

TENEMENTS, TOWERS & TRASH

An Unconventional Illustrated History of New York City



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Julia Wertz

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**Tenements, Towers & Trash: An Unconventional Illustrated History of New York City Julia Wertz
A New York Times Notable Book of 2017!**

Here is New York, as you've never seen it before. A perfectly charming, sidesplittingly funny, intellectually entertaining illustrated history of the blocks, the buildings, and the guts of New York City, based on Julia Wertz's popular illustrated columns in *The New Yorker* and *Harper's*.

In *Tenements, Towers & Trash*, Julia Wertz takes us *behind* the New York that you think you know. Not the tourist's New York—the Statue of Liberty makes a brief appearance and the Empire State Building not at all—but the guts, the underbelly, of this city that never sleeps. With drawings and comics in her signature style, Wertz regales us with streetscapes "Then and Now" and little-known tales, such as the lost history of Kim's Video, the complicated and unresolved business of Ray's Pizza, the vintage trash and horse bones that litter the shore of Brooklyn's Bottle Beach, the ludicrous pinball prohibition, Staten Island's secret abandoned boatyard, and the hair-raising legend of the infamous abortionist of Fifth Avenue, Madame Restell. From bars, bakeries, and bookstores to food carts, street cleaners, and apartments both cramped and grand, *Tenements, Towers & Trash* is a wild ride in a time machine taxi from the present day city to bygone days of yore.

Tenements, Towers & Trash: An Unconventional Illustrated History of New York City Details

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Author : Julia Wertz

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From Reader Review Tenements, Towers & Trash: An Unconventional Illustrated History of New York City for online ebook

Virginia Su says

So. good.

Whenever people ask me why I love this dirty, rat-infested city, I always find it difficult to put into precise words. This book has so beautifully captured the unique essence and personality of NYC that I struggle to explain. Many pages contain no words or phrases but I can still understand what the author is trying to convey. I love it.

Raina says

The story around the edges of this book is melancholy in tone.

In the foreword, Wertz reveals that after being illegally evicted from her apartment, she was forced to leave NYC and move in with family on the west coast. She finished this book in the years immediately after leaving the city. That sadness and nostalgia colors the book.

It's an impressive enterprise. Large size, many pages... The content alternates between Then & Now-style depictions of specific blocks or businesses in NYC, and short nonfiction pieces about various people, events, and inventions.

I like obscure history, and I really like Wertz' autobiographical work, so I was into it.

Read with:

Ramshackle by Allison McCreesh for a serious sense of place

Photobooth: A Biography for the aesthetic and niche historical stuff

Tokyo on Foot for the illustrated city idea

Syncopated: An Anthology of Nonfiction Picto-Essays for short-form NF goodness

Elizabeth A says

Most of us tend to read the usual travel guides when we visit a new (or old) place, but there is something really wonderful about micro histories that focus on things that tourists, or even locals for that matter, don't read about or see. This large and heavy book is a lovely illustrated micro history of New York City.

There are pages of and pages of drawings of buildings and street corners then and now. There are quirky bits of history and comics woven in throughout. Sure, there are some touristy spots thrown in, but this is not your usual tourist guide to a city. You get a sense of the history, of the changes in architecture over the years, and the transience of it all. A love letter to the city that was the author's home for about ten years. A wonderful book for new and long time fans of NYC.

Oriana says

My god this book is so splendid. I love Julia Wertz, and I love Julia Wertz's New York, and it was just so marvelous meandering quirkily through it with her. What a treasure.

Here's what we ate at book club! Bodega eggcreams, plantain chips, homemade cinnamon rolls, spinach-artichoke dip, and on and on.

Maggie Gordon says

Tenements, Towers and Trash is an illustrated art book of New York. You get some history and a few comics, but the real beauty of this book is the in-depth drawings of New York, both past and present. It's a fascinating way to look at the city through the details and forgotten bits rather than just the main tourist spots. I learned a lot about the city and where I will probably want to visit when I finally go, and I enjoyed the little historical stories (and accompanying humour!) along the way.

