



Onward: How Starbucks Fought for Its Life without Losing Its Soul

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In this #1 *New York Times* bestseller, the CEO of Starbucks recounts the story and leadership lessons behind the global coffee company's comeback and continued success.

In 2008, Howard Schultz decided to return as the CEO of Starbucks to help restore its financial health and bring the company back to its core values. In *Onward*, he shares this remarkable story, revealing how, during one of the most tumultuous economic periods in American history, Starbucks again achieved profitability and sustainability without sacrificing humanity.

Offering you a snapshot of the recession that left no company unscathed, the book shows in riveting detail how one company struggled and recreated itself in the midst of it all. In addition, you'll get an inside look into Schultz's central leadership philosophy: It's not about winning, it's about the right way to win.

Onward is a compelling, candid narrative documenting the maturing of a brand as well as a businessman. Ultimately, Schultz gives you a sense of hope that, no matter how tough times get, the future can be more successful than the past.

Onward: How Starbucks Fought for Its Life without Losing Its Soul Details

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David says

If you like the following: A) Coffee B) Business C) Comebacks D) Starbucks.

Then this is the book for you.

Howard Schultz does a great job in telling the story and how it is possible for such a large organization to have soul!

After reading this book, I now notice the following when I go into a Starbucks:

- How Starbucks tries to make their store the 3rd place in person life - 1st home, 2nd work, 3rd Starbucks.

- Smell of the Store... Howard Schultz (HS) is big believer in the smell of the store (he originally did not like the idea of food being served in the store because of the smell of the food overpowering the smell of the coffee, i.e. burnt cheese).

- The Art of the Pour. HS believed pour of espresso was an art and needed to be done right. He was so committed that he shut down all the stores (over 16,000) for re-training of how to properly make an espresso. He wanted workers to be facing the customers and showing them the art of the work in preparing their drinks.

When you put this all together, you should be able to walk into a Starbucks and have it feel familiar (but local in taste), see the workers facing the customer as they perform the art of espresso pour, and the smell of coffee in the air.

Onwards will leave you with a new appreciation for business done right.

Gil Bradshaw says

Howard Schultz is very passionate about coffee. He treats it on the same level as brain surgery or the NASA space program. It's fun to read about the inner-workings of such a high profile company.

I'm an orthodox Mormon, and don't drink coffee. Schultz' descriptions of the roasts and blends are so enticing that I have almost stopped in and broken my vows several times. Not because I'm going to become a regular coffee drinker--because I want to taste their different roasts, machines, and cappuccinos for context. I'm only halfway through this book and I'm sure at some point my drive for context will take me to a Starbucks. Note to self: to avoid temptation, don't ever read books which shamelessly promote drugs,

alcohol, or prostitution.

UPDATE: I'm finished with the book. Amazingly, I didn't go to Starbucks and get five different blends of coffee and line them up and taste them, even though I really wanted to while reading this book. I stuck to my Mormon roots.

I first found out about the story of Howard Schultz by listening to a private equity fund manager who raved about Schultz' passion and ability to take over Starbucks. For those who don't know, Schultz worked at a gourmet coffee distribution company called Starbucks. Schultz kept pitching the idea of opening consumer coffee retail store and selling gourmet cups of coffee. His bosses never thought it would work. So Schultz went and opened up several consumer coffee retail stores and when he became big enough, he purchased Starbucks, the distribution company. I really wanted to hear about how that happened. Unfortunately, he glossed over that story, mentioning it almost as an afterthought.

The majority of this book focused on how Schultz and Starbucks created an entirely new economy of gourmet coffee houses. I think that is certainly the case. In fact, just yesterday (July 6, 2011), a Wall Street Journal article hypothesized that Starbucks groomed the palates of coffee drinkers here in the U.S. to the point that many people are searching for even better coffee than Starbucks can provide, driving them to find smaller gourmet coffee houses that can provide even higher quality brews than Starbucks can (since Starbucks must serve millions and can't possibly maintain quality that small coffee houses can).

This story was fascinating. Schultz left the CEO position and then during the recession Starbucks stock price dropped 42% returned as CEO and performed a turnaround. Listening to him go on and on about the intricacies of the fresh roast of Ethiopian Arabica beans and the clover filtering system firmly impresses in me the fact that Mr. Schultz will never be able to leave Starbucks in anyone else's hands than his own (which are quite capable).

