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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rebecca Prince-Ruiz, Joanna Atherfold Finn. *Plastic Free: The Inspiring Story of a Global Environmental Movement and Why It Matters.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. 272 pp. $27.99, e-book, ISBN 978-0-231-55272-1.

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Columbia University Press's mandate in earth and climate science is to "seek solutions-oriented books for practitioners, decision makers, and concerned general readers that lead the way toward a healthier future."[1] *Plastic Free* meets this mandate well, as it reads as a practical guide to individually reduce plastic waste. Rebecca Prince-Ruiz and her co-author Joanna Atherford Finn commence the book with Prince-Ruiz's own story of deciding to go plastic free in July 2011, a spontaneous decision that grew into a global movement, encompassing an estimated 250 million people worldwide by 2019 (p. 225).

If you spend any time reading "solutions-oriented" environmental nonfiction, you will be well familiar with the formula of this book. Prince-Ruiz and Atherford Finn start with Prince-Ruiz's own agrarian idyllic childhood in Australia being run roughshod by groundwater salination problems, then use an overwrought reproductive futurity argument to encourage the increased domestic labor that becoming plastic free entails. Farmers markets, bulk food stores, beach cleanups, bin audits, and cookie, bread, and even pasta making feature prominently. At the end of their first plastic-free July, they celebrate with champagne, and "thank goodness wine comes in glass bottles" (p. 21).

The book then covers what you would expect. First it details why we live the way we do (chapter 3, "The Story of Throwaway Living"), which has an interesting, if simplified, historical account of the rise of disposability. Then it specifies the "top 4" items one can take action on: plastic bags, plastic water bottles, straws, and disposable coffee cups and lids. It moves on to the effects of single-use plastic on the environment (chapter 5, "Plastic Sea"), especially marine pollution. The following chapter focuses on what else individuals might do to reduce their waste (chapter 6, "Try to Do Better"). The remaining chapters shift to the successes that plastic-free July and the nonprofit foundation that grew out of it has had worldwide and discuss how to use that momentum for creating policy change. The book ends in March 2020, with a postscript that touches slightly on the current COVID crisis and the challenges of continuing

to be plastic free in a world that no longer accepts reusables due to fear of disease. ***Plastic Free*** was an enjoyable and relatively easy read, and I did find myself at the end of it wondering about the amount of single-use plastic I would be able to reduce around my home.

Unfortunately, while I enjoyed the narrative, ***Plastic Free***'s lack of in-text references or endnotes left me questioning many of the statistics. The lack of materials analysis bothered me as well, as stainless-steel reusable products also come from somewhere and have their own (far larger) environmental impacts, which often means you must use them hundreds or even thousands of times before their carbon or energy footprint is equal to a single-use plastic water bottle. The lack of awareness or acknowledgment of food deserts or poverty as obstacles for becoming plastic free is a little perturbing, though the book does feature "vignettes" of the international experiences and challenges of becoming plastic free in developing countries. The stereotypical references to indigenous ontologies, without referencing the poverty and colonialism that indigenous people often face, struck me as insensitive (while I am not all that familiar with the Australian indigenous experience, in Canada, where I am from, many reserves have been under boil-water advisories for decades and therefore can only get their water from plastic bottles). And most importantly, the focus on individual change—heaping yet more feminized domestic labor on mothers to prepare meals from scratch, to shop at seven different "local" stores and farmers markets (using only their bicycle), to clean metal straws every night after the litter-less lunch they lovingly packed the night before, to monitor and ensure that the reusable containers they give to their children return clean—does not reflect the realities that many dual-working or single-parent families with children face with respect to burn out. ***Plastic Free*** labors under the assumption common to this type of literature that more education equals more change, and unfortunately that has been proven patently false; instead change comes largely from policy and governmental intervention.

Ultimately I was left feeling a bit empty, in the same way that I was left feeling empty after viewing ***An Inconvenient Truth*** (2006), Al Gore's blockbuster warning about climate change. The problem's scale is so drastically disproportionate to the solutions proffered: change your lightbulbs, make sure your car tires are properly inflated. A total of 10 percent of all ocean plastic is related to the fishing industry; it comprises largely ghost fishing gear that floats and traps marine life in its nets and ropes. In contrast, straws make up only 0.025 percent of ocean plastic.

Finally, I would like to see a material analysis of the footprint of a metal straw and the number of times one must use that straw before it has the equivalent carbon footprint to a plastic one. Being a mother myself, I highly doubt that a child using a metal straw meets, much less exceeds, that bar.

Note

[1]. "Miranda Martin, Editor," Columbia University Press, accessed December 1, 2021, https://cup.columbia.edu/editors/miranda-martin.

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