Evocative Objects: Things We Think With

It's A Mistake To Believe That Things Are Just Things

For Sherry Turkle, we think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with. In Evocative Objects, Turkle collects writings by scientists, humanists, artists, and designers that trace the power of everyday things. These essays reveal objects as emotional and intellectual companions that anchor memory, sustain relationships, and provoke new ideas. This volume's special contribution is its focus on everyday riches: the simplest of objects—an apple, a datebook, a laptop computer—are shown to bring philosophy down to earth. The poet contends, No ideas but in things. The notion of evocative objects goes further: objects carry both ideas and passions. In our relations to things, thought and feeling are inseparable. Whether it's a student's beloved 1964 Ford Falcon (left behind for a station wagon and motherhood), or a cello that inspires a meditation on fatherhood, the intimate objects in this collection are used to reflect on larger themes—the role of objects in design and play, discipline and desire, history and exchange, mourning and memory, transition and passage, meditation and new vision. In the interest of enriching these connections, Turkle pairs each autobiographical essay with a text from philosophy, history, literature, or theory, creating juxtapositions at once playful and profound. So we have Howard Gardner's keyboards and Lev Vygotsky's hobbyhorses; William Mitchell's Melbourne train and Roland Barthes' pleasures of text; Joseph Cevetello's glucometer and Donna Haraway's cyborgs. Each essay is framed by images that are themselves evocative. Essays by Turkle begin and end the collection, inviting us to look more closely at the everyday objects of our lives, the familiar objects that drive our routines, hold our affections, and open out our world in unexpected ways. Essays by: Julian Beinart, Matthew Belmonte, Joseph Cevetello, Robert P. Crease, Olivia Dasté, Glorianna Davenport, Judith Donath, Michael M. J. Fischer, Howard Gardner, Tracy Gleason, Nathan Greenslit, Stefan Helmreich, Michelle Hlubinka, Henry Jenkins, Caroline A. Jones, Evelyn Fox Keller, Tod Machover, Susannah Mandel, David Mann, Irene Castle McLaughlin, Eden Medina, Jeffrey Mifflin, William J. Mitchell, David Mitten, Annalee Newitz, Trevor Pinch, Susan Pollak, Mitchel Resnick, Nancy Rosenblum, Susan Spieckle, Carol Strohecker, Susan Rubin Suleiman, Sherry Turkle, Gail Wight, Susan Yee

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Book Review submitted by: Stephen J. Hage, [...] 

This is an unexpectedly delightful yet seriously thoughtful book that invites you reexamine your relationship to objects, about which, you seldom, if ever think.

It’s a collection of essays written by humanists, designers, scientists and artists—thoughtful individuals—that disclose the fluidity and complexity of being alive by revealing their very personal relationships with objects as mundane as a rolling pin and as banal as comic book superheroes.

Each essay is paired with writings from philosophy, history, literature and theory which resonate with the essay in ways that illuminate both what the essayist is saying and what he or she means.

Each essay, in a very different way, demonstrates why it is a mistake to assume that objects are nothing more than inanimate collections of atoms and molecules. They show instead that objects can be and often are capable of evoking potent emotional responses dealing with grief, fear, loss, love, hatred, abandonment, intellectual curiosity, poverty and existence.

Here’s a taste of what’s in store for you should you choose to read this book:

From the essay MURRAY: THE STUFFED BUNNY

Before the essay the paired writing offers this: To get to the idea of playing it is helpful to think of the preoccupation that characterizes the playing of a young child. The content does not matter. What matters is the near withdrawal state, akin to the concentration of older children and adults. The playing child inhabits an area that cannot be easily left, nor can it easily admit intrusions. This area of playing is not inner psychic reality. It is outside the individual but it is not the external world. Into this play area the child gathers objects or some sample derived from inner or personal reality...[Thus] in playing, the child manipulates external phenomena with dream meaning and feeling [And] there is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, and from playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experiences. --D. W. Winnicott, Playing and Reality

The essay is about the experiences of a little girl with an actual stuffed bunny and explores how, at first, she finds it no different from the rest of the pastel objects of her world. As you follow the story you learn how the little girl (the author’s sister) develops the idea that she can love a bunny.

Next you come to understand how she deals with the separation anxiety associated with the realization that when she begins nursery school she
wont be able to take Murray with her. Later you learn how the little girl infuses Murray with a life of his own in a utopian setting with provinces and capitals and a complicated topography. And finally the author reveals this about Murray: ...he has given me a ringside seat at the performance of Shayna's imagination, even as I remind myself that in fact it was she, as his creator who bought me the ticket to that seat.

This book will make you laugh and cry, say WHAT(?) and oh yeah, I know exactly what that feels like. I found reading it like riding an intellectual rollercoaster that forced me to reexamine not only objects but my relationship with and to them.

The book begins and ends with an essay by Sherry Turkle which adds to the reading experience and further illuminates how and why objects, can and do become powerfully evocative.

I recommend this book without reservation.

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