Onward was a great read--and I don't even drink coffee. I can't imagine if I was a consumer--I probably would have liked it even more.

Karen Jett says

I have been an ardent Starbucks fan for many years. While I don't drink coffee, I am in love with Starbucks' Chai Latte (a black tea with spices – try it, you'll like it!). And I find pleasure in the welcoming ambience of almost every Starbucks location. Therefore, I was dismayed in 2008 when Starbucks was floundering financially. What made it worse was that when I looked honestly at many of the reasons press gave for the decline I had to admit to myself that there was at least a kernel of truth in most of them.

Onward chronicles the challenges faced by Howard Schultz, founder of Starbucks as we know it, as he decided to return as CEO and do the hard work required to turn Starbucks around. Mr. Schultz talks not only about his successes, but also his challenges, failures and fears during this tumultuous time.

However, what makes this book most worthwhile is that it is a book about strategy based on core values. And how by becoming very clear on those values and how they inform the strategy, Mr. Schultz was able to go back to the roots of what made Starbucks great while moving forward to face current challenges and future opportunities. He illustrates clearly the challenges and rewards that come with staying the same (values) while being open to changing everything else.

As a Starbucks fan, I thank Mr. Schultz for his strengthening the company I love. Even further, I thank Mr. Schultz for writing this book and sharing with others how a values based approach is not only doable, but also financially rewarding! If you are at all interested in how values, company culture, and strategy intersect to make a great company, I recommend that you read this book. I hope that you enjoy it as much as I did!

WhatIReallyRead says

I conquered this book! Woohoo! **Disclaimer.** There's no Starbucks in my country, so I've only visited once while traveling. I also don't drink coffee. So I read this book purely as a business book without any particular feelings towards the company itself.

THE CONTENT.

1. It felt a lot like a **promotional brochure for Starbucks instead of a business book**. Because talking about your barista donating a kidney to a regular customer... is clearly not a fair example of the great customer service your company has.
2. About 94% of this book is **one man constantly patting himself on the back**. He's not even subtle about it.

You offer medical insurance to your "partners"? Okay, good for you! **You don't need to repeat that 287 times throughout a 380-page book**. I got it the first time you mentioned it! Your coffee sales are certified as "Fair Trade"? You support (RED) and donated to Hurricane Katrina victims? Awesome! Mentioning it once is quite enough. No need to go on and on about it in every chapter. As you've probably gathered, the books is **very, very repetitive**.

3. I'll just say it like it is. "Onward" contained **zero useful information or any specifics**. It goes like this: 20 pages of filler, 20 pages of bragging, 20 pages of pretentious bs, 20 pages of recap, and now 5 pages of really interesting description of real-life business problems... only to end with "and then we solved it." !!!??? WTF MAN? How did you solve it??? This is the whole point of business books! You can't just prepare us for reading at last something interesting and just slide off **without saying anything even remotely specific or useful**. And he does it every time!

4. Howard Schultz keeps talking about how their sales dropped in 2008 because they didn't follow their values anymore, and how they got back on their feet in 2010 because they came back to those values. I mean... **I totally don't buy it**. Sure, the steps you took to reorganize the business helped, that's obvious, but I think the **macro-economy played a big role here, and it's not fair to discount that**. **Shrugging it off makes you look like a hypocrite at best**, and incompetent at worst. If you told in the book fair and square about the impact of your changes, that would be useful. Saying that one new product was profitable and another new product wasn't, and you didn't know why - that would be honest. Trying to bring everything back to "values"... ugh. I don't know.

THE WRITING.

1. The books is **MEGA PRETENTIOUS**. He keeps using such high, poetic language while talking about business processes, it looks extremely pretentious and out of place. You'd think he discovered the meaning of

life for the whole human race and not sold coffee. Every page is full of "mission" and "passion" etc. It gets old very fast.

2. Howard Schultz **keeps referring to his employees as "partners"**. Why? I don't know. But I only got that he meant "employees" at, like, 80% mark. So the whole 4591 I read this word before that, I was like: "What partners is he referring to? His suppliers? Bankers? Lawyers?". Again, it was **confusing for no reason**.

3. The **narrative was jumping around** all the time. We're in 1989. Now we're in 2007. Now we're in 2003. Now we're in 2008. Now we're back in 2007. A couple months forward, a couple months back. And it wasn't even necessary. Just **confusing** and hard to follow.

