



HOW OUR OBSESSION WITH STUFF
IS TRASHING THE PLANET,
OUR COMMUNITIES, AND OUR HEALTH
—AND A VISION FOR CHANGE

Annie Leonard
Host of the Internet film sensation
The Story of Stuff
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We have a problem with Stuff. With just 5 percent of the world's population, we're consuming 30 percent of the world's resources and creating 30 percent of the world's waste. If everyone consumed at U.S. rates, we would need three to five planets! This alarming fact drove Annie Leonard to create the Internet film sensation *The Story of Stuff*, which has been viewed over 10 million times by people around the world.

In her sweeping, groundbreaking book of the same name, Leonard tracks the life of the Stuff we use every day—where our cotton T-shirts, laptop computers, and aluminum cans come from, how they are produced, distributed, and consumed, and where they go when we throw them out. Like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, *The Story of Stuff* is a landmark book that will change the way people think—and the way they live.

Leonard's message is startlingly clear: we have too much Stuff, and too much of it is toxic. Outlining the five stages of our consumption-driven economy;from extraction through production, distribution, consumption, and disposal;she vividly illuminates its frightening repercussions.

Visiting garbage dumps and factories around the world, Leonard reveals the true story behind our possessions; why it's cheaper to replace a broken TV than to fix it; how the promotion of "perceived obsolescence" encourages us to toss out everything from shoes to cell phones while they're still in perfect shape; and how factory workers in Haiti, mine workers in Congo, and everyone who lives and works within this system pay for our cheap goods with their health, safety, and quality of life.

Meanwhile we, as consumers, are compromising our health and well-being, whether it's through neurotoxins in our pillows or lead leaching into our kids' food from their lunchboxes—and all this Stuff isn't even making us happier! We work hard so we can buy Stuff that we quickly throw out, and then we want new Stuff so we work harder and have no time to enjoy all our Stuff. . . .

With staggering revelations about the economy, the environment, and cultures around the world, alongside stories from her own life and work, Leonard demonstrates that the drive for a "growth at all costs" economy fuels a cycle of production, consumption, and disposal that is killing us.

It is a system in crisis, but Annie Leonard shows us that *this is not the way things have to be*. It's within our power to stop the environmental damage, social injustice, and health hazards caused by polluting production and excessive consumption, and Leonard shows us how. Expansive, galvanizing, and sobering yet optimistic, *The Story of Stuff* transforms how we think about our lives and our relationship to the planet.

The Story of Stuff: How Our Obsession with Stuff is Trashing the Planet, Our Communities, and our Health—and a Vision for Change Details

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Tammy says

This book goes way beyond exhorting readers to recycle (in fact, author Annie Leonard actually speaks the heresy that recycling carries some negative implications). This book follows our Stuff from extraction to production to distribution to consumption to disposal.

The result is a horror story. It is a story in which I'm completely implicated – to my great discomfort, because I like my Stuff.

I found reading the book uncomfortable – like watching a documentary about things that are horrible and bring great moral outrage, but are so big and systemic that one can do nothing about them. Really, it's a shame, an absolute shame and horror what we're doing to this earth. This litany of horrors is endless, discouraging, and compellingly presented.

And to make it even more uncomfortable, that “we” includes me. I see more clearly now that I have truly bought into a consumerist lifestyle and attitude. My particular consumerism doesn't include McMansions, or multiple cars, or ostentatious living. But I still consume and waste so very easily. This book brought that fact home.

Yet the strength of The Story of Stuff is that it focuses on the big picture. The book is best read in increments. I found that the story became more compelling as it begins to pick up where I entered the picture as a consumer.

Read this book and you'll never look at your stuff the same way.

Nick Klagge says

I had hesitated to read this book because I had already watched AL's "Story of Stuff" video online, and thought maybe it would be redundant. But I'm glad I checked it out! Although it covers a lot of the same ground, there is plenty of interesting stuff in it.

In this book, AL talks about so many different things in our lives that are bad for the environment that it can be a little overwhelming. During the early parts of the book I kept having the feeling that I wanted her to triage it a little, tell me which things were the worst that I should focus on not getting/using. But later in the book, I came to appreciate that she didn't do this. It became clear that this was to some extent intentional. AL makes it clear that she does not think we can shop our way to ecotopia. The true message is that the catalog of environmental horrors really is too long for individual choices to make a big difference, and that structural and legal change is also needed. AL does a good job of talking about things one can do better, but never losing sight of the fact that collective action is also necessary.

One concept that I found novel and interesting was "extended producer responsibility" or EPR. This is the idea that producers, rather than consumers (or municipalities) should be held responsible for the safe disposal of the waste created by their products. I had never heard of this before, and it's a big mental shift, but it makes a lot of economic sense. Waste disposal, and particularly safe waste disposal, is a major cost of consumption that is basically externalized onto municipalities. Economically speaking efficiency will be improved if this cost has to be paid by the producer or the consumer (it doesn't matter which, in theory, since prices will adjust); it makes more sense for it to be the producer because bookkeeping is simplified and because the producer is more able to exercise control over the set of available products. It sounds like it would be difficult to implement, but there are already places where companies have done it voluntarily (think about laptop producers that will take your old one back if you mail it in) as well as involuntarily (she discusses the EPR program for drink containers in Germany).

