



That Might Be Useful: Exploring America's Secondhand Culture

Naton Leslie

The Lyons Press (May 2005)

Unknown \$22.95 (320pp)

978-1-59228-705-5

In a society that adores MTV, Paris Hilton, and Botox, it's not hard to understand America's obsession with the "new." This culture is quick to throw out last season's fashions and yesteryear's furnishings, collectibles, and worn goods. Reluctant to repair or refinish, Americans across the country run out to the nearest mall or discount chain and quickly replace those items that they will then just toss into the dumpster. In this book, the author unearths the culture of the used, discarded, and forgotten. From neighborhood garage sales to high-dollar auction houses, Leslie explores the cast-off, rejects the notion that secondhand is waste, and asserts that America's greed for the new is actually merely wasteful.

Leslie is the author of six books, including *Marconi's Dream*, and has been the recipient of prestigious writing fellowships and grants while teaching and hunting for used treasures. His personal search for abandoned necessities is the thread that weaves his book into more than casual analysis. His own quest for the castoff merchandise that fills the basements of collectors and the vans of "pickers" leads him to insight that ranges outside of America's rampant materialism. He notes early on: "In the secondhand culture I have discovered the joys of a genuine American market, unfettered buying and selling, which most first-level retailing has lost."

The book reads like a rummage sale itself as the author traverses the varying regions of this subversive culture. He shadows the business of an auctioneer who looks to unload whole estates; he investigates the common junk shop, the crowded flea markets of the country; and he wanders into the world of the "pickers," who scour yard sales and auctions for valuable pieces that can be restored and sold at higher prices to antique dealers. In the end, Leslie even reveals how he once went "dumpster diving" to retrieve the trash of a neighbor who had thrown away brand-new clothes with price tags still attached.

But despite its clever composition and astute social commentary, this book might find a limited audience. Those who have reveled in secondhand goods for decades will certainly cheer the book's acknowledgement of this mesmerizing market, but many readers will find themselves lost in the world of the worn. However, Leslie's emotional appeal to a cultural sense of self is enough to convince any American to take another look at the world of used goods; after all, when a person is gone, his or her drawers and closets will be emptied of their "resonant secrets," and the once-new purchases will be on the market for those in search of the secondhand.

JESSICA HIGGINS (August 18, 2009)

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