So, as you see, I pretty much hated it until 50% mark. Then I kind of got used to Howard Schultz's style and became sort of okay with all this. The quality of the book didn't improve though. **So I ended up giving it an "okay" rating, even though I honestly can't find any redeeming qualities here.**

I read Delivering Happiness: A Path to Profits, Passion, and Purpose and very much liked it at the time. It was one of the first business books I've read. I wonder if now I'd feel about it the way I felt about "Onward". Dunno.

Crystal Starr Light says

Bullet Review:

Simply put: this is a good book if you love Starbucks, are interested in how Starbucks made such a drastic change or understand (or want to understand) the inner workings of a big business.

I drink at Starbucks (almost exclusively the Clover, which I find superior to their standard espresso), but I am none of those three things. That said, I can definitely see this being a 4-star read in a different readers hand.

Your Mileage May Vary.

Brian says

Read this for a twenty page report in business school back in 2011. Entertaining read. The author grew up poor and I admire his humility balanced by intelligence and skill. He went to Italy and brought back the layout idea for Starbucks.

Highly recommended for nonfiction lovers.

Jay says

""Onward" covers roughly 2005 - 2010 in the life of Starbucks, a time when the stock hits a long-term low and starts to recover, and the author returns as CEO. Schultz spends a lot of time describing his and others

angst over decisions and cheerleading about passion, which are all too common in these types of books. Schultz comes across as passionate about his shops, but also quite pompous. His story about the foray into social media makes it sound like Starbucks took big risks early on, but that is being over dramatic. There were four sections I appreciated for their business insight. One was the consideration of working with the "World of Warcraft" folks to try to draw the young male demographic into their shops. It didn't pan out, but this anecdote showed how Starbucks was open to odd ideas. Second was the description of one of Schultz's trips to China. This story illustrated well that Starbucks employees, in China even, have the ability to try things out, like new foods, even if they will likely never be sold by Starbucks. The story about Via instant coffee showed the company's willingness to do extensive research on a product extension. However, Schultz undercuts this story by mentioning that instant coffee detractors are mostly in the US, but instant coffee sells much better in overseas markets -- makes you wonder why they didn't speed that product to market more. The best part was the description of the Clover brewed coffee machine and the theater of espresso-based drinks. I hadn't noticed the theater aspect until I read this, but I see his point - baristas face the customer while working these drinks but not others. The Clover machine sounds wonderful, but even now, two years after the book was written, they aren't in many stores, and that isn't explained in the book. Schultz describes using "lean" concepts in optimizing store operations, and that, along with the Clover story, shows great use of the "time and motion" school of optimization. He even describes how the stores went from bean grinding once a day to once a pot to better optimize the customer experience of the smell of the coffee shop. On reflection, Schultz comes across as Steve Jobs-anal, but not all that Steve Jobs-brilliant. The book does explain why Starbucks is Starbucks, and is worth reading for that.

Margot says

As a memoir or a biography, this was a terrible example. Actually, it reads more like a biography written by someone else. The narrative is distant from Schultz, giving you zero insight into him personally or how he personally coped with the struggles of these years bringing Starbucks back to profitability.

Onward comes off more as a biography of the company itself. Or, more accurately, as a very detailed presentation to investors and potentially investors: *here's how we messed up, here's what I did to fix it, here's how we're so great now*. On top of being rather dry and impersonal, *Onward* is also extremely repetitive at times (I can definitely point to a few places where Copy and Paste were utilized) and the organization of the book really needed some work.

Having worked as a barista at Starbucks for almost two years, up nearly through the end of 2008, I was already familiar with a lot of the new products and initiatives Schultz outlines in this book. If you're a really *really* big fan of Starbucks and don't already have an inside view of their mission, vision, and philanthropic initiatives then sure, give this book a read. Otherwise, flip to the back of the book and just read the "Tribute" section to get a one-chapter summary of the entire book. Or skip this book all together and read my CliffsNotes instead:

Starbucks is actually not an evil corporation. They have a *ton* of philanthropic partnerships, not to mention providing health insurance to their part-time employees (they were the first to offer such health benefits). They are also a leader in the fields of fair business practices (they go above and beyond just buying fair trade beans) and environmental stewardship.

They make yummy drinks and food. (The "burnt" coffee flavor of some of their brews is actually **bold** and is supposed to taste that way. Some people like bold coffee.) And their cafes

have a nice vibe and are awesome to hang out in.

