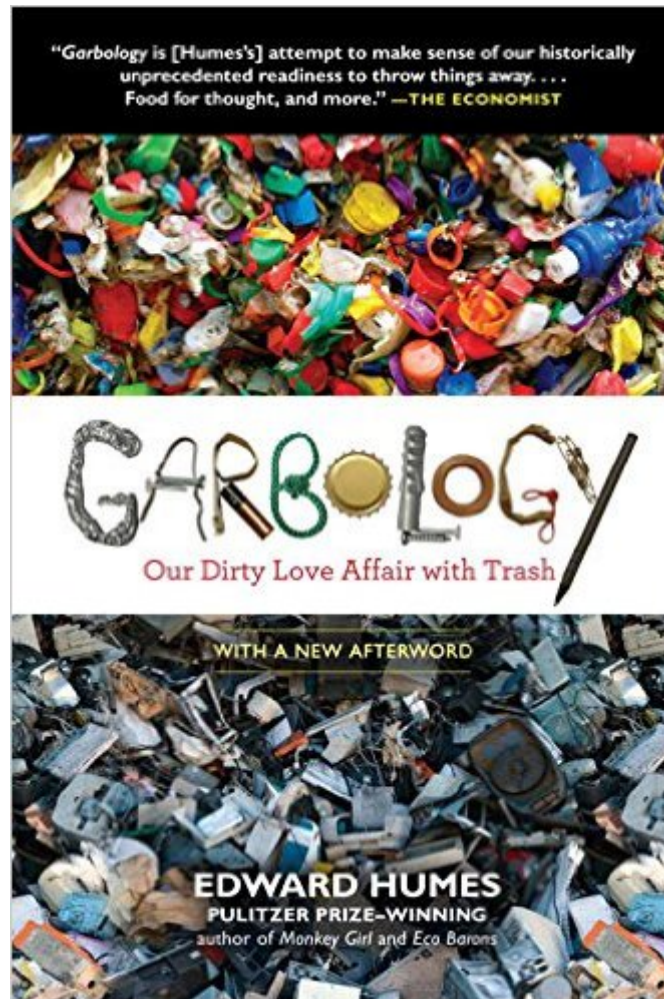


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# Garbology: Our Dirty Love Affair With Trash



## Synopsis

A Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist takes readers on a surprising tour of America's biggest export, our most prodigious product, and our greatest legacy: our trash. The average American produces 102 tons of garbage across a lifetime and \$50 billion in squandered riches are rolled to the curb each year. But our bins are just the starting point for a strange, impressive, mysterious, and costly journey that may also represent the greatest untapped opportunity of the century. In *Garbology*, Edward Humes investigates trash—what's in it; how much we pay for it; how we manage to create so much of it; and how some families, communities, and even nations are finding a way back from waste to discover a new kind of prosperity. Along the way, he introduces a collection of garbage denizens unlike anyone you've ever met: the trash-tracking detectives of MIT, the bulldozer-driving sanitation workers building Los Angeles's Garbage Mountain landfill, the artists residing in San Francisco's dump, and the family whose annual trash output fills not a dumpster or a trash can, but a single mason jar. *Garbology* reveals not just what we throw away, but who we are and where our society is headed. Waste is the one environmental and economic harm that ordinary working Americans have the power to change—and prosper in the process. *Garbology* is raising awareness of trash consumption and is sparking community-wide action through One City One Book programs around the country. It is becoming an increasingly popular addition to high school and college syllabi and is being adopted by many colleges and universities for First Year Experience programs.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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.

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.

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