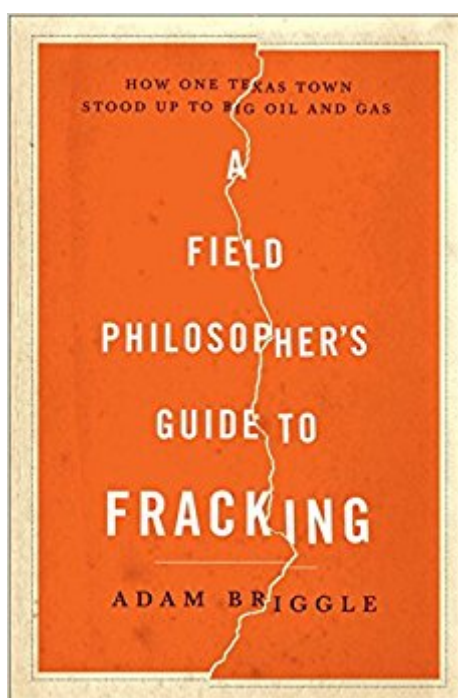


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# A Field Philosopher's Guide To Fracking: How One Texas Town Stood Up To Big Oil And Gas



## Synopsis

From the front lines of the fracking debate, a “field philosopher” explores one of our most divisive technologies. When philosophy professor Adam Briggie moved to Denton, Texas, he had never heard of fracking. Only five years later he would successfully lead a citizens’ initiative to ban hydraulic fracturing in Denton—the first Texas town to challenge the oil and gas industry. On his journey to learn about fracking and its effects, he leaped from the ivory tower into the fray. In beautifully narrated chapters, Briggie brings us to town hall debates and neighborhood meetings where citizens wrestle with issues few fully understand. Is fracking safe? How does it affect the local economy? Why are bakeries prohibited in neighborhoods while gas wells are permitted next to playgrounds? In his quest for answers Briggie meets people like Cathy McMullen. Her neighbors’ cows asphyxiated after drinking fracking fluids, and her orchard was razed to make way for a pipeline. Cathy did not consent to drilling, but those who profited lived far out of harm’s way. Briggie’s first instinct was to think about fracking deeply. Drawing on philosophers from Socrates to Kant, but also on conversations with engineers, legislators, and industry representatives, he develops a simple theory to evaluate fracking: we should give those at risk to harm a stake in the decisions we make, and we should monitor for and correct any problems that arise. Finding this regulatory process short-circuited, with government and industry alike turning a blind eye to symptoms like earthquakes and nosebleeds, Briggie decides to take action. Though our field philosopher is initially out of his element—joining fierce activists like “Texas Sharon,” once called the “worst enemy” of the oil and gas industry—his story culminates in an underdog victory for Denton, now nationally recognized as a beacon for citizens’ rights at the epicenter of the fracking revolution. 16 illustrations

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## Customer Reviews

“Ambitious”. Briggie excels in the abstract. His ability to apply philosophic treatises from Socrates to Hobbes to Kant to the dilemma of the oil and gas boom sweeping this country is admirable. [He] is lucid in describing a system that by anyone’s analysis favors the rights of those who own the oil and gas beneath the ground over those who live atop it. - James Osborne, Dallas Morning News

“Out of the university and into the streets, Briggie brings the practice of ‘field philosophy’ to the question of whether fracking is feckless or feasible. It is a fraught story, but Briggie tells it warmly and cogently, exploring both the interpersonal relationships involved and some of the geological science behind fracking. - Kirkus Reviews, Starred Review

“In this blunt yet hopeful chronology, Briggie confers with scientists, engineers, policy makers, and fellow citizens to gain a broad overview of fracking. Briggie’s philosophical framing of the conversation sets his work apart and helps provide further insight on this divisive topic. - Publishers Weekly

“This rousing account of a great people’s victory is also the occasion for some real reflection about the mad push forward now degrading the planet in deep and desperate ways. - Bill McKibben, author of Deep Economy