From reading this book, I got really excited about trying to repair my laptop myself. I have an old Macbook from 2008, which is coming up on its 8th birthday! For the most part it still runs fine; the main problem is that the battery is wearing out and will only hold an couple of hours of charge. I learned a lot about how electronics are intentionally made difficult to service yourself, to encourage you to either pay the manufacturer very high prices to service it for you, or to just get you to throw it out and buy a new one--this is especially the case with laptops, tablets, and smartphones. I did a bunch of research though and learned that my model of Macbook is one of the last ones that is relatively easy to service yourself. And since it is eight years old, I don't need to worry about voiding the warranty! I had been thinking about whether it was time to get a new laptop or tablet, but now I'm going to stubbornly see how long I can keep this one running in good condition. At worst, if I screw it up, I'll just have to buy a new one like I was already considering. First step will be the battery; if that goes well, I might also try upgrading the RAM and replacing the hard drive with a solid state drive. Should be fun and educational! If you are interested in learning about DIY electronics repair, check out ifixit.com...I spent a bunch of time on there.

Lia says

So, I've just read the opening pages of the book, and I thought she was doing really well at setting up how our pursuit of stuff will ruin us. However, even after making an excellent point that all human systems are subsystems of the earth's systems, she still makes the error that I think sabotages environmentalists everywhere. She claims that we are killing the planet. I don't think we have the capacity to kill the planet. I think the earth will easily outlast us, whatever we do. The thing we ARE doing is making the planet uninhabitable for US. That's what we're doing. I think this is a message that more people would respond to, since many people are numb to damages caused to the earth and its species. Anyway ... I'll keep reading, but it was disappointing to see her swap her systems right after getting them in order. The earth has outlasted many disasters. It can outlast us. Life may be different then, but it will still evolve and adapt.

UPDATE: Okay, so I read further in the book and I found that the author has a bad habit. When she is presenting her information, she will often tell it in such a way that it makes her point "stronger," but when the point is actually looked at, well, it falls apart.

For Example: She does an example of how it takes 98 tons of material to produce 1 ton of paper. Then she goes on about how wasteful that is. Okay, so let me give a counter example. Let's say I want to make a little pouch to keep things in. In order to do that, I need to acquire some fabric, thread, a sewing machine, a table to put the sewing machine on, a chair to sit on while I run it, a pair of sheers to cut the fabric, some little scissors to snip the threads with, some pins to hold the fabric together, and a piece of ribbon or something to

thread through the top to close the pouch (or a zipper or clasp or whatever). So ... to get myself a little pouch, I need soooooooooo much more stuff than the little pouch by itself. Isn't that wasteful?

But here's the thing: I'm going to use that table, chair, thread, sewing machine, scissors, pins, etc., again and again and again as I make more things. The same holds true with MUCH of that 98 tons of material to produce 1 ton of paper. So, why doesn't she tell us how much of those 98 tons are only used once? Because then her point wouldn't be so overblown.

And that, I think, is the downfall of the book. She doesn't trust her information enough, so she gets a little frantic about it and ends up not quite telling the truth in enough instances that the alert reader begins to grow wary and wonder if sources need to be checked. This shouldn't have to be the case. Especially when someone who already believes that we should consume so much less and change how we govern things in the world (me) feels skeptical while reading about this very topic.

Now, before I finish off, I want to say that she DOES say some very good things in this book. I liked how she showed that big companies like Nike don't make shoes, they *brand* shoes. They *market* shoes. Apple does the same thing. They don't *make* electronics. They brand them and market them. It's a good revelation of how the systems all work (or don't work). So, yes, she says good things, but I found that I couldn't relax and trust her, so I gave up on the book. Alas.

Trevor says

I haven't seen this film – I will probably need to track it down now. This brings together a lot of things I have been thinking about lately in ways I have also been coming to slowly. However, it was just about the last place I expected to find some of these ideas. What I was expecting was a kind of sermon on the death of the planet (which it almost was in part) – in the modern world it is environmentalists who are cast as the 'hell-fire and brimstone' preachers ("I've seen the light – I will do my recycling") and possibly our dentists and Weight Watchers who are like the new 'father confessors'. ("Yes father, and toffee and the occasional sugary drink – I promise to do two Our Flossings every day")

The best of this book is that it points out that we are not going to save the world piecemeal. This is not a matter of one piece of garbage at a time. As she so beautifully points out, if saving the planet needs to wait until everyone agrees to do something then we are lost – there is no hope. Just as there would have been no end to slavery if we had to wait until everyone agreed to end it.

The distinction here is that the society we have created for ourselves – a society that is obsessed onto death with stuff – is one that is literally killing us all. It is poisoning the air we breathe, it is making us responsible even when we buy shoes for the exploitation of third world children, it has the blood of nations on our hands so we can drive our SUVs and, at the same time, it is working us to death to afford this crap.

As she points out, we are generally at our happiest when we are with friends and family. Imagine us needing to be told something like that – I mean, think about that for a second. Postman says somewhere that much of social research is about finding ways to get paid for stating the blindingly obvious. But the sick part of our society is that we are killing the planet so as to own stuff we don't even want and in the process are killing ourselves at work so that we can get the money we need that will pay for the stuff we don't need and all that does is keeps us away from the people who really do make us happy. Hardly a virtuous cycle.

