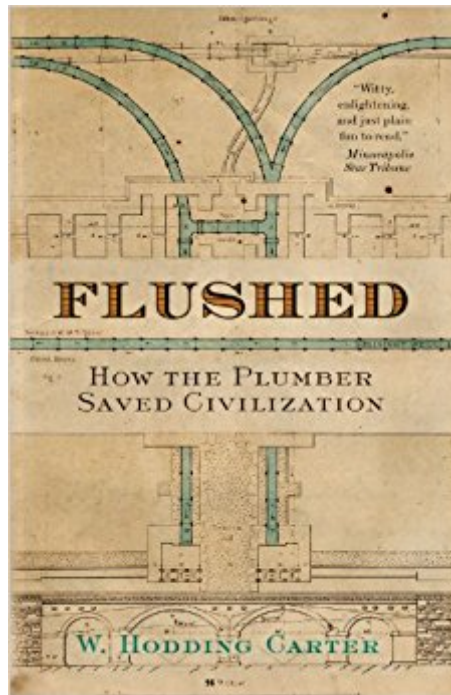


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Flushed: How The Plumber Saved Civilization



Synopsis

"The unsung hero of human history was, of course, the Brain of Drains, the Hub of Tubs, the Power of Showers, the Brewer of Sewers...the humble plumber." -- W. Hodding Carter When we consider the amenities that really make a difference in our well-being, surely good plumbing must rank near the top. But rarely have we taken the time to appreciate the engineering marvels that bring clean water into our homes with the turn of a tap and the flip of a lever. Until now. Witty, anecdotal, and thoroughly entertaining, *Flushed* chronicles the long and notable history of plumbing, while following Hodding Carter's travels and travails around the most underappreciated pillar of civilization. It's a winning combination of history, science, and firsthand experience -- a book that will both entertain and educate those who have never contemplated the hidden intricacies of this miracle of everyday technology.

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Customer Reviews

Carter, a "great sanitation scholar," gives us an outstanding tour of the world of plumbing; several tours, actually. One is the historical tour, from classical times to the present day and beyond. Carter goes back to the Romans, whose pipes made of lead ("plumbum" in Latin) gave us the word for plumber. The trip through time make brief stops in the dark ages, where monks railed against pagan rituals of water and washing, while quietly enjoying the highest levels of sanitation around. Carter's next historical high points come in the 18th and especially 19th century, when Europe finally

recovered and surpassed the Romans' level of engineering sophistication. The story continues into today, with recent innovations like the 1.6 gallon flush, and into some truly exciting possibilities for the future of human waste processing. Another kind of tour lets us visit the technologies of waste removal. Up until the 1800s, that largely consisted of an open window, a shouted warning to anyone passing below, and a mighty heave of the "thunder mug," which left the streets in a condition that beggars modern imagination. From there, Carter works up to the high-tech digesters that biologically decontaminate Boston's sewage stream, and to practical demonstrations of recovering energy from methane given off, or even bacterial fuels cells that generate electricity directly. It's also a story of social progress. People live longer and fewer children die of disease spread by fecal contamination, to be sure. Carter also describes low-tech innovations in India that promise to improve the lives of the untouchable undercaste, once they are freed from the necessary but "unclean" duty of clearing away the human waste of India's hundreds of millions.

Carter's book is a wonderful read. It's light hearted, slightly "off the wall" and very informative. Some of the information regarding ancient public and private sanitation systems was already known to me, but I was particularly impressed with the author's unwillingness to just take the historian's word on the subject as a given. His attempt to create a Roman style pipe was not only very funny, it was very informative. His search for a pipe in situ was impressive--not to mention enviable; I would love to hop a plane to a foreign land just to satisfy my own curiosity about some topic. The book is very well written and pulls the reader along with its wit and humor. Although the subject is one few individuals actually take time to consider, it is one of the more important issues facing mankind even today. As the author notes, several million people in third world countries do not enjoy the benefits of clean water and sewage removal. When I took a class on the history of medicine some time ago one of the things pointed out was that despite the acknowledged technological changes in medicine, the two most significant events with respect to human health and longevity were the introduction of antibiotics and public sanitation. In fact, of the two, the latter is probably the more significant. It was interesting to notice how fitful have been the advances in sanitation, especially since its significance was already recognized in prehistory. If the ancient people of the Indian subcontinent realized the benefit of the technology even before the advent of the written word, its slow progress seems odd. As the author points out, even the "modern" toilet is a 19th century product, which has changed only in minor details.

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