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# Mess: One Man's Struggle To Clean Up His House And His Act



## Synopsis

Hilarious and poignant, a glimpse into the mind of someone who is both a sufferer from and an investigator of clutter. Millions of Americans struggle with severe clutter and hoarding. New York writer and bohemian Barry Yourgrau is one of them. Behind the door of his Queens apartment, Yourgrau's life is, quite literally, chaos. Confronted by his exasperated girlfriend, a globe-trotting food critic, he embarks on a heartfelt, wide-ranging, and too often uproarious project—part Larry David, part Janet Malcolm—to take control of his cramped, disorderly apartment and life, and to explore the wider world of collecting, clutter, and extreme hoarding. Encounters with a professional declutterer, a Lacanian shrink, and Clutterers Anonymous—not to mention England's most excessive hoarder—as well as explorations of the bewildering universe of new therapies and brain science, help Yourgrau navigate uncharted territory: clearing shelves, boxes, and bags; throwing out a nostalgic cracked pasta bowl; and sorting through a lifetime of messy relationships. *Mess* is the story of one man's efforts to learn to let go, to clean up his space (physical and emotional), and to save his relationship.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I really enjoyed this book until the last couple of chapters. Barry Yourgrau confronts his 'clutter' (piles of it simply souvenirs & remembrances from every conceivable 'trip' - whether to the grocery store or Europe) and struggles to understand where his tendency to 'hoard' originates. Being one who has often said, "It could be worse..." about my own mess, I could relate to the way he would pick up and hold the magnifying mirror uncomfortably in front of his reality and then put it down and pick it up and put it down and and and for years, as he takes pictures and throws things away a little at a time. I LOVE how he studied and interviewed and researched and called and wrote to every conceivable 'hoarder,' friend of hoarder, relative of hoarder, great-great-god-child of hoarder and then visited every home, college, office, back yard, country, universe he could find where these people lived, breathed, died. Was all of this research really to learn about the condition, or to delay the discomfort of confronting the job? Either way, it was fascinating & funny & illuminating - when I could understand his French & Latin & Whatever asides and Brilliant People quotes. The thing that made me slam the Kindle down and walk away angry at the end of the book was that after all of the heartache, self-searching, shrink visits, dusting, chopping of sweaters, finding of fish, he never realizes that he's actually still in the same horrid relationship that created the need to hunker down with things that don't hurt you. Rather than, "I'm so proud of you. I know you're working so hard at this," nearly every forward step was met by his 'lover' (really?) with "So what?" or a shove out of the way as she rushed to her finally uncovered treasure. It brings tears to her eyes when she can finally touch it again, but where was she while it was being covered??? How did all of this 'mess' suddenly surprise her? I truly enjoyed getting to know Barry's story. He's someone I'd love to know. I enjoyed the history of 'hoarding,' and learning about some of the most complicated cases. But because I had to read about this horrible woman - whom I'll call Cruella - nagging and belittling and then finally crowing about HER input and good judgment, I wish I hadn't read the book. It seems to me that he'll never, ever quite get it right in her eyes, and that's heartbreaking.

This book helped me with similar personal struggles. I am not a hoarder, but I definitely have some hoarding tendencies. After reading it I was ready to clear the clutter from my house and throw away all the extra glass tomato sauce jars I used as glasses and tupperware. I had convinced myself that they were all useful, but really I had many I hadn't touched in ages. I keep the wisdom I gained through this book at the front of my mind, and my house has been cleaner for it since.

I am not quite finished with this book. It is an interesting struggle about hoarding but he refers to a

number of known and famous hoarders to almost justify hoarding. A number of times he has someone admit, when he is interviewing them, that they have a hoarding problem but it is unclear how bad it is and is it more collecting of some items. Throughout the story he is gradually cleaning up his own messes that are so bad he wants no one coming into his apartment. It is obvious he knows somewhere deep down it is an unacceptable way to live. There are some nuggets of wisdom from individuals he encounters or seeks out to explore hoarding. I am hoping by the end he will be able to have people over for dinner without the dread he has at the beginning of the book. There are some references to other hoarding sources which are probably worth looking up. Still there is the feeling that without serious help relapse is quite likely.

