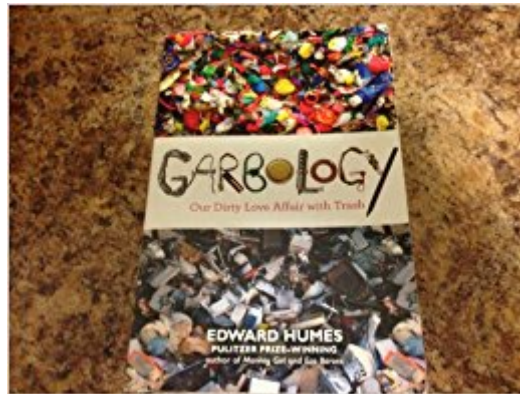


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# Garbology



## Synopsis

Environmental

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Environmental

Edward Humes introduces his readers to what is called garbology or the study of trash. Mr. Humes sets himself the objective to answer three questions in his study of trash: 1. What is the nature and cost of the 7.1 pounds of trash that each American generates on average every day during his/her lifetime (102-tons of trash legacy)? 2. How is it possible to generate so much trash with often too little thought spent on this generation rate? 3. What can be done to reduce this mountain of waste that each American generates during his/her life (pp. 4; 12; 92; 140; 155)? 1. Mr. Humes shares with his audience some interesting stats about the biggest "fillers" of America's landfills. Furniture & furnishings, clothing & footwear, and wood packaging represent the biggest contributors of total landfilled trash by weight (p. 34). Readers also learn that paper, food scraps, yard waste, and plastics each represent more than 10% of materials that Americans throw away, by weight, before recycling and composting. In addition, Mr. Humes discloses that containers & packaging, nondurable goods, durable goods, and food scraps represent together over 90% of the product categories that Americans bury in their landfills, by weight, after recycling and composting (p. 35). Similarly, Mr. Humes does a great job in bringing to light the cost of that trash to the U.S. economy. The Waste-to-Energy Research and Technology Council estimates that the current

system of burying waste in landfills amounts to burying a billion barrels of oil a year that could be used for much needed energy (p. 232). Waste Management, Inc., on its side, is working on new processes that could one day make it possible to derive over \$200 worth of synthetic gasoline from a ton of trash. More generally, Waste Management, Inc. estimates that the company could potentially increase its revenues by \$10 billion if it could capture the true value of the materials locked inside the trash that its staff collects and buries annually (p. 81). In addition, Mr. Humes repeatedly highlights the toll that all this trash takes on the well-being of Americans. Think for example about the trash that ends up in America's waterways or in the oceans (p. 161).<sup>2</sup> Mr. Humes is at his strongest when he clearly demonstrates how the American trash tsunami came to the forefront during the television's golden age. This age bore witness to the rise of consumerism, the new American dream, the plasticization of America, and the faltering of the Depression-era version of the American dream, which held that hard work, diligent saving, and conserving resources paved the road to the good life (pp. 59; 61; 63; 65; 93; 159; 161; 164; 196; 236-237; 257; 259; 261). Mr. Humes observes on this subject that (many) American's leaders still look for unabated consumerism to re-launch the U.S. economy: Buy anything. Then throw away and buy some more (pp. 64-65). Unfortunately for these leaders, the endgame is at America's doors as John Mauldin convincingly points out in his book "Endgame: The End of the Debt Supercycle and How It Changes Everything."<sup>3</sup> Mr. Humes is at his weakest when he tries to answer the third question mentioned above. To his credit, the author convincingly demonstrates with examples from both the U.S. and Europe that recycling/composting and trash burning in environmental-friendly garbage power plants, are complementary to eliminate or at least significantly reduce landfilling (pp. 225-236). The state of garbage in both America and the world is illuminating on this subject. Currently, the U.S. landfills 69% of its trash compared to 24% for recycling/composting and 7% for incineration. For the sake of comparison, Germany, the best student in the class, recycles/composts 66% of its garbage, incinerates the rest, and therefore sends no waste to landfills (pp. 25; 234). Furthermore, Mr. Humes rightly invites his readers to reduce their trash footprint for example by focusing on the cost of ownership and buying second hand whenever possible (pp. 260-261). Unfortunately, Mr. Humes never tackles systematically what needs to be done at a macro level to reduce the generation of trash. For example, does it make sense to systematically tax more heavily the consumption of all throwaway consumables, say razor blades and soda cans, to progressively shift consumer behavior as it has been done in a number of European countries? Is it sensible to ask all Americans to sort out their trash in different bins in their homes as it is increasingly done in Europe? What about the influence of companies such as Procter & Gamble, Staples, and Walmart

in "greening" both the supply and removal chains (p. 132)? In summary, Mr. Humes does a great job in raising awareness about the amount of trash that Americans generate and its cost to the U.S. economy, the environment, and their health. Nonetheless, the author falls short in going beyond what each American should do on his/her own to reduce his/her garbage footprint.

