



## **A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster**

*Rebecca Solnit*

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**A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster** Rebecca Solnit  
**A startling investigation of what people do in disasters and why it matters**

Why is it that in the aftermath of a disaster--whether manmade or natural--people suddenly become altruistic, resourceful, and brave? What makes the newfound communities and purpose many find in the ruins and crises after disaster so joyous? And what does this joy reveal about ordinarily unmet social desires and possibilities?

In *A Paradise Built in Hell*, award-winning author Rebecca Solnit explores these phenomena, looking at major calamities from the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco through the 1917 explosion that tore up Halifax, Nova Scotia, the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. She examines how disaster throws people into a temporary utopia of changed states of mind and social possibilities, as well as looking at the cost of the widespread myths and rarer real cases of social deterioration during crisis. This is a timely and important book from an acclaimed author whose work consistently locates unseen patterns and meanings in broad cultural histories.

## **A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster Details**

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Arise in Disaster** Rebecca Solnit

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## From Reader Review A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster for online ebook

### Brent Neal says

Solnit's thesis is that the ordinary folk tend to not act like animals when the poop starts flying. Well and good. She has gathered a mountain of research on the subject, which I love to see. My own inclinations (and personal experiences) tend to support her thesis.

What makes this book tough is that the writing is profoundly uncritical of the primary sources and while the examples chosen were chosen well, it is hard not to feel like confirmation bias had crept into the writing of the book. Even so, the historical accounts of the San Francisco Earthquake and the Mexico City earthquake were gripping and interesting to compare, as were the historical accounts of the World War I era explosion in Nova Scotia contrasted to New York City on 9/11.

That being said, the more cerebral and theoretical aspects of the book do nicely explain the incredibly inhuman events that took place during Hurricane Katrina and did so with much more internal consistency than official accounts. If you enjoyed Atlas Shrugged, you will loathe this book. You should read it anyway, because while it is not the most critical treatment of the subject, its at least based in some form of reality.

On a personal note, Solnit's thoughts helped to clarify my own personal disdain for general food charities, while being an enthusiastic supporter of Heifer International.

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### Richard says

Many folks might enjoy this book, but I'm not one of 'em.

There are two principle reasons for this, one of which is forgivable, the other is not.

The first is that this is a very personal book. No, it isn't TMI about the author, but her opinions and biases are evident throughout the story. When I see a title like this, I'm expecting something like what Simon Winchester has done numerous times (for example, this or this or especially this, or this one that turns out wasn't by him). Even this topic has been more-or-less done the way I expected. See, for example, *The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes — and Why*. Those are pretty straightforward examples of the genre I thought Solnit was diving into.

But she delivered the Oprah version. That's okay, I guess. Some folks want the human side of things to get more time in the spotlight. And Solnit is strongest in the portions of this book where she is describing the actions and reactions of the folks involved in these disasters. Those segments were very absorbing, even if I had been hoping for more of the cognitive psychology and sociology about why living in the midst of a disaster is so invigorating and uplifting (I remember this phenomena from living through the '89 San Francisco earthquake).

Where Solnit's effort here loses my respect is when she blithely tosses in her political and ideological biases into the mix. Although her political affiliations aren't made explicit, her attitude reminds me of some friends that call themselves socio-anarchists. Not exactly uncommon in San Francisco.

when one or two is portrayed as a member of a family (as seen in the stories of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake early in the book). There's a lot to be said regarding the ties between wealth and power and the degree to which the state's authority might be used too often and too casually in the service of private property. Actually, there's not just *a lot* to be said, there are volumes — nay, *oceans* to be said. A wise author would refrain from scattering opinions based on their own simplistic viewpoint in a book where it adds little or nothing. Solnit isn't that wise, so her ideology leaves a taint here that is likely to be unpleasant to anyone with more nuanced or different beliefs.

Of course, it could be said that an artist should be true to themselves, and she certainly has the right to create her book as she desires. But she might suffer for her integrity, cutting down the size of her readership.

Want a much better book written in a similar vein? Try *Zeitoun* by Dave Eggers' portrayal of one man's horror story during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

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San Francisco Public Library Announcement—

***SF Library Announces 2012 Citywide Book Club Pick***

On Wednesday morning, city officials and other early risers attended a 5 a.m. ceremony at Lotta's Fountain to commemorate the 106th anniversary of the 1906 earthquake. (The earthquake struck on April 18th at 5:12 in the morning.) The Market Street landmark served as a meeting point for citizens in the aftermath of the massive quake. As part of the ceremony, the San Francisco Public Library also announced this year's choice for the citywide book club, "One City, One Book": Rebecca Solnit's *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster.*

In the book, Solnit, who lives in San Francisco, documents the sometimes positive outcomes that arise from disastrous situations that force communities to unite in the face of hardship. In addition to other manmade and natural disasters, she discusses the aftermath of the 1906 earthquake. This is the 8th annual "One City, One Book" event, and this year the library is partnering with California Reads, an initiative started by the nonprofit Cal Humanities, which is hosting a series of reading and discussion programs around the theme of democracy in 2012. The library will also offer films, preparedness workshops, and an author talk in October.

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**David says**

Before reading this book I was not a fan of Rebecca Solnit. Upon the insistent recommendation of several friends who rarely steer me wrong, a few years ago I bought a copy of her earlier book about Eadweard Muybridge (*"River of Shadows"*) and found it completely unreadable. I could sense that Solnit was smart, but it was as if she were speaking in tongues - wading through her prose was sheer torment. So I ditched it.

About a month ago I heard her speak about this latest 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 her another chance. *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 still somewhat undisciplined, and the material could have been more tightly organized, I found these aspects less

annoying than in the previous book, 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 bejesus 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). Certain themes are common to all apocalyptic scenarios, however- in particular, a complete breakdown of the social order, with people reverting overnight to atavistic stereotypes, resorting to looting and hoarding as they fight tooth and claw for limited resources. This projected behavioral model is also popular with government and law enforcement agencies, e.g. to justify the aggressive intervention by armed law enforcement personnel with broad powers and orders to shoot to kill (think of the official response to Hurricane Katrina). It's based on a depressing and frightening view of human nature.