Otis Chandler says

An interesting book that describes Howard's return to CEO and the challenges of getting Starbucks back on track after massive scaling and the economic downturn of 2008 left it in a vulnerable position.

Howard comes across as someone that loves Starbucks - the company he created. His passion for innovation and coffee and making it work are infectious, and learning a little about his leadership style was very interesting. I particularly enjoyed his descriptions of how Starbucks went astray as it had scaled to over 20 thousand stores, and how he tackled bringing it back. "The Transformation Agenda" - because sometimes if you give change a name people will believe it's coming.

I enjoyed reading about the campaign to close all Starbucks stores to let employees watch a training video. A big statement, one that was very public, and acknowledged they knew they had issues they need to improve. Bold move, and a respected one.

My only criticism of the book is that it comes across as a lot of corporate speak. I'm not saying it's inauthentic, just that the kind of language that he needs to motivate his employees is likely different from what he needed to put in this book. But he's clearly an inspirational leader.

Howard spent a lot of time focused on creating a quality experience for his customers. He realized that every piece of the Starbucks experience was crucial to building a top tier brand that stood for quality and a place that people would want to spend time at. From the smell of coffee in the store (and the related battle to have or not have cheese sandwiches), to choices people have, to the interactions with the baristas. The baristas were crucial, because with over 20 thousand stores, he had to create programs to train them and make sure they had the right values and approach.

I still love my Blue Bottle, but I have more respect when I walk into a Starbucks store now.

Mavpion says

Howard tells the story of the CEO's return to Starbucks when he notices it is in the process of slowly self-destructing. He goes over his process of turning it around and tells why he did it, what was successful, and what failed. The book suffers from ghostwriting and feels like propaganda, but the story it tells is real and worth reading.

Let me start with my complaints before I get into why I like this book. First, this book comes across as a barely disguised piece of propaganda and really seems to lack the honesty and introspection from a good "This is how I succeeded" business book, but perhaps this is because it is ghostwritten. For instance, whenever he talks about having to lay people off or fire someone, he always talks about how emotional he gets. Or when a bunch of Starbucks employees listen to him or show up to mandatory meetings and then clap he says he's blown away by how much they are responding to his ideas (really--maybe it's because he's their boss). Another example is how he says that he loves coffee so much, and then proceeds to act like Starbucks

is the best coffee available. I think Starbucks has really done a great job of familiarizing people with good coffee, but it's definitely not the best available...

Now, for the good stuff. Even though the book comes across as dishonest in tone, every fact I found in there checks out. For instance, he talks about what was wrong with Starbucks when he came back as CEO--and these things are exactly the reasons I stopped going. And the fixes he applied actually worked--after reading this, I went to Starbucks again and it was so much better than it had been. His description of his turnaround and financial performance matches the stock prices during that period--and he is pretty straightforward about which of his changes worked and which didn't. One of the projects he was immensely proud of was the Starbucks "Via" product (freeze-dried coffee), and he has a right to be--it's the only instant coffee which smells and tastes like the real thing.

So, even though this book feels dishonest, I felt that the actual message and stories were real, inspiring, and completely worth reading. This is one time where the message is definitely more important than the telling.

Paul says

This was a tough book for me to read and comment on. In some respects the inside look at Starbucks decline and return to profitability is a great case study for the 21st century. For me, however the story is overshadowed by the tone and attitude of Schultz. It is evident that Schultz sees Starbucks as a religion, going so far as to opine on the analogy of local Starbucks outlets having the value of churches in their communities. To this end Schultz envisions himself as the hero of his own story, dare I say even the Starbucks messiah. In my mind the book was filled with false humility and double speak.

For example, Schultz states that "Family has always been the most important thing in my life..." yet he doesn't get around to talking about his family until Chapter 7 to make matters worse he then spends the entire chapter justifying his need to work during his annual family vacation, or as he puts it "the only time of the year when the four of us took time out from our busy lives to reconnect." In another chapter he details calling a member of his executive team on Christmas eve insistent that he meet "that day." Schultz has an interesting take on what it means to value family as the "most important thing."

