



Garbage Land: On the Secret Trail of Trash

Elizabeth Royte

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A brilliant exploration into the soiled heart of the American trash can.

Into our trash cans go dead batteries, dirty diapers, bygone burritos, broken toys, tattered socks, eight-track cassettes, scratched CDs, banana peels ... But where do these things go next? In a country that consumes and then casts off more and more, what actually happens to the things we throw away?

Garbage Land: On the Secret Trail of Trash Details

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From Reader Review Garbage Land: On the Secret Trail of Trash for online ebook

Eric_W says

Elizabeth Royte decided one day to find out what happened to her garbage. The result is Garbage Land, a mesmerizing trip through the hidden, but necessary, side of the consumption society.

The waste stream has tripled since 1960, 4.3 pounds per person. In 2003, every American generated 1.31 tons of trash each year, about 2.5 times what a resident of Oslo, Norway produces. The quantities of waste that we produce each day is staggering and technological approaches to managing the waste have evolved rapidly even since the eighties. Sanitary landfills, invented during the fifties in an attempt to control leachate, the intermixing of chemicals and organic materials, and prevent it from entering the groundwater supply, have become hugely expensive to build and maintain. They contain pipes to collect the leachate and return it to the top of the landfill, believing that it stimulates the breakdown of organic materials and speeds up the creation of methane, a valuable gas that is used to produce electricity in many locations.

Other installations produce electricity by burning trash (WTE, or waste-to-energy, plants.) Metal and other obvious non-flammables are pulled from the huge daily loads by large magnets and recycled. The rest is burned and toxic chemicals (remember, people throw out all sorts of hazardous stuff in the trash) are scrubbed from the smoke (most of it anyway) and the resulting ash (at least that's the plan.) The problem is that evidence is mounting that people who live close to WTE plants and landfills (because methane that leaks out often contains a variety of really awful chemicals) show much higher incidence than normal of a variety of ailments.

The numbers are staggering and ironically the costs drive policy (so what else is new.) New York can no longer afford to recycle because the cost of shipping trash off to Pennsylvania (largest importer of trash in the country) is so high they can't afford the additional manpower and vehicles to process the recyclables. That means more goes into the landfills or is burned, creating an even more bizarre mixture of chemicals to form who knows what in the landfill. And even 40 mm plastic sheathing at the bottom of these things is not 100% effective.

For those of you wanting to return to the simpler days of yore, a few facts:

1. In mid-nineteenth century New York, residents simply threw their trash out the window for scavengers to ravage. Often, by spring, garbage and less savory material might be two to three feet deep on the streets. Only the wealthy could afford trash collection.
2. Horses left 500,000 pounds of manure a day on Manhattan streets, and 45,000 gallons of urine. Horses worked hard; their average life span was 2.5 years and in 1880 15,000 dead horses littered the streets. Again, wild animals were expected to make the carcasses more portable by stripping the flesh off them so they could be dumped into the bay.
3. Ocean dumping virtually destroyed the famous oyster beds, but provided the land for the World's Fair and today's airports. It wasn't until 1948 that the public opinion demanded the first city dump.

Don't forget that today is the good old days of tomorrow.

Kathy says

Very well written, thought provoking, and even humorous. I hope at least one of the following quotes will entice you to read this book or at least think more about what you buy that you will eventually have to throw away.

"And here was another universal garbage truth: other people's waste is always worse than your own."

"Like most people I tended to do right by the environment-whether avoiding disposables or scrupulously turning off lights-mostly when it saved me money."

"The bureau of labor statistics classifies refuse collection as high hazard work. In fact, garbagemen are three times more likely to be killed on the job than police officers or firefighters."

"The dumps of the Roman empire more than 2000 years old are still leaching today."

