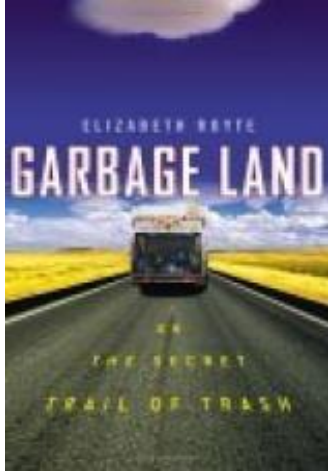


Garbage Land: On the Secret Trail of Trash

by Elizabeth Royte



About the Book

Out of sight, out of mind...

Into our trash cans go dead batteries, dirty diapers, bygone burritos, broken toys, tattered socks, eight-track cassettes, scratched CDs, banana peels ... But where do these things go next? In a country that consumes and then casts off more and more, what actually happens to the things we throw away?

In *Garbage Land*, acclaimed science writer Elizabeth Royte leads us on the wild adventure that begins once our trash hits the bottom of the can. Along the way, we meet an odor chemist who explains why trash smells so bad; garbage fairies and recycling gurus; neighbors of massive waste dumps; CEOs making fortunes by encouraging waste or encouraging recycling—often both at the same time; scientists trying to revive our most polluted places; fertilizer fanatics and adventurers who kayak among sewage; paper people, steel people, aluminum people, plastic people, and even a guy who swears by recycling human waste. With a wink and a nod and a tightly clasped nose, Royte takes us on a bizarre cultural tour through slime, stench, and heat—in other words, through the back end of our ever-more supersized lifestyles. By showing us what really happens to the things we've "disposed of," Royte reminds us that our decisions about consumption and waste have a very real impact—and that unless we undertake radical change, the garbage we create will always be with us: in the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the food we consume.

Radiantly written and boldly reported, *Garbage Land* is a brilliant exploration into the soiled heart of the American trash can.

Discussion Guide

1. Elizabeth Royte's trip to the Gowanus Canal was one of the factors that compelled her to embark on her strange journey. What compelled you to pick up **Garbage Land** and join her on her journey? Did you ever wonder what actually

happened to the things you throw away?

2. Garbage Land is a first-person narrative in which Elizabeth Royte guides readers through the hidden world of garbage. What does this first-person point of view add to the book? Do you think this book would have been as effective if it had been written from an omniscient narrator's point of view?

3. The author notes that trying to be environmentally responsible isn't always easy. Indeed, she writes (on page 141) that her publisher couldn't justify the added cost of printing the book on recycled paper stock. How can we reconcile the moral arguments for recycling with the economic arguments against it?

4. Garbage Land features a bevy of interesting characters, many of whom suggest innovative ways to reduce our garbage footprint. For example, Christina Datz-Romero is a proponent of desktop worm composters. Would you consider using one of these innovative methods? If so, which ones?

5. Elizabeth Royte writes about trailing sanitation workers, visiting waste transfer stations, and exploring landfills. How did getting an inside look at these three parts of the disposal process broaden your understanding of the costs of consumption? What was most surprising about the author's visits?

6. Less than 27 percent of garbage is recycled and composted. But in some cities—San Francisco, for example—the rate is much higher. What do you think about the measures that the San Francisco government has taken to inch toward the “dream of zero waste”? Do you think similar measures could be effective in your city or town?

7. The author discusses recycling and reducing consumption. Which approach to minimizing garbage does she ultimately think is more effective? Do you agree?

8. Have you noticed a change in our country's waste stream in your lifetime? Explain your answer.

9. In **Garbage Land**, a former sanitation commissioner controversially claims, “In the end, the garbage will win.” Does the author seem to agree with this sentiment? Do you?

10. How can we, as a society, reduce our garbage footprint? Has this book made you decide to change your behavior?

Author Bio

Elizabeth Royte has written for *The New York Times Magazine*, *Harper's*, *National Geographic*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *the New Yorker*, *Outside*, *Smithsonian*, and other national magazines. She usually writes about science and the natural world, which makes **Garbage Land**, which is mostly about dead things, a real departure for her. The best parts of reporting the book, she says, were sneaking into, and paddling around, landfills. A former Alicia Patterson Foundation fellow, Royte is the author of *The Tapir's Morning Bath: Solving the Mysteries of the Tropical Rain Forest*, which was named a New York Times Notable Book of the Year for 2001.

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