In a similar vein Schultz opens the book talking about his initial inspiration for the Starbucks chain, citing the art of a pulled espresso he first witnessed in Italy and the sense of community found in the coffee culture of continental Europe. Throughout the book he laments the fact that during Starbucks rapid expansion the company had moved from manual espresso machines to an automatic espresso machine preventing customers from truly experiencing this art. Yet several chapters later he justifies, and exemplifies using a new automatic machine over a return to a manual machine because it is "4 inches shorter" and allows better interaction with the barista.

It is clear that Schultz sees himself as a knight riding in on a white horse rescuing one of America's premier companies - in turn we should all be thankful to him, flocking to Starbucks outlets, praising their progressive business model and the man responsible for it all. I found it all a bit much to swallow. Like many have said about the coffee Starbucks brews this book left me with a bitter taste.

Austin Storm says

There are interesting events detailed in this book, but you have to work through the murk of endless corporate jargon to get to them. I have no doubt that this is Howard Schultz's authentic voice, but he hasn't adapted himself to the medium here. A structure he uses frequently is to print a transcript of a speech he gave - a shareholder meeting or earnings call - and then intersperse his thought process. The repetition and positivity are grueling - it's a tract for die-hard fans.

A few moments really pushed it over the top... calling staff to work on Christmas Eve, buying Clover, equating Starbucks' comeback to the rebuilding of New Orleans after Katrina, breathlessly describing the team-building retreat work of corporate consulting firms many times...

Simon Ruddell says

I enjoyed this book, but not as much as *Pour Your Heart Into It*. Make no mistake, I love Starbucks, both as a customer and as an investor, but this volume lacks the warmth and sheer adventure of the account of the startup of Starbucks.

The most interesting aspect of this account, for me, is that it serves as a perfect illustration of how annoying American upper management can be. Nothing is ever good enough or fast enough for this man. Everyone has to passionately commit. Everything has to be better than last year, last week, yesterday. Everything has to be done by yesterday!

The newly revamped Starbucks may be wonderful, but it is unsustainable, as is most of the American corporate model. A classic example of this is the author's breathless account of someone coming up with a good idea on a flight back to Seattle and his pride in the fact that he was able to approve the concept and get commitment to a date from others on the ground so that by the time they arrived everything was in place. Would it have been such a catastrophe if everyone had taken a day to think it all through? There is a great deal of this kind of thing in this book, and in my experience dealing with American business, such freneticism is all too common.

There is a great deal of pride expressed here in doing more with less - but that cannot go on forever.

sarah gilbert says

In attempting to paint a victorious picture of his takeover of the company and his underlying philosophy of passion and integrity, Howard Schultz has instead revealed his hyperactive and scattered management style; his penchant for distrusting his own employees and bringing in outsiders (at great cost, I'm sure) to make important decisions; his combination of self-doubt and hubris and sensitivity to criticism that keep him from ever finding that soul he insists he and his company have already claimed.

Schultz titles the first section of his frenetically-organized book "Love," and begins with the tough-love decisions he made; first, to close all the stores for four hours in February 2008 to retrain baristas at 7,100 stores on pulling good espresso shots and steaming milk. This decision was roundly criticized as a publicity stunt then, and even still, now; reading the book reveals just how expensive it was. As none of the stores had computers with internet capabilities, 7,100 DVD players had to be shipped with the DVDs to teach baristas how to pour milk and wipe steamer wands. After a trip through Howard's origins with Starbucks, and subsequent eye-opening trip to Milan where he discovered, people like the experience of a good latte!, we

learn what Howard does when the people around him don't agree with his latest sure thing: he takes his ball and stomps out. Err, "respectfully." (Partway through reading this book I decided that "respect" is Howard-speak for "someone who was stupid and disagreed with me.") "My bosses, for whom I had tremendous respect, did not share my dream of re-creating the coffee bar experience in Seattle... [a few years later], I left Starbucks..."

Schultz started a coffee company he named Il Giornale in 1986, using the sign-off "Onward" in his first company memo. Far from seeing it as a snobby "I'm outta here," he thought of it as a "call to arms," "Forward leaning. Nimble. Scrappy." (Either Schultz or his co-writer Joanne Gordon is enamored with the use of the impactful sentence fragment, but has forgotten the rule that fragments lose their impact. When overused.) And thus was born the one-word tag line that would one day lend a title to his book.

