THANKS FOR SHARING

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How I Gave Up Buying and Embraced Swapping, Borrowing and Renting

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For Jake and Phoebe

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Stop right there

This is not a business book. If you're after something technical on marketplaces, platforms or online communities I admire you, but I don't think you should read this. Stop now, put the book down and head to the other end of the shop. Or, if you're online, go back a page and return to your search. Thank you. You see the thing is, there are plenty of books out there about digital transformation and suchlike, and a lot of them are brilliant. But I haven't written one of those. Because although I work in this world, and had the urge to write about the sharing economy, I knew from the start that it wasn't going to be *that* kind of book. Why? Quite honestly, I'm not *that* kind of person.

Instead, I wanted to write something that answers not my colleagues' questions, but those of my friends and family. And what they often ask me is 'HOW?' and 'WHY?' and 'IS THAT REALLY A THING?' and 'YOU DID WHAT??'. (Not all of these questions relate to the sharing economy.) Quite often, they're not sure what it is, let alone how it works in

real life. And I guessed that if my friends and family aren't sure about it, then a lot of other people aren't either.

So I wrote this book as a way of saying *this* is what it's all about. This is the version of the sharing economy that isn't in the business section of the bookshop: it's on your phone, it's on your laptop or your tablet – if you want it to be. These are some of the apps and platforms you can try, and here's why – and how – you might want to. Some of them work (for me), some of them don't work as well (again, for me). Some of them are weird, some of them are brilliant and I'll never stop using them, and some of them are probably not worth the effort for everyone. Some of them just need a few more years to get going, so bear with them. And here's the really exciting part: I'm going to try some of them for you, like a sharing economy guinea pig. I'm also going to tell you a bit about why I think most of them are a good idea, and when and where a lot of the ideas for them came from in the first place (spoiler alert: it was usually a *very* long time ago).

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Let's not get ahead of ourselves. First of all, what even *is* the sharing economy? Put simply, it's using technology – in the form of an app or an online platform – to connect with other people (rather than businesses) to borrow, rent or swap instead of buying. In other words, it's anything which could be described as 'the Airbnb of . . .' (although I'm not a fan of that phrase, you'll find out why a bit later), like listing your clothes on a website for others to borrow, or renting a car from your neighbour via an app. It's also easily confused with similar terms, like the circular economy, which the sharing economy *can* be part of but is

more generally about keeping materials in use for as long as possible by reuse and recycling.

A bit of recent history: the phrase 'sharing economy' was used for the first time by a Harvard professor in 2008, and in 2011 it was described by *Time* magazine as one of the 'Ten Ideas That Will Change the World'. Quite a lot to live up to. Since then, the concept has been lauded as much as it has been criticised, misunderstood as much it has been analysed, declared 'dead on arrival' (often next to pictures of piles of abandoned bikes or scooters) and confused with loads of other 'trends'. Many early sharing platforms and apps did indeed fall by the wayside, with no similar companies to learn from and potential customers that didn't necessarily even get the idea in the first place. Some people just didn't like the idea of sharing things with others, maybe they thought – or think – that it's unhygienic, or not 'exclusive' enough. Which doesn't really make sense – hotel beds, even in the most expensive suites, were slept in by someone else the night before you checked in, so are 'shared' in that sense, just like cinema or restaurant seats.

There were other challenges: regulations, building trust, the technology that made the whole thing easy, finding insurance . . . even just knowing what the right 'things' were to share. But now, a decade and a half later, after failures and successes, the resulting apps and platforms are widely available for us to use, in most countries in the world. Some of them have even become 'unicorns' (a startup company with a value of over $1 billion). But that's getting into business talk, and I said I wouldn't do that.

So what are the benefits of these 'peer-to-peer' or 'person-to-person' – rather than 'business-to-consumer'

– transactions? There are more than you might think. Firstly, they allow us to get more use from things (or 'assets') that we don't use very much, or don't use at all. The fact is, the world has too many things in it, and, at the risk of overusing the word 'things', when people transact with one another rather than a business, and share use of the same 'thing', it slows down the production of more of these things. That's why another name for the sharing economy is 'collaborative consumption', which I like as a term, but mainly because of the alliteration.