In *A Paradise Built in Hell* Solnit mounts a spirited argument that this pessimistic view of how people respond to catastrophe is fundamentally wrong. Instead, she argues, disasters are far more likely to bring out the best in people -- there is a natural desire to help one another, which is actually easier to put into action, given the relaxation of social barriers that often prevails in the wake of a disaster. You might go for years just nodding at that neighbor across the street, but after the earthquake/fire/blackout the two of you may just end up having a real conversation.

Solnit grounds her argument in five specific case studies:

- \* the San Francisco earthquake of 1906
- \* the 1917 explosion of the munitions ship *Mont Blanc* in Halifax, Nova Scotia
- \* Mexico City's 1985 earthquake
- \* the World Trade Center attacks of 2001
- \* Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.

There were instances where a bad situation was made worse when those in power, through fear or panic, resorted to extreme and unwarranted measures (General Funston's imposition of de facto martial law following the SF quake, where soldiers were given license to shoot to kill anyone who did not cooperate satisfactorily; FEMA's and law enforcement's response after Katrina, where citizens were treated as likely criminals rather than people who needed to be helped). The fear-mongering narrative of barely contained pandemonium often finds traction with the media, but is rarely accurate. By detailed examination of the five case studies, Solnit makes an extremely convincing argument that the "natural" response to disaster is increased cooperation, a sense of solidarity and future possibility, indeed a degree of exhilaration among most survivors.

All five examples are interesting, but her discussion of the WTC attacks and Hurricane Katrina stand out as exceptionally measured, thoughtful and thought-provoking.

This is an extraordinary, wonderful book, which I recommend to everyone.

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## **Martin Empson says**

A Paradise Built in Hell ought to be read widely. All the latest climate change science suggests that the world is going to experience increased extreme weather, from floods and heatwaves, to hurricanes and rising sea levels. Solnit's book is important for two reasons. The first is that the "extraordinary communities" that arise in disasters are going to occur more often. The second is that the response from those at the top of society is often the worst way to respond to disasters and reflects the way those at the top view the majority of people.

We think of disasters in a particular way. It is a view shaped by common sense, by the media and by disaster movies. We believe, or at least we are told to believe, that when crisis hits, as society around us breaks down and when the state ceases to function we will return to some primitive nature dominated by selfishness and greed. We also think that any survivors will be damaged irreparably by their experience. Of course some people do respond to floods and earthquakes with violence and looting, and some people are utterly damaged by what they have seen.

But what Solnit's survey of disasters shows is that the opposite is actually true. Frequently, and more often than not, ordinary people respond to disaster with self-sacrifice, humanity, kindness and basic solidarity.

Full review on my blog [here](#).

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## **Travis Todd says**

So, yeah, by the time I dragged myself across the finish line I was so oversaturated with Solnit's passion for community that I wanted to hole up in some remote mountain cabin with guns and ammunition and food and books as far away from human contact as possible. I didn't want to hug or look with warmth upon another human being ever again. I'm glad she presents examples of people acting with compassion and resilience under disastrous conditions, and is such an incorrigible optimist, but I couldn't help think that this book was WAY too enamored of its premise. And it was so clogged with cliched activist-speak it approached unreadability at times. But let's face it, my own misanthropy was close to terminal long before Rebecca Solnit and I ever crossed paths and no amount of Rainbow Family soup kitchen food will probably ever change that. I sure hope she's right when the shit goes down.

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## **Anna Bishop says**

Rebecca Solnit always provides balm for my heart with clear, optimistic faith in humanity & all that we can be thankful for in each other. This is a fascinating review of the way we look at disaster & why the common idea that the veneer of civilisation disappears in a disaster & we all become less than human, is a sad & unjustified lie.

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## **chris says**

This book is pretty incredible, and I would recommend it to anyone. The argument builds from the 1906 San Francisco earthquake (and subsequent fire) to Hurricane Katrina, through many stops in between, showing

how civilized society is a very thin veneer beneath which lies... community and familial love. Looting and panic and random hysterical violence is largely a hyperbole of the very frightened elite. So the touchpoint, throughout, is that the real disaster is a society which keeps people apart, fostering a feeling of helplessness and fear. Emergencies and breakdowns allow a chance for real connection.

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### **Eric B. Kennedy says**

Surprisingly disappointing. "A Paradise Built in Hell" is a political ramble poorly disguised as research into disasters and people's responses.

From the outset, Solnit's convictions are pretty clear: emergency services and government are bad, organic community of the pseudo-anarchistic persuasion are great, and any exceptions to those rules are barely worth mentioning. This leads to a tremendously haphazard investigation into various disasters, wherein Solnit mistakes anecdote for research.

It's a worthy read if you're looking for "Chicken Soup for the Survivor's Soul" type stories that never escape a singular political focus, but not if you care about research methods, open-minded inquiry, or complex and nuanced stories of disasters and response.

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### **Fei says**

Good to hear of the resilience of people and that our instinct is not to panic or mob, but to help one another. These kinds of narratives need to be uplifted, esp to counter to the constant fear spewed by media.

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### **David says**

A challenging book, causing one to think whether the author's case is convincing or slightly askew. Perhaps the balance between good and evil depends on how important for the long term are the benefits to the local civilization in terms of spirit, morale, sociability, economic vigor, and spiritual strength. Yet how can the sum of those be weighed against the physical tragedy, the personal suffering, the days and months of effort lost? -- this is weighing the sum of two types of conditions, one about responsive human nature philosophically, the other practical and factual and statistical -- totally incomparable.