I encountered this book by chance when part of the NPR interview of Edward Humes, author of *Garbology: Our Dirty Love Affair with Trash* caught my attention. In the interview, Humes was talking about Bakelite, an early plastic that was used for billiard balls, piano keys, and telephones -- things that were meant to be durable, and have long, even heirloom-length, lives. He was calm and reasoned, not casting blame but describing a shift in the way materials are used as being problematic. It was impersonal, informative, and assumed intelligence from the audience. Humes opens the book with an anecdote of elderly hoarders, Jesse & Thelma Gaston, who had been trapped in their own home, by their own trash, for three weeks. He moves further into the story of trash by describing other hoarders, the condition of hoarding, and the media attention it has received in the last few years. His punchline is startling: "But little if any thought is given to the refuse itself, or to the rather scarier question of how any person, hoarder or not, can possibly generate so much trash so quickly. Of course, there's a reason for this blind spot: namely, the amount of junk, trash, and waste that hoarders generate is perfectly, horrifyingly normal. It's just that most of us hoard it in landfills instead of living rooms, so we never see the truly epic quantities of stuff that we all discard. But make no mistake: The two or three years it took the Gastons to fill their house with five to six tons of trash is typical for an American couple." (page 3/location 106) He follows this assertion with a discussion of how much trash the average American generates daily, coming up with an average lifetime production of 102 tons of trash. There is a reasonably detailed discussion of how one estimates that amount, and multiple illustrations for how much 102 tons really is. Aircraft carriers are involved. Which is kind of scary, when you are talking about one person's trash. Humes then poses three questions: What is the nature and cost of that 102-ton monument of waste? How is it possible for people to create so much waste without intending to do so, or even realize they are doing it? Is there a way back from the 102-ton legacy, and what would that do for us... or to us? (pages 11-12) These three questions form the organizing principles of the book. Part 1: *The Biggest Thing We Make* describes how America deals with trash, how it has been dealt with in the past, and some "paths not taken" in the history of American waste management. He talks about the concept of waste and wastefulness, how our natural sense of thrift was overcome by early mid-century advertisers (fans of *Mad Men* might find this familiar territory), and how the political climate defeats

promising policies. The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is discussed in (rather depressing) detail. Humes corrected my misconception, a common one, he asserts, that the Garbage Patch (not to mention the other gyres collecting plastic trash in the other oceans) is not an "island" of trash, but a chowder of plastic bits with floating detergent bottles and milk cartons and old toys floating around what ought to be a pristine blue surface thousands of miles from anywhere. Part 2: The Trash Detectives was perhaps the most depressing section of the book. It's the shortest, because it's the area involving the greatest number of unknowns. It goes against what we might assume, that "someone out there" knows what happens to the cans we put in the recycling, or the printer cartridges that we drop off at Office Depot, but in fact there is not really a clear, readily followable chain for where stuff goes when we're done with it (except the landfill) as there is for how to get it into our hands. Humes does a great job of detailing exactly what is and is not known about trash after its useful life, and although the information itself is depressing, his prose never is. It's informative and occasionally incredulous, but always readable and factual; he is one of us, which is to say, he doesn't exempt himself from the problem. Part 3: The Way Back was... maybe not so much empowering, given how thoroughly Humes detailed the scope of the problems our trash poses, but certainly hopeful. "Pick of the Litter" details a San Francisco dump and artist-in-residence program that talks about how much is found in the dump, but also how much potential there is for the stuff in there as actual materials. "Chico and the Man" recounts the efforts of a small entrepreneur to create a new kind of reusable shopping bag, and to educate people on the environmental benefits of avoiding plastic shopping bags -- and the gigantic lawsuit that was mounted against him by the plastic bag industry -- and how it was defeated. The remainder of the section talks about the efforts communities around the world and one Marin County, California family of four has been working to reduce their waste, one innovative idea at a time. If you're interested in treading lightly on the Earth, this book will be interesting and informative. If you've never thought about it before, it's a reasonable place to start; Humes makes a very good case for remaking ourselves into a less wasteful culture as being good for us personally, as well: with less stuff, and better stuff, we can do more, save more, be financially more secure and nationally more secure. The materials we have in our landfills are resources we've paid for and then discarded as though they are valueless. Humes makes a powerfully readable case for the value of our resources, and for renewing our natural tendency to thrift.

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