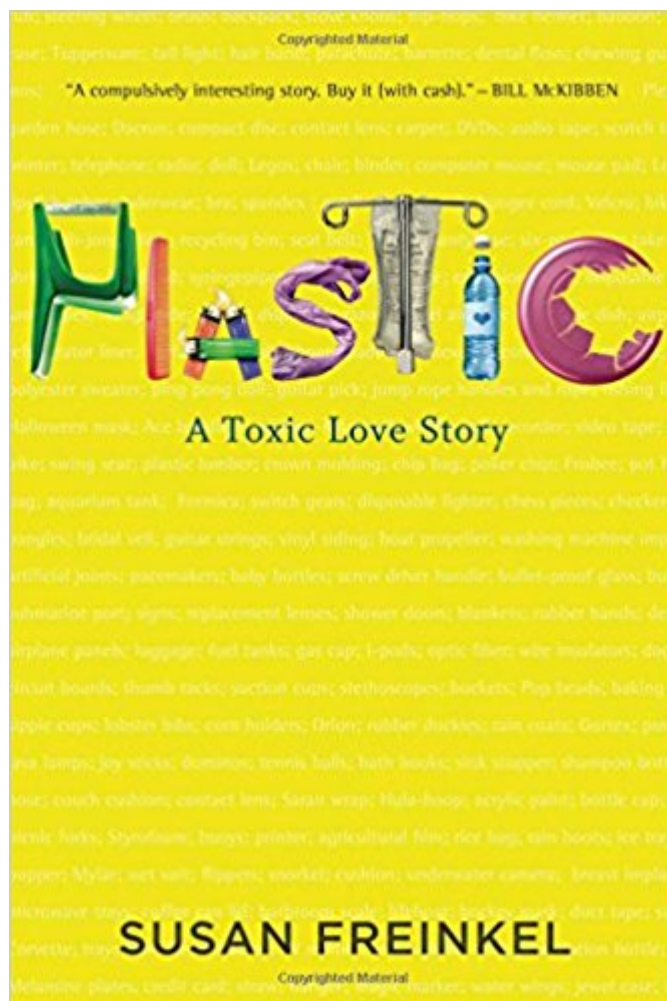


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Plastic: A Toxic Love Story



Synopsis

Plastic built the modern world. Where would we be without bike helmets, baggies, toothbrushes, and pacemakers? But a century into our love affair with plastic, we're starting to realize it's not such a healthy relationship. Plastics draw on dwindling fossil fuels, leach harmful chemicals, litter landscapes, and destroy marine life. As journalist Susan Freinkel points out in this engaging and eye-opening book, we're nearing a crisis point. We've produced as much plastic in the past decade as we did in the entire twentieth century. We're drowning in the stuff, and we need to start making some hard choices. Freinkel gives us the tools we need with a blend of lively anecdotes and analysis. She combs through scientific studies and economic data, reporting from China and across the United States to assess the real impact of plastic on our lives. She tells her story through eight familiar plastic objects: comb, chair, Frisbee, IV bag, disposable lighter, grocery bag, soda bottle, and credit card. Her conclusion: we cannot stay on our plastic-paved path. And we don't have to. Plastic points the way toward a new creative partnership with the material we love to hate but can't seem to live without.

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Exclusive: A Q&A with Author Susan Freinkel Q: Why did you decide to write a book about plastic? A: In San Francisco, where I live, there's been a lot of talk about the problems of plastic for several years. I decided to try getting through one whole day without touching anything plastic. The absurdity of this experiment became clear ten seconds into the appointed morning

when I walked into the bathroom and realized the toilet seat was plastic. So instead, I spent the day writing down everything I touched that was plastic. By day's end I was staggered to see how thoroughly synthetic materials permeated my life. Like most people, I completely overlooked the extent to which modern life depends on plastic.

Q: What did you learn about plastic that most surprised you? A: I was shocked to realize how fast our world became plasticized. In 1940, few plastics existed and scarcely anything was made of plastic. Today, there are thousands of different types of plastic and the average person is never more than three feet from something plastic. Even after years of research, I keep discovering plastic in unexpected places. For instance, the tiny beads in face scrubs are often made of plastic. Or here's one for the yuck files: It's also an ingredient of chewing gum.

Q: Why is the book subtitled "A Toxic Love Story"? A: In researching the history of plastic, I was struck by how our relationship with it resembled a love affair gone bad. People initially were infatuated with these new materials, eager to use them in every possible way. In the 1940s, pollsters found that "cellophane" was considered one of the most beautiful words in the English language, after "mother" and "memory." By the 1970s, when I was a teenager, plastic had acquired a much worse reputation; it was the stuff of pink flamingos, shiny suits, tacky furniture. It was synonymous with shoddy and fake. Today we're discovering truly serious problems because of our reliance on plastic—health hazards, wasting of resources, pollution. And yet every year, the amount of plastic produced and consumed goes up. We're trapped in an unhealthy dependence, the hallmark of a toxic relationship.

