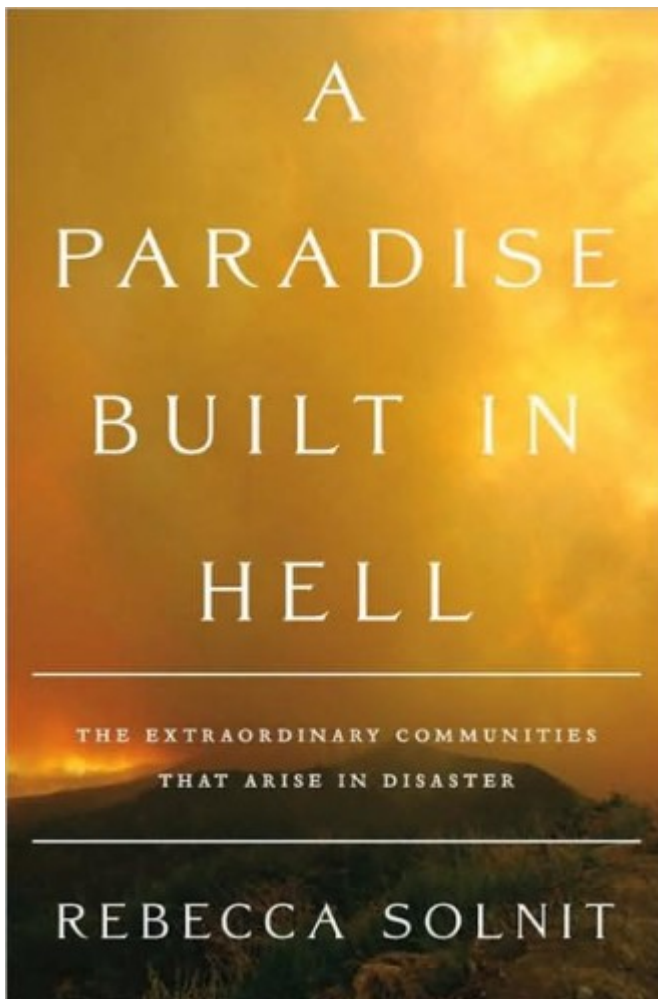


After disaster

by [Chris Herlinger](#) in the [June 14, 2011](#) issue

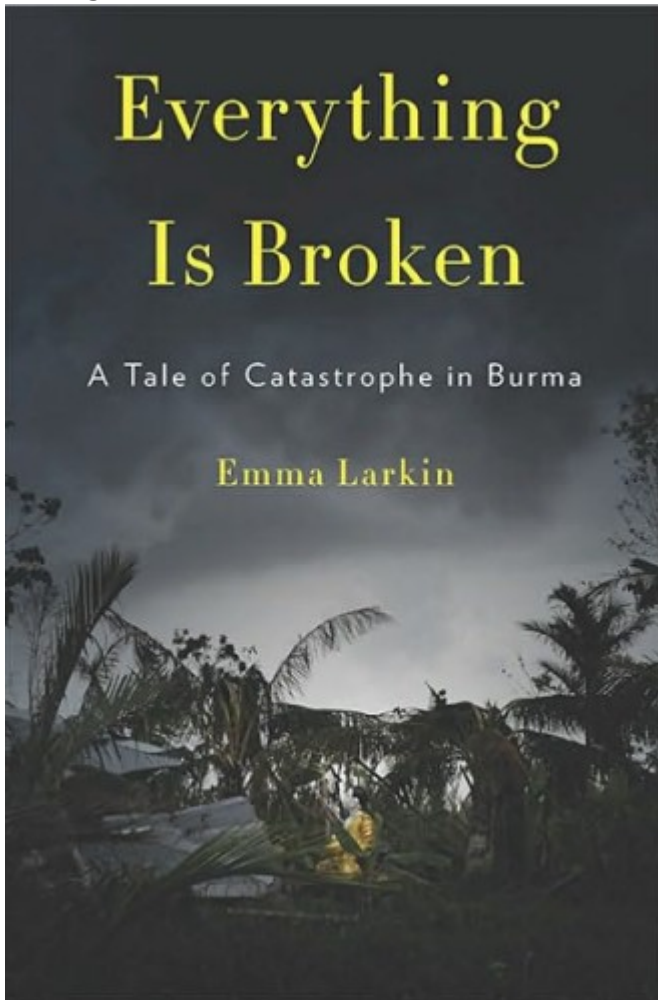


In Review



A Paradise Built in Hell

By Rebecca Solnit
Viking



Everything Is Broken

By Emma Larkin
Penguin

In all my travels to so-called hot spots—Pakistan, Afghanistan, Darfur, Chad—the only time I feared for my physical safety came in Haiti following the January 2010 earthquake. I had joined a group of humanitarian workers to report on the distribution of supplies in a village about an hour's drive outside Port-au-Prince. The Haitian aid workers had done a good job of setting up the distribution site, but within minutes of arriving we saw that their well-laid plans were in jeopardy.

This was the first assistance that people in the area were receiving—about two weeks after the earthquake—and tempers were short. Local police who had been called in to keep order refused to do so until they had received supplies themselves. They were particularly keen on getting tents. When the aid workers refused their demand, the police stood by and did nothing as a frustrated crowd rushed toward the distribution site. People chaotically grabbed whatever they could, and a policewoman responded by firing several shots in the air.

For me, it was another example of how humanitarian assistance is an imperfect business. While it does a necessary good, it is also limited in scope—just the first step toward recovery—and it is offered in circumstances of immense difficulty, pressure and confusion.

In short, a disaster zone like the one I saw in Haiti seems an unlikely place to generate a hopeful view of human nature. But Rebecca Solnit offers the novel thesis that disasters are not a burial ground for hope but rather can lay the foundation for change and renewal.

Most people, she argues, respond to a disaster with a surprising degree of compassion and ability. "In the wake of an earthquake, a bombing or a major storm, most people are altruistic, urgently 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."