"As little as a half an inch of rain in Washington DC can cause sewers to overflow into the Anacostia River which runs through the heart of the city." pg203

"The federal government encourages recycling and reuse but it doesn't require it. If we were paying what we should for virgin resources, e-waste recycling would be much more economical and local governments perhaps could break even on the e-waste recycling, but mining companies, like logging companies, and the oil and gas industry continue to benefit from perverse subsidies under the 1872 mining act. Corporations lease land at five dollars per acre, pay no royalties to the government on minerals they extract, and pass any environmental cleanup bills to taxpayers." 171

Wendy Yu says

Homes didn't used to even have garbage cans 125 years ago -- everything was reused, sold to local businesses to make soap, or composted. Now, whether waste is recycled, burnt or landfilled, the short story is, it's a huge problem for the city and the environment. Landfills inevitably leak harmful chemicals into the environment. Even if you recycled 100% of everything you bought, it takes 7 to 20 times as much waste to produce an item as the end product. The short short story is, reduce consumption. If I'm lucky, I'll remember the lessons of this book always.

Jennifer Heise says

a fitting companion for Waste and Want, Picking Up and The Big Necessity.

author Route starts by separating and weighing her household trash, then follows each stream of it as closely as possible to its destination, visiting NY San men, recycling centers, compost operations large and small, materials reclamation facilities, landfills and even the wastewater plant and bio cycling operation.

unlike the story of stuff she does not offer a final recommendation, though the cost benefit ratios of each option in turn stand out as equally painful in usefulness, environmental soundness and social justice terms and sort of wear you down; but the book doesn't drag on too long and become completely discouraging.

Amy (folkpants) says

This is a very informative book about what becomes of all of the waste that we humans produce. Unfortunately it is a very depressing book. I caught myself several times thinking that we are doomed to destroy this planet with garbage and pollution. That our population and the trash we've produced so far is just too big of an obstacle to overcome. All of the efforts of recycling and composting just seem a drop in the ocean. And the bottom line always seems to be we do what cost less or makes more money. Considering this book was published ten years ago, I can only imagine how much worse the situation is.

It has made me think about how I can be less of a consumer. But I am overwhelmed at the idea that I could have any change on the situations.

Rochelle says

This is a fascinating book about the path our trash and recycling take once they leave the bins outside our houses. I found the author a bit critical, aka mean, in her writing of the people she encountered that were 'in the business' of trash. She wasn't critical of what they did, rather, how it was they looked. If I read one more description of a "rounded faced man" I would have had to close the book for good. These repetitive descriptors distracted me from the topic at hand.

Overall, I think she could have had more suggestions in the "Zero Waste" dept. in terms of how to reduce our footprint locally and globally. However, I do recommend the book, but get it from the library. ;)

Adam says

I'm going to have some reflection on where all this stuff really goes before I throw away.

I think one of two things will happen while you read through this book:

1. You're going to feel slightly vindicated as you don't recycle
2. You're going to feel slightly disappointed as you do recycle

Recycling I guess is a good thing. Royte makes it sound as if paper and metal are the only things worth recycling. Plastic has too many variations which cannot be mixed; and requires further energy to melt into some conglomerate. Glass is actually crushed back into a fine sand to be used as a layer in landfills. People in the business of recycling claim plastic to be too much of a waste of time to make any profit.

Leaving the first two R's: Reduce and Reuse the real obligations that will make a difference.

To make any kind of long standing noticeable impact on landfills is going to require a lifestyle change that nobody in America is anywhere near ready to deal with. Everything has to be new, it's cheaper to buy new than to fix, and sanitization/packaging are all part of the marketing ploy. Imagine if in the US we took up a practice like they have in Germany...Re-sterilizing containers and reusing them as they are. Would recycled containers with double or triple the labor cost more than new containers?

It's going to take a lot more than a handful of people going poop in their backyard and taking their pedally bikes to the grocery to fill up burlap reuseable sacks. It goes all the way back to manufacturing, distribution, and packaging, then acceptance by the public before the dinky recycling at home has any impact.

For all I know we could have more then enough landfill space to use in the foreseeable future. However, I remain curious as to my impact on the landfills...and where does all of my trash and drainwater go in the end.

As others have said, lots of personal observations having more to do with the people and oddities of Royte's journey. But I think enough is still here to get you really thinking about some things.