As I reflect on our Loma Prieta experience, there were radio, TV and newspaper reports of loss of life, buildings toppled, statues fallen, bridges damaged, and millions of dollars required to reconstruct, repair, rebuild. Yes, we had to rebuild our house and carport. Meanwhile the support from our sons and good spirit among neighbors was omnipresent. When we were in China during the 9/11 death and destruction in New York, the Chinese people and their government were strikingly sympathetic and helpful to us. Goes to show that the unhappy and dreadful results of a tragic event are the surface news while the buoyant helpful solicitous and generous help is hardly alluded to. Indeed, the physical reconstruction is an investment for the future, with dividends being paid during other coming physically destructive events.

Meanwhile, the loss of life and the crippling physical harm might be viewed as merely another installment in the passage of time, along with sickness, accident, and other inflicted or self-inflicted events in a lifetime. Loss of our Douglas is but a deeply tragic milestone in our lives.

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It seems to me that Solnit is practically and philosophically setting aside the loss of buildings and humans, and is viewing the damage to human nature in disasters against the positive benefits. Or, as she states at the end of the 5th chapter - Some people were greedy, malicious, selfish, cruel, "but what theft took place was dwarfed by the gifts and gestures of altruism in the aftermath of the ruin of the city" and most often act on "not the worst but the best within. The ruts and routines of ordinary life hide more beauty than brutality."

Viewing the totality of this book, I find the same reactions and sentiments stated over and over, in much the same words. It becomes tedious, repetitive, adding little new knowledge as she progresses. She omits nearly all analysis of the governmental officials' actions and decision processes - which leaves the reader wondering if some bias has not crept into Solnit's thesis. (Governments and officials almost always are the bad guys! Certainly in New Orleans, Louisiana, and the Bush administration.) There are very significant educational contrasts between disasters in Halifax, Mexico City, New Orleans, and San Francisco - well worth pondering and studying. However, a whole chapter "Standing on Top of Golden Hours" seems almost frivolous, and too much about carnivals and Mexico's theatrical version of wrestling - and the chapter on the 9/11 attack is just more of the same - well, the journalist in Solnit gets carried away, over and over and over.

Later reflecting on Solnit's work, I'm led to think of the mediocre disaster planning of where my wife and I now live, of California community service programs in this decade, of Habitat for Humanity, of the volunteer ethos of modern American society, and of philanthropy in its various shapes and forms.

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## David Gross says

In times of disaster institutions are overwhelmed, authorities vanish or are unable to keep up, society itself is spun ajumble, and people must rely on their wits and each other. What happens next?

Perhaps you've heard that with the thin fabric of civilization ripped suddenly away from us, we become bestial and savage in our civic nakedness: "nature, red in tooth and claw" reemerges, in some Lord of the Flies or *Mad Max* way, and, until we can bring ourselves back under the protection of our authorities and institutions...

In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain... no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society, and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.  
?Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan

Rebecca Solnit says this is all?—?Max, Baalzebug, Hobbes, and the rest?—?something of an urban legend. More typically, when civilization breaks down in the face of disaster, the survivors crawl out of wherever they've managed to ride it out and they come together to help one another. Not only is this typical, usual, and ordinary, but it's also such a delight and a welcome surprise to people who participate in it that they often feel a warm *nostalgia* for the disaster they've survived and for the latent parts of their characters that the disaster allowed to shine forth:

Just as many machines reset themselves to their original settings after a power outage, so human beings reset themselves to something altruistic, communitarian, resourceful, and imaginative after a disaster... [W]e revert to something we already know how to do.

Solnit gives us many examples, from her research of historical disasters and from her on-the-ground reporting of more recent ones, of this spontaneous grassroots organizing to cope with the aftermath of

disaster, and of the delight people express when they recall what it felt like to be part of it.

She supplements this with summaries of the findings of the sociological subdiscipline of “disaster studies”—which finds that in times of disaster, the people on the ground who are most affected tend to cope with it creatively, generously, and cooperatively, while incidents of indiscriminate violence or panic are more likely to be found among the relatively safe members of the social and political elite, who are paranoid that unleashed mobs will threaten their authority and privilege.

“Elite panic,” indeed, is the term of art in the disaster studies community for this frequently-encountered phenomenon. “My own impression,” Solnit writes, “is that elite panic comes from powerful people who see all humanity in their own image. In a society based on competition, the least altruistic often rise highest... Those in power themselves are often capable of being as savage and self-serving as the mobs of their worst fears.” These fears, in turn, help to justify the status and authority of these loathsome elites: just as Hobbes enlisted his nasty-brutish-and-short myth to justify the authority of royalty.

The elites eagerly deploy such myths because disaster can be particularly disastrous to authority. The Bush Administration’s response (and those of other state and local governments) to Hurricane Katrina is a familiar example.

“In the immediate aftermath of disaster, government fails as if it had been overthrown and civil society succeeds as though it has revolted: the task of government, usually described as ‘reestablishing order,’ is to take back the city and the power to govern... So the more long-term aftermath of disaster is often in some sense a counterrevolution.”

Solnit quotes Lee Clarke, one of the disaster scholars who coined the “elite panic” term:

Disaster myths are not politically neutral, but rather work systematically to the advantage of elites. Elites cling to the panic myth because to acknowledge the truth of the situation would lead to very different policy prescriptions than... that the best way to prepare for disasters is by following the command and control model, the embodiment of which is the federal Department of Homeland Security. Thus do panic myths reinforce particular institutional interests. But it is not bureaucrats who will be the first-responders when the next disaster... comes. It won’t even be the police or firefighters. It will be our neighbors, it will be the strangers in the next car, it will be our family members. The effectiveness of disaster response is thus diminished to the degree that we overrely on command and control. This is another case where political ideology trumps good scientific knowledge about how the world works.

One of the themes of the book is that people do not just behave well in disasters, but *extraordinarily well*?—a wellness that puts our ordinary lives to shame. Our ordinary isolation, selfishness, zero-sum competitiveness, and mutual suspicion seem to require a civilization to maintain them?—when civilization is disrupted, we revert to our better, natural, undomesticated states. The state of nature, it turns out, is the *opposite* of our solitary, nasty, and brutish civilized states. (Maybe Rousseau Jean-Jacques 1712-1778 was right all along.)

