



## **Mess: One Man's Struggle to Clean Up His House and His Act**

*Barry Yourgrau*

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## **Mess: One Man's Struggle to Clean Up His House and His Act** Barry Yourgrau

Hilarious and poignant, a glimpse into the mind of someone who is both a sufferer from and an investigator of clutter.

Millions of Americans struggle with severe clutter and hoarding. New York writer and bohemian Barry Yourgrau is one of them. Behind the door of his Queens apartment, Yourgrau's life is, quite literally, chaos. Confronted by his exasperated girlfriend, a globe-trotting food critic, he embarks on a heartfelt, wide-ranging, and too often uproarious project—part Larry David, part Janet Malcolm—to take control of his crammed, disorderly apartment and life, and to explore the wider world of collecting, clutter, and extreme hoarding.

Encounters with a professional declutterer, a Lacanian shrink, and Clutterers Anonymous—not to mention England's most excessive hoarder—as well as explorations of the bewildering universe of new therapies and brain science, help Yourgrau navigate uncharted territory: clearing shelves, boxes, and bags; throwing out a nostalgic cracked pasta bowl; and sorting through a lifetime of messy relationships. *Mess* is the story of one man's efforts to learn to let go, to clean up his space (physical and emotional), and to save his relationship.

## **Mess: One Man's Struggle to Clean Up His House and His Act Details**

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## **From Reader Review Mess: One Man's Struggle to Clean Up His House and His Act for online ebook**

### **Kimberly says**

It's hard to even explain how bad this book is. The ramblings of a spoiled, immature person who refuses to accept any facet of his situation. He is enabled by those around him to his continued delight. He constantly is looking for validation of his various mental health issues as if he desperately wants to be labeled with a diagnosis he can trot out as yet another excuse.

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### **Melissa says**

I have to be honest: I did not enjoy this book. I wanted to, I really did. But Yourgrau is at his best when engaging with others, and this book is largely about him. His writing is most engaging when others are in the scene; when we, the readers, are alone with him and his thoughts, he becomes harder to tolerate. I wanted to find something likeable in him, but found him frustrating, annoying and sometimes just obnoxious. Admittedly, I am more like his Cosima: I don't understand clutter, hoarding, messes; I can just throw it away. But her patience far exceeds mine, because I found myself almost quitting on this book more than once. I ultimately finished it, but couldn't wait to start my next one.

Edit: It's been a few weeks since I wrote this review, and I will confess I feel a bit like a bully. It's not easy to make ourselves vulnerable, which the author did. So while I'm still not a fan of the book, I respect his willingness to open himself up to exactly this sort of criticism.

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### **Kerry says**

Personal struggle memoirs (though "Mess" is classified as mental health - hoarding book), like personal travel writing, are very hard to get the correct balance and tone. Talking about oneself is in itself not insightful or interesting. The world of social media proves that over and over. Likewise, traveling across the globe and sitting at the Taj Mahal while reflecting on roads not taken back in Kansas, or the author moaning over their continuing struggles with baggage claims, does an injustice to the exotic location.

Whether revealing a familiar place like a cluttered hoarders apartment, or an exotic place like India, the writer's goal is to transport the reader to the location and immerse them in the experience, without drifting into some narcissistic monologue. You know the type, where the niggling issues of other people/places are a sign of a real flaw at which they might take a jab (perhaps couched as irony), while their own issues are merely misunderstood endearing eccentricities, often humorous, certainly harmless. Yet it is equally important to identify with the writer, quirks and all, because a dry recitation of time and place facts is not entertaining either.

The New York author here does not strike that balance well and often seems too full of himself. It is written with self-deprecating humor (which feels too clever and contrived, at times) but to his credit he has moments where he reflects on the real grief behind the facade and his hard efforts to solve his problems. Unfortunately, much of his intellectual ruminating seeks to transport the reader from his hoarder's home to

anyplace else. Much like he does with his real life visitors.

I'm looking at random pages, on page 62, it is about his travels to Rome and Hong Kong, on page 78, he is at the Lincoln Center, on page 86, he is at the New York Public Library, on page 138, he is out having Greek dinner with Melissa. It is as if, by associating his junk with places of reputation, he can elevate his bric-a-brac and his act of acquiring it to a higher plane. The book is full the proper nouns, name and place dropping, Andy Warhol comes up, of course. It reads like procrastination and diversion.