Q: Does plastic really last forever? A: The lifespan of a plastic depends on a lot of variables. Some plastics might last less than a year; others can persist for decades or possibly centuries—especially in the ocean. When I started the book in 2008, I took a pair of plastic grocery bags and tacked one onto the fence in my backyard and tied the other to the branch of a nearby tree. Three years later, the bag on the fence is still there looking scarcely the worse for wear. The bag in the tree is gone—but only because the tree died.

Q: Did working on the book change your feelings about plastic? A: I became both more appreciative and more worried about plastic than I'd been before. I gained a better understanding of how plastic transformed fields like medicine, or transportation, or construction, making it possible to replace, say, a failing heart valve or build Boeing's new super-lightweight Dreamliner plane. Early in my research I attended a convention on eco-friendly construction and discovered that "green" builders love Styrofoam because it's a great insulator and is long-lasting. But many of the pluses plastic provides come with minuses. For instance, the qualities that make Styrofoam a friend of the environment in construction make it a disaster for the environment when it's used to make disposable cups.

Q: With huge

environmental issues like climate change or loss of biodiversity facing us, why should we care about plastic? A: For one thing, we've produced more plastic in the last decade than the entire previous century. Yet a lot of it is going to trivial one-time uses, which is an incredible waste of a very valuable resource—and one that could be very useful in helping us address the problems posed by climate change. But I also think how we use plastic is symptom and symbol of significant issues, like our dependence on finite fossil fuels, or our daily exposure to hazardous chemicals. Something like the fight over the plastic shopping bag might seem trivial, yet when we grapple with the plastic shopping bag, we're grappling with our whole throwaway culture—and the environmental problems that culture of convenience has created. Talking about plastics is really a conversation about just how deeply we want to transform the natural world, what kind of legacy we want to leave to the generations that succeed us. Q: Have you changed the ways that you use plastic? A: I am more conscientious about how I use plastic. I've really tried to reduce my dependence on single-use plastics, like bags, and to buy more in bulk when possible to reduce packaging waste. Because my family loves fizzy water, we bought a seltzer maker that comes with reusable bottles. The funny thing is how easy it is to overlook the place of plastic in your life—even when you're writing a book on it! Two years into my research, I was making tea one day when I suddenly realized my electric teakettle was made of plastic. Given what I had learned about the ways heat can accelerate the breakdown of polymer bonds, which allows chemicals to leach out, I decided to swap it out for a metal teakettle. Q: What are the five things people can do to improve their relationship with plastic? A: Unlike many troubled marriages, this is one relationship that can be bettered without a lot of pain: 1. Refuse single-use freebies: Bring your own bag when shopping. Carry a travel mug for your daily caffeine fix. Tell your waiter you don't need a straw. 2. Reuse where possible: Give that sandwich baggie a week's workout; use that empty yogurt tub for leftovers. 3. Quit the bottled water habit. You can stay just as hydrated with a reusable bottle made of stainless steel, aluminum, or BPA-free plastic. 4. Learn what you can recycle. Find out what plastics your community recycler accepts. Explore other recycling resources: UPS stores will take back shipping peanuts; many grocery chains will take used bags and plastic film; many office supply chains will take back used printer cartridges. 5. Don't cook in plastic. Heat can cause hazardous chemicals to leach out of some polymers, so transfer food to glass before microwaving.

"What is plastic, really? Where does it come from? How did my life become so permeated by synthetics without my even trying?" Surrounded by plastic and depressed by the political,

environmental, and medical consequences of our dependence on it, Freinkel (*The American Chestnut*) chronicles our history with plastic, "from enraptured embrace to deep disenchantment," through eight household items including the comb, credit card, and soda bottle (celluloid, one of the first synthetics, transformed the comb from a luxury item to an affordable commodity and was once heralded for relieving the pressure on elephants and tortoises for their ivory and shells). She takes readers to factories in China, where women toil 60-hour weeks for a month to make Frisbees; to preemie wards, where the lifesaving vinyl tubes that deliver food and oxygen to premature babies may cause altered thyroid function, allergies, and liver problems later in life. Freinkel's smart, well-written analysis of this love-hate relationship is likely to make plastic lovers take pause, plastic haters reluctantly realize its value, and all of us understand the importance of individual action, political will, and technological innovation in weaning us off our addiction to synthetics. (Apr.) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved.