The existing system is... mitigated every day by altruism, mutual aid, and solidarity, by the acts of individuals and organizations who are motivated by hope and by love rather than fear. They are akin to a shadow government?—another system ready to do more were they voted into power. Disaster votes them in... Disaster reveals what else the world could be like?—reveals the strength of that hope, that generosity, and that solidarity. It reveals mutual aid as a default operating principle and civil society as something waiting in the wings...

A world could be built on that basis... This is the only paradise that is possible, and it will never exist whole, stable, and complete. It is always coming into being in response to trouble and suffering; making paradise is the work that we are meant to do. All the versions of an achieved paradise sound at best like an eternal vacation, a place where we would have no meaning to make. The paradises built in hell are improvisational; we make them up as we go along, and in doing so they call on all our strength and creativity and leave us free to invent even as we find ourselves enmeshed in community. These paradises built in hell show us both what we want and what we can be.

Solnit interviewed a woman who had come through the 9/11 attacks who came to this conclusion: "People say it's how people behave when things are bad that matters. But that's easy. It's how they behave when things are good."

With this in mind, Solnit also considers how some people have managed to preserve these positive parts of their human nature even when civilization threatens it. Some of her examples are volunteers from groups like Habitat for Humanity, Burners Without Borders, the anarchist movement, and the Rainbow Gathering who have turned up at some of the disasters she's reported on to help both in the immediate aftermath and during rebuilding:

The volunteers are evidence that it doesn't take firsthand experience of a disaster to unleash altruism, mutual aid, and the ability to improvise a response. Many of them were part of subcultures, whether conservative churches or counterculture communities, that exist as something of a latent disaster community already present throughout the United States and elsewhere. Such community exists among people who gather as civil society and who believe that we are connected, that change is possible, and who hope for a better earth and act on their beliefs. They remind us that though disasters can be catalysts to bring out such qualities, disasters do not generate them; they are constructed by beliefs, commitments, and communities, not by weather, seismology, or bombs.

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## Darrell says

When disaster strikes, many people believe all hell breaks loose and it's every person for themselves, but in her book, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit makes the case that people actually pull together and become more altruistic than normal in the wake of catastrophe.

### San Francisco

She starts with a description of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, arguably the worst disaster to happen in 99 years. Author Jack London reported that there was no screaming, crying, or panicking like we'd expect from watching disaster movies. People remained calm. While the city was in ruins, many poor people received aid for the first time in their lives, so for some people, it was a step up. Neighbors pooled their resources and helped each other out.

Solnit acknowledges rich people and out-of-towners did indeed act selfishly and only looked out for themselves. Some people profited from the disaster. Some meat packing companies gave their meat away to people in need, but other meat packing companies let their meat rot instead. So we get both altruism and selfishness in the wake of disaster. Most of the evidence Solnit gives to support her theory is anecdotal, but

that may be the only evidence available for most disasters.

The government at the time treated the earthquake victims as criminals, making the whole situation even worse. The military took over the city, kicked people out of their houses, and used them as forced labor. General Funston believed his job was to protect the city from the people. The mayor authorized lethal force to prevent looting. Property was valued more than lives.

The soldiers made matters worse by accidentally starting several fires. Also, they looted themselves. In one instance, they shot a man digging through the rubble because they thought he was looting when in reality, he was trying to rescue someone. In another case, Mormon elders who were told to get supplies from a grocery store before it burned down accidentally went to the wrong store and one of them was killed for it.

How people act in a disaster depends on whether they are optimistic or pessimistic about human nature. If you think the worst of your fellow humans, you'll assume they're looting when they aren't. And if you think property is more important than human lives, you'll kill them for it.

People who experienced the quake firsthand, like the philosopher William James, were more cheerful and optimistic while people far away, like his brother, the author Henry James, were certain everything was horrible. Tragedy is easier to handle when it's shared. This is why people who experience disasters are more upbeat than people who experience private suffering. Disasters also give people two of the things required for happiness: purpose and social connection. Putting out fires, helping the injured, and gathering supplies gives people a purpose and a sense of community they don't usually have in their day-to-day lives. This is why disasters can ironically create a paradise for those who band together, even if the elites in power assume the worst and treat the disaster victims like criminals.

There was a moment in this section where Rebecca Solnit goes off on a preachy tangent about how she doesn't own a TV because TV shows are stupid (and thus implying that anyone who watches TV is stupid). Not sure why she felt the need to include that here, but whatever.

## Halifax

In Halifax in 1917, a ship loaded with explosives as part of the war effort, accidentally blew up in the harbor killing 1500 people. It was the biggest explosion before nuclear weapons. One heroic railroad dispatcher, Vincent Coleman, sacrificed his life by rushing back to the telegraph office near the harbor to warn an approaching train with three hundred passengers to stay out of the area. "Hold up the train. Ammunition ship on fire making for Pier 6 and will explode. Guess this will be my last message. Goodbye boys."

In the aftermath of the disaster, people worked together like they did after the San Francisco earthquake. There were rumors of people stealing rings from the dead, but Solnit tells us this didn't happen. (I wonder how she could know this. How can you prove something didn't happen?)

She tells us that once again only the authorities behaved badly while the common people were all good. She says bad behavior is the exception to the rule... but there do seem to be a lot of these exceptions.

In the Great Kano Earthquake in Japan in 1923, Koreans were blamed for starting fires and polluting the wells. About six thousand Koreans were killed by vigilante groups with the military and police sometimes joining in. So Solnit's point isn't that disasters bring out the best in everybody, rather, some people become more altruistic in the face of disaster while others don't. She seems to be telling us that people are naturally cooperative except when they aren't.

She quotes Thomas Paine who claimed America was a paradise after the American Revolution before the government took over. She tells us the French Revolution was paradise until it wasn't. She asserts a lot of

things without providing data. She relies on anecdotal evidence of people being good, and downplays or reinterprets the anecdotal evidence of people being bad.

She makes a good point that no society is entirely capitalistic since there are always cooperative and charitable organizations required to make any society work.

