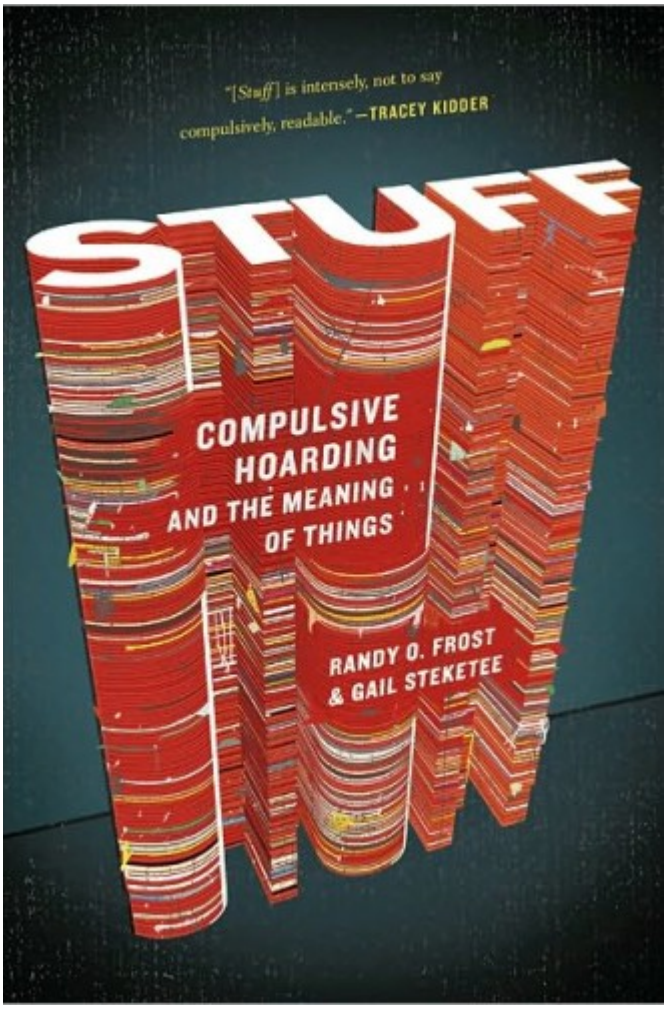
Stuff; Objects of Our Affection

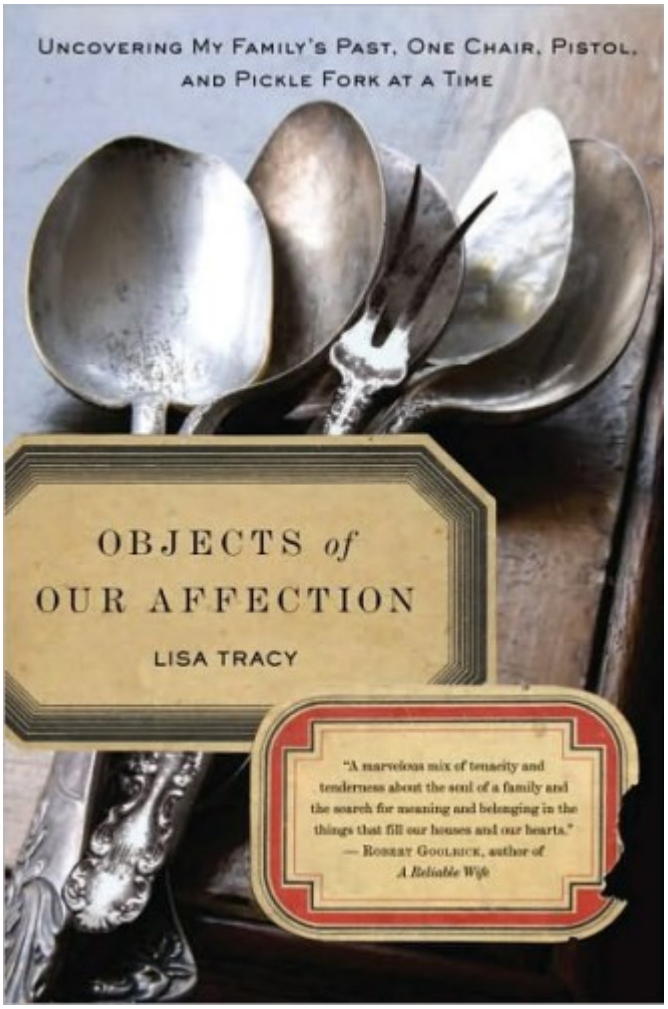
reviewed by Barbara Melosh in the January 25, 2012 issue

In Review



Stuff

By Randy O. Frost and Gail Steketee
Mariner



Objects of Our Affection

By Lisa Tracy
Bantam

We have become a nation of rich fools. Although the average house size has nearly doubled since 1970, self-storage units, once nearly nonexistent, are a booming business, comprising more than 45,000 facilities with 2 billion square feet of space, most of it full. As cheap goods become more available and our living spaces get bigger, we spend more and more time managing our possessions. "We may own the things in our homes," Randy O. Frost and Gail Steketee observe, "but they own us as well." Or as the sage of Concord, Ralph Waldo Emerson, put it a century and a half ago, "Things are in the saddle, and ride mankind."

Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things opens with the iconic story of the Collyer brothers, Langley and Homer, who were found buried under the debris

packed into their 12-room New York City mansion, and introduces readers to others living in conditions of extreme clutter. The authors define compulsive hoarding functionally: "If clutter prevents the person from using his or her living space, and if acquiring and saving cause substantial distress or interference in everyday living, the hoarding is pathological." In the style of neurologist Oliver Sacks, they explore the pathology of hoarding in ways that illuminate much larger questions about the meaning of possessions. "The boundaries between normal and abnormal blur when it comes to hoarding. We all become attached to our possessions and save things other people would not."

Between 2 and 5 percent of Americans are hoarders—6 to 15 million people. Frost, a professor of psychology, and Steketee, a professor of social work, find that chronic savers are motivated by the same concerns that lead others to acquire or retain things—fear of waste, promise of future usefulness, and the comfort and security provided by objects. Like most of us, they value objects as repositories of memory and tokens of identity. But they are different in the intensity of their attachment to objects and in the broad range of objects they value, encompassing things that others regard as useless.

Even as the authors provide a wide-angle, social scientific view of hoarding, they draw readers into their empathy for their subjects through close-up portraits of people who are trying to clear out their stuff, providing rich insight into a complicated and little-understood disorder. Frost and Steketee acknowledge the social and historical dimensions of hoarding, which is more visible and prevalent in Westernized societies than ever before, but their focus is on individual psychology. The treatment they recommend is cognitive behavioral therapy, with the therapist gently challenging hoarders' assumptions and helping them to rethink their attachments to objects.

Attractive for its directness and practicality, this approach deliberately sets aside the deeper existential questions of collecting. As I read these poignant stories and reflected uneasily on my own relationship to possessions, I wondered about the theological dimensions of the empty spaces that people overwhelmed with stuff both fear and desire.

In *Objects of Our Affection,* a memoir about the stories attached to family possessions, Lisa Tracy observes that "things . . . take on lives of their own." Clearing out the family home ten years after their mother's death, Tracy and her

sister finally contend with a lifetime's accumulation of objects that are redolent with family history and lore.

"It was quite the haul," she concludes in wry understatement, surveying the large accumulation of household goods from several generations on both sides of the family. As they make decisions about what to keep and what to sell at auction, Tracy reflects that she sees the problem as a spiritual one: "The walls are alive with the silent sounds of objects echoing our own lives back to us. We are our clutter, and it is us."

Tracy describes the labor of sorting as *triage,* a word evocative of both the intense emotion attached to the objects and Tracy's determination to deal with them decisively. She plunges into research to establish the value of some antique pieces and finds herself excavating layers of family history. Unable to establish the provenance of a pair of dueling pistols associated with Aaron Burr in family lore, Tracy decides to keep them anyway, valuing them for their place in family stories. Her grandfather's red chair claims a place in her home, cherished because it once occupied pride of place in her grandparents' living room. Other cherished pieces must go to auction when neither Tracy nor her sister can find space for them.

Attending the auction, Tracy and her sister suffer acute sellers' remorse. Sale prices become a public judgment on their private valuation of family treasures. "I think we were looking for validation as much as money," Tracy writes. High prices bring some satisfaction but renew their doubts about selling, while low prices are a stinging affront. Either way, letting go is painful.

Strikingly, Tracy often uses language about objects that is common among people with hoarding disorders. As they prepare for the auction, Tracy feels mounting anxiety for their things: "Not anxiety about them . . . anxiety for them, like the kind of worry you'd have for your children as you sent them off from home." The auction offers a kind of closure, "a decent burial, or at least something resembling a wake." But still Tracy is stalked by remorse and even guilt. On sleepless nights she imagines the reproaches of objects she has betrayed: "How could you do this to us? . . . You loved us. We were always together. Always. How could you separate us?"

Tracy recognizes this malaise as more than personal: it is "the conundrum of the 20th and 21st centuries, objects defining who we are." Her solution is characteristically American: salvation through self-invention or, as she puts it,

understanding objects as "yet another venue in which we can or must re-create ourselves, with the option of bringing along selected pieces of the past for comfort and perhaps stability, one less thing to reinvent."

This perceptive memoir moved me to ask what Christians might contribute to these complicated negotiations of our material world. In such a project we have the deep resources of a theology that both embraces that world and turns us toward ultimate things.