Lauren says

Royte put on the investigative journalist hat for this book, digging into the various systems that our modern society uses for waste management. She begins with a thoughtful experiment of weighing and sorting her trash, in her small Brooklyn apartment. She takes it to the next level by following her trash to the processing plants, the landfills, through the sewers to water treatment, and to recycling facilities. This book was written in 2005, and I am sure that some things have not changed, but it is very possible that the system is even more "roboticized" now, 12 years later.

3.5 stars rounded to 4.

Kirby says

The set-up is straightforward. Royte follows her trash wherever it leads her: to the sanitation truck, to the waste transfer station in Bayridge, to private landfills in Bethlehem, PA, to waste-to-energy facilities in Newark, NJ, to paper/metal/plastic recycling facilities in Staten Island, Jersey City, and Long Island respectively, to her neighbor's composting bin, to the water treatment plants in Owls Head, and yes, she even follows the trail of her poo to Hunts Point in the Bronx. (That is dedication, people.) In sum, her work is an effort to be fully accountable for the waste she produces and the waste that she tries to divert. It's pretty outstanding in concept and in practice.

Some of what she reveals during her journey I expected, but was still saddened/angered by, e.g., that 2/3 of New York's residential and commercial waste flows through the city's poorest communities—Hunts Point, which sustains up to 20,000 diesel truck trips per week, and Greenpoint, which has the highest concentration of airborne lead and the second-highest rate of asthma in the city. Waste companies across the country, much like the railroad and coal industries decades before them, gladly pay "host fees" to cash-starved rural towns and counties who rely almost exclusively on these funds to meet important public initiatives and also almost exclusively bear the brunt of illness and disease that result from the attendant air, water, and land contamination. Pennsylvania alone has 51 landfills of trash, mainly from NY/NJ, and made \$40 million in 2002 from out-of-state dumping. That trash is big business is disheartening from virtually every perspective.

A few elements of her various trails were new to me, e.g., international impact of our domestic efforts to be green. For example, some of New York's e-waste—old computer monitors and other electronic products gathered in feel-good citywide recycling events—is sent from Manhattan to Guiyu, China where men, women, and children wearing no protective gear mix nitric acid in open vats to extract gold components

from these items. Developing nations absorb much of the scrap iron, paper, and plastic that we recycle, but have little by way of worker rights. Add to this that many of the least pleasant jobs in the U.S. necessary for successful reuse efforts often involve a similarly invisible and neglected workforce of Black, Latino, and increasingly elderly populations. The intentional non-mention of this reality, which Royte calls “the dark underside of the green revolution,” is disingenuous and justifies lingering class resentment/suspicion of environmental awareness efforts.

The numbers and information she dropped on the industry-based political analysis were humbling. Virgin papermaking is destructive beyond the harm done to trees, as it is the third largest source of greenhouse gases and requires the dumping of billions of contaminated water. The government provides this industry with \$2.6 billion of tax subsidies; recycling and reuse industries get nothing. Royte saved her biggest statistical reveal for the last chapter though: of all the waste generated in the U.S., municipal solid waste (what they pick up from the curb) accounts for only 2% of the total. The other 98% comes from mining and agricultural waste, oil and gas waste, construction and demolition waste, incinerator ash, hazardous waste, etc. This ratio is straight crazy and begs the question of whether we should do anything at all as individuals.

It is clear that large-scale changes in corporate behavior will come only with legislation. Royte repeatedly noted that the European Union is way ahead of the U.S., e.g., building the cost of recycling into the prices of various goods, in virtually every area, but I wanted more from her on the reasons for this. Are the markets there stronger for recycled goods? Does the proximity of EU member-states to each other create an atmosphere for more collective discussion of environmental issues? Are they just superior beings?

Corny as it sounds, I am motivated to make small and large changes in my behavior after reading this, even knowing of the minimal impact. I have no excuse for not recycling pretty much every scrap of paper; I can make buying recycled goods and earth-friendly household products a habit. I can buy and drive less.

