

Garbage! Water! Or Why I Love Non-fiction



I read a lot of narrative non-fiction - historical, microhistory, natural sciences, travel, and environmental. I read these to be better informed, but also for pleasure so my ultimate test for a narrative non-fiction book is whether it would have made a better magazine article. I hate finishing something that I think was interesting, but could have been boiled down into a 20 page magazine article with the same impact. I've recently read two non-fiction books passed the magazine article test and then some.

The Big Thirst: The Marvels, Mysteries & Madness Shaping the New Era of Water by Charles Fishman isn't about how to make changes in your lifestyle with regards to water conservation. It isn't a how-to book for urban or rural planners. It is a book that will challenge what you think you know about water from the big picture including where it comes from and what do we really mean by "clean". This book will also identify our emotional connection with water and will put those assumptions to the test. Near the end of the book, an economist presents a model for future water use that makes sense for both dry places like Las Vegas and Australia should also be considered for wetter places like Atlanta and even Bloomington. There are pages and pages of research, calculations and notes at the end, but the book was captivating, accessible and provides much food for thought.

As a companion book, I also read *Garbology: Our Dirty Love Affair with Trash* by Edward Humes. Yep. This is a book about garbage, and it not only passed the magazine article test, but I found it really hard to put down. Unlike *The Big Thirst* which has an international perspective, *Garbology* focuses more on the US. What happens when we throw something away? Where does it go? And at what cost? Humes is able to answer these questions and along the way you meet people who have studied trash patterns (archeologists!), people who have eliminated 99% of the trash in their lives (but also not a specific how-to), people who are dedicated to inventing devices to take plastic out of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, and artists who fight for the opportunity to create art out of garbage from the dump.

Both of these books offer solutions that while make sense, are a big shift in thinking at the household, municipal, state wide and federal level. Both of these books are nonpartisan, and straightforward in their presentation of facts, research and options but also fascinating and often shocking! Now I'm going to have to take a non-fiction reading break because I'm not sure what I read next will measure up.

Posted by sbowman on May 16, 2013

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