



TESSA  
PACELLI

THE  
GARBAGE  
MAN

A  
THRILLER

Careful what you throw away

**THE GARBAGE MAN**  
**BY TESSA PACELLI**  
**BOOK CLUB KIT**

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## **A conversation with Tessa about THE GARBAGE MAN**

### **WARNING: SPOILERS AHEAD!!**

**The premise of THE GARBAGE MAN is that a garbage company – that most analog of businesses – is secretly cataloging and recording every item you throw away, in order to create an incredibly accurate and powerful profile of you. How did you come up with this idea?**

The idea came about through one quirk of living in a New York City high rise. When I take my recycling or my garbage to dispose it, I place it in a central room, with other apartments' trash. The protocol in our building is to just leave it, so my recycling and my garbage is just *out there*, often attached or next to identifying information, such as address labels.

That brought up *many* anxieties. If I threw away stuff that was embarrassing or strange or curious, I remember thinking: wow, if somebody were to look through this pile of garbage and recycling they would know many personal and private and odd things about me. That was essentially how I got the idea.

**Take readers into the process of writing this novel. What challenges did you face in premise or plotting, for example?**

There were two big issues in putting together this novel. First was the need to make any technology used *incredible* yet *believable*. I wanted technology that was “out there” enough so that the use case would surprise and amaze readers but not technology that was so advanced that readers would say, “Oh, that can't possibly happen”. The key was utilizing early-stage technology. Technology that exists in some form today. As one of my reviewers said, I wanted the book to be “realistic in a scary sort of way”.

Second, I wanted to avoid an issue that can plague techno thrillers or anything with a techie element to it or even sci-fi: solving plot problems with mumbo-jumbo. Meaning, anytime someone needs to do something, the writer solves it with some technology sleight of hand — *Oh, let's just hack into the system and program it to do X Y Z!* This kind of writing really bothers me. I always feel let down when a writer solves major plot problems (and I've seen this even at climax points) with tech garble.

**Do you have a favorite scene from THE GARBAGE MAN — anything especially meaningful or especially impactful?**

I would say the scene between Kayla and Miles where they both discuss the plans that they had (and other people had) for their futures versus the lives that they are leading. They both could not accept the lives that they were “supposed” to live according to those around them — the lives that they “should” want according to society, parents, peers, etc.

I think that a lot of us feel the weight of other people's expectations, so that scene was emotional. I have had that guilt of *not* wanting to live up to other people's expectations or *not* wanting to follow the dreams that others may have for me. Maybe even in that process realizing that I didn't know what dreams I had after spending years fulfilling someone else's dream for me or — and this is mind-bending — *what I thought was someone else's dream for me*. So that's why I found that conversation so compelling, as that's an issue many of us struggle with.

**Is there any material that you wrote that never made it to the final draft? Can you tell us about it?**

There was a lot of material that didn't make it into the final draft because it didn't work for whatever reason, but the dearest to my heart is the conversations that Kayla has with her father long before Escondido. I had scenes written where she visits him at Riker's Prison, which is obviously emotional and upsetting for her. In these scenes, he reveals that maybe he has found his own way of getting out. He hints that someone has approached him with an alternative to appealing his sentence and hoping for the best. He's a salesman at heart. A magnetic personality. The guy everybody loves and wants to be around. Kayvan Masouvi spent his life using charisma, smarts, and angles to get what he wants. So Kayvan *would* be searching for the angle here.

But the problem was that those scenes, while they developed the characters, didn't propel the plot forward nearly enough. That's one of my thriller rules: every scene needs “plot propulsion” and also needs to ratchet up the tension. Because of this requirement, I limit scenes where characters are sitting together in a room — no matter what kind of room it is! — and talking. Same with telephone conversations. Of course, these scenes need to happen sometimes. But I keep them to a minimum.

**What kind of artistic liberty did you take with the technology in this novel?**

Believe it or not, a lot less than you'd expect! Garbage-eating bacteria exists today. It's a technology that is not yet commercialized, but it exists. Obviously, we know metaverse and Virtual Reality rigs and VR applications and headsets like Oculus Rift exist. Even whole body contraptions like the omni-directional treadmill from Virtuix and VR arenas exist. Do they exist with the level of simulated reality that we see in the novel? Maybe not yet! And what about a garbage company tracking everything you throw away and using it to profile

you? Theoretically, that could be done today. But once again, maybe not in a commercially viable way.

**In your research, what was the most interesting/surprising/shocking thing you learned?**

That you have absolutely no legal protections over your garbage and no right of privacy to your garbage. The second that bin hits the curb, it's free game for anyone to use in any way. Now, of course, it's not legal to identity theft someone. And a crime is still a crime, but actually taking your trash and profiling you based on it? That actually is, as far as I could tell, legal.

**What do you hope readers will learn from THE GARBAGE MAN?**

The extent to which companies can use data to manipulate and control users without any meaningful knowledge or consent. I think we (me included) need a continuous dose of humility about the fact that our data — what we look at, what we click, what we buy, who we follow, what we say, what pictures we take — is powerful and can be used against us. We can't have the hubris anymore to think that *"I'm immune to being manipulated by my data fed into some algorithm"*.