At the end, Royte says that one of the most important things she learned in her research was the names of her local sanitation workers. I groaned out loud, but I get her point. Waste everywhere affects someone somewhere and usually in very harmful ways and her connection to her san men makes her mindful of the human impact of her choices. I'm for that.

Mona says

Now more than ever, I am horrified by my trash. I like books that make me re-examine the way I think about the world. This is one of those books. After reading this book, I am even more disheartened about what I can do to shrink my impact on the planet (but I will still be vigilant and make every effort!)

This book is an eye-opener to the long-lasting effects of garbage and even recycling. The writer's style is casual and conversational, and manages to treat a heavy subject with some levity, but without belittling the issue. It's very educational without being cumbersome or brow-beating.

I learned a lot of interesting facts beyond where trash/recycling/compost/sewage ends up. Things like, when you look at a finished product, you are only seeing about 5% of the resources that were spent making it. End users of a product are a part of the waste problem, but not the whole picture.

I like the conclusion that the author comes to - we shouldn't stop with focusing on what to do with our trash/recycling/compost, but the issue is really about reducing what we throw away at all. All of the "buy

green" marketing that's out there only perpetuates the heart of the issue of consumerism, which is what got us in this predicament in the first place.

Marieke says

i learned a lot--i had some cynical suspicions confirmed but i also learned to see some things from a different perspective. some things made me feel secure about how i do certain things, others made me feel like i could do better (when can i get a composting toilet installed?? and a gray water system? i'd love to have a couple of "ponds" in my garden!). i definitely think manufacturers can do better and should be held accountable. i feel much less complacent now and i'm definitely tuned in to watch the revolution unfold. because i don't want this to come true: *"In the end, garbage will win."*

Elizabeth Royte seems like a fun and creative lady, but i wish she hadn't described every trash or recycling or sewage machine in such excruciating detail. and my feeble brain is a bit deficient in numbers-processing, so my eyes glazed over with every passage that was chock full of data, statistics, or any kind of measurement.

despite those personal problems, i think this is a really important book that everyone should read, regardless of their stance on consumption and/or recycling. i don't usually do this, but i've dog-eared a lot of pages and plan to go back to do some underlining and marking up. this is definitely a book to interact with.

Chris Mara says

Where does all our garbage go? Once we have it exit our homes, it's pretty much out of sight, out of mind. This book takes us into the author/reporter's home with a peek into her family's trash and waste habits, touring the streets of New York City on trash day with the "San men" in a garbage truck, visiting the different paper, plastic, metal processing plants, sewage/wastewater treatment plants, landfills - the management (or mismanagement of them). This book is an eye opener on the excessive waste products of our nation and the disposal of them.

Why I wanted to read this book:

I became more aware of all the plastics in use in my household and especially when packing for a recent Minnesota fishing trip.

Plastic freezer bags for our fish, water and juice containers, shampoo and bath gel, hairspray and deodorant products, plastic toothbrush and shaver, medication bottles, plastic window fan, plastic fish and bait containers, plastic coolers, dispo contact lens, dog food and treats in plastic pouches, human snack packs, plastic food containers (salad dressing, ketchup, bbq sauce...)

HOLY SMOKES!! How did this happen????

I vowed my husband and I were going to make some changes once we got home and relook at some things we buy and use.

We already are pretty efficient with our garbage and recycling and have an active composting bin which is great for my garden.

The earth is already quite sickened with pollution and in trouble and the recent regurgitation of plastics on beaches and the swirling vortex of plastics in the Pacific, the destructive red tide in Florida, to name but a few, caused me to go on a mission to become more aware, more proactive in my efforts, and possibly help others become more aware and thoughtful with their garbage and future product purchases.

