

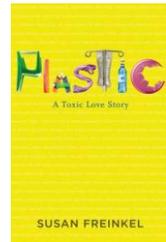
## Discussion Guide

### *Plastic: A Toxic Love Story*

By Susan Freinkel

#### Chapter One

1. Think about the 8 objects chosen by Freinkel to encompass the topic of plastic in her book (Comb, Chair, Frisbee, IV bag, Disposable Light, Grocery Bag, Soda Bottle, Credit Card). Are any of these objects more present in your life than others? For instance, if you smoke or used to smoke, how many plastic lighters do you think you've purchased? How many times a week do you go grocery shopping? How many times in a year? Do you use plastic or re-usable bags? If plastic, how many bags do you think that equals?
2. If plastic, in a sense, was meant to replace natural products like ivory and turtle shell, then why are hawksbill sea turtles still critically endangered? Is it just that they are still recovering? Why are elephants still killed for their tusks? Has our affinity for "natural" products not really diminished? Did it ever go away? Or does it go along with what Freinkel discussed, about how things are made more valuable when we can't or shouldn't have them?
3. When describing "The Gift of the Magi," Freinkel explains how Della first defined her world "by what she lacks rather than what she has" (18). Then at the end of the story, both Della and her husband define themselves "by what they give up-what they don't have-rather than by what they hope to consume. Compare these quotes to this phrase from 1953's *House Beautiful*: "You will have a greater chance to be yourself than any people in history of civilization" (19). What does this mean for the person who can afford everything and anything? Not necessarily because they are rich, but because of a better economy, better production, cheaper products, etc. that came about with the invention of plastic? Does this quote imply that you cannot or are not yourself without consumerism? If so, what does that make the "you" alone, with nothing? Are you incomplete?
4. Do you think the phrase from *House Beautiful* has completely replaced the message from "The Gift of the Magi"? Has consumerism become too powerful or widespread for us to fight, or has it become powerful because we don't fight it?



#### Chapter Two

5. Freinkel writes, "instead of feeling fulfilled, we now often feel choked by an empty abundance." What do you think she means by this statement?
6. Do you see monobloc chairs as disposable? If yes, is that ethical?
7. With the invention and further innovation of single mold plastic furniture, do you think any other materials will be able to replace plastic in the near future?
8. Would you spend \$400 on a plastic chair?
9. In the long term, what is worse for the environment: plastic chairs, wood chairs or metal chairs?



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#### Chapter Three

10. 60% of all plastic or 8 million tons that enters that the oceans is from 5 countries. China, Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines and Indonesia. This is due in part to the large amounts of production these countries provide for the western European and American markets (and also rapidly growing manufacturing sectors without comparably growing waste infrastructure). It's also an indication of the lack of infrastructure for municipal or household waste in these countries. In many of these countries, there is no garbage pickup. Who should carry the burden of this pollution?
11. What might a stronger regulation look like in terms of plastics manufacturing? Imagine you take this policy to Capitol Hill to try to get it passed into law. Make a chart of the stakeholders that might be in support of and against such a bill.
12. Do you believe Frisbees could be made with a material other than plastic?
13. Is it ethical for American corporations to demand Chinese manufactures to produce cheap plastic toys if it's at the expense of migrant factory workers?

#### Chapter Four

14. Does the inherent risk of exposure to phthalate from vinyl medical bags especially in newborns cause enough concern to find a safer material for medical supplies like IV bags?
15. The *Modern Plastics* article "Why Doctors are using more plastic" in 1951 stated "any substance that comes in contact with human tissue...must be chemically inert and non-toxic." Given the continuous health studies since why has this warning been continuously broken and ignored in medical supply production?
16. After reading chapter four do you have a deeper worry about the harmful effects of plastics chemically in our lives?
17. What should the burden of proof be for banning a toxic chemical– the American model of proof before safety or the European model of safety before proof?