We are living in the age of trinket capitalism – where far too much of our economic capacity is directed at producing crap no one needs so we can claim we have economic growth. And this fabled growth can only be defined ‘growth’ on the very limited terms on which GDP is framed.

I really don’t know enough about Economics, but what I do know is that it ought to be the study of incentives. I’ve really resisted this concept for too long. But we have created a system where there are too many perverse incentives. A world where it is cheaper to swallow mountains for low-grade coal than to invest in renewable energy AND where wasting resources on superfluous packaging, endless advertising and pointless ‘one use’ containers creates replacement mountains of junk.

We live in a society where the hollow word ‘freedom’ is used to justify every excess and so contorted that the very concept is lost. Where the notion of freedom is exhausted in the choice between fresh mint or spearmint toothpaste we really have given up our birth right too cheaply. Remember when we were citizens? No, probably not. Not now we are merely customers and clients. Customers can only feel they are always right by limiting the range of choices they have right down to where our every choice becomes actually wrong. We have to demand to be more than just customers – we need to demand our right to be citizens again.

We need to create incentives that encourage us to more equitably share our wealth and resources. A world where the US has 5% of the population but 20% of the world’s wealth is only sustainable by force and endless wars. The joke is that not only will this sharing make the planet better off, but it will make us better off too.

We need to reinvent that other C word – not only do we need to become better citizens (or rather, to become citizens again) but we need to do that by re-forming our communities.

One of the most distressing images I’ve seen recently in Australian politics has been the leader of the opposition protesting against the introduction of a carbon tax (that is, something designed to place a cost on carbon to thereby use market mechanisms to account for externalised costs – something a market fundamentalist ought to surely understand) by standing at a petrol station with petrol pump in one hand filling up oversized cars and complaining the tax will make petrol more expensive. Well, imagine that, a limited and diminishing resource might finally cost more per litre than milk. Clearly, we live in a world with perverse incentives that this man – a racist hell bent on killing the planet – can be the alternative leader of the country. No wonder the civilised West needs to spend decades and billions propping up tyrants only to bomb them into submission later to keep the flow of oil coming. We don’t need to worry about how the future will judge us – it is all too obvious.

Something I read recently suggested that a four degree increase in world temperatures will mean a human population of about half a billion. We currently have nearly 7 billion people on this planet. Is that a subtraction problem that disturbs you or not?

We need to do fundamental renovations to our society – we need to do so much more than just recycling. The solutions we need to find are political, not motivational. They need to be tackled by us as citizens, not as merely consumers.

Read this book.

Sylvia says

Overall, this is a pretty useful and interesting read, but her dismissive tone (why would anyone want to watch TV when they could instead have a nice conversation with friends!?!?) and failure to acknowledge her privilege really turned me off. I found some of her critiques really unpersuasive, especially with regard to online services/retailers and why and how people engage in fashion.

Also, Annie Leonard/her editors do not know the difference between rein vs. reign and positive vs. negative feedback loops.

Melissa says

This book is one of my favorites of the year. Anything that makes me think deeply automatically gets an extra star from me. I am very glad I read this book because I learned so much from it.

This book is very well written, thought provoking, and depressing, with research done to support the points that the author is trying to make throughout the book. Also, it is a pretty easy read and not at all confusing so that anyone can understand the points brought up. A book like Development and Social Change: A Global Perspective (which is also one of my favorites) is a good book to read, but it might be confusing to some people who don't really understand things like what the WTO is or who don't really know much about sociology. Annie Leonard mentions things like the WTO in her book, but she explains things simply so that anyone can understand what these things are and how they work in our world.

Basically and what I liked about this book is that she is trying to show us how the way our global economy works is extremely harmful to our planet and to also ourselves. Most people just assume that the way we live is the correct way, is the best way, and don't take time to consider the effects that this way of living can bring and are bringing. What if things were different? What is the actual value of living in this planet? What is the value of ourselves? Is constantly shopping, consuming, having a lot of material things, etc. really the best way to live? What makes us important? Is this way of living really the most important thing in the world? Is economic success what we should all strive for?

No, it's not. The way our system works is essentially destroying us and unfortunately it has caused a lot of damage to our planet already. Damage that either can't be fixed quickly enough or that simply can't be fixed at all. A lot of the damage done has been directly linked to the way we produce and consume things. We, who live in the U.S. might not see this damage at all or right away, but if you go around the world, you will see how many people are affected by our global economy. You will see how they suffer simply because our self worth, our happiness in life has been placed on the consumption of a lot of stuff. We have been made to feel like outsiders if, for example, we don't wear clothes that are in fashion or have the latest technology. With advertisements and other forms of media, we are made to think that this is the most important thing and we absolutely need to get new clothes, new gadgets, etc. when we actually don't. This is known as perceived obsolescence. And this was actually planned by corporations because for a lot of them, the most important thing is to keep the economy going, to keep you buying things so that they can keep making money, without regard to how the production of these things is harmful to you and to other people throughout the world.

