

surprise, then, that foreign investors withdrew \$17 billion from Italy during Berlusconi's first government.

Nor do any of these facts ever get reported inside Italy. Reporters Without Borders, an organization monitoring freedom of the press throughout the world, rates Italy fifty-third in the world, behind Uruguay, Albania and Madagascar. In the European elections of 1999, Berlusconi offered the country some 803 political advertisements. That led to a conundrum his opponents still haven't solved: "Since public TV in Italy does not broadcast political ads," Stille writes, "the center-left was in the impossible position of either giving money to its opponent or doing without television advertising." This in a country in which the average adult watches 235 minutes of television each day. (In 2001 only 6.4 percent of Italians used newspapers as their principal means of information; 77.4 percent used television.)

Stille's conclusion sounds a warning to America about the dangers of this kind of cozy relationship between news

organizations, high finance and central government. He compares Berlusconi to the New Jersey Democrat Jon Corzine and New York City's Republican Mayor Mike Bloomberg. The point about Italian illusionism is relevant in America, where, says Stille, "for years, conservatives... have accused the left of 'moral relativism,' of denying the existence of a universal moral code, the 'eternal verities' of traditional society. But it is in fact the new right who are genuine postmodernists and don't believe in any stable truth. 'It's all just opinion,' as Richard Viguerie put it."

There's only one problem with Stille's studious work: timing. It's published just as Berlusconi has been shunted off the political stage and comes in the wake of dozens of other studies in both English and Italian. There will doubtless be another chapter or two in the Berlusconi fable: He's not the kind of man to wander off with quiet dignity. *The Sack of Rome* comes too late to offer a running commentary on a politician at his peak, and yet too soon to give the reader a sense of the last act and the Berlusconi legacy. ■

mately 750 miles, along much of California's length, had released some of its vast storehouse of energy. People crept from their hiding places, from beneath tables or beds, and began looking for loved ones, surveying the damage and considering how to rebuild shattered landscapes and lives. There were aftershocks, but nothing remotely as jarring as the initial event. As it turned out, people had felt the shaking throughout most of California and beyond: from Coos Bay in Oregon to Anaheim, just south of Los Angeles; from well into the Pacific Ocean all the way inland to Winnemucca, in northern Nevada's arid interior. An area of roughly 400,000 miles had experienced some seismic activity. But San Francisco and its environs absorbed the brunt of the damage. The wounds were going to become far worse; the most severe would be self-inflicted. Blazes were just starting to burn around the city, born of urban life upended: cracked gas lines, scattered cooking fires, or candles and oil lamps toppled during the quake.

With the quake centennial recently passed and vast swaths of New Orleans still in ruins, the time has come to re-appraise San Francisco's 1906 earthquake. Philip Fradkin, Dennis Smith and Simon Winchester certainly think so. These authors couldn't have known that New Orleans would drown as their books were published, hype not even the shrewd folks in marketing could concoct. That said, Hurricane Katrina, even if it provided a sales bump, did these books no favors. All three authors use the 9/11 attacks as their benchmark for urban disaster. Consequently, their books feel dated, victims of the truism that we're all subject to the whims of unfolding history—even historians. And yet New Orleans's ongoing travails remind readers that to understand disaster we must look beyond spectacle, no matter how dramatic or gruesome, and focus our gaze instead on politics. Fradkin, to his credit, understands this, while Smith and Winchester are concerned with other issues: for Smith, a historian of fire and firefighters, the conflagration that cropped up after the quake; for Winchester, who seems incapable of discarding even the most fleeting thoughts that pass through his head, whatever seems relevant at the moment. So it is that Fradkin's work is the most illuminating in these seasons of catastrophe. His book demonstrates that the earthquake and fires created winners and losers, that the tragedy was manipulated for political gain—and, more broadly, that disasters, so often mislabeled "natural," are really a horrible out-

Unnatural Disaster

ARI KELMAN

THE GREAT EARTHQUAKE AND FIRESTORMS OF 1906: How San Francisco Nearly Destroyed Itself. By Philip Fradkin. California. 418 pp. \$15.95.

