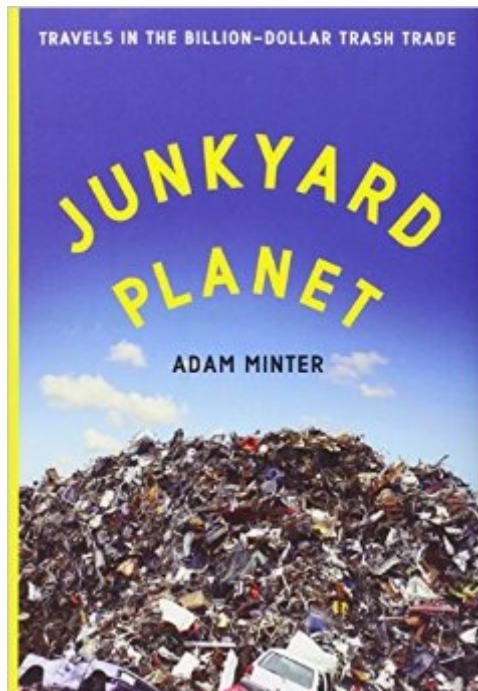


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Junkyard Planet: Travels In The Billion-Dollar Trash Trade



Synopsis

When you drop your Diet Coke can or yesterday's newspaper in the recycling bin, where does it go? Probably halfway around the world, to people and places that clean up what you don't want and turn it into something you can't wait to buy. In *Junkyard Planet*, Adam Minter—veteran journalist and son of an American junkyard owner—travels deeply into a vast, often hidden, multibillion-dollar industry that's transforming our economy and environment. Minter takes us from back-alley Chinese computer recycling operations to high-tech facilities capable of processing a jumbo jet's worth of recyclable trash every day. Along the way, we meet an unforgettable cast of characters who've figured out how to build fortunes from what we throw away: Leonard Fritz, a young boy "grubbing" in Detroit's city dumps in the 1930s; Johnson Zeng, a former plastics engineer roaming America in search of scrap; and Homer Lai, an unassuming barber turned scrap titan in Qingyuan, China. *Junkyard Planet* reveals how "going green" usually means making money—and why that's often the most sustainable choice, even when the recycling methods aren't pretty. With unmatched access to and insight on the junk trade, and the explanatory gifts and an eye for detail worthy of a John McPhee or William Langewiesche, Minter traces the export of America's recyclables and the massive profits that China and other rising nations earn from it. What emerges is an engaging, colorful, and sometimes troubling tale of consumption, innovation, and the ascent of a developing world that recognizes value where Americans don't. *Junkyard Planet* reveals that we might need to learn a smarter way to take out the trash.

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Customer Reviews

The saying, "one man's junk is another man's treasure," could easily be an alternative title to Adam Minter's "Junkyard Planet." Junkyard Planet will get you thinking about everything that you use, especially those items which you do not use up. So where does this stuff go? Well, a lot of it gets exported overseas, especially to China, where the need for scrap metal, scrap paper and scrap plastic is high. Recyclables are headed to places where the need for raw materials is not met by the amount of scrap generated in-country and where the cost of virgin materials is considerably higher. There is value in scrap. It will be found in those places where the costs of sorting, separating and cleaning it, along with transport, is lower than its value in reuse or in recycled materials. The margin or difference in cost is where money is. One of most important principles Minter espouses is, "the worst, dirtiest recycling is still better than the very best clear-cut forest or the most up-to-date open-pit mine." In other words, most low grade scrap would end up in a landfill if it were not exported to a place where its future value is above the cost of recycling and transport. Adam Minter knows his subject well. He was brought up in a Minnesota family with a modestly-sized family recycling business. He understands the terminology, the business process, how scrapping works. Metals were the key material in his parents family business. Minter's travels take him across the United States and Asia, to China in particular. With the rapid rise of the Chinese economy, it is China most of all, where international recycling is in full form. As China's economy moves from third-world to first-world stature, the amount of construction going on and infrastructure development is staggering. China is a nation mostly poor in resources. It is with the help of trans-shipped recyclables that China is vaulting ahead. Junkyard Planet gives readers a lot to think about. Five stars!

The scrap yards that I remember from my youth were what the author refers to as auto junkyards. I always believed they were the one and only place where scrap went, whether it was a car being sold in pieces or put into a crusher and turned into a pile of junk metal. I never really knew that there were places that specialized in other types of scrap, but I soon learned about the long history of scrap yards as I read this book. The author takes the reader on a tour of the various types of scrap that exist. From electrical wire, to electric motors, to plastics, to cars and to steel and aluminum and many more, each type of scrap has a market and a place in the recycling pecking order. In addition, there are places in China that specialize in each of these types of scrap. Our garbage is China's, and to a lesser extent, India's raw materials from which new products spring. Each has a growing economy and a developing middle class that wants the same goods that are present in the United

States. In addition, we are still addicted to buying inexpensive merchandise from China and the "raw" materials have to come from somewhere. The easiest way to obtain those goods is to come to the United States and buy them from recyclers and scrap dealers. Although that would seem to be an expensive proposition; buying a container of scrap, shipping it to China and then separating it into useful parts, nothing could be further from the truth. The containers travel back to China virtually free. The shipping companies have to get the ships and containers back to China, and they would get nothing for an empty one way trip, so they offer deep discount shipping to get something to help cover the cost of fuel. And, getting the product ready is also inexpensive as labor in developing countries is also cheap. The author made several points worth pondering. One, if the developing world didn't buy our scrap, it would end up in landfills, filling them more quickly and burying materials that have significant value. In addition, by buying our scrap, these countries are not opening mines to find the raw materials, which saves the environment and cuts greenhouse gas emissions. Imagine how many emissions would come from a copper mine, where 100 tons of material have to be moved to extract one ton of copper ore. Although the methods of stripping wire, or melting plastic in China are hardly ideal, they beat the various alternatives available. The final take away from this book is that it is best to reduce your purchasing habits, then to reuse items as much as possible, and only then to recycle. It certainly opened my eyes. In addition, I found the book to be wonderful read. The author wrote well, and despite some redundancy, the book is full of important information. I cannot recommend it highly enough!

I enjoyed this book from start to finish, it's been a while since I've enjoyed a non-fiction book this much. I read an excerpt a few months ago and it really whetted my appetite, and I wasn't disappointed after reading it. First of all, it's a very readable book, and it's not bogged down by excessive statistics. Of course, just from the nature of the subject, some stats are necessary, but he handles it with a deft touch. In some hands, recycling statistics could be deadly. While he makes it all very interesting, what I especially enjoyed was the way he constantly brought in the human element, with many interesting and informative individuals. It was a constant treat to meet some of the people behind the scenes. I'm not really equipped to analyse his writing style, but I was impressed at how easy (and fun!) it was to read. For me, this is the best type of non-fiction, informative and fun at the same time. Adam Minter hit this one out of the park.

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