“As extreme energy extraction moves next to backyards and playgrounds, where do we draw the line between reasonable risk and recklessness? You owe it to your children and your grandchildren to read this book. - Helen Slottje, architect of the New York state fracking ban and winner of the Goldman Environmental Prize

“Briggie offers a compelling look at the environmental issues and a broader look at citizen engagement in ethics and social policy. - Vanessa Bush, Booklist

“Through the story of Denton and his theory of innovation, Briggie shows us how the Texas government is a subsidiary of oil and gas corporate interests, not a government ‘of, by, or for the people.’ - Lon Burnham, former representative for Texas House District 90

“Briggie beautifully captures how the mad rush to drill and frack this country has led to one of the fastest-growing grassroots movements in American history. When we finally ban fracking across the world, it will be because strong communities like Denton, Texas, showed us the way. - Josh Fox, director of Gasland and Gasland 2

Adam Briggles teaches philosophy at the University of North Texas in Denton, where he also serves on a citizens' advisory group. He contributes to Slate, Salon, Truthout, and other publications. His work and the Denton story have been featured in the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, BBC, NPR, Washington Post, and Newsweek.

Reading Adam's book has given me a valuable perspective on the issue of Fracking that I have not found anywhere else.

I first heard of Briggles' book by way of C-SPAN's Book-TV. Having long been concerned about fracking, I was impressed with his oral presentation and ordered the book immediately. To his credit, he explores both sides of the issue throughout the full spectrum of choices citizens have concerning the issue of fracking. Philosopher Briggles opens with an epigraph from Goethe's *Faust*, which I cannot possibly translate, so I offer up what two different auto-translate sources seem to do with it. *Da ich erkenne was die Welt im Innersten zusammenhält* It That I know what the world (Google Translator) At the core holds together The fact that I recognize what the world In the most inner holds together (Reverso) From the start Briggles, a philosophy professor at the University of North Texas in Denton, is trying to convey what his book will be about: an ancient struggle, which continues today, between those who have little power (David) to stand up against those who seem to possess it all (Godzilla). His narrative is part memoir, part science, part philosophy, and part sociopolitical. He sets it motion by relating how he first comes to know what fracking is. Pushing his son's swing at Denton's McKenna Park in 2009, he chats with a young mother, who matter-of-factly informs him that the area next to the park, open ranch land, is soon to have three new gas wells. In some ways how else can a philosopher examine this situation except through the lens of his specialty? Such a lens offers a logical and sensible view, not often held by proponents of fracking. "Fracking exemplifies the technological wager, by which I mean a gamble or even a faith that we can transform the world in the pursuit of narrowly defined goals and successfully manage the broader unintended consequences that result. In many ways, we are gambling on present innovations. I think that if we are to live with high technology we cannot avoid this wager. The question is whether we can establish conditions to make it a fair and reasonable bet. In the case of fracking, I will argue, these conditions are largely not in place" (3). In other words, hydraulic fracturing of regions deep within the earth for the purpose of sucking out energy in the form of gas is perfectly acceptable to oil and gas companies,