For example, those who work in factories in some parts of the world are exposed to a lot of harmful chemicals that not only damage their health, but also because these toxins cling on to their clothes and things, they bring these toxins home which also harms their families. Most corporations know this and don't really care. And is that wasn't enough, most of the time, the garbage that we produce is taken to other countries and dumped there. Which contaminates their water, their air, and seriously damages their health.

Another thing I liked about this book, is that Annie Leonard tells us some things we can do to make a change. So even though this book is depressing in a lot of ways, at least we know that not all hope is lost. We can make some change, if we look for it and we fight for it. We don't have to keep living this way. As she says, it doesn't make sense to live this way, when there are more important things in life, like the relationships we establish with people, the experiences we live. So why should we keep up this crazy, consumer lifestyle?

I recommend that everyone and anyone that can, read this book because ultimately it has to do with our planet and our lives. Something that is worth so much more than the amount of stuff we have. This book will open your eyes and inform you. And if you don't have time to read it, you can always watch the short film. Here's the link: <http://youtu.be/9GorqroigqM>

Jenny says

I assigned *The Story of Stuff* to my college level writing class because they were focusing on environmental policy in their freshmen cluster classes. This book prompted a lot of good discussions about buying practices and our consumerist society and it did make some of my students question their habits but it also resulted in some of them feeling frustrated and overwhelmed with the wealth of problems out there. By the end, I had a few of them facetiously say, "I'm tired of the environment!"

The thesis of this book is Americans have too much stuff and we need to stop producing and buying so much stuff. Annie Leonard includes the expected descriptions of unfair labor practices, environmental pollution and degradation, horror stories of children working in mines, and workers toiling in dangerous clothing factories. We should never forget that workers and communities that work in and live near factories are almost always poor and minorities. She makes a very powerful argument and while reading this book I found myself declaring, "I will not buy any gold! I will only buy used clothes! I will not waste water!" I also appreciated her discussion of the insidiousness of planned obsolescence. You know how you can't replace that iPod battery when it wears out so you have to buy a new one? Or how it's cheaper to buy a new television than to fix your old one? Yeah, that's planned obsolescence and companies do it on purpose. The origins of this "designed for the dump" concept are pretty fascinating. I also liked that she asks us to question cultural expectations like for example the diamond engagement ring. If your fiancé doesn't buy you a diamond are you or your friends going to think they are a cheap shmuck? It's almost impossible to source non-conflict diamonds and I liked that she never says, "Don't get a diamond!" she says instead, "Buy a used one." She understands people still expect things like a diamond but she asks that we be mindful of our choices.

I chose this book because it was engaging, relevant, and very accessible. Leonard is not just telling the reader

that we are running out of resources but also showing us how we take so much for granted. She interjects much of the information and data in the book with her new found appreciation for her stuff and the steps she's taken to reduce the amount of stuff she buys with. She gives us doable suggestion like avoiding PVCs and pressuring manufacturers to make changes and some that are not doable like giving up coffee and installing a pit toilet. While it isn't exactly a handbook, it does contain a lot of useful information and I appreciated that she is totally optimistic in her outlook and her voice is that of an encouraging life coach.

I learned if you liked it then you shoulda put a ring on it but there better not be a diamond on that ring.

Jonathan Lu says

at first i couldn't wait to pick this up... finally a book on the environmental impact of consumerism written by an environmental scientist! very quickly you realize that there is zero science beneath these pages.

I give this book 1 star solely because of the introductory chapter which does offer an appropriate representation of the current state of affairs in the US with just a slightly alarmist hint... which then gradually (and substantially) evolves to use of statistics and numbers for fear-mongering and extraordinarily partisan diatribes. Nothing Miss Leonard reports is fabricated, just highly 1-sided (and overwhelmingly elitist) with zero touch of realism.

Yes there may be many downsides to use of PVC or polysilicates... but to present from a perspective of "anyone who makes PVC-containing products is evil" or "Dow Chemical and Union Carbide are worse than Hitler" without providing any context as to why some chemicals are used today (yes there are actually very good reasons) or why people/companies make the decisions that they do (no, greed is not the only reason) is inappropriate and irresponsible. The "solutions" that Leonard offer are just as out of touch - we need to slow production lines down in order to decrease pollution (umm, yes that idea has no downside or impact to adverse impact on peoples' lives?), we need to ban PVC altogether (and... those who cannot afford alternative materials, sorry your kids don't deserve to have a backpack?), we need to decrease water consumption, decrease pollution, and increase recycling (brilliant! no thoughts on the "how", just a rigid "what"?).

This book is a great example of how it's not just those on the far right who see the world in black & white, but those on the far left are equally as bad. If written from the perspective of understanding, real-world practicality, and focus on solutions rather than unilateral griping, perhaps we could get somewhere. This book simply argues rather than presents an argument, has almost no ground in reality as takes no consideration into trade-offs. No capitalism is not perfect, but to consider it as purely terrible is just as wrong as considering socialism as purely terrible. I guess that we Americans just have to feel bad that our culture is wrong then and her way of life is the only one that can work... I do hope that at least Miss Leonard can find a way to marry Europe since she loves it so much.

