

Not Buying It

by Judith Levine

About the Book

Shocked by the commerce in everything from pet cloning to patriotism, frightened by the downward spiral of her finances and that of the trash-strewn earth, Judith Levine enlists her partner, Paul, in a radical experiment: to forgo all but the most necessary purchases for an entire year.

Without consumer goods and experiences, Judith and Paul pursue their careers, nurture relationships, and try to keep their sanity, their identities, and their sense of humor intact. Tracking their progress -- and inevitable lapses -- Levine contemplates need and desire, scarcity and security, consumerism and citizenship. She asks the Big Questions: Can the economy survive without shopping? Are Q-tips necessary?

Not Buying It is the confession of a woman any reader can identify with: someone who can't live without French roast coffee or SmartWool socks but who has had it up to here with overconsumption and its effects on the earth and everyone who dwells there.

For the humor and intelligence of its insights, the refreshment of its skepticism, and the surprises of its conclusions, *Not Buying It* is sure to be on anyone's list of Necessities.

Praise for the Book

"Sharp and witty.... honest and humorous.... By thinking harder about how it would feel to consume less, we might just make ourselves -- and our planet -- a lot better."

— *The Christian Science Monitor*

"One of the five best books on consumer culture."

— **Paco Underhill, *The Wall Street Journal***

"I love this book."

— **Barbara Ehrenreich**

"An Important Book."

— **Bill McKibben**

"Well worth its price!"

— **Editor's Choice, *Entertainment Weekly***

Courtesy of Simon and Schuster

About the Author

Judith Levine

American Writer (1952 -)

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Personal Information

Family: Born September 20, 1952, in Queens, NY; daughter of Theodore (a psychologist) and Charlotte (an administrator; maiden name, Peterson) Levine. Education: City College of the City University of New York, B.A. (magna cum laude), 1974; Columbia University, M.S., 1979. Politics: "Feminist, socialist." Religion: "Jewish, non-practicing." Hobbies and other interests: Bicycling, cross-country skiing, swimming, film, theater, art, bird watching. Memberships: National Writers Union (vice president), Authors Guild, Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce (FACT), No More Nice Girls (founder). Addresses: Home: 372 State St., Brooklyn, NY 11217. Agent: Diane Cleaver, 55 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10003.

Career

Writer, 1979--. Worked variously as a waitress, daycare teacher, and bike messenger, 1972-79.

Awards

Richard J. Margolis Award, 1993.

Writings by the Author

- *My Enemy, My Love: Man Hating and Ambivalence in Women's Lives*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 1992.
- *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex*, University of Minnesota Press (Minneapolis, MN), 2002.

Contributor of articles and reviews to periodicals, including *Lears*, *Mirabella*, *New Woman*, *Philadelphia Inquirer Book Review*, *Village Voice*, and *Village Voice Literary Supplement*. Contributing editor, *New York Woman* (magazine), 1991-92.

Further Reading about the Author

Periodicals

- *Insight on the News*, May 20, 2002, Robert Stacy McCain, "Sex Isn't Just for Adults Anymore," p. 27.
- *Library Journal*, June 1, 2002, Martha Cornog, review of *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex*, p. 176.
- *Nation*, May 20, 2002, JoAnn Wypijewski, "The Wonder Years," p. 24.
- *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 16, 2002, Beth Gillin, "Book Blasted for Views on Childhood Sexuality."
- *Psychology Today*, July-August, 2002, Deborah Roofman, "Sex: Friend or Foe?," p. 70.
- *Publishers Weekly*, April 22, 2002, review of *Harmful to Minors*, p. 63.
- *Time*, April 15, 2002, Rebecca Winters, "Child Sexuality: Challenging the Taboos," p. 22.
- *U.S. News & World Report*, April 22, 2002, John Leo, "Apologists for Pedophilia," p. 53.
- *Women's Review of Books*, June, 2002, Louise Armstrong, "Wishful Thinking," pp. 1-3.*

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Author Essay

Don't Shop, Celebrate!

It was a Saturday morning two weeks before Christmas in New York. My partner, Paul, was online pricing insulation for the cellar steam pipes.

I was putting on my shoes for a walking tour of Walt Whitman's Brooklyn haunts, courtesy of a historian friend.

For the whole year, Paul and I had undertaken an X-treme experiment in nonconsumption. We had purchased nothing but necessities: basic food ingredients, Internet access, insulin for our diabetic cat. The rest we forewent: new clothes, books, movies, restaurant meals. I had meditated on the experience; the result was my book *Not Buying It: My Year Without Shopping*.

Now we'd arrived at the ultimate test: the holidays. Could we resist buying not just gifts, but all the fixins' of the season: red-velvet ribbon, Champagne flutes, New Year's Eve finery?

So far, *Not Buying It* had given Paul and me a holiday gift whose value we could not have anticipated. Free of the obligation to buy or to be merry, life was gloriously ordinary. Watching my neighbors schlep parcels through the slush, I felt fleet of foot and light of encumbrance. My backpack was so empty I had room to carry around a 600-page library book, Andrew Solomon's *Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*. "Glad tidings!" I thought, each time I hauled it out to read on the subway.

