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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

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.

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.

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