Mikhaela says

Ah, yes--THIS is the book I've been waiting to read forever--I wish this had been around when I had taken Juliet Schor's "Shop Til You Drop: Gender and Class in Consumer Culture" course back in college. A smart, clear activist breakdown of our toxic materials economy and the massive and devastating environmental

impact of consumption on the health of workers, the planet, consumers, communities, animals, etc... and what we can do about it.

Instead of the obnoxious and ineffective "personal green lifestyle purity" approach--where we're all supposed to just personally and voluntarily recycle and do research and buy "better" products, etc--Annie wants to fix the whole broken system itself, and put responsibility for the environmental and human rights and health disaster that is our current consumption-driven paradigm where it truly belongs. Which isn't to say she lets individuals off the hook--she encourages us to act as citizens, and not consumers, to agitate to take apart our broken systems and create a new sustainable future--before it's too late. Super inspiring, an easy read, and even entertaining, if terrifying, at times--I recommend this book to EVERYONE.

JC says

This book has made me rethink my choices daily. I am one of those people that plays consumer regularly, doesn't think about what I am throwing away and what effects my actions have on the environment. This book has opened my eyes to the fact that I need to understand the choices and how they are impacting the future of the earth. This book goes through how stuff is created and used from the very beginning of when forests are cut down or water is used all the way through to when you throw it out and it goes in that huge landfill. It is pretty disgusting how much trash we generate and throw out. Honestly, I couldn't believe it. I already have a list of things that I can change and do better with from this book. I want to start composting and reusing more. Recycling is alright, but I want to find better alternatives first. On top of that I will be making more conscience decisions about what I buy at the store and what products I use. I'm afraid that we're going to meet an unhappy reality in about 10 years unless corporations and the government start making huge changes.

???????????????????? says

so biased and data-misrepresenting.

Colleen says

If you're thinking that you might need to read this, that's probably a good indication that you don't. Are you for the environment? For human rights protections? Concerned with consumerist culture and overconsumption? Concerned about the steady increase in garbage and where it all goes? Are you for progress and against war? For time spent with other humans rather than with stuff? If so, you don't need to read this. The point is to explain to people why they should think about these things. If you haven't thought about these things before, this is the book for you. Or you could watch her 20 minute documentary on youtube. Or even better, you could watch George Carlin's bit on "their stuff is shit and your shit is *stuff*", it's only 5 minutes and it's classic (she even references him): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4x_Qk...

So the book seems to be preaching to the choir. It's also written at about an 8th grade level; she defines "ecosystem" and explains that we need the planet to live. She has a whole chapter on vocabulary, explaining what she means by "consumption", "corporation", and even "Americans" (apologies to Canadians and South Americans; I think she missed an apology to Central Americans). It really feels like a "for Dummies" book.

Still, there is some good info in here. The consumption chapter had some interesting things: for example, the average American has 6.5 credit cards? (Really, that's *average*? I think I'd like to see the distribution underlying that statistic according to income levels.)

Overall, I found that reading the first sentence of every paragraph (occasionally a middle or end one too) was more than enough. Luckily I bought this bit of stuff used and will recycle it through Goodwill. Hopefully an environmentally conscious high school student will find it.

Susan says

I wish the Goodreads rating system had a way to mark "I just couldn't finish it," because I didn't get past the middle of the first chapter with this one.

I had heard an interview with the author on NPR and it was great, so I was very excited and waited for ages to rise to the top of this list and get this from the library. But (a) it turns out to be topics and information that I personally have read, heard, lived and worked for years. It might be a great book for people who don't already link consumerism with capitalism, third world working conditions with first world wealth, and social justice with everything.

My other issue is that the preface was 23 pages long and as dry and boring as could be. I might have liked the book better if I just started with Chapter 1, but I didn't.

A good book for some (if you start with chapter 1, anyway), but not for me.

Luara says

Seria quatro estrelas, mas como o assunto é muito importante, subi pra cinco.

Jenny O. says

"When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."

--John Muir, wilderness advocate

This book may garner intense reactions. You may find yourself vowing to make drastic changes to your life. You may throw the book aside in disgust and chalk it up to environmentalists' hysteria. You might become paralyzed by the staggering scope of problems our industrial complex has created, and simply do nothing and hope a miracle gets us out of this quagmire.

I live in Baytown, Texas. The population here is roughly 70,000. It is the home to one of the biggest oil refinery-complexes in the world: ExxonMobil. It is also home to several other refineries like Chevron

Phillips and Bayer. When you drive about 15 miles southwest on Highway 146 then take the Highway to 225 to Pasadena, you run smack dab into a wall of stench that seems to be a solution of rotten eggs, steamed cauliflower and rubber.

They don't call it Stink-adena for nothing.

And while the industry is the bread and butter for many residents, we are very aware of the environmental implications. The Baytown Nature Center is what was formerly known as the Brownwood Subdivision, an affluent neighborhood in the 1970's. That is, until the ground dropped between 10-15 feet due to a depleted water table. What depleted resources started, Hurricane Alicia finished. The houses were then condemned, the area was vacated for about 20 years, and then ExxonMobil and the community worked together to turn it into a nature preserve.

We know about consumption. We know about waste. We know about depleted natural resources.

But when I read Annie Leonard's book, I could feel a chill go up my spine. And the more I read, the worse I felt.

