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# Picking Up: On The Streets And Behind The Trucks With The Sanitation Workers Of New York City



## Synopsis

"Meticulous . . . [Nagle's] passion for the subject really comes to life." —The New York Times  
New York City produces more than twelve thousand tons of household trash and recyclables a day. As quickly as it accumulates, it's hauled away. But who makes that happen? What's life like for the workers with careers built around garbage? In *Picking Up*, the anthropologist Robin Nagle takes us inside New York City's Department of Sanitation, a largely unseen and often unloved army responsible for keeping the city alive. Nagle spent a decade with sanitation people of all ranks to learn what it takes to manage Gotham's garbage. She even took the job herself, driving trucks and plowing snow while enduring the physical aches, public abuse, and risk of injury that are constant realities of the job. Nagle offers an insider's perspective on the complex hierarchies, intricate rules, and obscure language unique to this mostly invisible world. Not just a contemporary account, *Picking Up* charts New York City's four-hundred-year struggle with trash. It traces the city's waste-management efforts from a time when filth overwhelmed the streets to today's far more vigorous practices, which have made the city cleaner than it's been in decades. Complete with vividly evoked characters and memorable descriptions of the sights and smells of the job, *Picking Up* reveals the vital role sanitation workers play in every city across the globe.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Meticulous . . . [Nagle's] passion for the subject really comes to life."  
—The New York Times  
"With *Picking Up*, Nagle joins the likes of Jane Jacobs and Jacob Riis,

writers with the chutzpah to dig deep into the Rube Goldberg machine we call the Big Apple and emerge with a lyrical, clear-eyed look at how it works.

— Sydney Brownstone, *Mother Jones*

“In her 10-year, sometime-firsthand study of ‘san man’ crews, cultural anthropologist Robin Nagle shines a light on their invisible lives . . . [she] evokes the physical and psychological toll of this dangerous, filthy, necessary work.

— Nature

“Nagle worked as a garbage woman to better understand her subject, and that experience, combined with years of research, results in an intimate look at the mostly male work force as they risk injury and endure insult while doing the city’s dirty work. She also provides a fascinating capsule history of the department and the city’s 400-year relationship with waste.

— Publishers Weekly

“War correspondents routinely embed with military units, and it’s only appropriate that Robin Nagle embedded with the people who daily go to war against New York’s city’s unimaginably unending flow of trash. In gripping and often harrowing detail, Robin Nagle shows us the unbelievable amount of crap the Strongest go through (and put up with) to keep a city clean, navigable and safe, all times of year, especially winter. Thanks to Nagle, you will never think about snow the same way again.

— Robert Sullivan, author of *Rats and My American Revolution*

“Gamely braving ‘indications of unwelcome,’ Nagle - bad-ass and brilliant--insinuates herself inside sanitation garages to decode the folkways of a vast, and essential, city bureaucracy. Scholarly and funny, *Picking Up* is an irresistible work of participatory journalism and cultural anthropology.

— Elizabeth Royte, author of *Garbage Land*

“Robin Nagle’s brilliant book does not simply teach us about a reviled occupation. It serves as an inspiration to open our eyes to the unnoticed and unmarked experiences of city life.

— Mitchell Duneier, author of *Sidewalk*

“*Picking Up* eloquently conveys the human stories behind the dirty work of trash collection. With a literary sensibility, Robin Nagle gets inside the guts of one of the largest rubbish hauling systems in the world, and, in doing so, reveals the dignity of these filthy, at times demeaning, always brutal labors. This book will change how you think about the people who haul away your trash.

— Heather Rogers, author of *Green Gone Wrong* and *Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage*

“Robin Nagle’s *Picking Up* brings a necessary ‘bottom-up’ approach to the chronic problems of collection and disposal of municipal waste. The very human quality of the book should remind us that sanitation workers are not faceless drones, but public servants taking on tasks that any of us would shun. Nagle shows us that solid waste service might be a mundane task, but without it we couldn’t even step out of our houses without a sensory and environmental assault. *Picking Up* is a fine corrective.

— Martin V. Melosi, author of *The Sanitary City*

Robin Nagle has been anthropologist-in-residence at New York City's Department of Sanitation since 2006. She is a clinical associate professor of anthropology and urban studies at New York University, where she also directs the Draper Interdisciplinary Master's Program in Humanities and Social Thought.

