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Short Cuts

Paul Laity

If you're feeling vulnerable in these cataclysmic times, stay clear of Lee Clarke, the Eeyore of American sociology and author of the forthcoming study of disaster, *Worst Cases* (Chicago, £16). 'Doom is everywhere,' he says, 'catastrophes are common.' Viruses as deadly as Ebola could circle the globe in 24 hours, 'on the planes that don't crash'. And 'it's not a question of if but of when terrorists will detonate a nuclear device.'

Bad things happen all the time, but once in a while the bad thing is so unlikely as to be almost inconceivable. In 2001 a hunter in the middle of a wood in Pennsylvania fired his gun: the bullet failed to hit a single tree, travelled through the window of a house, went through a door and a wall, and killed a woman standing in her bedroom. A few years before, on Long Island, Andres Perez, testing his new .22 rifle, pointed it into the sky and fired. A minute or so later, Christina Dellaratta, sunbathing in her backyard nearby, felt a nasty sting.

For Clarke, five hundred airline passengers are five hundred potential casualties. The 'worst single airplane crash in history' was that of Japan Air Lines Flight 123, which in 1985 lost its tail and slammed into first one, then another peak of Mount Osutaka. He writes about the *Hindenburg* crash, Bhopal, Chernobyl, the King's Cross fire, 9/11 – all were regarded as 'worst cases' – and about near misses, too: during the Cuban Missile Crisis, for instance, a sentry at a Minnesota air base noticed an intruder climbing the fence, fired a shot and sounded the general sabotage alarm. At the military airfield in neighbouring Wisconsin, the wrong alarm went off – one indicating that a nuclear war had begun. The pilots of nuclear-armed interceptors had got their planes almost ready when the mistake was realised. The intruder turned out to be a bear.

And then there are asteroids. It's only a matter of time before Earth is hit, Clarke warns, so 'a reasonable person might conclude that we should be afraid.' If a comet a mile wide strikes us, we're all done for: this is the ultimate 'worst case' – total human annihilation. The chances of it

FROM THE ARCHIVE

The Olympics Scam
Iain Sinclair: The

happening are extremely remote, but 'Near Earth Objects' whiz past all the time. In June 2002 an asteroid as big as a football pitch missed Earth by 75,000 miles, less than a third of the distance to the moon: 'Something that size could release the energy equivalent of a large nuclear explosion.'

'I think,' Clarke writes, 'we ought to prepare more for possibilities of untoward events that are out of control and overwhelming.' They probably won't happen – but then again they might, and the consequences will be terrifying. Governments often try to hide behind probabilities, he argues: 'we should always hold officials' feet to the fire when they make outrageous claims for their abilities to know and to control.' Events on the Gulf Coast have left him more inclined than ever to withhold his trust. 'This was an easy one,' he wrote recently, 'Katrina was predicted and the magnitude of the devastation was knowable.' Just last summer, emergency officials ran a disaster simulation – 'Hurricane Pam' – that involved FEMA, the US Army Corps of Engineers and other agencies. In the simulation, a storm surge topped levees around New Orleans and more than a million residents were evacuated. The FEMA regional director was pleased with the way the exercise went: 'We made great progress this week in our preparedness efforts,' he said.

Worst Cases was finished months before Katrina hit, but the implications of this 'worst case scenario' are spelled out in the book. 'Being poor is worse than being rich in most places. In New Orleans it can be fatal.' But then disasters usually hurt the poor most. When the *Titanic* went down, 62 per cent of first-class passengers survived, 25 per cent in steerage. Almost all of the seven hundred people who died in the Chicago heat wave of 1995 were poor (a disproportionate number were black); most would have survived if they'd had air-conditioning. And when a tornado killed 18 people in Georgia in February 2000, what went unmentioned in many news reports was that all those who died had lived in trailers.

Nick Raynsford, our former minister for civil resilience (*sic*), last week reminded Radio 4 listeners stunned by the details of Katrina how well the British authorities have coped with recent emergencies. (We now have a new minister for civil resilience: Phil Woolas.) The Civil Contingencies Secretariat (set up in the summer of 2001 'to improve the UK's resilience against disruptive challenges') calls its website 'UK Resilience', and the body established in the weeks after 9/11 to prepare the capital 'for major incidents or catastrophes' is called the 'London Resilience Forum' (it has a special 'resilience team').

In September 2003, the resilient LRF was busy with the 'Osiris II' simulation of a chemical attack on the Underground at Bank (remember the TV footage of firemen in green suits shepherding 'victims' to the decontamination showers?), and last year, great resilience was shown in planning the response to a major flood on the Yorkshire coast. It's comforting to know that preparations for catastrophe are going on everywhere. For £99, you could have attended this year's Norfolk Annual Disaster Preparedness Study Day, organised by the County Council. It was wonderfully entitled 'When Nature Calls', and among the speakers was Donald Norrie, from Cumbria, who has been 'involved in several major incidents, including . . . the terrorist bombing of the Warrington gasometers'.

Should we really, as Lee Clarke advises, ready ourselves for the horrible worst? How many other priorities should we shelve in doing so? Might it not be a trifle over-zealous to suggest that 'we would be wise to think of nursing homes, where an increasing proportion of our population lives, as excellent terrorist targets'? I never doubted, however, that even a professional Cassandra such as Clarke would end his book on an upbeat note. Many disasters have silver linings, he reassures us, and catastrophes can lead to 'social betterment'. Think of the improvement in living standards after the Black Death.

Paul Laity edited the *Left Book Club Anthology*. Formerly an editor at the *London Review*, he now works at the *Guardian*.

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