

## Book Review: “Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage, by Heather Rogers, 2005 The New Press

By Patricia Goldman

Wednesday, June 6, 2007

In this concise and important book, Heather Rogers shows that garbage is here today, but not gone tomorrow. It’s only removed from sight and mind, as it inexorably piles on higher and deeper on our planet.

I wouldn’t ordinarily recommend a book about garbage for summer reading. But rather than reading garbage at the beach or in the backyard, how about reading a short book that encourages us to preserve our beautiful planet earth?

As Rogers explains, the best ways to control trash are the 3 R’s. “First reduce consumption, then reuse goods in their manufactured form as long as possible, and then, only as a last resort, recycle.” Unfortunately, it’s not working that way.

Newton now has an excellent recycling program. Rogers, however, points out that in much of America today, “Just because materials are hauled away in a recycling truck doesn’t mean that they actually get reprocessed...Almost half of discarded newspapers and office paper is buried or burned, while two-thirds of glass containers and plastic soda and milk bottles are trashed instead of recycled. She also explains that many ‘recyclables’ are remanufactured only once, using vastly more resources than washing, sterilizing and reusing a bottle.

Packaging constitutes the main portion of municipal solid waste – reaching 34% by 1976. This book traces how. In the post-WWII 1950s, America moved optimistically into the future, building homes, buying appliances and cars, and enjoying such “breakthroughs” as paper plates, polyester, fast foods, disposable diapers, and bright, clean packaging in the form of boxes, bags, cellophane wrappers and throwaway beer cans.

Within the first decade after WWII, most consumers already owned what they needed, so how could industry sell them more? The answer was ‘built-in obsolescence.’ Producers began making commodities that intentionally wore out faster than necessary. Disposables were the apex of obsolescence and disposable packaging helped to brand and market products. Shoppers absorbed the increased expense of packaging and were left to fund the management of waste.

Rogers says that it wasn’t until the energy and oil crises of the 1970’s that environmentalists began arguing that reusables and returnables made more sense than disposables. What took the public so long to wake up? Rogers details the “greenwashing” lobbying activities of the packaging industry, which funded a nonprofit called “Keep America Beautiful.” KAB launched a very savvy anti-littering campaign designed to distract public attention from the real issue of growing mountains of packaging waste and later supported recycling for the same reason. Today

organizations such as the American Plastics Council are engaging in other distracting efforts to appear “green.”

Rogers vividly describes other methods of trash disposal from filling in wetlands with trash, to incineration that spews pollutants into the air, to today’s corporatization of waste removal that often involves hauling away trash to landfills in other states and even shipping it overseas to places as far away as the Philippines and China.

The question is how do we reduce consumption and reuse goods? Today “e-waste” - computers, cell phones, VCRs, CDs, TVs - has become the biggest area of built-in obsolescence and the most virulent because it contains heavy metals, PCBs and other toxic substances.

As individuals we can make substantial efforts to reduce waste. We can reuse our own canvas shopping bags and avoid taking plastic or paper bags from stores. We can keep cars longer, recycle children’s clothes and toys to family and friends, and make pitchers of iced tea instead of buying one-serve bottles. We can actively join with others to support “zero waste” programs and urge companies to use non-toxic biodegradable materials and avoid excessive packaging.

Rogers, however, convincingly shows that industries have failed to voluntarily step up to the plate to reduce the creation of wasteful and hazardous goods. She makes a strong case that “anything short of government enforcement of production regulations to protect human and environmental health will ultimately end in failure.” Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Finland, Ontario, and Quebec, for instance, have enacted measures that require and promote reusable containers.

Rogers was the May speaker for Green Decade Coalition’s Environmental Speakers Series. I am glad that this book is available to hammer home her main points, and I intend to watch for her talk to be shown on NewTV.

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