

Books & arts



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Shelves loaded with packets of goods are shifted around by robots inside an Amazon warehouse in New Jersey.

Planet junk: a journey through discards

A trawl through the global tide of cast-offs shows how we might avoid drowning in them. **By Edward Humes**

A sprawling, insightful travelogue through the world of repair, reuse and waste, *Secondhand* takes readers deep inside the consumer economy's back end. In exploring the vast global tide of used and discarded goods, Adam Minter, a journalist writing on technology and the environment, delivers a book as crammed with oddities and gems as the second-hand shops he loves to haunt.

Manufacturing – the start of the expanding consumer pipeline – is environmentally damaging enough. The United Nations estimates

that the fashion industry, for instance, is responsible for 10% of global greenhouse-gas emissions and 20% of waste water. Some 85% of textiles then end up in landfill, or are burnt. Our homes are filled with other products – furniture, kitchenware, shoes, décor, appliances – that meet similarly ignominious and unsustainable ends. But a significant portion of global consumer goods finds second and third lives through the reuse economy. It is the costs and benefits of this afterlife of stuff that Minter examines with a sense of wonder and cautious optimism in *Secondhand*.

In effect a follow-up to Minter's *Junkyard Planet* (2013), *Secondhand* is anecdotal rather than analytical. It journeys from Goodwill used-goods stores in Arizona to the textile-salvage importers of Nigeria and Pakistan, and the market stalls of an enterprising Mexican merchant known only as Shoe Guy. Sprinkled with sometimes counter-intuitive observations, the book delivers a key insight early on from a professional home de-clutterer: we are all hoarders. The extent to which that becomes problematic is a matter of degree.

This is a mass behaviour, Minter shows, that is unprecedented in human history: keeping more possessions than we need, or can even contain in our homes. Between 1967 and 2017, he notes, US spending on stuff, from sofas to mobile phones, increased almost twenty-fold. He asserts that similar patterns of overconsumption are gathering steam worldwide. In one startling discussion on how consumers have bitten off more than they can chew, he looks at the US mini-storage warehouse industry that sequesters domestic overflow. By 2017, Minter reports, there were more than 54,000 home-storage businesses, generating annual income triple that of Hollywood's box-office revenues – which was US\$12 billion in 2018.

Ultimately, we have collectively failed to create a 'circular economy' – obviating waste by designing consumer products to retain value through use, reuse and recycling. In Minter's view, that is a signature crisis of our age.

These are disturbing issues with wide-ranging impacts. Yet simultaneously, Minter – the son of a junkyard owner – is fascinated by the inner workings of the second-hand world. He delights in exploring how cultural perceptions of used goods differ between countries.

Japan is one of his most interesting case studies. Its ageing, shrinking population is leaving behind homes filled with uninherited possessions. The country has been particularly adept at turning the stigma attached to used goods into a virtue. Bookoff, a company that buys and sells used goods in brightly lit,



Workers sort through bales of second-hand clothes in a recycling centre in Senegal.

fashionable boutiques, has led the charge. When it started in 1991, the company designed a machine that refurbished books by shaving away stains on pages; similar methods were applied to clothes. Gradually, consumers began to realize that keeping possessions in pristine condition retained their value, meaning that they fetched better prices when sold. Eventually, used goods began entering the store as good as new, and the machines were retired.

Minter asserts that such attitude change is essential on a global scale. But this is only part of his prescription for creating a modified consumer economy that could save us from drowning in discards. This is a tall order, Minter admits. In most of his travels, he found that consumers almost always prefer new goods, and will select poor-quality, quick-to-wear-out, inexpensive new items over even the most pristine, high-quality used goods.

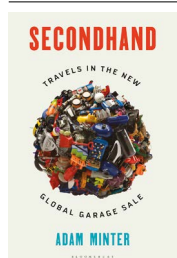
Retailers such as Walmart in the United States, and 'fast-fashion' chains in the United Kingdom, sell many cheaply made, ephemeral goods at second-hand-shop prices. That simultaneously drives the impulse to buy higher, while creating goods with little resale value. Minter laments that even on eBay, the online auction house that began as a game-changing force in the sale of used goods, poorly crafted

new products now comprise more than eight out of every ten sales.

Assessing the net impact of the reuse economy is anything but straightforward, Minter notes. Although it has created jobs and new sources of affordable, high-quality products in low-income countries, the flood of used items can destroy industries. In Kenya, for example, home to some of the world's largest used-clothing markets, a textile industry with 500,000 workers in the 1980s has dwindled to one-tenth of that workforce.

Secondhand offers a few possible solutions beyond the Sisyphean task of altering this ingrained consumer preference for the new. It suggests manufacturers are having something of a light-bulb moment in realizing that durability and longevity in products are good for business. One example is Dell's strategy of building long-lived, upgradeable and future-proofed computers that can be leased for three years, then resold as economical alternatives to brand-new hardware. Minter is also a fan of right-to-repair laws as a counter to the trend of manufacturing unfixable products, as well as the growing Repair Café movement in Europe (notably absent as a significant force in the United States).

Prescriptions aren't *Secondhand's* strong suit, however. Instead, Minter succeeds brilliantly in using the stories of those working in the world of waste to hold up a mirror to our out-of-control buying habits and incite us to join the reuse, repair and recycle economy.



Secondhand: Travels in the New Global Garage Sale
Adam Minter,
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