In fairness, this could be a matter of pacing. Who wants to listen to an otherwise anonymous stranger ruminate about their stuff for 273 pages. In fiction, character is king. I think in this kind of personal struggle memoir the author needs to establish a connection as well. I never developed that connection, I could not identify with his pretentiousness. Maybe a hoarder might benefit from his story and research that a casual reader might miss. Maybe I just needed a great before/after picture. Ultimately, I never felt what the point of where the story was going. *I read ending so I could have a better idea* Of course, it ends with his place clean ... and a trip to Miami. Maybe he should try travel writing.

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### **Catherine says**

I'm conflicted about this book. On the one hand I think the more stories we have about mental disorders, the better equipped we are to blast apart stereotypes and stigma about those illnesses. I have no doubt that someone will recognize themselves in this book, and perhaps be moved to begin the tough job of healing. If so, this book has done a service to those who are often disenfranchised and isolated, and should be commended.

That said, this was not a book I particularly enjoyed. It could have been far more concise - the author spent a great deal of the book telling the reader what he was going to do, rather than actually telling us the story of him doing it - and his urge to paint his condition as a product of his creativity, his cultural sensitivity, his appreciation of art . . . ugh.

Still, there were some genuinely moving moments, such as when the author finally confronts his father's books. I wish there had been more of that honesty in the book, and fewer attempts to look at the problem, in retrospect, as one of a too-cultured mind.

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### **Rebecca says**

\*\*I received an ARC through the generosity of WW Norton and Goodreads First Reads. Thank you\*\*

First things first, I am a hoarder. When this title came up for grabs on First Reads I immediately entered due to the fact that its a topic with which I am well acquainted . So naturally I won. When the book arrived I couldn't wait to dig in, as a former/recovering hoarder what had the author found out for himself. Or is he actually a collector or cluttering enthusiast? I found the author's journey a fascinating tale from his meetings in Clutterers Anonymous (I didn't know that such chapters exist) to delving into his family's history. Its a story of personal growth where one can let go and make peace with the past. A book that is well written and very personal, easy to become immersed in.

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### **Erin Boyington says**

Ugh. Whiny, self-absorbed New Yorker sponges off of his girlfriend and procrastinates cleaning up his messy apartment. I admit I gave up on this one. I just didn't care about his thoughts and feelings, or about his clutter, or about his reliance on psychobabble over action.

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### **Douglas Lord says**

Catalyzed by the shame and 'hypersensitive intimacy' of his girlfriend seeing all the crap he's living amid, Yourgrau begins to slowly dig himself out. The process, while quite honest, is fairly mundane; less an Updikean excavation than it is simply making a decision to make decisions. Unfortunately the author's grandiosity streak is a bit much. He decides to "chronicle" his ordeal, to "descend into the existential bowels of my beleaguered self" and "be a questing pilgrim slob, on a twelve-stations-of-the-Cross trail of transformation." Yourgrau also has the ability to wax about his pathology ad nauseam; four closets are "...stuffed to the gills, in good part with the unworn, the broken. Crummy mini-caves of an anti-Ali Baba." Really, he's just some dude who can't get rid of certain things. He learns that it has to do with his past wounds and hurts; that one's emotions can form attachments to things and make them part of the hoarder's identity. The root is when he dropped a repurposed bottle his mom gave him when he was a kid. It's an accessible book, just boring. Yourgrau might be interesting to sit next to at a clambake, but his narrative is simply wearisome. Soon, you'll just want him to stop: Wah wah wah, clean up your crap. He'll feel elated after pitching a "chewed-up trolley" or an office chair, then spend an hour picking out a goddamn screensaver. Perhaps if the crap he was deciding on was different, but this is old suitcases, broken laptops, ancient typewriters. VERDICT It's easy to overlook the author's good writing when we're too busy judging him on his time-management skills.

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### **Holly says**

I'm just starting the audiobook but already not sure about this reader who, by his tones and diction and pacing, simply sounds too organized and 'together'....

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I'm going to stop listening at 25%. I retract my accusation that the audiobook reader sounded too disciplined - I guess I thought the book was about a "messy" guy and so I expected more rough edges in voice and approach. But the book is actually about OCD and one man's psychological reasons for clutter, so a crisp, clipped diction is not inappropriate. I just didn't become terribly interested in his particular life-story and was looking for excuses to do something other than listen to him when I went for my run and dog-walks. It was time to move on.

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## **Eva Smith says**

By the time I finished this book – skipping through much of the last section – I really didn’t like this Mess or the author.

