

COLORS A MAGAZINE ABOUT THE REST OF THE WORLD

COLORS 82 - SHIT **A survival guide**

Treviso, November 2011. Feces. Excrement. Stool. Poo. Caca. Its name changes but not most people's reaction to it. Poo is something we ignore or treat with disdain. It repels us. It's kept behind closed doors and never mentioned in polite company. But in its new issue, *Shit. A survival guide*, COLORS looks straight down the pan, exploring the truths behind the taboo, and the reasons why we should start to take shit seriously.

Today some two-thirds of the world's population have no toilet or latrine. They relieve themselves at the roadside or in fields, contaminating water sources and food. Over 90% of diarrhea is caused by the contamination of food, water, or fingers with shit, and although diarrhea is just a banal intestinal virus for those with a toilet, every year it kills more people than AIDS, malaria and TB combined.

Feces is a weapon of mass destruction and a nightmare of biological pollution, but it is also a fuel and a fertiliser. It can heat, feed, cure. It's the world's most underrated resource, and it can save lives. In Butare prison in Rwanda, the inmates' shit is treated and turned into biogas, which is then used to cook their meals. In New York, the fecal transplants carried out in Dr Brandt's clinic may seem like torture, but they have a 91% success rate in treating *Clostridium difficile*, an infection that kills 100,000 people a year in the US and Europe alone.

So how do you persuade people to start taking shit seriously? How do you encourage them to build a toilet, or dig a pit latrine? Like an ordinary tourist, Virginia Chumacero asks the inhabitants of Aramasi, Bolivia, to give her a tour of their village. She is one of thousands of social workers involved in Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS), a method invented in Bangladesh to promote the use of toilets. As they pass through the village, she stops at every pile of human excrement; with a plastic model of a fly, she demonstrates how insects dip their legs in the shit, then land on the villagers' food.

The toilets in Christchurch, New Zealand, became unserviceable when an earthquake hit the city in 2011. But the inhabitants got around the problem with a bucket, a pit in the garden and a few sparks of creativity. The resulting DIY WCs became a symbol of local pride, showcased at www.showusyourlongdrop.co.nz.

When it comes to anal hygiene, the world is split into "wipers" and "washers": depending on whether you use toilet paper or water to clean yourself. To washing fans, cleaning your bottom with paper makes as much sense as trying to rub dirt off your body, instead of having a shower. To wipers, paper is practical and lets you keep your hands

clean. Though with revenues of \$15bn a year, cultural differences don't seem destined to change as far as toilet paper multinationals are concerned.

As the saying goes, cleanliness is next to godliness. Most religions have rules that the faithful must abide by to be clean and pure before prayer. Jains, for example, prefer to use their home bathroom because after defecating they cannot enter a temple before they have thoroughly washed their clothes. Buddhists have to put the time needed for a bowel movement to good use by meditating. According to the Hadith, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, before entering a lavatory good Muslims must remove any rings, never face or turn their back to Mecca, clean themselves with an odd number of pebbles and, once they leave the toilet, carefully wash their private parts.

Of all peoples, the Chinese probably have the best relationship with their excrement. It has been used in Chinese fields as fertiliser for 4,000 years; there are goddesses of the toilet in the Chinese pantheon; and Beijing's leading bookshops have a whole department devoted to toilet culture. In China, respect for poo applies equally to the people in the trade. In 1959, Shi Chuanxiang, a night-soil collector, had the honour of giving a public speech at the Communist Party's National Conference of Heroes. Fifty years later, Li Ying, 31, won the 1st May Medal for Work, one of the greatest accolades to which a Chinese worker can aspire; she's probably the best-known public-convenience attendant in the world.

FURTHER INFO

This issue of *COLORS* was inspired by *The Big Necessity* (published in the UK by Portobello Books in 2008 and translated into Italian, Dutch, Spanish, Swedish, Korean, Chinese, Japanese and Arabic), a book by the British writer and journalist, Rose George, a former *COLORS* senior editor.

The Big Necessity is a world tour with the tone of an inquiry and the humanity of a novel. While writing it, Rose George personally explored the sewer systems of London and New York, walked around Indian suburbs where 700 million people have no access to toilets, and met the activists who fight for sanitation in the Third world. She came up against the hypocrisy of politicians and corporations who want to defend the status quo, while China leads the world in exploiting excrement's energy potential and American cities suffer from biological pollution.

Named by *The Economist* and by the American Library Association as one of the best books of 2008, *The Big Necessity* incisively describes how a daily habit has become a timebomb for the health of the whole planet.

Rose George studied modern languages at Oxford and in 1994 received her MA in international politics from the University of Pennsylvania. A freelance journalist since 1999, Rose has written for *The New York Times*, *The Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *COLORS*, *Slate.com* and *The London Review of Books*.

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