



# **Big Coal**

## **The Dirty Secret Behind America's Energy Future**

### **By Jeff Goodell**



**Helen Plum Library**  
Sunday, February 26 at 2pm

**Discussion Leader**  
**Lonnie Morris, Sierra Club**  
(Borrowed books are due Feb. 26)

### **Critical Praise**

*"Big Coal's greatest strength lies in Goodell's ability to tell human stories—how individuals, families and communities are affected by the mining, production, and consumption of coal."---Rocky Mountain News*

### **Author Background**

Jeff Goodell is a contributing editor at *Rolling Stone* and a frequent contributor to the *New York Times Magazine*. He is the author of the New York Times bestseller *Our Story: 77 Hours that Tested Our Friendship and Our Faith*, based on the terrifying hours nine Quecreek miners spent trapped underground; he appeared on Oprah to talk with the miners about their experience. Goodell's first book, *The Cyberthief and the Samurai*, was about the hunt for the notorious computer hacker Kevin Mitnick. His memoir, *Sunnyvale: the Rise and Fall of a Silicon Valley Family*, was a New York Times Notable Book.

### **Book Summary**

In the tradition of Rachel Carson and Eric Schlosser, acclaimed journalist Jeff Goodell travels around the United States to examine the faulty assumptions underlying coal's dominance and to shatter the myth that cheap coal is the energy source for the 21st century. *Big Coal* is an intelligent, frank look at how and why coal has maintained a prominent role in the energy conversation. Through hard-hitting investigative reporting, historical background, and business analysis, Goodell highlights issues all Americans should understand about coal, why we need to care, and what needs to change.

## Discussion Questions

1. Coal mining takes a harsh toll on the land. For example, mountaintop-removal mining has permanently destroyed 1,200 miles of streams, polluted groundwater and rivers, and demolished some 400,000 acres of forest in Appalachia alone. What effect will this destruction of the land have on our general quality of life? Are we trading away too much to have “cheap” electricity? How should we calculate the cost of coal?
2. In America today the coal power industry operates for the most part in the same antiquated configuration envisioned by Samuel Insull at the dawn of the electric age: a state-regulated utility system whereby enormous centralized generating plants supply cheap energy for vast numbers of consumers. What were the benefits of this plan initially, and what are its drawbacks today? Should the infrastructure be reorganized? How? What are some of the obstacles to such a change?
3. Goodell writes, “The fact that most Americans no longer fear that pollution from a coal-fired plant will kill them is both a sign of progress and a dangerous illusion.” Discuss this seeming contradiction.
4. In the epilogue of this book, Goodell calls the coal industry “an empire of denial.” What does this mean?
5. You see ads on TV for clean coal. Is there such a thing as clean coal? How can people protect themselves from disinformation campaigns?
6. Illinois is at risk of becoming more of a coal mining state (with strip mines in southern Illinois and long wall mining in central Illinois) and less of an agricultural state. Coal mining uses the land once to extract coal, altering the landscape, destroying its fertility, streams, and leaving behind waste and destruction. Are we losing too much land to coal? How can we protect Illinois farmland?

## Further Reading & Viewing

### Books

*The End of Oil: on the Edge of a Perilous New World* by Paul Roberts

*Reckoning at Eagle Creek: the Secret Legacy of Coal in the Heartland* by Jeff Biggers

*Storms of My Grandchildren* by James Hansen

### DVD

“Dirty Business: ‘Clean Coal’ and the Battle for Our Energy Future”