He is a kept man – intellectual arm-candy with a British accent for a successful woman who feeds him and takes him with her on round-the-world trips. Otherwise Yourgrau sits in his small apartment – not a house – and dabbles at writing and surfing the Web. The apartment is a hand-me-down from his girlfriend who moved into a bigger apartment where he goes for food and entertainment.

At one point his girlfriend, who has a pseudonym in the book, asks him what she is getting out of the relationship. What, indeed.

He is surrounded by stuff – his stuff, his dead parents’ stuff, his girlfriend’s stuff (including a piano) and, amazingly, his girlfriend’s ex-boyfriend’s stuff.

What I think is Yourgrau is a lazy slobola, not someone with a psychological disorder. The only amazing thing about him is that his mess embarrasses him. The mess in his apartment not the mess in his life. He is oblivious to that.

He cobbles together this book – the other amazing thing is what gets published these days – from research about scholarly writings about packrats, sensational stories about packrats, two visits to a Clutterers Anonymous meeting and a couple of interviews with people who make their living helping people get organized.

There was a passage about what I’m going to call The War on Books. That is becoming a “thing.” Ron, one of the organizers for hire, allowed Yourgrau to come with him on a job. “The client and I were brothers against Ron. I’d heard him and Ron differing about the books on these shelves – about books in general. The client and I were brothers against Ron. ‘I haven’t read a book in fifteen years!’ he’d boasted at the Jackson Diner. Collecting books of ‘value’ (that word again – meaning monetary value) was one thing. But the old paperbacks and such on the shelves here were simply disposophobia, he argued. Though he wasn’t going to twist anyone’s arm.” (Page 137.)

Back to Yourgrau’s mess. He throws or recycles away some stuff – like plastic grocery bags. His girlfriend buys him some super-big plastic storage bins and lets him store those in her apartment building’s basement. Problem solved. Book published.

The saving grace about Mess is that I didn’t buy it. It will go back to the library on my next trip.

To be fair, the man has his fans. From an Amazon review about “The Sadness of Sex,” another book by Yourgrau: “From the man The New York Times Book Review called ‘an uncommon diagnostician of the curiosities of the human heart’ and hailed on NPR (National Public Radio) as ‘the stand-up comedian of the unconscious...’”

Whatever.

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## Melki says

**Number of *visible* cardboard boxes in my place, empty or full: 45**

**Number of shopping bags with handles, large and small, in *visible* use: 22**

Well . . . this one hit home.

The book begins with Yourgrau's girlfriend begging for admittance to his 700-square foot apartment. He is too ashamed of the way it looks to let her in. And when he mentions that he is embarrassed to allow repairmen through the door, it all came flooding back to me.

That's how I used to live.

My mother was an animal collector. I grew up surrounded by dozens of dogs, cats and a possum. NO ONE was allowed to visit. My best friend was permitted to play in the basement, but in the thirteen years we lived near one another, she never saw the upstairs of my house. Things got even worse when we moved to a sprawling farmhouse, as my mother began collecting parrots. Soon fifteen large cages filled our living room. (My dad, excited at the prospect of watching syndicated *M\*A\*S\*H\** reruns never got the chance. The theme song set the birds off into an hour-long squawk-fest!) The menagerie generated an astonishing amount of dirt, and my mother was not a good housekeeper. She thought sweeping the kitchen floor once a day was enough. Magazines and catalogs piled up and were never tossed. Everything in the house became dotted with fly specks.

My father was not a hoarder, but he did generate his own messes. His den, as we called it, was the biggest bedroom in the house. A large kitchen table in the center of the room held books and piles and piles of paper - articles he was writing, reading or researching. Though the room contained floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, stacks of books teetered on the floor. A small pathway led from the door to his typewriter. It might sound like a nightmare to some, but I loved spending time in that room. (Hmm . . . maybe he *was* a hoarder. Or am I just more forgiving of people who hoard books?)

When something broke in my parents' house, it stayed broken. After the kitchen sink became clogged beyond my dad's meager plumbing abilities, my mother started doing the dishes in the adjacent bathroom sink. The inconvenience was preferable to letting a stranger see how she kept house. It's good the furnace never needed repair. I assume we would have just bundled up and carried on grimly with chattering teeth.

So I worry and I wonder - could this happen to me? And I am fascinated by others with the same concerns. It's the main reason I bought this book.