Annie herself discusses this:

One friend told me me that reading this kind of information actually makes her want to go shopping because it is such a relief to be in a situation where your biggest concern is if your shoes match your purse. People everywhere are experiencing crisis fatigue. Heck, there are flu pandemics, freak storms, unemployment, and foreclosures to worry about. The thing is, we don't have a choice.

No, we don't. We live on this planet, and if it goes, we go. We haven't yet discovered a habitable place for human beings.

And still:

We use 98 tons of various other resources to make 1 ton of paper. Yes, you read that correctly.

The Fresh Kill landfill on Staten Island is said to have a volume comparable to that of The Great Wall of China and is taller than the Statue of Libery.

In trying to reduce our reliance on petrochemicals for fuel, we have destroyed the environment in other ways. Now, tropical rainforest are being cut down in order to creat farmland to grow those very biofuels. You're kidding me right? Sadly, no.

In the US, we spend more than 20 billion dollars on our lawns. Get this: with power motors "so inefficient they 800 millions of gasoline a year."

This is just a small sampling of the facts you will find in here. There are many, many others. You will never look at your cheeseburger in the same way. You will wonder at the true cost of that pair of shoes, or that watch, or this leather purse.

Because it's paid for all right. And not just with your money.

But Leonard isn't just doom and gloom. She actually gives you a list of ways you can help contribute to a better environment.

Reuse. Noting the effects of mineral extraction, the author has her fiancee buy her an antique ring instead of a new one. I really like that idea.

Don't buy teflon nonstick pans. (Did you know their fumes can kill your household birds? What are they doing to your kids?)

Reduce your waste. Buy reusable water bottles.

Compost. Your trash won't stink and your garden might look a little nicer.

Get a clothesline. I have such fond memories of helping my grandmother take down the laundry off the line. I'd love to do that with my girls.

Avoid PVC. period.

And for those of you that would like to take it a bit further, write a letter. To companies, congressmen, your local politicians. Remember they work for you. Leonard even provides a sample letter to PVC retailers, manufacturers, and lobbyists.

We're all together on this rock hurtling through space. Let's take care of our home.

Start with a little. Make a resolution to change one thing. Then add another.

If we all do this, we can start a chain reaction. It's better than sticking our heads in the sand hoping a miracle will save us.

Oh yeah, and stop by The Story of Stuff Project to learn more about ways you can help, check out the author's book tour, and scour through other available resources.

Don't forget to watch the video, either!

*I received this book free of charge from the publisher in exchange for my review. This in no way affects my opinion.

Jim says

I think this is a really important book. There is a lot of bad news, and it is not what we want to hear, but we certainly need to. There is also good news - a long list of positive suggestions, with links, that point the way out of the trash and into a sustainable future.

I read dystopian novels, in part, to get a sense of what horrors the future may hold, and how people can or cannot adapt to them. The fact that many of those books are ripping good reads is also a big attraction. There is also (presumably) some sick fascination for me over the unspeakable crimes against Earth that were (presumably) committed by previous generations, and their ghastly aftermath.

I also read nonfiction books – like this one - about unspeakable crimes against Earth that are being

committed today. I do this to get a sense of 1) why these horrors are happening – in this case, as a ‘cost-effective’ strategy to support a consumer-driven lifestyle and economy; 2) how the perpetrators are getting away with it, and how they might be impeded or stopped; and 3) what steps could be taken to diminish or avoid the dystopian world of those other books.

In *The Story of Stuff*, Annie Leonard has done the world, and the United States in particular, a huge favor. Drawing on her first-hand expertise on the flow of materials through the ‘pipeline’ of extraction/production/consumption, she shows in graphic detail the impossibly stupid way that we are living today, and the disastrous consequences that inevitably follow. She systematically dissects the textbook, business-school model of the production-consumption ‘pipeline’, and then asks and answers the obvious question: what happens to all the Stuff that comes out at the post-consumption end of the pipe? Hmmm.

Short answer: it gets dumped. Somewhere, anywhere, preferably where no one of any ‘importance’ will see it or have the means to stop it. In the textbook model, there is a cost for the act of dumping, but in general there are no costs – on the typical corporate balance sheet under current accounting practice – for the damage to the planet of all the Stuff that gets dumped. And that is a **HUGE** problem.

Leonard also shows that most of the dumping of Stuff actually takes place at earlier stages of the process – the extraction and manufacturing steps, in particular. Furthermore, a lot of toxic crap is put into the products at these stages, and the balance sheets don’t account for the effects of those, either. In general, the companies don’t bother to tell you about the toxins you are buying. In many cases, they are not required to list them on the product labels. Hmmm. A little legislative collusion, perhaps?

This is all very, very bad news - we seldom hear it, and would prefer not to know. That is the way our brains work, and companies know this. But ignorance of such things is not bliss, and knowledge of them is the beginning of power to change. Leonard hammers on both of these messages to great effect.

But the biggest strength of the book, in my view, is the discussion of practical, powerful, and *happening* steps that can begin to turn this monstrosity around. Issue by issue (with cartoon guideposts), she provides examples, practical advice, and links to hundreds of groups that are working in creative ways to right the wrongs. This is all very, very good news. It is also the biggest favor that the author does for the planet (the U.S. in particular).

