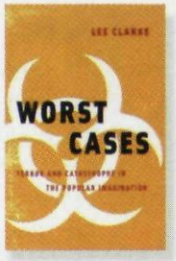
What, Me Worry?

WHY WE SHOULD THINK ABOUT THE UNTHINKABLE.

WORST CASES: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination
Lee Clarke
University of Chicago, 200 pages, $22.50

YOU WORRY about your heating bill this winter. You worry about your cholesterol. And the West Nile virus. And avian flu. Now and then, you may worry about a repeat of 9/11 in some diabolical new form. But you probably don't spend much time thinking about the threat of NEOs (near earth objects, such as asteroids, which could strike the planet with catastrophic impact) or the accidental release of deadly nerve gas at the facility near Toole, Utah, where the U.S. Army is disposing of chemical weapons by burning them.

Lee Clarke wants to change that. He wants ordinary citizens, planners, and policymakers to pay more attention to potential events that are admittedly improbable but possible nonetheless—events with consequences so severe that we ignore them at our peril.



Not that he supposes we'd be better off in a constant state of anxiety. On the contrary. Thinking ahead in this way may have a practical payoff (consider the preemptive response to Hurricane Rita versus the lack of adequate preparation for Katrina), but there is more at stake. By acknowledging that such terrible things *could* happen, we admit there is much that remains beyond our control.

Clarke makes his case in a flawed, occasionally maddening, but timely book, *Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination*. "Worst cases," in Clarke's fuzzy usage, can mean anything from the 1937 explosion of the zeppelin *Hindenburg* or the 1940 failure of the Tacoma Narrows Bridge to the extinction of the human race. A notion so elastic has little purchase. And the subtitle seems to belong to a different book, perhaps one concerned with disaster in movies, novels, and so on.

Worst Cases differs from Richard Posner's book of 2004, *Catastrophe*, which is more systematic and policy-oriented. Clarke's book will make you ponder how we think about (or fail to think about) "the unthinkable." Catastrophe is a kind of reality therapy. He writes: "In this book, I look the worst full in the face. What I see is frightening but enlightening. I believe that knowing a thing permits more comfort with that thing." In other words, *Memento mori* ("Remember your death"), as our ancestors did.

| reviewed by **JOHN WILSON** |

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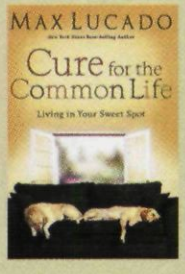
Dwelling Place is a deeply informative and moving book. —*M.N.*

CURE FOR THE COMMON LIFE: Living in Your Sweet Spot
Max Lucado • W Publishing, 240 pages • $22.99

We're made to fill an empty spot in God's jigsaw puzzle, says bestselling author and pastor Max Lucado; we're custom-designed for a one-of-a-kind assignment.

In this slim volume, bulked up by Lucado's delightful trademark anecdotes, a comprehensive study guide, and a personal assessment questionnaire, Lucado encourages readers to look for their "sweet spot." It lies at the convergence of what we do, why we do it, and where we do it (our everyday life).

Being "sweet-spot-centered" requires that



we periodically step away from our lives and reassess what we are doing. The assessment questionnaire will help readers find their "tools" or gifts. We should use these gifts, Lucado says, to serve others and glorify God.

Lucado urges readers to "spelunk these verses with me," and observes, "When you do the most what you do the best, you put a smile on God's face. What could be better than that?"

Lucado devotees should find this a satisfying read. —*C.C.*

BORN AGAIN AND AGAIN: Surprising Gifts of a Fundamentalist Childhood
Jon M. Sweeney • Paraclete, 173 pages • $19.95

Wait a moment. Take a pen and cross out the word "fundamentalist" in Jon Sweeney's subtitle. In its place, write "evangelical." Now we can begin.

Born in 1967, raised in Wheaton, Illinois, and educated at Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College, Sweeney might have been specially created to represent the changing face of American evangelicalism, evolving from the fundamentalist faith of his grandfathers—both of whom were Independent Baptist preachers—to the expansive movement whose most prominent spokesman was Billy Graham. In his growing-up years, Sweeney seems to have experienced almost every distinctive of evangelical culture, including the ritual destruction of some of his favorite cassette tapes (the Eagles) after a visiting speaker explained

Clarke's psychology is a bit shaky here. After all, he is a professional disasterologist (a sociologist by training), and one of his favorite words is "interesting." An airliner inexplicably explodes in midair? That's interesting. The prospect that more than 50 million people could die from a rogue strain of avian flu? That's *really* interesting! Clarke is not unfeeling—not at all—but he does like to point out that almost every disaster has a silver lining. (Katrina will no doubt boost the sales of his own book.)