Algorithms can absolutely manipulate us! Just having that humility and knowing the weakness is a huge step to preventing manipulation. It takes power from the algorithm when you know that it's designed to manipulate. You take a step back. You distance yourself, mentally, and — very important — emotionally. That's a power move on your part. Taking back your brain. I really want readers to take that away! Don't let the algorithm run you!

## **Behind the Book**

### **The technology – real or made up?**

All the technology in THE GARBAGE MAN has some basis in products and services that are available today. Usually, the technology exists but is not yet in commercially viable form.

### **Garbage-eating bacteria**

Garbage-eating bacteria — specifically plastic-eating bacteria — exists and has existed for over twenty years. Researchers at the Kyoto Institute of Technology discovered the first plastic eating bacteria in 2001 in a trash bin. They named it *Ideonella sakaiensis*. Others have been developed since. The challenge remains making a commercially viable technology.

### **Personal data collection on a massive scale**

I think we all know that data collection (aka Big Data) is alive and well. It gets more sophisticated and capable every day. The only technology in THE GARBAGE MAN that doesn't truly exist today (as described in the novel) is the idea of a garbage company vacuuming up all that information on you. For the most data intensive companies in the world, the Amazons, Googles and Metas, they have decades of experience in slicing and dicing and gaining insights from terabytes of information on you and me. How to best use it to increase profits. Or, to put a finer point on it, how to manipulate you and me to increase their profits.

### **Mind control technologies / Brain implants**

“Controlling devices with your thoughts” is NOT science fiction! Implanting a chip in physical proximity to brain tissue exists today. Several companies are developing and testing brain-computer interfaces (BCIs). Currently, their use case is individuals who have paralysis or related conditions. The software in these implantable chips translates neural signals from the brain into actions on a computer screen, allowing the user to remotely control a technological device. It's early, but it's there.

### **Hyper-Realistic Virtual Reality**

“Virtual reality” technology exists today. Metaverse software, headsets such as Oculus Rift, and others are available. True immersive VR is in its infancy. Products like omni-directional treadmills from companies such as Virtuix allow the user to direct herself in a virtual world with complete freedom of movement. Is anything at the level of sophistication that I imagine in THE GARBAGE MAN? Not yet. Not that I've seen. But I believe it's truly only a

matter of time before virtual realities become extremely lifelike. My view is that virtual realities that aren't close to life don't seem to engender more than a niche interest.

In a bid to spur mass adoption, technology companies will devote massive development dollars towards creating virtual realities that mimic real life.



## Reading Group questions

1. The novel's first epigraph is a quote by Napoleon: "War is 90% information."
  - a. Do you agree with this quote?
  - b. How do you think this quote is relevant for the book?
  
2. The second epigraph defines "Big Data", which can, per the epigraph, "control and manipulate you without your consent or knowledge".
  - a. Do you agree?
  - b. How does the novel expand upon the idea of Big Data and how does the novel use the concept of Big Data to advance the plot?
  - c. What have been your experiences with Big Data? With predictive algorithms?
  
3. Kayla's dream job is to be a professional poker player instead of getting a "nine to five" job where she can pay her bills.
  - a. What do you think of this dream?
  - b. Do you think she's just immature and thoughtless or do you think she has a right to pursue a dream as crazy and ridiculous and out there as professional poker?
  - c. Have you (or anyone close to you) ever had high-risk, high-failure "dream jobs" like professional poker (for example, acting or sports)? How did you deal with that?
  
4. Both the Kayla and Miles deal differently with managing other people's expectations of them.
  - a. Did their experiences resonate with you?
  - b. Talk about a time where you had to manage someone else's expectations of you. What was difficult about it?
  
5. One of the big themes of the of the novel is the impact of duty and responsibility on a person and how that can warp a person's sense of identity and self-worth.
  - a. How do the different characters react to and deal with the duties and responsibilities that are thrust upon them by the forces and people around them?
  - b. Do you agree with how they handled those situations? If not, how might they have handled them differently?



6. Why do you think Evan Schechter developed a location for the Genesis Foundation underground?
  - a. What do you think he was hoping to accomplish?
  
7. The author narrated this novel from a third person limited perspective.
  - a. In what ways did this choice add to the novel and what ways did this choice detract from the novel?
  
8. Take a moment to consider the character of Olivia / Vapor.
  - a. Did you agree with her motivations for her actions throughout the book?
  - b. Do you believe her self-stated motivations for doing what she did?
  - c. Do you think she's a good person? A bad person? Why or why not?
  
9. Did the book make you angry? Sad? Scared?
  - a. Discuss specific passages to which you had a strong emotion. Why do you think you had that emotion?
  
10. Discuss Schechter and Monahan's competing visions for Resilio.
  - a. Whose vision do you like the best?
  - b. Whose vision is more ethical?
  - c. Whose vision do you think will cause the most problems for future humans?  
The least problems?
  
11. Did you have sympathy for actions of the antagonist Frederick Monahan?
  - a. Did you have sympathy for his response to his fatal disease?
  - b. If you were in his shoes, how might you have handled it differently (if at all)?
  - c. Do you think he is a bad person? A good person? Why or why not?