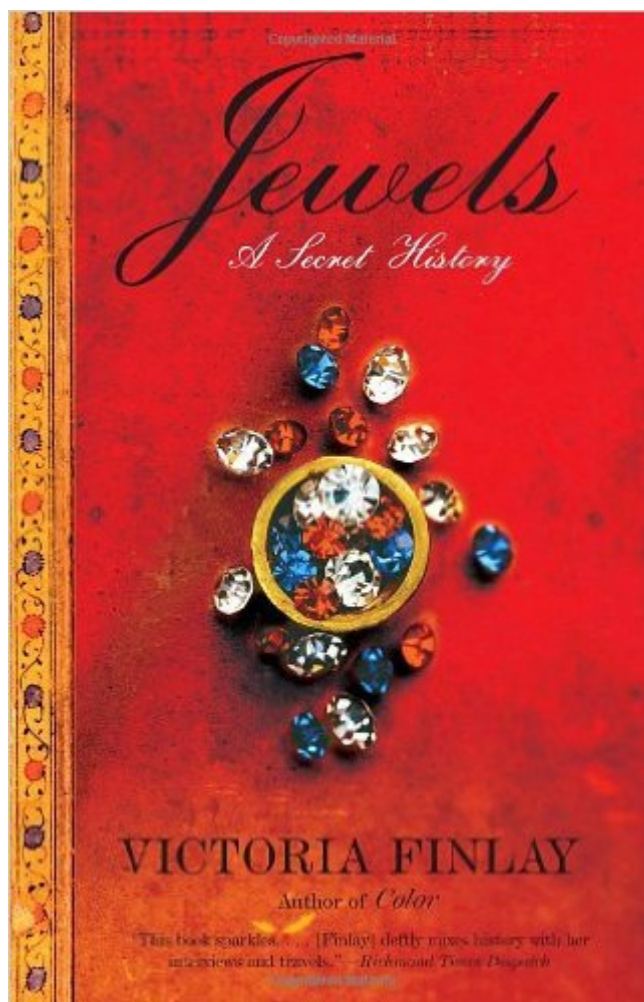


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Jewels: A Secret History



Synopsis

Throughout history, precious stones have inspired passions and poetry, quests and curses, sacred writings and unsacred actions. In this scintillating book, journalist Victoria Finlay embarks on her own globe-circling search for the real stories behind some of the gems we prize most. Blending adventure travel, geology, exciting new research, and her own irresistible charm, Finlay has fashioned a treasure hunt for some of the most valuable, glamorous, and mysterious substances on earth. With the same intense curiosity and narrative flair she displayed in her widely-praised book *Color*, Finlay journeys from the underground opal churches of outback Australia to the once pearl-rich rivers of Scotland; from the peridot mines on an Apache reservation in Arizona to the remote ruby mines in the mountains of northern Burma. She risks confronting scorpions to crawl through Cleopatra's long-deserted emerald mines, tries her hand at gem cutting in the dusty Sri Lankan city where Marco Polo bartered for sapphires, and investigates a rumor that fifty years ago most of the world's amber was mined by prisoners in a Soviet gulag. *Jewels* is a unique and often exhilarating voyage through history, across cultures, deep into the earth's mantle, and up to the glittering heights of fame, power, and wealth. From the fabled curse of the Hope Diamond, to the disturbing truths about how pearls are cultured, to the peasants who were once executed for carrying amber to the centuries-old quest by magicians and scientists to make a perfect diamond, *Jewels* tells dazzling stories with a wonderment and brilliance truly worthy of its subjects. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

"It is an ordinary gemstone," writes Victoria Finlay of the sapphire in a ring given to her by her parents, "yet like most other ordinary gemstones it has a good story to tell, if you go looking for it." Go looking she does, not only for the story of that sapphire but for those of other gems, and yes, she found good stories and writes them up in *Jewels: A Secret History* (Ballantine Books). Indeed, she values the stories more than the stones' rarity, perfection, or size. She set out to tell stories of nine different stones, from semi-precious to precious, and from two to ten on the Mohs hardness scale. The scale, invented in 1825 by mineralogist Freidrich Mohs, simply rates stones and other substances by what they can scratch and what scratches them; talc rates a one and diamond, the hardest substance known, rates a ten. Finlay ranges her chapters from softest stone to hardest: amber (Mohs somewhere between gypsum 2 and calcite 3), through jet, pearl, opal, peridot, emerald, sapphire, ruby, and finally diamond. (It is interesting that value tends to increase with hardness, indicating that we place a premium on durability.) Even the biggest stones, Finlay notes, are objects that are really rather small, but the stories encompass great swaths of human history and technical expertise. I will mention here only her quest for amber, for which she visits the Polish Baltic coast, a source for the stone. You may know the sticky sap that is oozed out when a pine tree is injured, and amber is the fossilized version of the same thing. Its origin is mysterious, because for amber to have become the geologic deposit as it is now found, huge numbers of evergreens (the species of tree is no longer with us) must have been hit with some sort of disease or other stress. Amber is the stuff that entrapped the mosquito that had dined on the blood of the dinosaur which yielded the DNA to build the monsters of the movie Jurassic Park. Its prices rose sharply when that movie came out in 1993, demonstrating our whimsical notions of value. Finlay goes to the University of Gdansk where is located the Museum of Amber Inclusions, and a guide indeed shows her insects trapped within. There is a particularly strange sample that looks like a long fly, only it has twelve legs; it turns out to be two flies caught by the sap during copulation. She attends the Amber-Washing Championships at Jantar, Poland, in the expectation that she would even herself be able to wade into the sea to fish out amber with the rest of the competitors, but finds that the sea no longer easily yields this treasure. Competitors on the beach were looking for amber pieces as big as shirt buttons planted by the organizers. "The whole thing was as exhilarating as a grape-peeling competition" she grumbles. The local supply of amber comes from a mine in an ex-Soviet Gulag "even bleaker than I had expected." It is a constant theme: gems may sparkle, full of richness, but the areas from which they are extracted are grimly impoverished. Finlay has mined the historic literature for good stories; her debunking of the story of the curse of the Hope Diamond, for instance, is hilarious. She has also gone to the countries involved with each gem, and literally

