

Invisible Workers, Essential Work

Picking Up: On the Streets and Behind the Trucks with the Sanitation Workers of New York City, by Robin Nagle. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013.

Reviewed by Ben Jablon

What makes us more fascinated with deviants than conformists? With tragedies rather than mundane successes? Firefighters rather than sanitation workers? Anthropologist Robin Nagle would tell you it's because some things are "marked" for our attention. We naturally gravitate toward more exceptional events and people, and spend significantly more time musing about their inner workings. However, in providing a rare inside account of the lives of New York's sanitation workers and tracing the evolution of the city's battles to clean its streets, Nagle has made a strong case to include sanitation work in the "marked" category.

On a camping trip when she was ten years old, behind a campsite that had otherwise seemed pure and unspoiled, Nagle discovered a 40-foot-wide pile of garbage that upset her childhood assumptions about adults' concern for their environment. This sparked an interest in waste management that years later led her to become a New York sanitation worker – at the same time she was becoming a professor at NYU. But the process of gaining access to sanitation fieldwork and later becoming fully employed were not as easy as she'd expected.

New York's Department of Sanitation (DSNY) has not had the greatest relationship with the media over the years. Reporters who'd been granted the opportunity to interview staff would ask unassuming questions and generally appear pleasant. But in most of the resulting publications, the department would emerge with its reputation even further damaged. To make matters worse, on a field trip with her NYU students to Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island, once the largest landfill in the world, Nagle allowed a New York Times reporter to come along, without first receiving permission from the DSNY. This mistake, coupled with the DSNY's general disdain for the media, barred Nagle from her quest to do sanitation fieldwork for several years. It was not until 2002 that Vito Turso, DSNY's newly appointed Deputy Commissioner for Public Information, allowed her to visit a DSNY garage, Manhattan district 7.

While Nagle had done considerable research before first setting foot in a garage, she had much to learn about the physical work and behind-the-scenes processes needed to keep New York's streets clean. During her first few days on the job, she realized her clothes were improper, her lifting techniques inadequate, and that the job's daily noise and dangers were unexpectedly serious. But the work also subtly shifted her perspective on city life: instead of looking only at buildings, trees and people, she began focusing more and more on trash, endless piles of trash that she was now required to fully commit both her mind and body toward picking up and heaving into a truck. Nagle also learned that the position of supervisor, while seemingly appealing, is generally shunned by ordinary workers due to the initial pay cut upon accepting the position, the forced realignment of relationships with coworkers, and the increased responsibility. Higher-ups attack supervisors before they go after individual workers, because supervisors are represented by a weaker union than the sanitation men.

Even more impossible to predict before her fieldwork was how Nagle would, as a visitor and a woman, be received by the workers and supervisors. The first time she sat down in the lunch room, a worker asked a supervisor to tell her she was not welcome to eat with the rest of the workers, as she was only a visitor who did not belong in the employees' exclusive areas. While she did gain enough trust and familiarity with the workers to eat with them eventually, her gender proved a longer-lasting hurdle impeding collegial ties with some coworkers. Several let it be known that they thought sanitation workers should be "manly men," who have the strength demanded on the job. They actually told her she should take care of the home, and that women create tension in what would otherwise be a relaxed setting. Their masculine sense of pride from wearing DSNY uniforms was spoiled by the presence of female workers. Nagle challenged all of these assertions, pointing to the rapid change in women's rights and roles, especially since the 1972 Equal Employment Opportunity Act and later, the first female DSNY uniformed workers in 1986. The most abrasive sexual harassment was when several employee lockers were purposely left open,

displaying pictures of naked women meant to rile Nagle, as one of the workers went on a misogynistic rant. Nagle walked out of the garage, to remove herself from the situation, and returned to see the lockers had been closed.

Nagle did share one thing in common with the other sanitation workers – they were all invisible. She was made aware of this fact when, on a morning garbage run with two men, a beautiful woman strolled by their operation and one worker, knowing he would not be seen, leaned back onto the dump truck, crossed his arms, and blatantly stared at her, eventually catching a memorable whiff of her perfume. Nagle got a direct sense of this invisibility herself when she pleaded in vain with bystanders to step aside so she could sweep up the garbage left by a parade. She decided that the uniform is responsible for this; they are seen not as individuals, but only as sanitation workers. Nagle wonders how it's possible that the people responsible for such a key part of any city's health and appearance are so unseen by the general population.

To prove the value and importance of sanitation and a clean city, the author explains that New York regularly struggled with various deadly diseases from the 17th through most of the 19th centuries, due to inadequate sanitation strategies and corruption within the sanitation department. Under Tammany rule, the infant mortality rate increased by 65% from 1810 to 1870, the death rate was 1 in 36 in 1860, and at any given point in time, between 50 and 70% of New Yorkers were ill. The Ladies Health Protective Association began a movement for a cleaner New York in 1884, and their goals were achieved after George E. Waring, appointed head of the Department of Street Cleaning in 1894, brought major changes to the department. The result was a far cleaner New York by 1896, removing waste from the streets that was, in some places, knee-high.

In *Picking Up: On the Streets and Behind the Trucks with the Sanitation Workers of New York City*, Robin Nagle provides very interesting insights on a little-studied profession and her personal

experiences during her time as a sanitation worker are illuminating and thought-provoking. Inevitably, her views only represent a limited perspective – that of a visiting female academic, and later a semi-permanent worker. One cannot say for certain that an ordinary DSNY worker would have the same opinions of the job as Nagle if he or she was to write a book about it. Interestingly, Nagle spends an entire chapter attempting to describe the job from a married male's perspective. Surprisingly, the reader is not made aware of this change in perspective (and change from nonfiction to fiction) before it begins, and the chapter repeats several thoughts and ideas from previous chapters. There is also an entire chapter devoted to the story of two sanitation department tug boats being lost at sea during a brutal winter storm. While enjoyable reading, it is only tangentially related to the book's main themes.

Overall, I do not believe Robin Nagle has achieved her goal of transferring sanitation work from the "unmarked" to the "marked" category of topics. While we are made aware of why sanitation work is extremely important and dangerous, the book does not offer much to challenge the stereotype of the job as extremely monotonous, and relatively uncomplicated. Had she gone into greater detail in describing a typical day's work, this might have created for readers a stronger connection to and appreciation for the men who do the job. Additionally, Nagle appears to have missed an opportunity to learn about the internal musings of her coworkers, as her interviews with them only focus on their experiences rather than their thoughts and opinions, leaving Nagle as the lone critical perspective on what this crucial but widely overlooked work entails.

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