems quite secondary. I did enjoy the history of the European wines and the backstory. I thought it was interesting that Thomas Jefferson, instigator of all this hoopla, was ultimately quite happy with affordable, drinkable wine. I'm with him.

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### **Julie Christine says**

Oh, this was so worth the wait. This fantastic piece of investigative story-telling combined good old-fashioned was-there-a-crime-and-if-so-who-done-it, the history of Bordeaux, a peek into the oft-bizarre world of the obscenely rich, and an exposé of global wine snobbery. It seems that there are few commodities that can invoke the passion, competitive spirit, imagination and ego as much as the fermented juice of grapes.

Crisply written with spirit and punch, this is a read not only for vino-geeks but for anyone who'd enjoy a rollicking good truth that's far stranger and more entertaining than fiction.

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well darn it all. I received a notice from the library that this was due today and there is a waiting list, so no renewals. If only I hadn't spent a precious couple of hours slogging through that Amy Tan book, I could have finished this.

Back to the library it is & I'm back on the wait list. The mystery will just have to wait.

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### **Tara says**

As wines are often described as drinkable, this book is eminently readable. If you liked the 1998 film "The Red Violin", or if you are ever (even occasionally) drawn in by Antiques Roadshow you will love this book. (And if you haven't seen "The Red Violin", you really should)

The epitome of narrative non-fiction, *The Billionaire's Vinegar* is the tale of a world gone mad with wine lust, historical infatuation and drunk on self-importance. *The Billionaire's Vinegar* is much more than the story of a bottle of wine, but how circumstances were ripe for the old-guard elite and *nouveau riche* to be seduced by the siren's call of a new, highly indulgent, rare and collectible international craze that swept them away.

Before I read this book, all I really knew about wine was that I liked to drink it; and, if I had too much, it caused a headache unlike any other. Now, though hardly an expert, I have a deeper understanding and appreciation for a much more complex and interesting process. Terms and situations are explained clearly, with no hint of snootiness - which I find near miraculous given the subject.

The characters are intriguing and as the book progresses, you understand how so many individuals were duped, besotted or obsessed - in earlier chapters I felt the desire to build a time machine to transport myself to a time when such exquisite wine was sold in supermarkets for \$8 a bottle. And as the mystery starts to become unveiled, you join the crowd yelling, "The Emperor wears no clothes!"

Full of blunders (a poor rich fool breaks a priceless bottle of wine while showing it off), masochistic dedication (the wine taster who flew in last minute after a liver transplant) and priceless charm, I laughed aloud, winced and was kept guessing to the last chapter.

A very strong caution: You **will** want to drink wine will reading this book. It is inevitable. So, stock up.

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### **Sue Degoey says**

If you spent an exorbitant amount of money on a bottle of wine and upon the first sip discovered it was rather foul tasting, would you still finish the bottle? I felt the warning signs at the beginning of a tedious read, but pressed on, and really gained nothing, but lost a month of really prime reading time. Probably just wasn't my vintage, as many other people seemed to enjoy it.

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### **Sloane Berrent says**

My mom had recommended this book to me at least 2 years ago. I finally got around to reading it, and it was while I was traveling in Burma. It's written by a journalist and so the attention to detail and sources he went to for information and quotes are just overwhelming. He took pieces from years apart, people spread apart and an unsolved story and somehow wove a story together of it all. It's a terrific book for anyone interested in wine or mystery. In my eyes, this is a bestseller.

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### **J says**

Somewhere around two-thirds of the way through this entertaining account of the controversy surround possible counterfeit antique wines, I began to hope that there'd be a definitive answer. The book seems to fall on the side of very, very strongly suggesting that all the rare old vintage wines produced by the book's "villain," Hardy Rodenstock, one time pop band producer turned rare wine dealer, were fakes, but for

obvious litigation issues stops just short of outright accusation. I didn't want to know the answer because of a curiosity about the truth of the matter. The real reason I wanted an answer was because I wanted all the rich pricks in the book to get owned – and hard.

To back up a bit first, though.

