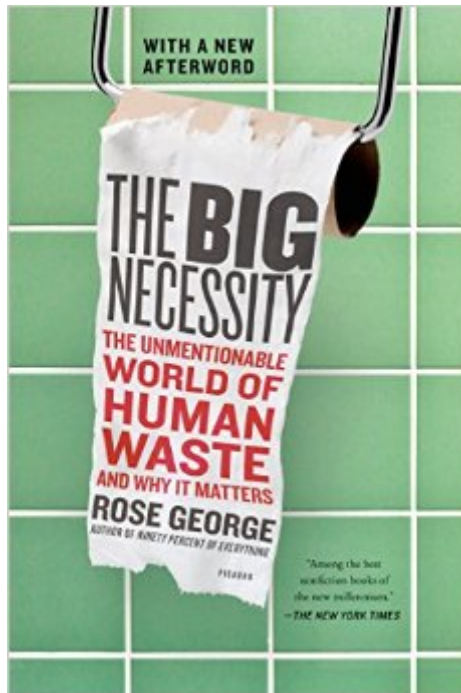


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The Big Necessity: The Unmentionable World Of Human Waste And Why It Matters



Synopsis

"One smart book...delving deep into the history and implications of a daily act that dare not speak its name." •Newsweek Bodily waste is common to all and as natural as breathing. We prefer not to talk about it, but we shouldâ •even those of us who take care of our business in pristine, sanitary conditions. Disease spread by bodily waste kills more people worldwide every year than any other single cause of death. Even in the United States, nearly two million people have no access to an indoor toilet, while the sewers of major cities worldwide are an infrastructure disaster waiting to happen. With razor-sharp wit and crusading urgency, mixing levity with gravity, Rose George's *The Big Necessity* breaks the silence, turning the taboo subject into a cause with the most serious of consequences.

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Customer Reviews

What if you learned that a particular problem was causing 80% of the illness in the world and was killing a child every fifteen seconds? Would you want to find out more, and insist that governments and the world do more, to improve the problem? What if you learned that one of the big reasons that governments and the world aren't doing more is that the problem is, well, yucky, and people don't like talking or thinking about it? There are blunter words for the problem, and Rose George uses them; the problem is feces. It is the topic of her book *The Big Necessity: The Unmentionable World of Human Waste* (Metropolitan Books), a sobering and eye-opening account of just how badly the world handles this one great and inevitable problem. Most of the people who read this book will be

among the set that uses flush commodes which connect to sewers and treatment plants, considered the tops in fecal disposal. But 2.6 billion people lack not only toilets, but also lack latrines or outhouses or even a bucket. Toilets and sewage treatments have their problems, covered here, but with billions of people who literally have no place to go, feces wind up all over the place, easily getting into food and water and causing misery. George has been to sewers of huge cities, wandered excrement-coated slum streets, experimented with public toilets in rural china, and visited the workers who clean sewers or empty pits. There is humor here (not much of the toilet variety) and well-crafted explanation and description, but it is not overall a pretty picture. If you don't want to think about this problem, that's just the problem. Toilets, if a culture has them, are only a starting point.

When I was young and living in very rural farm country and adventuring in the woods or hills and had to take a dump, I did what everyone else did: squatted, made some crap, wiped myself with a few leaves or a handful of grass, and moved on. (If the foregoing language disturbs you, then don't read this book; it's just as graphic, especially in the latter part.) Now, imagine the teeming, close-living tens of millions in the slums and cities of developing countries--and even growing India--where, today, open defecation (that's the "polite" word, which is not that often used in the book) is the socially acceptable and often economically-necessary thing to do. Because it's cheap. There are no sewer systems, few toilets or even working public or private pit latrines. And where does this excreta go--be it India, Africa, China, Tibet, Mexico and even lesser sanitary places? Into the streets, ponds, rivers, oceans and even drinking water. Multi-tons of it everyday. In some African countries, Tanzania and Kenya are two examples, the cheapest latrine is a plastic bag: "defecate, wrap, and throw. Anywhere will do, though roofs are a favorite" (pg. 210). Millions upon millions of people world wide have to make a choice when it comes to ridding themselves of excrement: "contaminating the environment or contaminating human settlement" (pg 222). This book is shocking, but it has to be. Fortunately, in the beginning, the author spares us the worst part of the history (and history-in-the-making) of sanitation by discussing the glories of the sewer systems in Britain and the U.S. Then, she moves to other parts of the world.

What is the cheapest toilet in developing countries? It is a plastic bag. "Kenyans call them helicopter toilets. Tanzanians prefer flying toilets. Whatever the name, the technique is the same..." Go. Wrap. Throw. The plastic bag is one step up from open defecation, which according to the author, is still widely practiced in India. We live in what the author calls a 'flushed and plumbed' nation. It is hard to

believe that 2.6 billion people must do without a toilet--what the U.N. delicately refers to as 'access to clean water.' However, we Americans shouldn't be congratulating ourselves on our bathroom habits. Really advanced countries like Japan think that toilet paper is gross. "Japanese toilets can, variously, check your blood pressure, play music, wash and dry your [back and front parts] by means of an in-toilet nozzle that sprays water and warm air, suck smelly ions from the air, switch on a light for you...put the seat lid down for you (a function known as the 'marriage-saver'), and flush away your excreta without requiring anything as old-fashioned as a tank." "The Big Necessity" is a serious book about "the unmentionable world of human waste and why it matters." Rose George, its author is by turns courageous, humorous (although she tries hard to avoid potty jokes), and indefatigable. Different chapters find her exploring the sewage disposal systems (or lack thereof) in Thailand, China, India, Africa, and even the sewers of London (37,000 miles) and New York (6,000 miles). She also has a genius for the telling anecdote: when describing a slum family in Nehru Nagar, India she says: "They had one dim room for six people, smaller than the average American parking space..."

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