Julie Ehlers says

I was a rather unlikely reader of *Tenements, Towers & Trash*, in the sense that I liked but did not love Julia Wertz's *Drinking at the Movies* and I'm generally not that interested in New York City (sorry, New Yorkers!). But my interest was piqued enough to take this out of the library, and I'm really glad I did—the art was BEAUTIFUL, and a lot of the history was so interesting. For some reason I particularly loved the section that focused on different types of apartments. The depictions of various blocks, decades ago contrasted with the present day, were also very striking. Of course I also loved the drawings of, and stories about, various independent bookstores. Not everything was so fascinating—I didn't particularly care to hear about Dead Horse Bay or all of the areas that have become disgusting trash heaps, and I also thought Wertz came across as a bit hipper-than-thou (which was my major issue with *Drinking at the Movies* as well). Overall, though, I really learned a lot and the pages just flew by. Recommended!

Caitlin M says

Julia Wertz has concocted a book that's irresistible if you love New York City and its lore, old and new. Written from the point of view of someone who moved to the city as a young adult, fell in love with it, and spent a lot of time exploring its odd corners and its ghosts, *Tenements, Towers & Trash* is personal, discursive, and opinionated, all of which are qualities in its favor.

Told through prose and detailed black-and-white drawings, the book is stuffed with then-and-now streetscapes, collections of of-a-kind establishments past and present (apothecaries, bakeries, theaters, food carts, bars, and indie bookstores, to name but a few) that figure in New Yorkers' daily lives, and with deeper

explorations of people, places, and things both well known and not (from a nineteenth-century abortionist, graveyards for boats and once-banned pinball machines, trash collecting, and the subway, to the *Village Voice* and recent institution Kim's Video) that make up the fabric of the city.

Even as Wertz celebrates the old architecture that still stands and the historic businesses that endure, her then-and-now illustrations show the city New York is becoming, beyond the inevitable churn of time: The familiar shift from independent neighborhood businesses to chain drugstores and Verizon outlets; the buildings torn down and replaced by luxury apartments for the well-heeled, gentrification pushing longtime, economically and ethnically diverse residents out of their neighborhoods. This can be depressing (if not exactly news to those who've followed the news in recent years), but these portraits sit alongside others that show farther-flung neighborhoods populated by an array of small businesses serving the needs of still-diverse communities.

Like Julia Wertz, I'm a Northern California native who moved to New York City in my mid 20s and lived there for a decade (after visiting with some regularity throughout my growing-up years), though I left around the time she arrived—so *Tenements, Towers & Trash* brought with it a certain amount of nostalgia for me. It entertained me equally with history I was familiar with and that which was new to me; it evoked memory with illustrations of places I'd walked by hundreds of times and businesses I've patronized, and it took me to many neighborhoods and corners of the city where I'd never ventured, and without even showing me people frequently gave me a sense of who once lived and now lives there. Wertz's project isn't meant to give a comprehensive look at the city; as she explains, she wrote a book about things that interested her as she explored her adopted city. The breadth of what she does cover is wide, and often enough fascinating. The book's large size (think coffee-table dimensions), quality paper, and sewn binding make it a pleasure to read, giving space for the reader to explore the detail and density of the illustrations and letting the occasional text-heavy pages breathe.

David Schaafsma says

Julia Wertz, the maker of endlessly self-deprecating and always wryly amusing diary comics turns to this an illustrated love letter to the New York she called home for several years. I love her diary comics, but this is a serious departure into a view of New York seen through its buildings, storefronts, signage. Not a tourist's guide, but a New Yorker's passionate goodbye to her city, as she moves back to California. Wow, it is impressive to look at! This is not a fun story, though there are comics in it sometimes. Mainly it is a book of buildings with little commentary. The diary comics are all her, of course; this huge ambitious book is about her City.

You want to read other books that are love letters to cities or reveling in architecture? Here's a list, and I have reviews of all of them and more in this category:

Cheap Novelties: The Pleasure of Urban Decay, Ben Katchor (a good pairing with Wertz's book)
Building Stories, Chris Ware (though he has many about or based in Chicago).
Here, Richard McGuire

A new one I have yet to read: Going Into Town: A Love Letter to New York, Roz Chast

Also: 750 Years of Paris, Vincent Mahe
The End of Summer, Tillie Walden

Cleveland, Harvey Pekar
The Bind, William Goldsmith
See the City: The Journey of Manhattan Unfurled, Matteo Pericoli

Denise says

This was just the most awesome thing. The most "me" book to ever exist, I think. Such a great showpiece to have on display and flip through, but 100% worth taking the time to read and savor. The cityscapes are gorgeous, and the random facts and behind-the-scenes info about NYC is just too good to pass up. I want to get up, go out, and walk forever around the city to take it all in. I kept flagging things to check out (the Spite Triangle, all the Ray's Pizzas, Ideal Hosiery, weirdly, the 15-mile walk -- CHALLENGE ACCEPTED, the excellent list of books and resources at the end, and SO many more). Julia Wertz's books were some of the first "real" NYC stories I read. Stories about the beauty and mess and the grossness and the misery and the ebullience. The Julia stories interspersed here are so true to her original work and energy, which is a really awesome and welcome interlude in the cityscapes and factoid sections. I remember reading about when Julia was kicked out of her apartment, and I felt a strange sort of sadness, like this mythological place had been destroyed. This book is a great tribute to Julia's time in NYC, and a great tribute to the greatest city. A worthy purchase for locals, dreamers, and adventure-seekers.