She seems to be a fan of anarchy and claims hunter gatherers are more bound together and cohesive than modern people. (I guess she hasn't examined the data Steven Pinker presented in *The Better Angels of Our Nature* which shows 14 percent of hunter gatherers die a violent death compared with only one percent of people in state societies.)

Wealthy people tend to weather disasters better than the poor because society is built for them. In disasters, firefighters tend to let poor urban areas burn while protecting the remote affluent areas. She makes a good point that movies about disasters usually don't make sense. Should meteorologists not tell people about hurricanes to keep them from panicking? In reality, the elites are the ones who panic, afraid the general public will act as selfishly as they themselves do.

### Mexico City

We again see elite panic in the aftermath of the 1985 Mexico City earthquake. The government ordered buildings bulldozed even when there were people still inside. But we also see altruism since many students lay down in front of the bulldozers to stop them.

Factory owners rescued machinery from buildings instead of people and refused to pay the workers their wages, but good came out of this since it led to the formation of a union. The death toll from the earthquake was particularly high, partly due to the shoddy construction of the buildings, but this led to the formation of a housing rights movement.

The earthquake also revealed government corruption. Men who had been tortured to death in the basement of the attorney general's office were revealed by the quake. The Mexico City earthquake also saw the rise of a real life superhero. A man named Super Barrio who wore a mask like a Mexican wrestler, prevented evictions and stood up for the common people.

Bureaucracies tend to be bad in disasters since they aren't good at improvising. However, disasters can sometimes lead to improvements in society since they reveal many injustices. They increase activism since people are temporarily knocked out of their comfort zone. For example, the 1755 Lisbon earthquake may have contributed to the enlightenment.

### New York City

In the aftermath of the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City, we see the same coming together of community. Volunteers helped for months afterward. People in the towers evacuated calmly and politely. Solnit gives an account of civilians helping a firefighter while the police stood by dazed. Lots of people with boats helped evacuate. Rather than PTSD, post traumatic growth seems to occur after most disasters. Again, the people who panicked the most were the people who weren't there.

### New Orleans

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast of the United States. It's a horrendous scene. People trapped on rooftops watch as bodies, coffins, and alligators float by while pelicans and sea gulls try to eat them.

As in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the police treated victims like criminals and were more concerned with protecting property than saving lives. The police pointed guns at people and drove past refusing to help. The victims were treated like prisoners. They weren't allowed to leave the Superdome which was flooded with sewage. And actual prisoners were left to die in a flooded jail without food or water.

We see elite panic once again. The police chief claimed there were hundreds of gang members in the Superdome murdering and raping everybody even though this didn't actually happen. The media spread false rumors only retracting them after the damage had already been done. The only murders that actually happened were committed by police and the military against civilian victims who they irrationally feared.

The mayor and governor called off search and rescue operations in order to use the police to prevent looting instead. As in the San Francisco earthquake, it turned out the police did most of the looting themselves by stealing guns, jewelry, computers, and even cars. Elites often justify their own selfishness by believing the poor are just as selfish as they are.

The federal government delayed evacuation due to racism. FEMA turned away volunteers and supplies, claiming the city was unsafe to enter, while President Bush's friends got contracts and charged exorbitant sums. When FEMA finally got around to entering the Superdome expecting to find hundreds of bodies, there were only six. All the media's talk of murder was fictional.

A lot of New Orleans residents owned guns, but they were mostly used to fire into the air to get attention. There were a few people shooting at the cops, but for the most part, the victims were friendly to police, even providing them with food and water. Meanwhile, the military and the Black Water mercenaries acted like they were entering a war zone and murdered dozens of black men and dumped their bodies in the river.

Danny Brumfield was shot in the back by police in front of his kids in broad daylight because they thought he was going to attack them. In reality, he was going to use the scissors to cut up cardboard to make a shelter. Police make mistakes like this all the time when they see black men because they immediately assume the worst.

Many white residents of New Orleans had the means to evacuate, but didn't because they wanted to stay to protect their property. They formed vigilante groups and murdered any black people they thought of as suspicious.

The government's mishandling of Hurricane Katrina is especially scandalous when you compare it to Cuba where hurricanes are common, but deaths are rare because they're much better organized.

Of course it wasn't all bad. As in other disasters, there were numerous volunteers and organizations, both conservative churches and liberal counter cultural movements, who stepped in to help when FEMA and the Red Cross failed to do their jobs. An organization called Common Ground was founded to help people.

Solnit's thesis is that common people are altruistic in disaster, while the elites panic, but are the vigilante groups who panicked and started murdering people in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the Great Kano Earthquake really elites? Aren't they common people too? I think all we can really say for sure is that when disaster strikes, some people panic and some don't.

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## Paula says

I am a big fan of Solnit's and consider her River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological

Wild West one of my all time favorites. For the first two thirds of *A Paradise Built in Hell*, however, I found the repetition of the author's main point that quasi-utopian communities often, or even almost always, arise during disasters a bit tedious. Most interesting to me were the details of the particular disasters themselves. I appreciated the accounts rather more than the theorizing. Solnit seems at first to be offering a fairly unnuanced alternative reading of disaster to that of Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine: the Rise of Disaster Capitalism* and, indeed, Solnit mentions Klein and her different depiction of how we react to disaster. The sections of the book that focus on the 1906 San Francisco and 1985 Mexico City earthquakes as well as the bombing of the World Trade Center towers in New York City in 2001, the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in San Francisco, the explosion of a munitions ship in Halifax in 1917 and several other incidents can be summed up by a quote from Dorothy Day, "While the crisis lasted, people loved each other." The earthquake in Mexico City stands out in Solnit's view because peoples' response to that disaster and the government's mishandling of it resulted in enduring changes to Mexican politics and government. She claims that Mexico offers a glimpse of what might be if the spontaneous blossoming of civic society that happens during a disaster could be normalized into an exuberant everyday phenomenon; in her words, the challenge is "how to maintain a sense of purpose and solidarity in the absence of emergencies." She also claims that "the real revolution may be the period between regimes, not the new regime . . . . Certainly the period immediately after, or during, the revolution comes closest to the anarchist ideal of a society without a state, a moment when everyone has agency and no one has ultimate authority, when the society invents itself as it goes along."