It's not only 'things' you can share. Sharing skills or services on online platforms and apps allows people to use themselves, or the things they can do, as an 'asset'. For example, you could share skills to make money, or in some cases, trade or swap them for credits to buy other skills and services. I get into this later in the book, and by way of a teaser, Henry the Hoover is involved, and there is a bold mention of nipple tassels. This is one of only a couple of risqué things in the whole book, making it appropriate for any age, much like the sharing economy itself.

I digress. In the sharing economy, the choice – and freedom – belongs to the platform or app users. Which leads us to another benefit: empowerment. Teach French five hours a week, because that's what works for you. Clear out your shed and make money by lending out your tools. Hire out your camper van instead of leaving it to sit on your driveway. No camper van? Rent out your driveway: it's up to you. But what I think is the true power of the sharing economy is even more exciting than all of this – and is the part I love the most. Sharing platforms and apps match users and providers, or 'sharers' and 'sharees', both locally and

globally, offline and online, so that communities have the chance to thrive again. We become networked: connected to our peers, looking up, down, sideways and around us for exactly what we want or need – not just in a single direction, for a one-size-fits-all delivery from a big business.

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So that's the sharing economy . . . but what about just *sharing*? Because the thing is, sharing (the sort without the technology part) is something we have always done, as you will hopefully find out in this book. And I mean *always:* some of the examples I've managed to get my hands on go back to the beginning of human history. It has proved itself in the past to be not only *desirable* to collaborate when it comes to consumption, but *essential*. And even (get this) actually part of our evolution. As powerful as that is as a concept, somewhere along the way we stopped sharing as much, and this coincided with us having less of a sense of community, and less of a need, as more things were available to us, thanks to mass production.

There are social commentators who believe that the 'privatisation' of our social lives into smaller units, and the easy availability of technology to choose when and how we use them, has undermined 'social capital' – the collective identity and activity which used to be reflected in things like churches, sports clubs and pubs. So, compared to our parents and grandparents, you could argue that we have very few common experiences. After all, the latter fought in wars and had their diets decided by rations; the former had a very limited choice of media, lifestyle and education compared to young people today. Certain common activities which

used to be thought of as essential – like voting – are now considered almost voluntary. Even the common activities we have, like national days and religious festivals, are often presented in a consumerist way. Some people bemoan this, while others celebrate the choice and diversity it brings. So is the sharing economy in fact 'Sharing 2.0'? A new sort of sharing, which is by choice rather than by obligation: 'bite-size', transactional sharing rather than lifelong, inherited identity – and global too, thanks to technology?

However we define it, to me it feels like the stars are aligned for the sharing economy to become mainstream. But as I said before, many people aren't sure how to be part of it, or what it even is. Firstly, it's not about composting your own poo or going to live in a badger's sett: I'm no hippie, although I used to have my nose pierced and experimented heavily with the 'Boho look' in the Noughties. No, this is 'lite' green, about small changes to our day-to-day lives. About doing things like we used to, just taking the good bits with the help of technology. About living more sustainably, making – or saving – some money, and creating powerful connections, online and off.

In part one of this book, 'It's the little things', I'm going to be sharing everyday things: food, clothes, pets, household items and furniture. I start with food, and you get a whole chapter on that. Then you'll be with me as I bring in a new type of sharing at the start of each chapter, and try to embrace it, as per the title of this book. So by the end of part one, I'll have tried all five, and be ready to move on to the bigger things. Then in part two, 'The big idea', I look at how – and why – we can share the larger things in our lives like transport, space, travel, skills and even experiences.

It's not a precise science, but then neither is the sharing economy. As I begin the book, I start doing some sharing things, then bring in new things to try. Some I do once or twice, while other things I keep doing and I'm still doing, because I like them. Some types of sharing are more 'occasional use', and some are a day-to-day activity. So it's more of an 'ebb and flow' than a month-by-month affair, although the book does take place over roughly a year. I'm also not being a total purist: a few areas of the sharing economy have traditional renting mixed in, and that's pretty good too. It'll make more sense when you start reading, but it's explained on the cover when it says 'swapping, borrowing and renting'.

And finally, remember as you read that not all of these platforms and apps will be available where you live (yet), and sometimes you'll actually have access to more of them than I do. To help you try out any of them that appeal to you, I've put some useful information on each type of sharing at the end of each of the two sections of the book. One last thing, I can't try everything – this book would have to be six volumes long if I did, and nobody wants that. Right, are you ready? OK, I'm off to start sharing. You'll thank me, I promise.