descended into the mines. She has funny stories, like being in a taxi stalled for an elephant parade in Sri Lanka (elephant parades are good for the sapphire business, as such a gem that has been worn on an elephant tusk is believed to have been blessed by Buddha himself). She has undergone no small amount of risk on these excursions. She has skillfully interviewed sometimes reticent subjects within the mines or within the business of bringing jewels to market, and employs judiciously the colorful anecdote. The historic and social results of our fascination for these useless rocks ("You can't eat them, you can't read them, you can't shelter under them ..." she quotes a Burmese taxi driver as saying) are on display here, as colorful and surprising as any of the gems themselves.

For anyone who is interested in the fascinating story of some of the world's most popular types of jewels, this book is for you. For anyone who is interested in visiting little known and remote parts of our planet, this book is for you. For anyone who is interested in better understanding why people are mesmerized by beautiful objects and why other people undertake dangerous jobs to find them, this book is for you. The author not only shares the fascinating history of how these jewels have been used throughout history but she tells the even more fascinating story of those who make their livings finding and selling them. Ms Finlay has not let distance or danger inhibit her desire to see first hand where the gems come from and to speak with those who spend, and often risk, their lives in their pursuit. Their stories are as interesting and varied as the stones themselves. Like Patrick Leigh Fermor and other top travel writers, this author seems to be able to put almost anyone at ease and entice them to tell her their stories with amazing candor. She has then been able to blend historical facts and current circumstances into a really fascinating read. For me, her quest was really to better understand why jewels which, while beautiful, are basically useless command so much time, effort and even in some cases human lives in their production. After reading this book I believe that each person will be able to form their own answer to this question.

"Throughout Asia and Europe, pearls were traditionally believed to ease a range of conditions, including eye diseases, fever, insomnia, 'female complaints', dysentery, whooping cough, measles, loss of virility, and bed-wetting ... Though nobody seems to advertise the potential for pearls to cure bed-wetting anymore." - Victoria Finlay in JEWELS JEWELS is one of those delicious volumes you read for the pure pleasure of acquiring esoteric knowledge that has no practical, everyday use. Similar books I've read that come to mind include *Salt: A World History*, *PURE KETCHUP* PB, *Robbing the Bees: A Biography of Honey--The Sweet Liquid Gold that Seduced the World*,

andÂ Death by Black Hole: And Other Cosmic Quandaries. If someone has penned a narrative entitled WIRE COAT HANGERS, I'd read that too if the subject was made interesting. (There isn't; I checked.) Author Finlay's approach is to discuss nine gemstones, three "organic" and six mineral, in the order of their position on Mohs' Scale of Relative Hardness. They are, listed by increasing hardness: amber, jet, pearl, opal, peridot, emerald, sapphire, ruby, and diamond. (On Mohs' scale, talc occupies position #1, i.e. the softest. My wife treasures her pressed talc engagement ring.) Finlay, a social anthropologist turned journalist, is no desk-bound researcher. To write JEWELS, the story of the various gems' sources and evolution in societal value systems, she traveled the world: Kaliningrad Oblast (Russian Federation), northern England, Japan, Australia, Arizona, Egypt, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and, perhaps the hardest to access, Antwerp's Diamond Club. The book begins with European, Asian, Japanese, and Australian "treasure" maps. Indeed, on asking what to look out for prior to visiting the remote site of Cleopatra's emerald mines in Egypt's desolate interior mountains, she was told, "Scorpions." JEWELS contains an 8-page section of color photos as well as a liberal sprinkling of black and white snaps and illustrations. Oddly, it's the color section that comes up short, a fact which compels me to award 4 stars to what would otherwise be a five-star effort. Only examples of amber, pearl, opal, and diamond are pictured. There is no display of jet, peridot, emerald, sapphire, or ruby; I, an ignoramus when it comes to the topic, had to resort to the Internet. And there are no photos of two of the largest and most famous diamonds of history specifically mentioned in the text: the Cullinan(s) and the Golden Jubilee. Moreover, the Hope Diamond is given visual short-shrift considering its fame. JEWELS concludes with a 19-page, perhaps useful "Miscellany of Jewels", which includes a glossary of terms, color scale and clarity terms for diamonds, a listing of American state gemstones, popular vs. mineral names for gemstones, Mohs' Scale, and a listing of birthstones. "Miscellany" is certainly the operative term. Victoria's narrative is instructive and entertaining from start to finish. Except for the deficiency mentioned, one could hardly ask for more.

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