Spread out underneath our cities, a vast network of pipes, drains, culverts, and basins slosh water and human waste out of our lives. These infrastructures—sewers—are the focus of science journalist Jessica Leigh Hester’s short popular science book. Very few scholars working on drainage infrastructure can reach as wide an audience as Hester has managed to do with this book. This is a shame as sewers and drains are in many ways at the forefront for how cities and towns might respond to the mounting impacts of environmental crises: increased urbanization, reduced permeable surfaces, increased runoff, more intense and frequent flood events, sea level rise, and waterway pollution, among others. These threats are entangled in a complex web of aging and underfunded infrastructure across many parts of the world, with coastal cities feeling these pressures acutely.

*Sewer* leaps off from the Bloomsbury Object Lessons series and dives down into the world of sewers. By analyzing sewers as an object, Hester is given ample opportunity to interpret what constitutes focus—perhaps wet wipes and fatbergs, perhaps whether to fold or scrunch toilet paper, or perhaps how “sewers are a barometer of privilege” (p. 11). The intensity of her focus fluctuates: in some places, such as the critiques of the lack of political enthusiasm for wastewater infrastructure, it is piercing and driven; in other places, it is soft and clearly crafted in a way to accept all kinds of readers. By doing this, Hester has put forward a book that is enjoyable for those who are familiar with these topics but also illuminating for those who aren’t. While generous with evidence-backed journalistic flair, when it comes to theoretical and conceptual focus, *Sewer* is somewhat reserved. But given the scope and intent of the book, this isn’t a major critique to dwell on.

While *Sewer* covers a neat smattering of examples and case studies, these tend to swing primarily between the United States and mostly the United Kingdom. There are some brief nods to the rest of the world, but mostly the focus is well and truly set across these two countries. This is a shame as there are many fascinating instances of complex cases from cities in the Global South,
which would have offered balance. The book begins with a neat overview of the major themes and then quickly presents a “history of” sewers as per Europe and North America in chapter 1. Chapter 2 and 3 both revolve around how sewers can go wrong, focusing on the “wet-wipe” phenomenon and the emergence of “fatbergs,” respectively. These do well to situate the reader into the world of those on the frontline of managing these tricky infrastructure interlopers. Often “out of sight” and so “out of mind,” sewer blockages become all too real when toilets back up and houses start flooding.

Hester goes further than just bringing these issues into our living rooms though. There is a broader, multispecies justice tint that is cast over her commentaries. The reconceptualization of sewers and drainage infrastructure as habitat is something that managers and maintenance staff would probably rather see not happen. Pipes and all kinds of subterranean infrastructures have become homes—permanent or passing—for a counter-city ecosystem, whether it is fish and birds or crocodiles and rats. Reconciling with these more-than-human themes isn’t a pressing matter for Hester’s book’s agenda though. This is a book about humans and their messy relationship with their waste. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 go deep into conceptualizing what kinds of futures sewers might have in a climate-changed world. The attention here is on the technology and design of these infrastructures. This does seem at odds with the social and political issues that are acknowledged as driving many of these issues. While a balance of the two is advocated for, the way the book progresses, these more complicated social, behavioral solutions do seem to be left behind.

Each chapter is bookended with an assortment of experiential narratives that do well to set each chapter’s scene. Short, snippy quotes from interviews with sewer workers help flesh out the storylines for each chapter. But there is a disconnect between how these all fit together. Perhaps this is because of the acknowledged disruptions that the project went through because of COVID-19, or perhaps this is because the “characters” of the book flit in and out so quickly. Because of the scale of this book (only 188 pages from cover to cover), each chapter’s pace is quick. This results in an overview of the major themes and struggles to go as deep as a more expansive text might allow. This isn’t to discount the robust scholarly work that Hester has achieved with this research. The breadth of material that is engaged with helps solidify these inquiries in academic, as well as popular news media, sources. Doing this ensures that local encounters with sewers are threaded together with expansive sociopolitical commentaries. This is a consumable popular science book with the backbones of extensive research and reflection.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at


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