

Everyone's Trash: One Man Against 1.6 Billion Pounds

Duncan Watson

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Using humor as an educational tool, Duncan Watson's charming memoir *Everyone's Trash* reveals recycling secrets and stories about detritus.

After earning a master's degree in resource management in the early 1990s, Watson started a job at the Keene, New Hampshire, dump, whose access road was lined with litter. The dump itself was an open pit hosting thousands of scavenging seagulls. Luckily for Watson (and everyone else), the US was at a turning point for policies on solid waste disposal, rendering the Keene dump part of "a dying breed." The history and remediation of the site are treated as a microcosm of American trash management.

The book takes a nonlinear approach, skipping between trash management's earliest days, profiles of long-time employees, Watson's first weeks on the job, eccentric anecdotes, and coverage of the twenty-first-century construction of Keene's state-of-the-art transfer station. Throughout, Watson emphasizes people over technological progress to enjoyable effect. He also pokes fun at his own idealism, explaining how tossing items that "should be recyclable" into recycling bins works against the process: "The wishful (overzealous) recycler is the pest of recycling professionals everywhere. My name is Duncan Watson, and before I knew better I was a wishful recycler."

Shocking descriptions and local history wend in as Watson documents bizarre phenomena like "floating tires" that rose up through heavier trash and rubber baby dolls that did the same, if in a more harrowing way. The dump's social functions are emphasized as Watson recalls talking with neighbors and employees and listening to long-term residents brag about great dump finds back in the day, when attendants would set aside trash with potential for re-use.

With good-natured humor and serious statistics, the ecologically-minded memoir *Everyone's Trash* defines recycling as a community affair.

MICHELE SHARPE (November / December 2024)

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