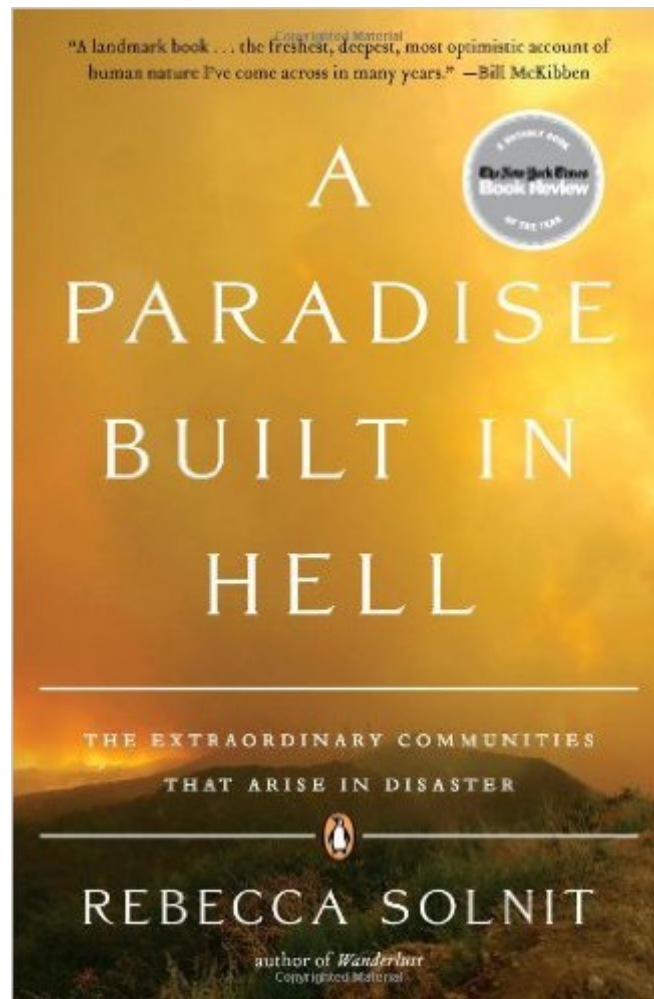


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A Paradise Built In Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise In Disaster



Synopsis

"The freshest, deepest, most optimistic account of human nature I've come across in years." -Bill McKibben

The most startling thing about disasters, according to award-winning author Rebecca Solnit, is not merely that so many people rise to the occasion, but that they do so with joy. That joy reveals an ordinarily unmet yearning for community, purposefulness, and meaningful work that disaster often provides. *A Paradise Built in Hell* is an investigation of the moments of altruism, resourcefulness, and generosity that arise amid disaster's grief and disruption and considers their implications for everyday life. It points to a new vision of what society could become—one that is less authoritarian and fearful, more collaborative and local.

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Customer Reviews

Sometimes, a book comes along that forces me to stop reading every few pages. Not because it's badly written, clumsily argued or otherwise defective. But simply because it's so provocative, so compelling and so articulate that I had to pause in order to digest a whole raft of new ideas, toss out some old preconceptions and ponder some important questions. Solnit's core argument -- that we can find hints of a humanist-style utopia in the world's worst disasters -- is not only provocative but fascinating, as she amasses a host of evidence to prove her point from the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 up to Hurricane Katrina nearly a century later, disasters that range from the Halifax explosion during World War 1 to the terrorist attacks on 9/11 in both New York and Washington. In the midst of these disasters, as she chronicles repeatedly, people -- ordinary

individuals, not institutions -- rose to the occasion. Rather than panicking, they acted, whether that meant battling to save lives or simply to reach out to strangers in random acts of love and compassion. With disaster, paradoxically, can come joy, since in disaster it is possible for those of us not immediately afflicted to rediscover a sense of community and purpose that is otherwise absent from our lives. "The desires and possibilities awakened are so powerful that they shine even from wreckage, carnage and ashes," Solnit writes. Solnit was driven to write this book by her experiences in California's Loma Prieta earthquake; I was compelled to pick it up by my own experiences in the heart of lower Manhattan on September 11, 2001. I witnessed sights that continue to give me nightmares, but experienced (and to some extent participated in) the kind of reforging of a spirit of community of the kind that she describes.

About a month ago I heard Rebecca Solnit speak about this book on a local radio program and she was so incredibly smart and passionate and articulate, and her thesis was so appealing, that I felt compelled to give it a try. "A Paradise Built in Hell" was well worth it. It's an extraordinary book -- fascinating, thought-provoking, and ultimately persuasive in supporting Solnit's thesis. And although her style is somewhat undisciplined, and the material could have been more tightly organized, I didn't find these aspects annoying, probably because they seemed to be primarily a manifestation of her infectious enthusiasm for the material. Viewers of "The History Channel" will be familiar with its habit of broadcasting a regularly scheduled "Apocalypse Week", during which they attempt to goose the ratings by scaring the bejusus out of their viewing audience. A typical day's programming during Apocalypse Week takes one possible way in which the world might end (megavolcano explosion, meteor impact, nuclear holocaust, deadly plague, climatic catastrophe, the Rapture, Armageddon as prophesied in the Book of Revelations, insert your own favorite apocalyptic nightmare here ...) and develops it in depth. The cynicism and idiocy with which these scenarios are fleshed out cannot be overstated (e.g. alleged "experts" pontificate on whether emergency services are likely to be overextended, or whether planes will fall out of the skies, in the immediate aftermath of the Rapture; or the apocalypse is "linked" to the prophecies of Nostradamus, or the Mayan calendar; boundless idiocy runs rampant).

Before I picked up this book, I didn't even know that there was an academic field called "disaster sociology." It turns out it goes back to William James himself, an eyewitness to the 1906 San Francisco earthquake who had the open-mindedness to look at how the people of San Francisco were affected by that disaster without projecting his own prejudices on it. He was astonished;

people in disasters don't act anything like how we would expect them to. James' findings have been replicated by studying people in hundreds of historical and modern disasters, and from those studies disaster sociologists have come to some concrete, reliable scientific findings. Solnit believes very, very much that the rest of us need to know what the disaster sociologists know, because our mistaken expectations of what will happen during and immediately after disasters keep making things worse, not better, for the survivors. Before James Lee Witt took over FEMA, and ever since he left, it's been a standing joke that all disasters come in two phases: the disaster itself, and then the even worse disaster when FEMA arrives. This is not a coincidence; Witt knows things about disaster that almost nobody else in America knows, including other first responders, and it showed up in his priorities. Solnit draws most of her examples from four disasters and their aftermaths, each recounted in detail: the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the 1917 explosion of an ammunition ship in Halifax harbor that destroyed the city, the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, and the World Trade Center attack on 9/11 of 2001. Other earthquakes, hurricanes, bombings, and other disasters are cited for comparison and contrast.

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