Facts at the time of this book's publication:

- * America throws out an average of 4.65 lbs of trash per week (based on 2 adults and 1 child in 10 months).
- * Pennsylvania has 51 landfills and they import ten million tons of waste per year from neighboring states. States that take other states' waste receive financial payment, which in turn, generates jobs, jumpstarts their economy and community and provides services in these once depressed counties that were lacking before.
- * The worst garbage time periods per the "San man" (sanitation man) is after a party (lots of food waste), and between Memorial Day and July 4 (lots of bbq garbage and food waste) and after Christmas.
- * The garbage dumps of the Roman Empire are still leaching waste residue; more than two thousand years later!
- * In death, being cremated causes air pollutants and funeral embalming pollutes our sewers and contaminates the land where we bury our loved ones.
- * China has taken a lot of the waste off our hands in the past. (As of early 2018, China is now banning/rejecting our waste, causing a backlog at the source. So if we can't find anyone else to take it, it goes into a US landfill...so much for our recycling efforts).

There are a lot of facts, figures and information in this book and it is well done with some humor thrown in. Don't worry the figures are NOT overwhelming at all and will not put you to sleep like an Excel spreadsheet presentation, but instead will astound you when the author talks about millions of tons of waste or sewage or products or gas. There are some yuck sewage parts but it is all real and fact based.

Recommendations:

- 1) This would be a good book for a book club discussion.
- 2) Check out "The Violent Afterlife of a Recycled Plastic Bottle...What Happens After You Toss It Into the Bin" at theatlantic.com by Debra Winter, The Atlantic Monthly magazine, Dec 4, 2015

Jessica says

Granted this is a little outdated in its stats in today's world, but that doesn't change the fact that this is an extremely powerful read! I am so fascinated about where our garbage goes, and how the whole ecosystem functions. Do the recyclables I send out actually get recycled? Where does the green waste I send out go? The further I dive into this, the more fascinated I am!

Petra Eggs says

This is a very dense book that appears to cover every possible aspect of garbage disposal and recycling in New York in particular and California and other states in general. Its quite interesting and very worthy and ... ultimately meaningless as a statistic towards the end reveals that only 2% of all garbage is household waste. The rest of it is industrial, primarily manufacturing and commercial, mostly restaurants and fast food outlets. One of the quite shocking (if you imagine this planet weighed down with detritus) figures is that for every 100 pounds of manufactured goods, 3,200 pounds of waste are generated.

Elizabeth Royte quotes from a paper by Samantha McBride of NYU's Dept. of Sociology on consumer recycling. 'Such programs', she wrote, redirect 'the focus of environmental concern away from the material unsustainability of the current economic system, instead turning it inward on the self'.

As long as we insist on living in an economy that revolves around forever researching, developing, manufacturing, selling, purchasing, using and discarding goods in favour of the Next New Thing, the focus on trash will be how to deal with it. We really should be concentrating on how not to make so much of it in the first place. But we won't, we're too addicted to 'new'. The thought of an economy that does not depend on consumerism would be considered anti-patriotic by Americans and, in any case, be unworkable in any present Western society.

So what to do? Buy a bag that says Green on it, divide up the garbage and feel satisfied that you are doing your bit for the planet and forget the other 98% that nullifies your efforts. Blinkers.

Oriana says

I have been told to read this book for months and months. Finally got around to it, and I am *so* glad I did. *Garbage Land* is a completely accessible, extremely well written contemporary history of the garbage industry, with chapters on landfills, composting, glass recycling, plastics (referred to as "the devil's resin"), etc. I learned *so much* from reading this book. It includes great ideas for future sustainability, like making manufacturers responsible for disposing of the materials their goods come in (like plastic bottles or toxic computer parts), and building gardens on the roofs of city apartment buildings to cool the buildings and provide a home for "putrescibles," i.e. compost. Who knew garbage could be so enthralling?

Here is a great sum-up quote from this book:

Our trash cans, I believe, ought to make us think: not about holes in the ground and barrels of oil saved by recycling, but about the enormous amount of material and energy that goes into the stuff we use for an instant and then discard. Garbage should worry us. It should prod us. We don't need better ways to get rid of things. We need to *not* get rid of things, either by keeping them cycling through the system or not designing and desiring them in the first place.