Paradise can arise in hell, she says, "because in the suspension of the usual order and failure of most systems, we are free to live and act in another way."

Solnit bases her argument on sociological and historical research and interviews with those who have survived disasters, particularly in urban areas of North America: New York, San Francisco and Mexico City. What she finds is moving: "People step up . . . to become their brothers' keepers." Individuals and organizations motivated by love are ready to step in and act even as a "shadow government."

Disaster votes them in, in a sense, because in an emergency these skills and ties work while fear and divisiveness do not. 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 when it's absent from the stage.

This is a stirring thesis in an often moving book, but *A Paradise Built in Hell* is also unwieldy, too long by perhaps a third. Especially scattershot is Solnit's account of post-Katrina New Orleans. The best section in the book is her reporting on the gallant, often courageous ways that New Yorkers of all stripes (not just emergency personnel) responded to the events of 9/11 without panicking. Too often this kind of positive picture is obscured by media stereotypes.

Solnit also rightfully points out that elites and official forces often respond poorly to a disaster. She calls this "elite panic"—elites assume that since they are no longer in control, "the situation is out of control, and in their fear [they] take repressive measures that become secondary disasters."

I hesitate to fully endorse Solnit's thesis, however. In every disaster I have covered in more than a decade of reporting, I have often seen far more outright exhaustion and frustration than signs of visible elation and hope. (Unexpected generosity and solidarity exist but are decidedly hard-earned.) The "paradises" that Solnit glimpses can be short-lived, and *A Paradise Built in Hell* does not rigorously trace the successes and failures that followed the flashes of hope.