We start with the alleged rare wines. The most notable wines procured by Rodenstock are supposedly from a cache of bottles from one of the homes where Thomas Jefferson lived in France. Widely regarded as America's first wine fancier of note, Jefferson's memorabilia and documents depict a man who wished to turn his fellow countrymen away from the brutality of corn liquor and on to the finer vintages of Europe. He also was a staunch advocate of home grown experimentation in wine production. According to Rodenstock, a wrecking crew breaking through a plaster wall in a home scheduled for demolition found the wines, walled up to prevent their theft by revolutionary peasants after Jefferson's departure back to America.

Wallace goes into great detail cataloguing the aspects of the bottle, the fine engraving of "Th. J" on each bottle, an inscription greatly contested by Monticello historians, the antiquity of the cork and the wax seal around it, and the provenance of the wine. Rodenstock, in his bid for authenticity, enlists the help of Michael Broadbent, in-house wine expert for Christie's auction house whose seal of approval on the mystery bottles ignites bidding wars and much speculation. The first bottle to go up for auction is eventually snagged by Christopher "Kip" Forbes for \$157,000. (Subsequently, this idiotic family with their mania for collecting put the bottle up for display in a lighted glass case where the heat ruined whatever was inside the bottle and accelerated the rot in the cork, leading to it falling into the bottle where it floated for however many hours it took for someone to notice.)

Further bottles from this supposed cache were purchased by the American editor of Wine Spectator magazine, by a mysterious man from the Middle East rumored to be a frontman for Dodi Al-Fayed, and by tycoon Bill Koch whose eventual lawsuit against Rodenstock brought the entire matter to a head. In the intervening years between Forbes' purchase and Koch's lawsuit, Rodenstock came under increasing suspicion for his facility with finding incredibly rare fine vintages and their amazing drinkability. He regularly "discovered" long lost stashes laden with dramatic historical value, though his finds often were of bottle types which disputed as ever having been produced, such as imperial magnums of certain years when vintner records reveal no such bottles.

Wallace tells the story in well-spaced intervals, pausing for chapters to detail Jefferson's trip through France, the history of the vintners most usually faked, the debate between the pre and post-phylloxera years, and about the growing market of wines in England and America. It is this latter side note that leads to Koch's interest in wines and the book's most aggravating personalities.

Not exactly wine snobs, these mostly American collectors (joined by similar types from around the world) prove to be a trial to endure reading about. Hosting lavish tasting parties of "verticals," that is, parties featuring one vintage over several decades and "horizontals" a single year's great wines from various vintners, these wine collectors seem less interested in taste and flavor and enjoyment than impressing each other with the rareness of their cellars. The love of wine rapidly morphs into dick-measuring contests whose appeal is lost on those of us who aren't involved. Wallace lovingly portrays their orgiastic excesses to such a degree that my inner Marxist was sliding well into Trotskyite bloodlust just to hear of their fancy balls.

That the book's late middle section becomes dominated by these assholes is a fatal flaw in the story, but nonetheless an important one, because it is through Rodenstock's desire to impress at these gatherings of wealthy experts (the better to tempt them to buy his suspect wares) that his eventual exposure as a likely

fraud is made possible. It is through such events that Rodenstock tangles with Koch, a litigious bastard if ever there were one.

To get to the bottom of the matter, Kohc hired a team made up of a retired FBI agent and his private investigators, scientists versed in the art of chemical analyses based upon radioactive isotopes, and David Molyneux-Berry, the former head of Christie's rival auction house, Sotheby's wine department. Koch has filed suit in several jurisdictions against Rodenstock, cases that have yet to be decided.

In this sense, the book feels incomplete, as if the story was rushed out in anticipation of something. We end without any definitive proof that Rodenstock was completely faking these wines and without any on-record resolution to the court cases. The overwhelming bulk of the circumstantial is damning enough in my mind, but the book stops just centimeters shy of making such a claim.

This is dissatisfying for obvious reasons, but more so the book leaves me with a sense of unalloyed frustration. While I relish con artists who practice the short and long-term grift and live on their wits, Rodenstock is an unappealing faker without much in the way of charisma as he's portrayed by Wallace. To some degree, this must be an authorial flaw, as such high stakes and such long-lived forgery schemes can't survive solely based on the marks' gullibility. The conman must have a charm that is obvious and compelling. As painted by Wallace, Rodenstock lacks this fundamental virtue. His victims, such as extravagant prick Bill Koch, are likewise repulsive creatures full of money and unattractive personal qualities. Shed a tear please for the Forbes family if you can.