To hear the next tough love story, we must jump forward in time to Howard's disappointment with Jim Donald, someone he both "respected" and found to be "tremendously well-liked." Donald was the second CEO to serve after Howard stepped back to his roll as chairman, but he was the only one brought in to the position from outside the company. The growth plans that Schultz had not just embraced, but sold as his own to analysts and partners — the famous incredulity-straining 40,000 stores — had, he suddenly realized in the chill pre-dawn of a February day in 2007, "led to the watering down of the Starbucks Experience, and what some might call the commoditization of our brand."

The memo was, almost immediately, leaked. "A quick Google search and there it was: 'The Commoditization of the Starbucks Experience' on a gossip website, for anyone to see. Investors. Journalists. Starbucks' partners. Staring at the screen, I was speechless... What upset me, what felt like a blow to my gut, was the leak... It was nothing less than a betrayal." Though he has "tremendous affection for Jim," this is the beginning of Howard's summer of discontent. Within hours he is calling in outside counsel (Wanda Herndon, a former Starbucks manager who now leads W Communications), a pattern when he cannot trust either his gut or those of the people on payroll. Within weeks he is concertedly working to undermine Jim (and this is the stuff he'll admit in the first section of a bestseller), going around talking to store, district and regional managers, even baristas, about the direction the company is headed, and how it's probably wrong.

"For me, the most acute example of this, the most symbolic representation of how Starbucks was deviating from its heritage and losing its magic, was the breakfast sandwich," he writes. He can't stand its aroma, "...few things had ever piqued my ire as much as that smell." He goes to his favorite among the Starbucks management team Michelle Gass "then head of our global products" and orders, "Get the sandwiches out!" Jim tells her, don't get the sandwiches out. Not only do customers love them, but they're great sellers. "Whether I was right or wrong about the sandwiches was less telling than my obsession with removing them, which was a manifestation of my mounting frustration," he wrote. "By the fall of 2007... I began to seriously consider if the time had come for me to return as ceo."

For the next several chapters Howard describes how he orchestrated the board's agreement on removing Jim and retaking the helm of his ship. He sits in meetings, "a fly on the wall," and criticizes the team for indecisiveness and lack of creativity, unexpectedness, or magic. He looks for counsel to another outsider, Jim Fingerth of crisis management company Kekst and Company. He engages a Kekst team to help him take the company back. He overnights them all his work product. He begins to meet with board members one by one to get them on his side. During his annual "family" vacation in Hawaii, he spends three hours each day riding bikes with Michael Dell, consulting about Dell's approach to taking his own company back over. He pores over the daily same-store sales numbers, beginning to suffer from the yet-to-be-named recession. "I was on the phone with our people in Seattle asking for comps from every region of the country," he writes. (Later, we'll learn that on Christmas Eve, he insisted that one of his management team meet with the CEO of

Salesforce.com to lay the groundwork for MyStarbucksIdea.com. That day.)

“There was a disciplined, almost chesslike approach to the work we did in the days leading up to the public announcement on Monday, January 7, 2008,” he writes. And then, incredibly, he says of his communication to Jim Donald — called to Schultz’ home for a beheading on Sunday evening — “the board has been closely monitoring what has been happening at the company” and “the board feels it is my obligation” to take over again as CEO. For the rest of the book, he will attribute the decision to remove Donald as one made by the board and not orchestrated all “chesslike” (I’d venture to say, Machiavelli-like) by himself.

From this key decision, the book becomes tedious and insufferable and difficult to read. It’s hard to follow the timeline of the events; repeatedly, Schultz will start out setting a scene as he makes an announcement or takes the stage at a conference or analyst call or partner meeting, then again and again jumping back and forth in time for the rest of the chapter, even (as with his fateful Hawaiian vacation of December 2007) coming back to one decision point or specific date much later in the book. As literature, it would be a challenge that was perhaps rewarding; as a business book, it only serves to reinforce my impression of Schultz’ frenzied leadership style.

He repeatedly mourns the fact that there is no “silver bullet” in his business, nothing like Frappuccino that would make a name and a billion-dollar business. Nothing like... Via?

Schultz describes in detail the events leading up to the perfection and launch of the company’s instant coffee product, which he refused to call instant coffee in press comments at launch but here, in the book, he admits is exactly that. As previously described, although not in this detail, Via was begun as a tinkering of a mad scientist, of sorts, in 1989. Don Valencia was a cell biologist who went for a hike and didn’t like the coffee, and as he was already working on special freeze-drying technology for cells, he applied his thinking to coffee. One day, he brought it into the Pike Place Starbucks (the vaunted first store) and, eventually, was hired by Starbucks.