Solnit gives many examples of the "elite panic" that perpetuates and acts based upon urban disaster myths, in the mistaken belief that their role is to maintain order and stability and defend against the murder, mayhem and especially property "crimes" such as "looting" that they expect, rather than to mitigate suffering or save lives. In the final section of the book, "New Orleans: Common Grounds and Killers," Solnit's analysis becomes more complex, and this section provides, I think, the real meat of the book and redeems it from its earlier redundancy and obviousness. Solnit reinforced my sense that that particular disaster, even more than 9/11, has been a defining one for our nation. When I first saw the photos coming out of New Orleans in August of 2005, I thought that finally, the entire world was seeing the U.S. at its ugliest: the poverty, the racism, the contempt for human welfare and human lives on the part of virtually all levels of government, but especially the federal government. Once again, I found that my rather entrenched cynicism could be shocked afresh. And yet, as Solnit eloquently demonstrates, there is another side to the story, as there is to the story of 9/11: how some people (sometimes, most people) come together to do what is necessary and help each other out, without considerations of personal gain or even safety and how that becomes a peak positive experience for many, all the while the disaster is horrific, and, in the case of Hurricane Katrina, catastrophic.

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## Dan says

not solnit's best book, but still pretty remarkable. it's tough not to think of naomi klein's *the shock doctrine* while reading it. in a sense, it's a correction to some of klein's assumptions about community response in the face of catastrophes. both writers are extremely skeptical about neoliberal "relief" efforts - as well as state power in general. but solnit's perspective is more optimistic about grassroots organization - as well as more directly sympathetic to anarchism than her earlier work might imply. the books are also, frankly, similar in their tendency to cherry-pick info in support of an argument. some of the digressions in *paradise* lack the context necessary to really resonate (there's a bit about the sandanistas, for example, that feels uncharacteristically thin). part of the problem is that solnit has set up a more conventional, journalistic narrative here than in books like *a field guide to getting lost*. digressions are typically her strong suit (does any living writer digress as well as solnit?), but this book requires a more conventional approach to evidence. at its best, it's a fascinating look at collective action under dire circumstances. there's a section devoted to william james that ranks among my favorite solnit passages. by the end, i wasn't entirely sold on the

transformative power of ordinary people, but i look to solnit *on account of* her belief in others, rather than in spite of it.

and frankly, who else writes so beautifully about political action? solnit indulges none of the miserable fatalism of most on the radical left, and avoids most breeds of may-of-68-nostalgia in the process. as far as i'm concerned, we need more voices like hers - and more books like this one.

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## **Riku Sayuj says**

### **What is the moral equivalent of war?**

Solnit's book is in many ways an extended argument (with examples) on William James' essay on his famous question: "What is the moral equivalent of war?" - Based on the premise that war is an ennobling bringing-together of humans and that the experience is uplifting and necessary and an equivalent would be a wonderful thing to find.

Everyone from Hobbes to Hollywood filmmakers has assumed and showcased that when disaster strikes, society crumbles. They show this "Law of the Jungle" as pure and dangerous chaos. Solnit wants to show that what in fact takes place is another kind of anarchy, where the citizenry by and large organize and care for themselves and rises above the disaster.

News Media (to most the only media that exists) loves spectacle and spectacle is gore - they highlight the worst stories and that is what you remember. That is why this book is important. Because Beliefs matter.

Especially when we move into an age where disasters are going to be more and more a part of our lives, it is important to learn to maintain continuity and a sense of societal organization through such periods.

Solnit tells numerous stories to illustrate that in the wake of an earthquake, a bombing, or a major storm, most people are altruistic, urgently engaged in caring for themselves and those around them, strangers and neighbors as well as friends and loved ones. The image of the selfish, panicky, or regressively savage human being in times of disaster has little truth to it Solnit asserts.

But belief lags behind, and often the worst behavior in the wake of a calamity is on the part of those who believe that others will behave savagely and that they themselves are taking defensive measures against barbarism.

This is the power of self-fulfilling prophecies - any belief that is acted on makes the world in its image. Beliefs matter. And so do the facts behind them. The astonishing gap between common beliefs and actualities about disaster behavior limits the possibilities, and changing beliefs could fundamentally change much more.

Of course it is dangerous to subscribe fully to this optimism and the case can easily be made that Solnit got carried away in this book. Her descriptions of disasters are so ennobling it begins to test the limits of belief.

Then Solnit starts talking of how disaster is almost nostalgic to its survivors:

*...It reminded me of how many of us in the San Francisco Bay Area had loved the Loma Prieta earthquake that took place three weeks before the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. Or loved not the earthquake but the way*

*communities had responded to it.*

Especially when you hear phrases like “enjoying immensely the disaster...”, it is natural to feel skeptical but we also have to keep in mind that this might only be a limitation of language:

*...if enjoyment is the right word for that sense of immersion in the moment and solidarity with others caused by the rupture in everyday life, an emotion graver than happiness but deeply positive. We don't even have a language for this emotion, in which the wonderful comes wrapped in the terrible, joy in sorrow, courage in fear. We cannot welcome disaster, but we can value the responses, both practical and psychological.*

In addition, a few major drawbacks too have to be pointed out:

1. By and large Solnit avoids turning her gaze to the disasters in the developing world where chances of solidarity might (or might not be) be less. I am not implying that the people would be less noble, but with less infrastructure and with total anarchy, it might disappear. The study is not complete without exploring that aspect.
2. Solnit paints a particularly dangerous picture of the administration and the authorities in this book. This is dangerous since if the purpose of the book is to influence beliefs, painting such a caricatured version would make it harder for order to be established post-disaster - trust in the authorities would surely be necessary at some point.