After being denied admission that fateful day, Yourgrau's sweetie is appalled by the way he lives and issues an ultimatum - **"You have to clean up. And I don't mean just your house. I mean your act."** And for the first time, he makes a serious attempt to do so . . . in his own particular way. When asked if he had started cleaning yet, his response was:

**"I found this great encyclopedic guide to cleaning," I informed her, chuckling. "It's called *Home Comforts: The Art and Science of Keeping House*. It weighs almost three pounds! I weighed it on the bathroom scale."**

**"Why are you weighing books when you should be vacuuming and throwing out all your crap!" she**

**demanded.**

Much of Yourgrau's book concerns his coming to grips with whether or not he HAS a serious problem - is he a hoarder, a clutterbug or a collector? He attends meetings, and interviews professional de-clutterers. He delves into the psychological reasons why he has trouble parting with his possessions. And he takes strides towards cleaning his home, his "place of disarray."

Cosima/Medea/Prunella, as Yourgrau names and renames his lady-love, occasionally comes off as a shrew, but we procrastinators NEED people like that in our lives. People with artistic temperaments have a tendency to save things - for sentimental reasons and "just in case." (For years, I've been saving those tiny springs that come on clothespins, "just in case" I ever want to make steampunk-inspired jewelry. It's been fifteen years now and I haven't made ANY jewelry, but, you never know . . .) Someone needs to step in and say "Enough!" Just by being present, my husband is my Cosima. I often joke that where he grew up, you could eat off the floors, and where I grew up, the floors went crunch when you walked on them. Knowing that he was not raised the way I was is enough to keep me sane from letting things get out of hand.

I've come to the conclusion that I am a clutterer/collector. The last time we moved, the man who came to do the estimate described my home as "a very FULL house." I have a lot of stuff. I think it is well organized, and much of it is rotated through the seasons. People are allowed in my house, and most of them seem to enjoy looking at my collections. Occasionally a visitor will say something like "I could stay here a month and not see everything!" And then I start to wonder. I find myself using some of the same phases Yourgrau used, like "**At least I'm not as bad as . . .**" or "**What is WRONG with me?**" And what if I had to live in his 700 square feet?

I'd be screwed.

For now, and hopefully for always, I do all I can to not become my mother. When it comes to dusting and dog fur, I'm fairly lax, but I draw the line at piles of stuff. Every now and then my husband asks if I wouldn't like a second dog. And it's tempting. I would LOVE a second dog. But two can so easily lead to three and before you know it, there are possums and parrots.

Nope. Not on my watch.

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For most readers this is probably a four star book. But for me, it's led to soul-searching, deep introspection and, for better and for worse, a trip down Memory Lane. For that, I award piles and piles of stars. Now you have to dust them, Yourgrau.

### **Julia Mitchell says**

This book is trying way too hard to defend the author's lifestyle habits with quasi-intellectual references and illusions to literature/history/romanticized views of why he is....a hoarder. It's not good. I couldn't even finish it even though this is the type of subject matter I'm interested in.

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### **Jessica says**

I LOVE shows like *Hoarders* and I've read other books about hoarding that were really good, so I was excited to read this one. Barry Yourgrau realizes he has a problem when his long-time girlfriend locks herself out and shows up at his house - but he won't let her inside and she hasn't been inside for over 5 years because of his clutter/hoarding. After that she gives him an ultimatum about cleaning up, which he recounts in this book. Reading this book must be what it feels like to be inside a hoarders mind because it was kind of all over the place and he is CONSTANTLY getting derailed anytime he attempts to clean. But, after 2 years he finally has his place cleaned up and can finally have people over again.

I found Yourgrau VERY hard to relate to - I'm not a hoarder, but he seemed very neurotic and scattered. I'm glad he finally got motivated to clean up, but the book was very slow and meandering. I didn't love it. I'd recommend *Coming Clean* by Kimberly Miller or *Stuff* by Randy Frost as much better books about hoarding - or just watch the TV show *Hoarders*.

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### **Pamela says**

This is a quirky book, from an admittedly quirky author. It's about Barry Yourgrau's attempt to clean up his apartment. He isn't sure if he's a hoarder or not, he likes to think he's just a messy collector, but when his girlfriend comes to visit and can't get into the door because of all the stuff, well something has to be done. So begins The Project. Yourgrau has a tendency to desperately try connecting himself to almost anything, which is an unnecessary part of the narrative. Like the Collyer brothers, famous hoarders that lived in New York City until their demise in 1947. And there are more fleeting aspects than they both live in New York.

The girlfriend's name changes several times throughout the book, and her mother's as well near the end. It's just a distraction. There are bits of extraneous information everywhere. Most of the parts with the girlfriend aren't necessary to the story, but if you think of the book as a memoir, then it works better. Yourgrau early on talks about how distracted he gets, so this extra fluff is really part of who he is ultimately.