Still, without running up our credit card balances or running ourselves ragged with the anxieties of the season, we managed to celebrate cheerfully, and have done so every year since. You can too:

1. **Do tell, don't ask.** Inform friends and family you aren't buying gifts and request they reciprocate. No one will be insulted. More likely, they'll be relieved.
2. **Relish the excesses of others.** Your decision not to purchase a three-meter-high inflatable front-lawn Santa or a £10,000 Cartier Tankissime watch does not prohibit you from admiring the gorgeous vulgarity and insane generosity the season brings out in us all. Yes, retailers take advantage, but these are our best instincts.
3. **Freeload.** If the party is big enough, no one will notice when you show up empty-handed and monopolize the pancetta-wrapped mushrooms. Your hosts do want your company; that's why they invited you. They don't need another bottle of mediocre Merlot; that's not why they invited you.
4. **Reject dogmatism.** Do not punish the postman or dustbin man with your newfound thrift. These people serve you gladly all year; they are not always well paid. Reward them. Ditto, the kids. You don't have to buy them the moon, but receiving the iPod or Bratz doll they've been longing for will not turn them into Posh Spice. The holidays are no time for negative reinforcement. If you practice

nonmaterialist values the rest of the year, your family's holiday practices - and spirit - will change.

5. **Go selectively overboard.** Paul and I throw an Annual Chanukah Latke Bash. Like all holiday feasts, it is an orgy of extravagance: dozens of potato pancakes, vats of sour cream, a small school of smoked whitefish and trout. Our guests arrive, load their plates, and gorge until a fatted stupor descends on the room. Everyone adores it. Our year without shopping taught Paul and me that where getting and having are concerned, enough is significantly less than we, and Americans generally, think it is. But, wrote Blake, "You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough." In celebration, too much is just enough.

Courtesy of Simon and Schuster

Discussion Questions

1. **December 2003: *Panic***

What were the author's reasons for embarking on a year's experiment she calls the "Year Without Shopping"? What might be learned by researching people's choices not to purchase or to seek less material means to satisfy their needs and why has so little research has been done on the subject?

2. **January: *Surplus***

Why is an inventory of possessions a good way to start an experiment such as a year of not shopping?

What decisions does the author make following the inventory which seem economically sound; Which seem unsound?

In this chapter, Levine begins to explore the line between need and desire.

How does she go about this? How might you draw that line for yourself?

Though Alexis de Tocqueville observed a young America and pronounced it a place where people rejected "sumptuous depravity and splendid corruption," what could he not have predicted would occur in America?

3. **February: *Consumer Psychology***

One of the author's friends comments, "Consumer culture is a machine for dissatisfaction." How is that remark substantiated in this chapter?

According to sociologists and anthropologists, why do we buy?

Define emulation and "affluenza" as they apply to consumerism.

In a year of not buying, the author finds borrowing from strangers embarrassing -- but when she does -- she finds it a positive experience. What is learned by the experience?

4. **March: *New and Improved***

"Consumption is the very arena in which culture is fought over and licked into shape." What does this mean? How does Levine relate this quote from Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood to the gentrification of neighborhoods? What are some of the problems with gentrification, for tenants or stores and restaurants?

How does consuming help people express their identities and their dreams?

Give examples from the text.

5. **April: *In/Voluntary Simplicity***

This chapter contains many references to self-help groups/books/Web sites that are used as references for recovering compulsive shoppers, anonymous debtors, back-to-the-landers, New Agers, Buddhist mediators, and skinflints. Which ones seem to have merit? Which ones seem to be too "far out"? Why? According to Ellen Willis of New York University, what are the three historic periods of postwar consumption, and what relevance do they have for consumers? What are the consumer arguments on the political right and left? What do they have in common?

6. **May: *Scarcity***
 As part of the non-buying plan, books are to be checked out at local libraries. Why doesn't this plan work and why isn't Barnes and Noble the answer? The author makes a bid for government funding of the arts. What is the reasoning behind this statement? What does she say about privatization versus public funding of public amenities, such as transportation and parks?
7. **June: *Redistribution of Wealth***
 In this chapter the problem of giving gifts arises during this non-buying year. Why is it so difficult for the giver? What are some of the unspoken cultural rules of gift giving, and why do they seem so important? Douglas B. Holt, a professor of advertising at the University of Illinois, identified a species of consumerism he calls postmodern: "The idea is to circulate continually through new experiences, things, and meanings, to play with different identities by consuming the goods and services associated with those identities." Cite examples from the text.
8. **July: *Structural Adjustments***
 What is the goal of "Radical Simplicity"? What can we learn from it? Does it seem workable in this modern world? In this chapter, Georges Bataille is quoted as saying that "all art is luxury." In modern society, might beauty be considered a necessary luxury? Why or why not?
9. **August: *Memories of Underdevelopment***
 What is the irony of this statement: "the retreat from the industrialized world is accomplished, and enriched, by the use of technology"? (page 172) List some examples from the chapter of how technology "helps" people simplify.
10. **September: *Security Fraud***
 The author discusses the purpose of "organizing our things" as making "the world manageably small, personally controllable." (page 193) What are some ways the text supports this opinion?
11. **October: *Brand America***
 The discussion of fashion and fads in this chapter indicates that the passage of time renders fashion superfluous. What are some reasons for this reaction? Why are we prone to fads in the first place? "Consumption is political, and politics is a form of consumption." (page 211) What does the author mean by this statement? Do you agree? Give examples from the text.
12. **November: *The Ownership Society***
 One theory in the book about the sameness of merchandise is that "buyers have selected products to please everyone, so they please no one who does not want what 'everyone' wants." (page 221) What is the paradox implied in this chapter? On the biggest shopping day of the year, Levine expects to find misery in the stores. What does she find instead? What does she learn from

the experience? What is the Church of Stop Shopping, and what is their critique of consumerism?

13. **December: Prosperity**

The Year Without Shopping is over in this chapter. What are some of the financial rewards of the project?

What are some of the personal rewards?

What are the bigger lessons learned about consumerism and citizenship?

Courtesy of Simon and Schuster