With unpleasant players on both sides of the fence, Wallace's book lacks a compelling figure for reader sympathy save for Michael Broadbent. A stronger focus on Christie's wine expert and how damaged his reputation emerged from the scandal might have carried the day, but caught up in the fancy dress balls of the upper class wine fetishists, Wallace loses sight of his ace in the hole. Sidelined as a bit player for the book's second half, Broadbent as figure of semi-tragedy could have added a pleasing top note of pathos to the work. As it is, the book is good enough for quaffing, but lacks what all wine makers hope for, cellar appeal.

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## **Sara says**

For a non-fiction book, the story of Hardy Rodenstock and his Jefferson bottles flowed well and was interesting, the characters being real people instead of just names in a book.

The author seems to favor the idea that Hardy Rodenstock, an avid collector and connoisseur of wine, forged some very old bottles of wine, even some from the 18th century purporting to belong to Thomas Jefferson himself. Rodenstock seems to be a bit unbalanced, putting it mildly.

This book takes place over the course of 20 years - roughly 1985 to 2005 - and goes into detail about old wine, wine collecting, wine tastings, and wine personalities. This was fascinating, especially to someone who feels that spending over \$7.99 for a bottle of wine is extravagant.

Unfortunately, the book ends during the lawsuits against Rodenstock. I had to google the ending and I'm still not sure what's up. There's been more lawsuits but I'm not sure anything has come about because of them. I did read that Michael Broadbent, the Christie's auctioneer, sued Random House for libel and this book cannot be sold in the UK. Also, I saw rumors on the net of this becoming a movie. That would be interesting.

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### **Mainon says**

I had only medium expectations for this book, and for the most part that was right on target. Moderately interesting, especially for someone like me who has a passing knowledge of French wine and some of the more famous chateaus. Gets a little dry at times.

Unfortunately, I'm considering ranking this two stars -- if I could rank the ending separately, I would -- because it was such a letdown at the end. I had read reviews that the ending seemed rushed, but this was much worse than I had imagined. He practically drops the story with no ending at all -- there's an intermediate court judgment, a quotation from someone saying they believe they'll eventually prevail, and then... the end?

Couldn't he have waited to publish this until he found out what actually happened?? Or, at the very least, given us a little update on where each of the major characters stood as of the date of publication?

Ugh, I was literally in disbelief when I got to the end of the book. Definitely an unfinished feeling.

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### **Kate says**

This book could have been really, really good. The story was very captivating, the characters involved were super-interesting, and I learned a ton about rare wines and history. However, the book was very poorly written. It was confusing. It didn't occur in a time order that made any sense. Facts were shoveled on top of each other in ways that completely prevented you from understanding them. The author left on tangents that had little to do with the main plot line, and then when offering an answer near the end of the book, did it in the most completely anti-climactic way possible. If Malcolm Gladwell had written this book, it would be FANTASTIC. Benjamin Wallace needs to spend less time on research and more time learning how to tell a decent story.

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### **Michael says**

The disappointing think about this book is that the story isn't finished. Litigation is ongoing, and the book ends rather abruptly. Also, the author skips around chronologically fairly liberally, presumably to enhance the narrative flow, but sometimes it feels disjointed or just doesn't make sense. Despite these complaints, this book is an engrossing read. As an amateur wine enthusiast, the subject matter was interesting to me and the character sketches were engaging. It also proved a great validation of my wife Autumn's career choice, as the book serves as an indictment of the practice of previous employer Christie's, while validating the work of researchers at Monticello. Overall, I recommend it!

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### **Anna says**

My knowledge of wine is similar to the guy from *Sideways* who guzzles the glass down and declares "tastes

pretty good to me!" For the reader who knows little about wine, this is a good introduction to the high-end world of wine collecting. The first 2/3 of the book is interesting and informative and reads like a good mystery, but the last chapters seem hastily thrown together. The book misses making some important conclusions about the ramifications of the Jefferson bottles on not only wine collection but the average wine-drinker who depends on certain critics to select their wines.

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