The author of *Mess* isn't a typical hoarder if, indeed, there is anyone typical. We've been led to believe there is: those pathetic souls brought to light by Oprah and cable television who need the help of experts, conveying ever-so-slight superiority to the hoarder, measuring success by the sheer tonnage of the clutter removed from the now happier home. Barry Yourgrau admits he has some sort of clutter problem. It's not the worst kind, though, since he doesn't yet have the need for goat paths through the chaos. And he recognizes that his brand of clutter isn't being discussed at his local Clutter Anonymous group. There only the amount of trash removed has value; the value of the objects themselves is never discussed. For Barry, this is what, aesthetically, will keep his collection out-of-reach of the clutching fingers of the Declutterer his long-time girlfriend threatens to call in to solve the problem. Barry has been extraordinarily lucky in his choice of companionship. Cosima is an employed food critic and cookbook writer who travels the world in search of the new and different. It is her job. It is not Barry's. He collects mementoes from his travels with Cosima, though, and these he brings home to an ever-expanding pile. It's not just clutter, he muses. It's colorful. It makes a wry and clever statement about the place visited. He chose it. There's the crux of the matter. Because this bit of clutter is in his apartment, it has intrinsic value. Barry chose it, brought it back from some exotic destination, and draped it over the treadmill in the living room. The reader, of course, sees the fallacy in Barry's thinking. There are ways to turn one's collection of mementoes into one that's socially acceptable. One frames certain items, not every item. One buys a glass case to display the best of the lot, not the entire lot. And, eventually, Barry's inadvertent soul-searching as he tries to justify his trashy ways to himself results in some real breakthroughs in his thinking. For example, while looking for a particularly evocative foreign laundry bag that is brim to the top with sentimental and romantic value, Barry finds in a closet the cast off clothing and worn-out shoes belonging to his predecessor who frequented this apartment when it belonged to Cosima. (She now

lives downstairs from Barry in the same building.) He is unable to justify keeping another man's clothes in his apartment, although he tries. Why, when he took over the apartment, did he not clear out this stuff? (By the way, why didn't she?) Giving up some long-held beliefs about his habit of collecting stuff and finally confronting a few unsettling insights into his own behavior, Barry haltingly heads down the road to manageability. This book is a valuable addition to our national conversation about clutter. We're both fascinated and repelled by those who keep trash in their homes. Then we eye our own messy corners with distaste and either energetically clean and discard, or we continue to ignore and collect. This is not an easy problem to solve, whether it is a minor clutter problem that keeps the sufferer from entertaining guests for dinner or the truly pathological full-on fourth circle of Hell-style pile that can fall on you, smother and kill you in a final dump of unavoidable and lethal irony. Barry leads us through some of this tangle and points towards other books on the subject. (One entitled *Stuff*, for example, as well as books by Professor of Museum Studies Susan M. Pearce. Barry invokes Dr. Pearce to explain why yours may not, but his trash has archival value.) You know, it would be impossible for some of us to clean up that clutter-filled back room without first researching why that room is crammed full of my stuff in the first place, right? So, yes, I consider Barry somewhat of a kindred spirit, at least when it comes to justifying why my stuff is here in my living space rather than in the trash where, my husband argues, it belongs. I do think we should consider that no one collects rubbish just to log, eventually, the amazing weight of it, except perhaps the guy who collects rubber bands or string and I think those fellows might belong in a different book. As usual, Americans tend to simplify complex problems to make them palatable for mass consumption and entertainment. Barry Yourgrau's book is an attempt to re-complicate the issue and that's probably a necessary step towards understanding a crippling disorder, born out of anxiety about the way one can control liveable and comforting spaces in an increasingly disordered world.

Another interesting trip inside the mind of a hoarder/clutterer. They are fascinatingly similar, with the procrastination and the "I'm not READY YET. Very familiar. The book is one long procrastination, but the writer is interesting and (spoiler) he does make a big change in his life, and he is happy about it.

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