You could make the case, as Michael Crichton does in *State of Fear,* that—thanks in part to the insistent presence of the media—contemporary Americans are already excessively, absurdly conscious of myriad threats, risks, and lurking dangers, even as they enjoy a degree of safety and comfort unparalleled in human history. And yet, as Clarke and others argue, the very advances that have enabled such safety and comfort have also rendered modern societies extremely vulnerable. (What happens when there is a massive failure of the power grid?)

Clarke's *we* sometimes overlaps with the readership of CHRISTIANITY TODAY—such as when he's addressing our common responsibilities as citizens—but it often does not. The primary audience he has in mind, it seems, consists of enlightened secularists. Where he differs from many of his own tribe is in his recognition of human limitations. "Worst cases," he writes, "should humble us more than they do."

It's not Clarke's purpose to consider how Christians—and evangelicals in particular—might distinctively wrestle with catastrophe. Theologically, such matters are tied up with rival understandings of God's sovereignty, though how they play out in the everyday lives of believers is another question.

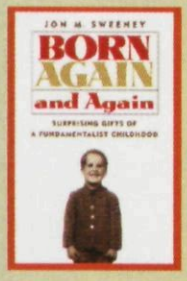
What about the charge—raised, for example, by Bill Moyers ("Welcome to Doomsday") in a screed in *The New York Review of Books* last year—that evangelicals tend to be indifferent to global warming and other threats to the environment because (with some exceptions) they're pretty much convinced the Rapture is coming soon anyway? Presumably the same reasoning would apply to other potential catastrophes, unless they are looming straight ahead.

Moyers needs to get out more. He would find evangelicals planting trees, engaging in estate planning, and generally behaving as if this present world will continue, even while knowing that it will someday come to an end. But there is a grain of truth in his indictment. Modern evangelicalism suffers from an enfeebled doctrine of Creation. There are, however, hopeful signs of generational change.

As for those catastrophes just waiting to happen ("Things that have never happened before happen all the time," Scott Sagan nicely puts it, quoted by Clarke), perhaps it would be wisest to divide the labor of our worrying. Unprompted, I wake up in the middle of the night with just the sort of thoughts Clarke's book encourages: for instance, the worldwide failure of the coffee crop due to some pestilential mutation. So you needn't worry about that particular catastrophe. I've got it covered.

John Wilson is the editor of BOOKS & CULTURE and of *Best Christian Writing 2006* (Jossey-Bass).

that they contained subliminal satanic messages. It figures that by the time he was at Wheaton College, Sweeney and some of his fellow students were checking out a church that didn't look like a church, a place called Willow Creek.



But Sweeney's evolution didn't end there, and while he still defines himself as a Christian, he has departed on many points from the teachings of his childhood. His memoir—remarkably free of bitterness—will be particularly valuable to readers who have traveled part of the way with him (in their changing attitudes toward Roman Catholicism, for instance), but who remain evangelical, as an invitation to clarify their own convictions. —*J. W.*

A PROFOUND WEAKNESS:
Christians and Kitsch
Betty Spackman • Piquant, 448 pages • $50

Betty Spackman is herself an artist, so, upon learning that she has turned her attention to imagery and objects that express Christian faith in the chaos called "popular culture," we might expect a diatribe against Thomas Kinkade. Alternatively, we might expect an uncritical celebration of the "popular," the kitschier the better.

What Spackman offers instead is a wonderfully fresh, honest wrestling with photos and figurines and T-shirts and all manner of stuff, in the process illuminating our apprehension of the invisible God. Of a clumsy painting, she writes, "A golden crown and what looks like a pair of shorts on the child in the stable make no literal sense. We accept them as symbols for the sake of maintaining the myth, of remembering the whole story. They are ridiculous. They are necessary." Amen.

The book is superbly produced. You could say it doesn't look like a Christian book. But it is, and what a hopeful sign. —*J. W.*

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