The instant coffee was back-burnered; Valencia and his team of pharmaceutical whizzes came up with the Frappuccino base that would change the company’s fortunes in the late 1990s. By January 2007, Valencia was dying of squamous cell carcinoma, and Howard was impatient. How long would it take? he asked. “32 months,” was the answer. “If Apple could develop the iPod in less than a year, we can do this!” was Schultz’ response. Despite his impatience, it would take that long, and although he would wow his dinner party guests and employees with how hard it was to tell which was regular brewed Starbucks and which was instant, in the end, he “was extremely disappointed.”

Why was Howard Schultz so disappointed? Although his internal marketing team, the very “creative” and hard-working team that had come up with the name evocative of both Italian streets and Valencia’s name, had come up with a design it was “generic” and “rainbow-colored.” So he went outside, again, bringing in an outside creative firm to redesign the packaging in about two weeks. Howard-style, he invited first the outside firm, and then the internal creative team, to his house on a Sunday afternoon. “News that I’d brought in an outside firm under the radar met with some inevitable frustration,” he writes. And this is the part that I think is the most “raw” of the whole book: he admits he’s kind of an ass.

“It was never my intent to undermine anyone,” he writes of this, one of an innumerable string of underminings, “but there were moments throughout the transformation — and for that matter throughout Starbucks’ history — when I had to make tough choices, at times deciding that the best interests of the organization were contrary to the interests of an individual or group. Sacrificing people’s feelings, and more than once even a personal relationship, for the good of thousands of partners is one of the most painful

elements of my job as Starbucks' chief executive."

This book, then, is an apologia. As such, is it grandiose and full of needless details and explanations. It is perhaps beyond dramatic to write, of his opening remarks before an impromptu and secretive global summit in March 2008, "A tiny microphone clipped to my white shirt amplified my voice throughout the hushed ballroom." This is a business book, not a thriller. If it is a book about love — as Schultz said again and again in interviews given around the date of its release — it is the sort of numb, passionate, senseless love a teenager has for a much older lover: blind to both his own faults and those of the one he longs for, even as he recounts them in moony detail. Careless of the feelings that must be hurt as he pursues the object of his affection. Analyzing every detail of what other people think of his lover, but only as it applies to him; sure that he is the only one that could make her truly shine; as changeable and predictable as the moon.

In resolution, Howard Schultz insists he has saved the soul of his company and brought it firmly into a future of unswerving growth and positive margins. But could the handsome prince fall out of love, as easily as he fell in?

This review is an abbreviated version of one that I wrote for The Story Stock

Stephen E says

I really wanted to like this book more than I did. I like coffee, and I like reading about how things work.

But this book has a very self-congratulatory tone. Even the parts where they admit to errors in the past seem like "I thought they were errors, but realize that they were just learning experiences on my way to awesomeness".

Schultz has definitely accomplished a lot. He built a very successful chain, handed off the control to someone else, and then made big steps to rebuild it in a tough economy after it was failing. He realizes that there is a community element to the coffee experience, and believes people are paying for more than coffee, and he is right. And his vision has been rewarded.

But the reading is difficult. It is 80% business jargon. And it also benefits from 20-20 hindsight. For example, he describes 2 big undertakings, which had different outcomes: Sorbetto, which failed, and Via Instant, which appears to have succeeded. The mistakes that caused the Sorbetto to fail are described as surprises, out of his control, etc., when it's really that someone just messed up figuring out the costs and planning for contingencies. There's flowery discussion of learning from mistakes, and the heartache of disappointment. But when it comes to Via, it's all "there were people who said it couldn't be done but I stuck to the vision". I'm sure there were similar voices for Sorbetto, but they are not discussed.

They also call employees at Starbucks "partners", which they clearly are not, at least not in the traditional sense of the word. Their opinions are clearly valued, and they are important, and they are the "front line", but they are not partners... baristas were not consulted about the massive layoffs and store closings as one would consult a partner. To me, this "partner" phrase just emphasizes the fact that they aren't, and comes across as insincere. Well, not insincere. It's just a corporate kitschy thing. But every time I read it, I kept thinking it meant some kind of vendor or something, and then realized, oh no, it's their code word for employees.

So, I can't say I recommend it, even if you're interested in coffee. I'm amazed at what he's done, it's just not a

great read.