One exception is Solnit's discussion of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake. The people of the city experienced a tremendous sense of connection and unity immediately following the earthquake. But Solnit shows how that response quickly disintegrated into a "political fracas" that was "part of business as usual—self-interest, corruption, and plays of power." Nevertheless, as Solnit notes, the San Francisco earthquake had a lasting effect on people like Dorothy Day, who survived the quake at age eight and recalled all her life that "while the crisis lasted, people loved each other."

Another drawback of Solnit's book is her almost exclusive focus on North America. She hints that the poor response by government officials to earthquakes in Nicaragua and Mexico in 1972 and 1986 helped lay the groundwork for political change, but that assertion is sketchy at best.

On trips to Haiti and Pakistan recently I tried out Solnit's thesis with those I met. It did not get a warm reception. Examples exist, of course, of people acting decently, selflessly, even heroically. But the threats of violence and the sting of poverty leave a deeper impression. As time wears on and conditions do not improve, weariness

sets in. A humanitarian worker in Haiti said, "I don't find meaning in disasters, though of course they change us. Certainly, you see life as it is: you see homelessness, the problems with water and shelter, the missing. You see it all right in front of you. It's palpable." But the work of returning to some form of normality is difficult and takes a severe toll.

In January I stood in a wind-swept area north of Port-au-Prince with Calvin Bourre, the 24-year-old son of a Pentecostal minister, who spoke of problem after problem that he faced in his postearthquake life: he lost his home, he lost his work, he worries about his children getting sick, and his future is uncertain. He finds himself "so far from that 'Godly light.'" He added, "It's not me. It's Haiti. It's everywhere."

We cannot say that there is no hope in Haiti—far from it. As my aid worker friend put it, "If you say Haiti is hopeless, it's like you're saying that Haitians aren't even people." But getting to that better place is often a slog.

If I am more pessimistic than Solnit, perhaps that is due to accounts like that of Emma Larkin in her book on a natural disaster in Burma. The American author, who writes under a pen name because of the dangers of reporting from Burma, offers an elegant account of the effect of Cyclone Nargis in 2008. The disaster, according to some accounts, left at least 138,300 dead or missing. What was particularly notable about the event was that the ruling military junta refused, at least initially, to allow humanitarian assistance into the country. We still do not know how many died as a result of that confounding and arrogant act.

Even Larkin, an experienced hand in Burma, comes up short in trying to understand the "cruel negligence" of the regime. At best, she points to the regime's attitude of "fear and self-protection" stemming in part from the potent street demonstrations against the regime the year before. The generals who rule Burma are separated from the lives of ordinary Burmese. "The very air they breathe is clouded with paranoia and the ground they walk on is riddled with the fault lines of treachery." The generals could not imagine Western aid workers, with their "airy-fairy ideals of democracy and equality," entering the country and going into remote areas that were already difficult for the generals to police.

Larkin movingly portrays the trauma and confusion that people experience after a disaster. A fisherman shares with her his sense that life all around him has changed:

"We are all different now. Look at my wife: she used to talk all day long and now she hardly says a word. And me, I used to eat for the whole of the town, but now my wife has to force me to take a little rice in the morning and evening." He spoke of the sense of unreality that had settled upon the town: "Maybe I am dreaming this. Maybe I will wake up soon."

While focusing on these kinds of trauma, Larkin also points to the possibility of hope that the repressive regime would fall apart. She sees the collapse of a 2,300-year-old pagoda in May of 2009 as an intimation of the unease of Burma's junta. "Call it wishful thinking or the manifestation of unvoiced hope," she writes, "but there is no doubting the frisson of excitement that ricocheted through Rangoon as the story of the pagoda's collapse spread across the city."

This is probably not quite what Solnit means when she writes that "joy matters too." But perhaps Solnit and Larkin would agree that whatever or wherever hope is maintained, it is a matter of hard-earned perseverance that sometimes—sometimes—pays off with glimpses of a better world. "Horrible in itself, disaster is sometimes a door back into paradise," writes Solnit. "The paradise at least in which we are who we hope to be, do the work we desire, and are each our sister's and brother's keeper."