This near-parody portrayal of the ‘authorities’ is extreme and should probably be ignored. That is the problem with anecdotal books - a book could easily be written too about how the supposed monsters of bureaucracy becomes angels of deliverance in a disaster. This is not to use that as a hammer against this book, but only to suggest that such a book too should probably be written.

3. Another parody-portrayal is that of the ‘elites’ - painting them as the defenders of some ‘order’ who completely lose it when utopian anarchy descends in the wake of a disaster. Being blind to goodness, they then embark on a path of distraction that brings a bad name to all disaster victims. ‘Elite Panic’ she calls this phenomena. This section of the book is written with some heavily shaded blinkers and deserves at best a derisive laugh from the unbiased reader.
4. In addition to these wild approximations, Solnit in her quest for legitimacy for the ideas presented opts for wildly reaching speculations into various fields - for example, comparing disaster to carnivals and thus as a necessary celebration of life. Or comparing to revolutions, or to freedom struggles to show that disasters are a break with the past, ‘mini utopias’ of a sort. That is surely more than just ‘stretching an argument’. In these aspects the book is an overkill. Even lunacy, at times.

Indeed, as Richard says in his review, this is the Oprah version. But, in spite of all the criticisms above, it is still an important book. Sometimes the best way to convey to people that the horrid hell of a disaster aftermath is still a path to possible escape is to draw upon real stories, and present them in as empathetic a manner as possible. Disaster is never terribly far away. Knowing how people behave in disasters is fundamental to knowing how to prepare for them. And what can be learned about resilience, social and psychological response, and possibility from sudden disasters is relevant as well for the slower disasters of poverty, economic upheaval, and incremental environmental degradation as well as the abiding questions about social possibilities.

The purpose of the book is not to inform, it is to affect in a visceral fashion - you might not remember facts when the next super-cyclone hits, but you might remember a story and if that stops you from going for an axe for a second longer - enough to see the pain in another eye - the book might have served its purpose. Beliefs matter.

P.S. Of course, this review is also the Oprah version, but I was moved and I will stand by the author on this one, at least in essence, if not in full.

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## Jen Hirt says

In 2011, the city where I live (Harrisburg, PA) had the fifth worst flood on record when the Susquehanna River reached about 25 feet (normally it's around four feet deep). I live two blocks from the river, and so I experienced, for the first time in my life, a mini-disaster -- roads in and out were underwater, there was no electricity, and many homes flooded.

But what I and my neighbors noticed right away was the baffling decisions made by the city. For example, Paul and I and some neighbors frequently walked over to the river to assess the situation -- it was essential to actually look at it in order to see how dangerous it was going to get. And yet, the mayor threatened arrest to those approaching the river, and she enacted curfews in an attempt to keep people inside, isolated. Patrol cars cruised the streets using bullhorns to order us back inside.

Then, the city started mandatory evacuations in the neighborhood uptown from us, with rumors that our neighborhood was next. Our neighbors met on the street to decide what to do, and all the residents who had been here upwards of 15 years decided to stay. It just made more common sense -- we could more easily keep an eye on things, and each other, if we stayed. And we were lucky -- that night, the water stopped rising about a block away, and with our electricity off, we all sat outside with flashlights and candles, sharing food that was going to go bad if the power stayed off. People walked in friendly groups around the streets, checking on everything. The cops with their bullhorns were annoying and completely ineffective, and we quickly ignored them. It was, dare I say it, a really nice night.

I share this anecdote because it is exactly what author Rebecca Solnit is getting at with her extraordinary book, which is built around this question: "What if paradise flashed up among us from time to time -- at the worst of times? What if we glimpsed it in the jaws of hell?" Through fascinating historical research into major disasters (including 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, technically a catastrophe, not a disaster), Solnit shows us a startling new way (well, new to most of us) to think about disaster preparedness. Her research shows again and again that the top-down disaster management systems fail more than they succeed (FEMA, anyone?) and that most ordinary citizens can weather a disaster with admirable calmness, altruism, common sense, and problem-solving. Solnit is a tireless researcher, and she interviewed many unheard survivors for this book. For example, their 9/11 stories of survival without the help of trained emergency responders, so totally outside the mainstream news coverage, had me in shocked tears of both admiration and frustration. Meanwhile, she also covers disasters from the early part of the 20th century, and since there aren't survivors left to interview, she presents "disaster scholar" research into these events. FASCINATING. I had to get out my notebook and take notes, because the next time my river floods, I'll have a whole new game plan. Most importantly, Solnit highlights the idea of "elite panic" and how dangerous it is during a disaster: quoting Kathleen Tierney, disaster scholar, "Elites fear disruption of the social order, challenges to their legitimacy." Solnit also concludes, "Elite panic in disaster...is shaped by belief, belief that since human beings at large are bestial and dangerous, the believer must himself or herself act with savagery to ensure individual safety or the safety of his or her interests." (Cue up some episodes of "Doomsday Preppers" if you want to see elite panic in action...or just watch some archival footage of Hurricane Katrina.) But what Solnit found in her research is that most people DON'T panic in disasters, but organized agencies are often too slow and burdened by red tape to do anything but panic, and "the elite" almost always DO panic right away, to the detriment of almost everyone, especially the poor and minorities (whom elites often name first, and incorrectly, as the source of looting and vigilante gangs...Solnit presents startling evidence that the only

murderous vigilante gang in New Orleans was white).

Her sharp analysis of situation after situation, each one perfectly endnoted and supported with relevant backing, should be required reading for every citizen, because not only does she skewer the failed emergency agencies, she champions the unique communities that emerge and shows us how, if we keep the momentum going, larger change takes place.

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### **Lorianne DiSabato says**

A fascinating exploration of how people actually behave in the aftermath of disasters and why some disasters lead to an upsurge of community while others lead to social chaos. Solnit shows through sociological research and numerous anecdotes how the belief that the masses naturally panic during disasters is a myth created in large part by social forces trying to stay in power and fueled by media hype. If given the chance, Solnit suggests, strangers will go to extraordinary lengths to help one another, finding a redemptive and even euphoric sense of camaraderie and community in the immediate aftermath of disaster, when social barriers are broken down. This spirit of community is ruined, however, when government and law enforcement treat the public as if they were more dangerous than the disaster itself, as happened in New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina, when officials deemed it more important to protect property from looters than save stranded evacuees. Solnit suggests that if government and law enforcement officials trust the people they are sworn to protect, the public can be a powerful ally in rebuilding and recovering in the aftermath of disaster.