Yourgrau visits therapists and support groups, like Clutterers Anonymous and investigates other places of hoarders and the people who help them clear their stuff. Of course the television shows of hoarders are mentioned, how could it not? Yourgrau is particularly bent on comparing his problem of stuff with others, often pictures are mentioned but none are provided in the book. Yourgrau definitely has emotional issues tied to his things, and most particularly Father issues, which is explored in the book, as part of The Project.

Overall it is very readable, and interesting to a degree. The writing style and approach is cutesy and a can be annoying at times. Near the end the point of view changes, jarring, unnecessary, but I suppose adds to the quirky distracting nature of the overall book. This is not a book to read to try to fix your own problem, no, it's more just one man's tale of what his experience with his stuff and his life, or how his life affected him to accumulate stuff. And how he de-cluttered, cleaned up. The subtitle really does explain what the book is about. If you want a book to help you declutter your life look elsewhere, but if you're fascinated by the topic this is a good enough read.

One of the most poignant quotes gleaned from the book, a quote from someone else, Susan Pearce an "expert

on collecting", she said: "Souvenirs are lost youth, lost friends, lost past happiness; they are the tears of things."

Book rating: 3.5 stars

*Update - May 3, 2017: I received a free copy of this book from the publisher. I was not required to write a review, but felt like it and, of course, the above opinions are my own.*

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### **Wanda says**

What a mix of emotions I felt while reading this memoir of an extreme clutterer and how he, as the subtitle says, cleans up his house and his act.

First, I felt sympathy. After all, I know what my guest room currently looks like. It has become a dumping ground for unmade decisions and it's one of my projects for February—get it fit to receive guests once again. It's very hard in a society such as ours, which pushes consumerism and acquisition as the route to salvation, to keep clutter under control.

Second, I felt just a touch of panic. Could I end up in the same situation as the author? Not wanting to allow people in my house. Not being willing to have maintenance people in to fix malfunctioning plumbing or to paint or repair windows.

Third, I felt anxiety. I couldn't help it, sometimes it just twisted off the page and wrapped itself around me. The tremendous anxiety that Mr. Yourgrau felt while trying to sort out his life was palpable. As a somewhat anxious person myself, I could identify with this feeling very strongly.

Fourth, I felt relief. I was happy for him that he managed to get his life under his own control again, that he was comfortable to have people in, and that he was enjoying his surroundings. Plus, I went to my paper nightmare and proceeded to purge, sort, and file like a boss and felt some relief of my own.

I find it interesting that many creative people have problems with "stuff." I don't consider myself to be in the creative category, but one of my sisters definitely is and her clutter problem is somewhat worse than mine. Just as for Mr. Yourgrau, she feels an emotional attachment to every article of detritus in her home and finds it wrenching to let go. Although she does not feel the need to destroy things, as he does, so that no one else will ever be able to use them.

On a final note, if I ever end up with a landlord again, I am going to steal his nickname for his: The Bubonic Weasel.

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### **Jacqueline Masumian says**

In this memoir a hoarder systematically works to discover all he can about the source of his affliction, and the book makes for some interesting reading. The author tells his story via a number of sidetracks: visits to homes of pathological hoarders, sessions on various psychiatrists' couches, and interviews with hoarder

counselors who work to free their clients from odious treasures of trash. The reader becomes a voyeur, peeking into the lives of those tortured souls who simply cannot let go of their stuff. But there is also a good deal of thoughtful writing here.

In a jokey, self-deprecating voice Barry Youngrau presents himself as a struggler against moderate hoarding tendencies (deemed so by a self-administered personality test) that are interfering with his life, causing him considerable anxiety and fear. In order to hold onto the woman he loves, the lively, sensible, and talented Cosima, he becomes determined to beat his obsession. The reader can truly sympathize with his dilemma and feel the angst associated with indecisiveness and hoarding (I trust many of us tend to have “collections” of seemingly valueless objects ourselves). What keeps this book animated are the characters: the author, his girlfriend, the girlfriend’s wise-cracking mother, the various hoarders, counselors, therapists and other colorful personalities the author encounters on his journey to get to the bottom of his hoarding.

Though it bogged down in the middle with a discussion of various off-beat psychotherapies, I enjoyed *Mess*. It is the story of a true human struggle (hoarding has been associated with OCD, PTSD, and various other maladies) and could potentially offer insight to any reader dealing with their own hoarding tendencies or those of loved ones. Plus, it’s an entertaining read. 3.5 would be a more accurate Goodreads rating.

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