no matter what the cost. Our children and their children, state the corporations, will have to figure out how to correct any mistakes we make, if any. But Briggles book is also, as I said, part science. He walks us through the ugly steps of the fracking process. First, pieces of heavy equipment deface the land. Then millions of gallons of fresh water are mixed with toxic chemicals, forced back into the earth to shake loose the shale, and then disposed of once again by pumping it deeper into the earth once the process is complete for now the water cannot be filtered and purified for reuse, because it has been so utterly polluted. Next, at certain times these toxic chemicals leak into the air, and if you live downwind, they can complicate, in the least, chronic breathing problems such as asthma, and at worst, after multiple exposures, cause more dire conditions. He provides proof of how the groundwater in Denton and the surrounding counties is being depleted, often with little or no remuneration to ANYONE. To the big companies the water is "free" part of their ownership of the mineral rights to what lies below the soil which a family may have owned for generations. And I have mentioned neither the number of "earthquakes" that plague Oklahoma and North Texas nor the noise that pollutes 24/7, once the well is being constructed. Neither one of which is a minor consideration for urban life. The sociopolitical aspect of this book may provide its most prominent strand, as Adam Briggles relates the struggle of Dentons Drilling Awareness Group (DAG) an amalgam of Democrats, Republicans, and Libertarians who battle Godzilla to keep their city fracking free. The years-long crusade results in a referendum which appears on the ballot in November 2014. Briggles and his associates debate the issues with the Big Boys in every possible venue. Thugs make threatening phone calls. They are sneered at or spat upon by local gentry, who believe a ban on fracking, among other things, will cause Dentons merchants to lose millions of dollars in revenue. Close to the end of the ballot count, the numbers are 9,000 in favor of the ban on fracking and 6,000 against. When pro-bans are sure theyve won the victory, there is much rejoicing on the part of those who have for many years sacrificed time, energy, and sleep. Briggles and his wife even spend the night in a hotel room, having been informed that their house might not be safe if the ban goes into effect. In the acknowledgements, Briggles writes that immediately following the election, several oil and gas companies file lawsuits against the city of Denton. And Governor-elect Greg Abbott and his cronies have vile words for them, as well. "I dont know how things will turn out, but I do know that I have been educated and inspired by my journey as a field philosopher in Denton" (284), Briggles concludes, er, uh, philosophically. On election day, Briggles monitors one of the polling stations for twelve hours

to make sure there are no shenanigans by the opposition, and he speaks with a young man who fracks wells in West Texas. He wants to know why DAG wants a ban in the first place. When Briggie explains that the companies plan to frack within the city limits, the young man says, "Are they fracking in the city? That's crazy," (277). From his mouth to . . . Godzilla's ears. Adam Briggie's book is a candid yet uplifting read! Get it. Read it. Give it to your friends. Seriously.

Very well written. Helps show the horror of fracking - loss of water wells, property values dropping to low levels. Shows the truth about "Big Oil's" lies about safety - very similar to the cigarette industry - and shows the unfortunate truth that the EPA really does not seem to care about our water and air. Everyone who is about to go to war with local, state and federal governments to stop current fracking and BAN the practice before permanent danger to the nation's water supplies for a small fast return for a few people at the risk of us all.

I learned a lot about fracking and immensely enjoyed reading this book. To find out about how locals in the town of Denton, TX fought the "big guys" of oil and gas production and won is truly inspiring. The book is well written and informative as well as an interesting story with personal vignettes which make it an enjoyable read. I would highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the subject of fracking and its environmental consequences.

Author tackled this very complex and confusing topic in a way that informed the reader while inserting light and very human stories about his and his family's journey through several years of trying to make his city a safe and healthy place to live. A very readable book.

This is a wonderful account of the struggle of a Texas city in the heart of the Barnett Shale to fight the power structure promoting hydraulic fracturing in their city. Against all odds of being outspent and in a region with an entrenched and powerful industry, the grassroots movement was able to get a vote passed to outlaw the practice in their city.

This is a lively story about environmental activism told at several different levels. The narrative about how Denton TX came to adopt a moratorium on 'fracking' new gas wells provides a vehicle for the author to describe his own personal experience in learning about fracking, starting out as a new

resident of Denton, becoming a somewhat neutral 'field philosopher' in a sort of non-participant observer role on the issue of fracking, and evolving into a fully committed environmental activist. He also explores the practical and emotional aspects of how a group of underdogs can manage to defeat a behemoth. At each step along the way, he conducts an internal dialogue about how what he is learning, thinking, and doing comports with the thoughts of great philosophers over time. He creates a conceptual framework that differentiates between a 'proactionary' approach to managing technology (act first, study later) and a 'precautionary' approach (study first, act later). My one surprise in the book is that the author does not explicitly delve into the economic concept of externalities, which is another valid way of addressing the environmental and health impacts of a profit-making activity. He explores the impacts of fracking thoroughly, and he points out that when and if solutions for all of its negative consequences are imposed on the drilling company that it may no longer be economically feasible to pursue, but he does not explore how this might work. Finally, he paints a very attractive portrait of Denton, while depicting the appalling laissez faire attitude toward business regulation by the State of Texas.

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