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### **Meg says**

It's a joy to read scholarship that is affirming and challenges conventional thinking about human nature. Solnit's basic thesis is that although we believe that disasters lead to looting, violence, and social chaos, in reality the vast majority of people step up and engage in mutual aid and social organizing for community support and survival. Though there are always a few looters and opportunists, the majority of social chaos in disasters comes from "elite panic": governments, police/military, or companies/ corporations decide they need to clamp down tightly on the civilian population so that looting and violence won't happen. The example of Hurricane Katrina is an obvious recent one which Solnit explores in depth, but she also describes the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, in which the police and military were ordered to shoot anyone looting. (In one case, a soldier shot and killed someone who was picking over rubble, only to find out that the person had been trying to rescue someone who was trapped.)

It was really a pleasure to read Solnit's descriptions and examples of mutual aid that has arisen in disasters and her quotes from people about how it affected them - including reflections about the particular kind of joy that comes from connecting with others in the community for a purpose. I certainly wondered whether she was cherry-picking her examples, and I'm not sure whether she fully makes the case that mutual aid is more widespread than looting/ violence/ chaos. (I don't mean that mutual aid ISN'T more widespread - just that I don't think she fully gives proof.) But the examples were very powerful and compelling, and it was so great to see a counter-example to all the media hype about how people act in disasters.

I thought it was a little dubious when she made the connection between post-disaster mutual aid and long-term social change, though I'd be interested to hear some more convincing examples. Also, some of the philosophical bits and biographical tangents got a little long for me. I liked this book best in the parts where she really explored specific examples of disasters in depth.

P.S. How nice to read a book which references Kropotkin! It's been a while.

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## Ran Prieur says

Like most nonfiction books, this is fifty good pages of content padded with hundreds of pages of repetition and filler. You can get almost all the ideas just from the first section on the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

Anyway, the ideas are important. In the 21st century we still have a 19th century view of how ordinary people behave in a disaster: that they panic, run around aimlessly, are more selfish, and are unhappy.

The evidence shows exactly the opposite: people calmly come together and self-organize to help each other out, and the experience of building a social system out of free action, driven by necessity to do things with concrete value, makes them much more happy than in their normal lives doing meaningless chores in a bureaucracy. Some people, like Dorothy Day, have been inspired to spend their lives trying to make ordinary society more like a disaster utopia.

Meanwhile, the ruling powers become more dangerous, because they're threatened by people taking care of each other and making them irrelevant, and also because the chaos gives them room to push their top-down utopian visions. Naomi Klein's book *The Shock Doctrine* is all about this.

I wish, instead of the boring obligatory sections on 9/11 and Katrina, Solnit had gone deeper into the question of why it's so hard to make a really good society last. She briefly mentions Burning Man and Rainbow Gatherings, and I wonder what exactly is stopping us from making a Rainbow Gathering permanent? If we had sci-fi food fabricators, and no interference from the authorities, would it still fail because of mass psychology? And could we remove that limit by changing our culture?

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## Shel says

Should a real life disaster strike, consumers of fictionalized accounts from Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* may well despair for humanity's survival.

Watch any disaster movie and assume chaos and panic.

This book offers a welcome antidote.

### Consider:

"...human beings are at their best when much is demanded of them..."

"...human beings, and this cuts across all societies...rise to the occasion."

"...human beings respond with initiative, orderliness, and helpfulness; they remain calm; and suffering and loss are transformed when they are shared experiences."

Researching real life disasters from the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, author Solnit examines how real people respond in disasters — and offers the phrase "disaster utopia."

It's an optimistic, but well-documented, assessment of the humanity, helpfulness, and calm people display when a crisis brings them together. People assist each other. Disasters uncover a sense of community and purpose and survivors often recall those times of earnest cooperation with pleasure.

**Survivors of the San Francisco earthquake reported:**

"Never in all San Francisco's history, were her people so kind and courteous as on this night of terror."

"While the crisis lasted, people loved each other."

Of course, disaster response is not all light and roses. Base impulses surface in a disaster as well as benevolent ones.

However, it's not usually the masses in the majority that cause the trouble. Solnit instead points the finger at those in charge. She explores the phenomena of "elite panic," in which those "in charge" do more harm than good by trying to keep control. She cites examples of authorities who hinder volunteers, further their own agendas, and who out of fear of "mobs" and "looting," brutally put protection of personal property ahead of the protection of human life.

Since our beliefs about how we will behave under stress influence disaster response, the field of disaster sociology's discovery that we can count on each other in a crisis is pivotal.

In a disaster, our first responders will likely be our neighbors.

There's an anarchist theme to Solnit's discoveries that decentralized, rapidly-formed communities frequently rise above bureaucracies and governments in a crisis. However, rather than forwarding the rather depressing idea that we need a disaster to bring out the best in us, the book leans toward the conclusion that the structure of our current day-to-day society breeds inordinate competition and isolation and restrains our social natures.

"The ruts and routines of ordinary life hide more beauty than brutality."

"...human beings are gregarious, cooperative animals who need no authority to make them so; it is their nature."

"...just as many machines reset themselves to their original settings after a power outage, so human beings reset themselves to something altruistic, communitarian, resourceful, and imaginative after a disaster..."

**Pairs well with:** Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of our Nature*

**Of note:**

- research by biobehavioral scientists Shelley E. Taylor and Laura Cousino Klein offers an alternative view to the fight-or-flight stress response "...women in particular often gather to share concerns and abilities...the 'tend-and-befriend' pattern."
- Sociologist Enrico Quarantelli, in more than 700 studies of disasters found, "cooperative rather than selfish behavior predominating" and few instances of panic.