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Cradle To Cradle: Remaking The Way We Make Things



Synopsis

A manifesto for a radically different philosophy and practice of manufacture and environmentalism. "Reduce, reuse, recycle" urge environmentalists; in other words, do more with less in order to minimize damage. But as this provocative, visionary book argues, this approach perpetuates a one-way, "cradle to grave" manufacturing model that dates to the Industrial Revolution and casts off as much as 90 percent of the materials it uses as waste, much of it toxic. Why not challenge the notion that human industry must inevitably damage the natural world? In fact, why not take nature itself as our model? A tree produces thousands of blossoms in order to create another tree, yet we do not consider its abundance wasteful but safe, beautiful, and highly effective; hence, "waste equals food" is the first principle the book sets forth. Products might be designed so that, after their useful life, they provide nourishment for something new—either as "biological nutrients" that safely re-enter the environment or as "technical nutrients" that circulate within closed-loop industrial cycles, without being "downcycled" into low-grade uses (as most "recyclables" now are). Elaborating their principles from experience (re)designing everything from carpeting to corporate campuses, William McDonough and Michael Braungart make an exciting and viable case for change.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This doesn't feel like a book - literally. It's a different size and shape, the pages are thick, the thing feels significantly heavier than it looks, and it's waterproof. The design of the book is making a point

also made in the text of the book: the current state of recycling generally turns higher quality products into lower quality ones useful only for purposes other than the original product, and then eventually discards them. This is not recycling; it's slow motion waste. "Cradle to Cradle," the object, is intended to be easily and completely recyclable into a new book of the same quality. "Cradle to cradle," the phrase, is contrasted to "cradle to grave." "Cradle to Cradle," the text, argues in favor of making all human productions either recyclable in the way this book is or completely biodegradable so that they can be used as fertilizer. In the future envisioned and partially created and described by this pair of authors, packaging will be tossed on the ground in response to signs reading "Please litter!" Appliances will be leased and returned to manufacturers to be completely recycled. Objects that must contain both biodegradable and inorganic recyclable elements will be easily separable into those respective parts: you'll toss the soles of your shoes into the garden and give the uppers back to the shoemaker. And the water coming out of factories will be cleaner than what came in, motivating the factory owners to reuse it and eliminating the need for the government to test its toxicity. These authors teamed up on the 1991 Hannover Principles to guide the design of the 2000 World's Fair. McDonough has an architecture firm in Charlottesville, Va.

I can't think of another book that so obviously practices what it preaches as *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (North Point Press) by William McDonough and Michael Braungart. Books are usually printed on a fairly high grade of paper (compared to, say, that used in newspapers), paper which everyone knows comes from cutting down pretty and naturally useful trees. The paper is printed with inks that have heavy metals and other chemicals in them. You can recycle a book, but those chemicals get to be part of the mess, and are expensive to remove. Anyway, you don't really recycle it, you *down-cycle* it (the authors' term), because the paper in it can only be bleached and chemically treated to turn it into a lower grade of paper, such as for newspapers. And newspapers can be turned into toilet paper, in further downcycling. *Cradle to Cradle* is about breaking out of such "cycles" and into real cycles. It has smooth, bright white pages that are heavy, like the paper in the best books. They are not, however, paper in the usual sense, although you probably wouldn't notice the difference unless your attention was called to it. They are made of plastic resins and inorganic fillers. Although the pages are designed to last as long as any paper book, these pages can be recycled by conventional means to make more paper of equal quality. They might even be *up-cycled* into resins of greater complexity and utility. The ink on them can be easily removed by a safe solvent bath, or washing with extremely hot water, and does not contain dangerous chemicals. The authors, one an architect and one a chemist, created

McDonough Braungart Design Chemistry in 1995, to consult with companies about designing sustaining products and factories.

Proof that our technologically advanced, high-consumption industrial system can make environmentally sound and sustainable products. We can manufacture a whole range of goods that are ecologically efficient in that they reduce waste and yet are less expensive to make than traditionally manufactured items. Pick up CRADLE TO CRADLE and the proof is right there in your hands. "This book is not a tree" the authors tell us. Its slightly heavier than your average paperback, the pages are whiter and they're also waterproof (I took the authors word on that one and am happy to say I was able to read on). The pages are made from plastic resins and fillers and in keeping with the message of "eliminating waste", the book is 100% recyclable. McDonough and Braungart's vision of "Remaking the Way We Make Things" goes way beyond books. Why not buildings that produce more energy than they consume? Or "green" roofs that give off oxygen while cooling the occupants? How about factories that produce drinkable effluent? or products that when their useful life is over can be used as nutrients for soil? What sounds like science fiction is convincingly shown to be quite feasible by the authors. They offer numerous examples to prove it. "We see a world of abundance, not limits" they say. As an architect (McDonough) and chemist (Braungart) they don't have any special qualifications for this re-thinking and re-doing. What they simply have done is re-imagine the whole manufacturing process beginning with the design elements. Sometimes it's simply a matter of asking the right questions and looking at things differently. They are not talking about smaller-scale industry or limiting themselves to the "four R's" of traditional environmentalism - reuse, recycle, reduce, and regulate.

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