It's difficult for anyone to imagine a good book about trash... call it refuse, rubbish or garbage, whatever you might like. However, sometimes one can be quite surprised, even as a New Yorker. Author Robin Nagle's *Picking Up* is about the DSNY, the City of New York's Department of Sanitation, and it's an interesting and sometimes fascinating book. As the subtitle "On the Streets and Behind the Trucks with the Sanitation Workers of New York City" suggests, this one takes you down to the road level where the trash bags, garbage cans and dumpsters exist, waiting their scheduled pickup. Ms. Nagle teaches anthropology at New York University, and has been anthropologist-in-residence at the DSNY since 2006. After reading this book, it isn't hard to be a bit more grateful of the efforts of the men and women who clean up after us, regardless of where you live. These unsung heroes are essential to us, unless you're one of those who has to take your own trash to a municipal dump or some such suburban facility. As one reads the pages of this work, it becomes amazing to realize that Manhattan Island itself has historically been extended into both the Hudson and East Rivers by building on its own trash. The author does an excellent job of covering the role of the long history of sanitation and its workers in the Borough of New York, going from such topics as 17th-century New Amsterdam's ban on scavenging pigs to Street Commissioner George E. Waring Jr.'s spotless White Wings cleaning crews at the turn of the 20th century. The author also looks at the command breakdown that tarnished the reputation of the DSNY after the 2010 blizzard. She reveals that the DSNY has its own fascinating jargon: "getting banged" is undergoing corrective disciplinary measures and "disco rice" refers to maggots. The term "mongo" refers to objects salvaged by sanitation workers from the trash, and can be used as either a noun or as a verb. In addition, sanitation workers should be referred to as "san men" and not as "garbage men." We are reminded that sanitation workers have a higher on-the-job death rate than any other uniformed department in the city, firefighters and police officers and firefighters included. They have one of the 10 deadliest jobs in America, due to traffic accidents and exposure to toxic waste, yet their responsibilities are not at all as respected, much less admired. She quotes a sanitation worker: "You can go your whole life without ever having to call a cop. And you can also go your whole life without ever calling a fireman. But you need a sanitation worker every single day." Ms. Nagle's book

is not just to make us more aware of sanitation workers. She reminds us that they are New York's Most Essential. She writes: "Sanitation is the most important uniformed force on the street." *Picking Up* is the result not just of Ms. Nagle's years researching the New York Department of Sanitation, but of a deeply-rooted preoccupation with trash that dates back to her own childhood. She has taken a topic that many of us would pass on, thinking that it would be boring or perhaps even disgusting, but instead we find a book that reads like a novel. Open it and you'll find (and pardon the pun) that it's a good trashy read. 5/10/2013

I am one of those people who put out a Christmas gift for the garbage collectors in my suburban neighborhood (in Central NY). I have always had an appreciation for the people who haul away our refuse. I knew it was a tough, thankless, dangerous job & this book confirms my belief that without trash collectors we would all be up to our necks in crappola. Rare is the writer who literally jumps into the job to be able to report the inside perspective that only being there can provide. Amazing to me that women do this job. I know -- but I am older & come from a different generation even though I too worked a rather physical job when I was younger. It's brutal & wears you out even on the best days. The writing here is smooth, well researched, & nicely balances historical information & current issues. It is informative w/o being dull & covers a wide range of topics. Probably doesn't go into the "politics" of the biz enough but do we really want to be dragged down with too much of that?? Nah. Tell us the nitty-gritty true life on the streets stories of the men & women who keep NYC functioning w/ little or no thanks for their non-stop efforts in all seasons & under all weather conditions. As much as the author covered in this book I'll just bet she's got another book worth of great stories that she could share with us. And you can learn a lot from the footnotes & glossary! Nicely done. It's lovely to enjoy a non-fiction book that reads like a novel. She cared enough to get it right.

As a child, I remember watching a "Sesame Street" segment about garbage disposal. It began with a banana peel being tossed in a garbage chute, and ended with a barge chugging out of a harbor with a sing-songy jingle reciting, "Goodbye, garbage!" I was always troubled by that segment - notwithstanding the obviously absurd implication that garbage dumped in the ocean ceases to exist, I also felt that there must be more - a LOT more - to the story. Years later, I sometimes observed rumbling garbage trucks and wondered about their mission and the people who carried it out. Enter Dr. Robin Nagle, anthropologist, professor, and sanitation worker. *"Picking Up"* is a moving, gritty, and sometimes laugh-out-loud-funny meditation on sanitation in the modern world. Nagle considers sanitation workers the single most important uniformed force in New York City, and after recovering

from the audacity of such an idea, I had to acknowledge its plausibility. Her descriptions of New York BEFORE modern sanitation opened my eyes to blessings I never realized I had. I used to think of the City as grimy, even dirty, but compared to the ankle-deep filth and rampant disease of earlier times, I now recognize its astonishing cleanliness. This is one of the most literate books I have ever read. Nagle tips her hat to at least half-a-dozen literary works, from Dante's "Inferno" to Douglas Adams's "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy". That, the exhaustive end notes, and the occasional word that sent me to a dictionary ("peristaltic"?), engendered a deep respect for the author's scholarship. I am relatively well-read, with an above-average education, but Nagle's prose led me to intellectual depths I never even knew were there. I felt that "Picking Up" is about so much more than just garbage and sanitation workers. This is a book linked to universal human experience, through the basic life functions essential to one of today's most vibrant and challenging urban centers.

Nagle offers a lively, personal, and engaging account of what happens to the stuff we throw away. It's both a rich tribute to the men and women who deal with the materials no one else wants to deal with and a thoughtful account of how our society deals with garbage. The fact the she is a brilliant raconteur and a graceful writer makes the book a great read.

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