As a plastic distributor, I like to read books about the history of plastics. As a Colorado resident, and husband to a professional conservationist, I enjoy learning more about environmental issues. I got a chance to do both when I recently read the new book, *Plastic; A Toxic Love Story* by Susan Freinkel. The author decided to spend a day without touching anything plastic. But she didn't make it too far. About 10 seconds, she estimates...since both the light switch and the toilet seat in the bathroom were made of plastic. So she changed the experiment into a list-making exercise and that day she wrote down 196 different plastic items that she touched. Of course, many of these items were non-durable items like plastic packaging. The next day she continued list-making with a similar tally of everything she touched that wasn't at least partially made of plastic. The non-plastic list only made it to 102 items. This led to some reflection and a list of questions, which she attempts to answer in the book. Those questions include: What is plastic? Where does plastic come from? How did we get so many plastic items in our lives without really trying? What happens to plastics after we put them into a recycling bin? Does plastic actually get recycled after it's picked up curbside? How much of the plastic that the typical American discards is ending up in the ocean? Should we stop using plastic shopping bags? Is there a future for plastic in a sustainable world? To explore the answers to these questions, the book is organized into separate chapters about eight common, everyday, relatively non-durable objects that are commonly made from plastic, including the comb, the stackable cafe chair, the Frisbee, the intravenous solution bag, the disposable lighter, the grocery bag, the soda pop bottle and the credit card. Two of my favorite factoids in the book were: In the 19th century plastics were actively promoted as a way to replace ivory from elephant tusks for

use in billard balls and to replace hair comb materials that were coming from hawksbill turtle shells. The rapid growth of plastics after World War II had a lot to do with their utility as a way to use the ever-increasing stream of petroleum refining by-products. Overall it thought that the Pro's of this book were: It's a good historical overview of plastic. The author acknowledges the paradoxes of the plastic industry. There is a good chapter explaining what the recycling numbers on plastic products indicate and where they came from. And there's an excellent notes section at the back of the book. And I thought the Con's of this book were: No durable plastic items were examined. No full-scale solutions for the paradoxes of our huge reliance on non-durable plastic products were identified or examined.

Thought it would be merely calling out the dangers of plastics and calling for alternatives that wouldn't be pragmatic. This book is much more, it outlines the entire history of plastic, the wonders plastic has done for us, and then later the more unpleasant side of plastics. Frienkel isn't at all a luddite, but to the contrary is very much in support of tech. Throughout the book she stays entirely objective, which is extremely admirable considering the insane amount of research she put into it. Excellent read, would like to see more books from her.

This book is chock full of the vital historical perspective we all desperately need to start setting our listing ship aright! Freinkel manages to tell this story in such a personal, narrative way it doesn't feel like a lesson at all. Most of us have grown up with plastic so deeply embedded in our lives, we can't imagine how it could be otherwise. This read feels like getting know some of our planets secrets that are hidden in plain sight. She brings plenty of insight and optimism to the table as well. Read it!

This is my first time to review a book on , and Susan Freinkel's lucid, sparkling prose inspired me to the act. In a work that is both breathtakingly comprehensive and compellingly detailed, Freinkel constructs a succession of lenses with which to inspect this troubling but essential component of our reality today. "Plastic" clarified my instinctual aversion to this ubiquitous, petroleum-based, everlasting enigma. At the same time it revealed the mindbogglingly diverse forms that plastic assumes to enrich, support and improve our well-being. I've spent most of my adult life denigrating this material which lasts forever yet is perversely deployed for short-term, even disposable, purposes. But Freinkel's blend of deep research and personal narrative -- creative, colorful, apt, responsible and truthful -- left me with new respect and informed insight to the questions of production, use and waste. "Plastic: A Toxic Love Story" is required reading for anyone who cares

about the world we live in today, and the one we will leave to our children: environmentally, economically, technologically. Brava, Susan Freinkel, for telling this story that needed so much to be told -- and for making it such a shockingly good read.

Even though early plastics have existed long before America started to put them to use in a high volume. Unfortunately I like most people want to make reality the old days when toys and stuff were made out of wood, metal, clay, porcelain and other creative ideas. I find the book shines a lot on the people who have over enthusiasm for plastic. However I find there is one reality minimize our plastic to as much as possible. Now I understand that is hard but if you read this book it has a mix of people who are aware of what plastic is doing to us and those who are still unaware of what it is doing to our environment. Be aware of the dangers of plastic be it cellphones to credit cards however we should to minimize how much we have of it. I think that is what the book is trying to tell us. I also feel the message varies person to person as it should be but I think the people denying the dangers of plastic need to be woken up. However I think Western medicine may need plastics for a long time. Granted there are better ways to make the various things but they may not last as long as plastic. If we cannot make plastic go away we will have to make it safer and thank the people who came before us and set the example in making it safer. This is a must read for anyone who wants to get into the complex world of why plastics exist and where they came from.

This is well written and easy to stay involved with the history of the 8 plastic product she chooses. Great educational piece of how we got to live in plasticville.

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