Lisa says

Meh.

Juliana says

I saw this huge hardcover graphic novel in the window of a local comic shop and after the owner pulled it down for me I had to have it.

Did you love Richard Scarry books as a child? Walking? Urban exploration? Old and new architecture? Then and now photography? Then you will also want this illustrated book.

Julia Wertz has illustrated the buildings and street corners of New York, the subway stations, the pizza parlors, tenements, and along the way tells you stories about her urban exploration and the history of New York.

Robert says

The history is mostly good, and its well written, and the subject matter is interesting, but the comparison pieces - where the author does side by side illustrations of a particular street from two different eras - are a subject matter that works much better in a photographic format. Drawings, however technically skilled, don't have the captured weight of history behind them and seem to blend together.

Hannah Garden says

On my deathbed I will say, “I’m so glad Julia Wertz drew a thousand tiny windows.”

This book is perfect.

Keith Schnell says

The world needs more books, and especially more illustrated / graphic books, like *Tenements, Towers & Trash*, because there really isn't anything that I can think of that's quite like this. Probably the closest thing would be Harvey Pekar's *Cleveland*, like this essentially a love letter from the author to a city that became a muse. But Pekar was handicapped by the fact that his readers needed a lot more of the basic history of his more provincial city in order to understand why it is the way it is, leaving less space for him to weave his own life into the narrative or to tell awesome *Cleveland* stories. Fortunately for Julia Wertz, New York needs no introduction, so she can focus on what she does best: stunningly detailed streetscape illustrations combined with obscure, hilarious stories and anecdotes full of local history and trivia, told through the lens of her own experience as an artist in the City.

Some of the best material here -- the long stories about the Pinball Prohibition and the World's Fair -- were previously published in *The New Yorker*, but as is always the case that's never an excuse not to read them again; there are also new stories along the same lines. The fascinating streetscapes were mostly, as far as I can tell, never before published, and I spent hours poring over them in detail, looking at the storefronts of different eras and trying to imagine living in that world, which was clearly the whole point of the book and is the real reason to pick it up.

Peter Landau says

TENEMENTS, TOWERS & TRASH: AN UNCONVENTIONAL ILLUSTRARTED HISTORY OF NEW YORK CITY by Julia Wertz opens with an E.B. White quote:

“There are roughly three New Yorks. There is, first, the New York of the man or woman who was born here, who takes the city for granted and accepts its size and its turbulence as natural and inevitable. Second, there is the New York of the commuter — the city that is devoured by locusts each day and spat out each night. Third, there is the New York of the person who was born somewhere else and came to New York in quest of something....Commuters give the city its tidal restlessness; natives give it solidity and continuity; but the settlers give it passion.”

I disagree. It's not passion, but mythology that those coming to New York City bring, which all but obliterates the reality of the place.

Julia Wertz isn't a native New Yorker, but she comes to town with a wide-eyed appreciation of the dirt

behind the iconic arclights that blind one to the real city. It's history, not the narcotic of New York City's iconic pull that draws her.

And she draws out the past still present, even when it's been razed to make way for chain stores. With a mix of comics and archetrical drawings, she explores the ephemera of New York City, the history it sweeps aways, the garage it buries.

It's a beautiful and funny book, full of great stories and detailed images of streets past and present. Wertz was priced out of her beloved metropolis and wants to return, but her book shows how New York City changes, and recently those changes are not good.

There's still remenants of the past and even hope for the future, but New York City has entered a new era, one in which it no longer leads, but follows. It looks more like a suburb, or maybe all the suburbs stacked on top of one another, unable to wake up from a dream of its own making.

I love New York. I love Wertz's book. If only New York loved people like Wertz and gave them a space, even a fucking outer-borough studio, in which to make their art, then, maybe, the creative capital of the city wouldn't be in default, like New York City nearly was back when in the 1970s, when it was cheap and artists could stake a claim.