For a quick (20 minute) guide to the bad news portion of the book, I strongly recommend the online movie that led to the writing of the book. The website has other movies and a lot of useful information, but here is the original movie:

<http://www.storyofstuff.org/movies-al...>

I also recommend the excellent review by Trevor:

<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>

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Here are some quotes (in italics) and summaries to illustrate the bad news/good news quality of the book. I checked the links that are included, and added comments here and there:

In fact, all of us on the planet collectively are consuming more resources than the planet produces each year; we’re consuming about 1.4 planets’ worth of bio-capacity resources annually.

Unfortunately, we only have 1.0 planets.

It's just not going to work. There isn't enough for everyone to consume at this high bar. And if we were to make the selfish and immoral choice of going any farther down that path, then we would have to build bigger walls and fences and hunker down, because it would get ugly. As an official of the U.N. World Food Programme said, "A hungry world is a dangerous world. Without food, people have only three options: They riot, they emigrate or they die."

Sounds a little dystopian, doesn't it?

Lots of specific problems are discussed in the book, and allocation of fresh water is one of them:

Hardly anyone looks at a cotton T-shirt, a car, or a light switch and thinks about water. Virtual water is the amount of water embedded in food or other products based on how much water was needed to extract and produce that item. If you're curious, you can go to www.waterfootprint.org and get a rough calculation of your own water footprint.

My rough calculation from this site was not pretty to look at.

Another problem is how electricity gets made:

I wanted to investigate any links between my own lightbulbs and blowing the tops off of mountains in Appalachia, so I went to the www.ilovemountains.org website, which allows anyone in the United States to type in a zip code and see which mountains were destroyed for your power.

Using this site, I found the mountain that was destroyed to provide my power, assuming that we used the standard provider for this area. Good news – we switched to green alternatives (wind/small hydropower) several years ago. We pay a little more for it, and feel a lot better about it.

A third major problem is the dumping of poisons. Some, but by no means all of these are reported (in the U.S.) in the Toxics Release Inventory (TRI):

Currently about 22,000 industrial and federal facilities are covered in the TRI. In 2007, those facilities reported that 4.1 billion pounds of 650 different toxic chemicals were released into the environment, including both on-site and off-site disposal. The data compiled in the TRI is available to the public through both government and nongovernmental websites. My personal favorite is Scorecard (www.scorecard.org), which allows you to look up major pollution sources and chemicals by zip code.

The scorecard for my county was not good. Here a toxic dump, there a toxic dump.

Now for some good news. For each problem, Leonard discusses ways and means for solving it:

Another revolution in the production of our Stuff is both necessary and possible. With existing and developing approaches, within a decade we could transform today's most destructive processes and eliminate the most toxic ingredients from our factories and products.

Rather than focus on reducing any one population's (like children's) exposure to hazardous chemicals, the simplest solution is to phase out toxics altogether and replace them with safe materials...

She talks about two strategies for doing this: green chemistry and biomimicry:

Pioneering green chemists are designing new materials from the molecular level up to satisfy all our requirements, while also being fully compatible with ecological and human health. To learn more about green chemistry, visit Clean Production Action at www.cleanproduction.org.

The Biomimicry Institute notes, “nature, imaginative by necessity, has already solved many of the problems we are grappling with. After 3.8 billion years of research and development, failures are fossils, and what surrounds us is the secret to survival.”

Imitate nature, and survive.

<http://biomimicryinstitute.org/>

In the meantime, we need ready access to better information about the toxins that are embedded in the products we buy. Leonard discusses a very powerful way to do that:

GoodGuide, a free online searchable database, allows you to get current data on the environmental, social, and health impacts of everyday products and their parent companies. In late 2009, GoodGuide launched its iPhone application that allows shoppers to simply point their phone camera at a product’s bar code and immediately receive environmental and health data on the product, far beyond what any label will reveal. GoodGuide provides all of us massively increased access to information about the supply chains of the products we use, so we can make better choices—better choices for our families, the workers making this Stuff, and the global environment. Some people call this “voting with our dollar.”

This is my strongest recommendation from the book: www.goodguide.com and/or the mobile app. It is a work in progress, but getting better and getting noticed. You can get a toolbar for your browser that will report on products as you look at them, on sites like Amazon and on Google searches. Don’t like the score for your product? Send feedback, with a few mouse clicks and specific comments. And buy a better product, from the list of alternatives that GoodGuide has rated.

Try it; I think you will like it. I canceled an Amazon subscription for an item that had a low GoodGuide score. Amazon asked for a comment about my reasons, and I told them. I also said that I would look for an alternative with a higher GoodGuide score. That easy.

There is much, much more in the book, and on the Story of Stuff Project website.

Highest possible recommendation.

Blair Emsick says

Lots of fascinating facts and info but Leonard comes us as real, Realll snooty at times.. and her overall message that we should work less and buy less is just not possible for us minimum wagers

Leslie says

Americans live in a consumer society. We are constantly bombarded by advertising and encouraged to buy more and more. Purchasing something new is supposed to make us happy. We are even told it's patriotic to shop, spend money, get the economy moving. But how many of us ever think about what it takes to produce all this stuff and ship it to stores or our homes and then haul it off to the dump to dispose of it when we are done with it. After reading *The Story of Stuff*, it's difficult to look at 'stuff' the same way again.

