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# Plastic: A Toxic Love Story

By Susan Freinkel



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**Plastic: A Toxic Love Story** By Susan Freinkel

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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## **Plastic: A Toxic Love Story** By Susan Freinkel Bibliography

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## **Editorial Review**

Amazon.com Review

**Amazon 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 '40s, 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.
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#### From Publishers Weekly

"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.)

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#### Review

"It turns out that plastic is not only an ongoing environmental peril, but a compulsively interesting story. This well-reported and lively history helps us see the last decades in a different light. Buy it (with cash)."

—Bill McKibben, author of *Eaarth*, founder 350.org

"A must-read, and a fun-read, for anyone who wonders how our society became so plastics-saturated and who wants to do something about it."

—Annie Leonard, author of *The Story of Stuff*

"In a world glutted and fouled with fake plastic crap we never missed during nearly our entire history, Susan Freinkel's timely book on the subject is the real thing. No animals or children were harmed by its writing, I'm sure—but thanks to her diligence, a whole lot of them just might be saved."

—Alan Weisman, author of *The World Without Us*

"Plastic is everywhere, and Susan Freinkel explains why. *Plastic: A Toxic Love Story* is gracefully written and deeply informative."

—Elizabeth Kolbert, author of *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*

"The first step to creating change is understanding, and the first step to understanding anything to do with plastic is reading Susan Freinkel's compelling, much-needed, and truly brilliant book."

—David de Rothschild, Leader of the Plastiki Expedition

"Who'd have thought that combs, Frisbees and lighters could have such secret histories and such disturbing futures? Susan Freinkel's page-turner brings together history, science and culture to help us understand the plastic world that we have wrought, and has become part of us. Although we should all worry that plastics will persist for centuries, Plastic deserves to endure for years to come."

—Raj Patel, author of *The Value of Nothing*

"Susan Freinkel's book exponentially increased my desirous love and ...

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Amy Hewitt:**

This Plastic: A Toxic Love Story book is just not ordinary book, you have after that it the world is in your hands. The benefit you will get by reading this book is information inside this book incredible fresh, you will get facts which is getting deeper you actually read a lot of information you will get. This kind of Plastic: A Toxic Love Story without we recognize teach the one who examining it become critical in contemplating and analyzing. Don't end up being worry Plastic: A Toxic Love Story can bring if you are and not make your carrier space or bookshelves' become full because you can have it in the lovely laptop even phone. This Plastic: A Toxic Love Story having great arrangement in word along with layout, so you will not sense uninterested in reading.

#### **Michael Collins:**

A lot of people always spent their own free time to vacation or perhaps go to the outside with them household or their friend. Do you realize? Many a lot of people spent many people free time just watching TV, or playing video games all day long. If you want to try to find a new activity that is look different you can read the book. It is really fun for you personally. If you enjoy the book which you read you can spent the entire day to reading a publication. The book Plastic: A Toxic Love Story it is rather good to read. There are a lot of folks that recommended this book. These people were enjoying reading this book. If you did not have enough space to develop this book you can buy often the e-book. You can m0ore simply to read this book through your smart phone. The price is not to fund but this book offers high quality.

#### **Catherine Riddle:**

Plastic: A Toxic Love Story can be one of your basic books that are good idea. Most of us recommend that straight away because this publication has good vocabulary that can increase your knowledge in terminology, easy to understand, bit entertaining but nonetheless delivering the information. The article author giving his/her effort to put every word into pleasure arrangement in writing Plastic: A Toxic Love Story although doesn't forget the main point, giving the reader the hottest as well as based confirm resource facts that maybe you can be among it. This great information can certainly drawn you into brand new stage of crucial imagining.

**Clifford McDaniel:**

Don't be worry when you are afraid that this book can filled the space in your house, you might have it in e-book way, more simple and reachable. That Plastic: A Toxic Love Story can give you a lot of pals because by you investigating this one book you have factor that they don't and make a person more like an interesting person. That book can be one of one step for you to get success. This guide offer you information that probably your friend doesn't learn, by knowing more than different make you to be great persons. So , why hesitate? We should have Plastic: A Toxic Love Story.

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