#### Chapter Five

18. Freinkel talks about a lighter that made its way to her from Hong Kong. The lighter is built so it can be used for a couple of months... but it actually lasts for years. What other common objects do we use like this without even thinking of where they are going?
19. Freinkel describes the mentality in the 1950's being one that reused essentially to the point of not being able to reuse anymore. People used quality objects that stood the test of time and took pride in their purchases. Is there any way we can change the mentality back to this?



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20. A vast variety of things are being put into the ocean, but some things are commonly showing up like lighters, cigarette butts, bottle caps, plastic spoons, food packages, plastic bags, etc. What do you think the better route is to handle the oceans pollution; should politicians focus on laws about these specific products, or worry about pollution as a whole?
21. What are some potential policies lawmakers could put in place to restrict the most commonly found items of marine debris? (e.g., easier breakdown of products, making things reusable/refillable like bags or lighters, etc.)
22. Since matter (as pollution) never truly vanishes, the garbage ends up in the ocean and collects in the gyres. Should we focus on the patches themselves? The sources or places where pollution enters the ocean? Or points along the major ocean currents?

## Chapter Six

23. Do you agree with Murray's (executive director of Californians against waste) Zero Waste concept? It encourages people to "reduce consumption while pushing industries to extend lifespan on things we use by designing and producing products that can readily be reused, repaired and recycled"? Why or why not?
24. Are paper bags a good alternative while we come up with a solution? Would you, family and friends be willing to do that? (Remember it's not as durable or waterproof, and still uses resources).
25. What can we do as consumers to share this knowledge in our communities? Signs? Adding a fee for the use of disposable bags? Prohibiting plastic? Providing cloth options?

## Chapter Seven

26. Would you, if given the chance, go back to the days when all drink bottles were made of glass, keeping in mind how fragile glass bottles could be? (Think baby bottles, etc.)
27. Do you believe that we could ever implement a two-way system again? (Full bottles are delivered, and the empty ones are taken away by the same delivery person)
28. Which do you feel would help reduce the amount of recycled plastic more: eliminating most of the unnecessary packaging, or creating a simpler but more inclusive recycling system.
29. If the USA were to adopt a more wide-spread bottle bill and other EPR laws, would you be willing to potentially pay a good deal more for most existing products (due to all the plastic packaging)?



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#### Chapter Eight and Epilogue

30. In the chapter Freinkel quotes Mark Rossi when he said, “Plastics aren’t created equal”. This refers to the fact that some plastics aren’t as harmful as others and vice versa. Would you be willing to completely stop using a certain product (credit cards, gift cards) if you knew it would mean the eradication of that type of plastic (PVC)?
31. The chapter also talks about using PLA, a relatively new biopolymer, for everyday products. The problem is that when it is used for chip bags they become “too loud” and when it is used for water bottles it becomes deformed in the face of mildly high temperatures. When it is used for soda bottles it cannot withstand the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> from the soda so the bottle becomes deformed as well. Would you be willing to change your lifestyle (i.e. don’t leave bottles in the car on a hot day, ignore the loud sound of a chip bag, etc.) if it meant that products were made from a more environmentally friendly plastic?
32. How effective do you think bioplastics are in regards to fighting climate change?
33. In this chapter, Freinkel talks about her “biodegradable” Discover Card. Upon further investigation she finds out that the key to being biodegradable is that the whole product is completely biodegraded at the end of the process but in reality her credit card is only 13% biodegradable. Should there be punishment for false advertising? If yes, what kinds of discipline will keep other companies from false advertising in the future?
34. PLA, while being a biopolymer, cannot be recycled and if it is it would contaminate that batch of recycling. How important is it that the public pays more attention to this issue when considering the commonality of PLA and the consequences of a contaminated recycling batch?
35. Can you imagine a world without plastic? How possible is it really? Why? What are our options?

**Terms of Use:** This Discussion Guide is authored by University of Hartford students in the classes: POL390: Marine Debris Policy and Action and HON385: Marine Pollution, Spring 2016 and can be found at <https://ctmarinedebris.wordpress.com/discussion-guide-for-plastic-a-toxic-love-story-by-susan-freinkel/>. It has been reformatted for the Network of the National Library of Medicine for educational purposes.



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