I consider myself a green person. I reduce, reuse, recycle, conserve energy, grow my own veggies, compost everything I can and generally try to be a good citizen of the planet. After reading this book I have learned there is much more to the life cycle of a product than most of us ever realize. The author takes us through the five stages with a chapter on each: Extraction, Production, Distribution, Consumption and Disposal. Each stage consumes resources and creates pollution, and not just here in the US but around the world.

An eye-opener for me was learning that while recycling is good it's not the solution. We are consuming resources faster than the planet can replenish them. The problem is excessive consumption. The author found that when she asked, "Are we consuming too much?", it was not a very popular question. Our economy now depends on consumption at an ever accelerating rate.

As consumers we've become resigned to the fact that our stuff is disposable. It wasn't always this way. Things used to last years and years. Now they are designed with planned obsolescence and fall apart quickly and cannot be repaired. That particularly resonated with me. A few months ago my printer stopped working. This was a perfectly good printer that I really liked and I wanted to get it repaired. Seems simple enough, right? Wrong. The cost to fix it was almost as much as buying a new one. I did some research and in the end I opted to fix it anyway because the ink cartridges it uses are half the cost of the newer models plus this kept my printer out of the landfill. All too often it doesn't work out this way and the item ends up in the dump.

The Story of Stuff is a wealth of information and knowledge on the hidden costs of consumerism and what we can do to make it better. The author presents the facts without being preachy and writes in a humorous and engaging style. Ultimately we have to ask ourselves, does buying more and more stuff make us happier?

Keith Akers says

This is an excellent book. Parts of it are a bit hard to get through; it drags, and the five section headings are perhaps deliberately chosen to be not-exciting: "Extraction," "Production," "Distribution," "Consumption," and "Disposal." I read probably 80%-90% of the whole thing. However, I noticed that it picked up in the last section ("Disposal"), which is evidently Leonard's special expertise and passion. The story about how toxic stuff winds up in Haiti and Bangladesh, and various people's reactions to this, was quite illuminating.

The thing I liked most about the book is that the author understands that there is a connection between our material standard of living and the environment. This seems like an obvious point, but 99% of the population and virtually 100% of our national political leaders don't understand this. We're being promised "green growth" -- we'll still have stuff, but it will somehow be produced without harming the environment. She understands that this is a mirage.

A lot of our materials extraction (not to mention production, distribution, consumption, and disposal) is

dependent on energy supplies, and thus as energy supplies decline or become more expensive, our materials will also decline or become more expensive. I think she understands this point -- she discusses it on pages 29-34 -- but then tends to separate the two issues, saying that solar and wind can pick up the slack.

So let me get this straight: does this mean that we will be able to extract the same amount of materials using clean energy, but shouldn't do so because it would still trash the planet? Or does she think that the whole system of producing stuff will decline as energy supplies decline? It's not clear. If I had written this book, I would have given "peak oil" and "peak coal" a bit more play than they got; and this might have lent a structural theme to what is driving this whole process.

She explicitly excluded food from this process. For me, this is a logical way to proceed; she wants to limit her book to those areas in which she is clearly an expert.

But I look forward to a future book on "The Story of Food." In fact, food is part of our whole extraction, production, distribution, consumption, and disposal process. We extract materials to power our industrialized agriculture, then we produce the food, distribute and consume it (making some people fat, and leaving others without enough to eat), and then dispose of the waste products, which include methane in the atmosphere and water pollution from livestock manure.

One final thing: while I saw the video "The Story of Stuff" before I read this book, what really attracted my attention was "The Story of Cap and Trade." This short video (in the same style as "The Story of Stuff") was quite a bit more controversial within the environmental community, but Leonard was exactly right, of course, and it's this kind of sharp commentary which really shows that this is someone we can respect and admire in the environmental community.

Brenda says

"The Story Of Stuff" is a thought provoking book, but also a bit depressing if you really think about it. Before picking up this book I thought I was doing my part to keep the planet green, I use freecycle regularly to get rid of my unwanted stuff, I also donate to Goodwill, and try to recycle as much as I can, but heck I learned that many of the things that I recycle have toxic material in them, so instead of recycling more I need to try and waste less.

The author does a great job of showing us the true value of the stuff, where it comes from, and what we do with it when we don't want it anymore, I was really surprised at the amount of garbage the average American produces a day, 4.6 pounds per person, while in China that number is only .70 per person. How can we change that, the author shares some easy ideas especially in the Appendix 2, which we can easily incorporate into our daily lives.

I really was middle of the road with this book, while the author has some good ideas, some are very unrealistic, for example her view on e-books, she instead prefers local bookstores that she can walk or ride her bike to, or to use the public library, because she thinks like all other gadgets the e-reader will be updated every few years. I would think we are saving many many trees with the use of e-readers and now most libraries have e-books to lend, and for someone that lives 25 miles from nowhere, well, its a long pedal to the bookstore. So while there is plenty of fuel for thought in this book my approach is to continue doing what I am doing to keep the planet green, even if it doesn't really make any difference at all.

rating 3.75/5

I was provided a complimentary copy of this book by the publisher in exchange for an honest review.