SAN FRANCISCO IS BURNING: The Untold Story of the 1906 Earthquake and Firestorm. By Dennis Smith. Plume. 294 pp. \$15. Paper.

A CRACK IN THE EDGE OF THE WORLD: America and the Great California Earthquake of 1906. By Simon Winchester. HarperCollins. 462 pp. \$27.95.

It was dumb luck that most of San Francisco was fast asleep when the city began shaking at 5:12 AM on April 18, 1906. Had it been later in the morning, main arteries clogged with traffic, or midday, the city center humming, the carnage would have been worse. Instead, most people woke abruptly and took cover when the quake didn't pass quickly enough to be mistaken for a bad dream. It lingered for nearly a minute, an eternity for terrified San Franciscans. In an instant, the ground in some parts of town liquefied; whole blocks of poorly constructed tenements slumped into piles of rubble, entombing those inside. Even monumental buildings, constructed to embody state power or Gilded Age prosperity—the US Post

Office; the West's most luxurious hotels and grandest office buildings; and the still-new City Hall, a Beaux-Arts monument that captured San Francisco's ostentatious sense of itself at the dawn of a new century—all suffered significant structural damage. It was, without question, the worst disaster in a city whose short history had already been punctuated by earthquakes and fires. And the horror had just begun.

Then the shaking stopped. The city righted itself. The infamous San Andreas Fault, where two massive tectonic plates rub each other the wrong way for approxi-

Ari Kelman teaches history at the University of California, Davis. He is the author of A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans (California).

growth of the most human of concerns: politics.

Fradkin cuts to the chase in the first line of his preface: "San Franciscans, not the inanimate forces of nature, were primarily responsible for the extensive chaos, damage, injuries, and deaths in the great earthquake and firestorms of 1906." The fires especially, he says, were a product of poor planning and negligence. After the quake ended, with the city in chaos, there was no way to communicate across town, much less the nation. Huge chasms had opened in some streets. A herd of longhorn cattle stampeded through town. San Francisco's fire chief, Dennis Sullivan, lay dying from injuries sustained when a building collapsed around him. The Army's Brig. Gen. Frederick Funston, stationed at the time in San Francisco, stepped into the leadership gap and assumed command of firefighting efforts in the city. The city's mayor, Eugene Schmitz, and former mayor, James Phelan, a banker who still dreamed of higher office, took nominal control of civil affairs—though "control" badly exaggerates their grip. With the city burning on the day of the quake, Funston decided to use explosives to create fire-breaks intended to stop the blaze from spreading. It was a bad choice. The re-

sulting explosions started more fires, creating a firestorm that ultimately charred five square miles, razed nearly 30,000 buildings and left tens of thousands homeless. San Francisco, Fradkin concludes, was destroyed by the people charged with saving it.

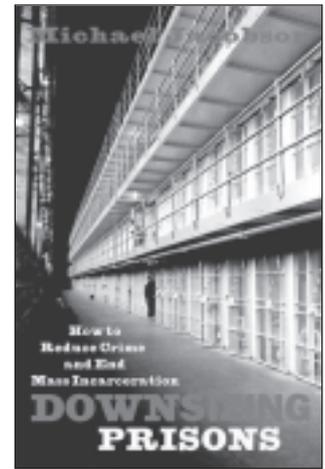
The idea that natural disasters aren't natural isn't new. Mike Davis, Ted Steiner and other commentators writing in Hurricane Katrina's wake have made similar points. And yet the notion of natural disasters persists, in part because it provides a convenient alibi for politicians and developers who might have prevented, or at least minimized, these catastrophes in the first place. The alibi goes like this: Nature is a fickle mistress. When she brings high winds or floods or shakes the earth, what can be done to prevent the ensuing carnage? If a disaster is natural, in other words, people are insulated from blame, the status quo protected. Fradkin isn't having it. The quake might have been unavoidable, but allowing Funston to burn San Francisco down, albeit unintentionally, was just one among many examples of government abdicating authority and contributing to the catastrophe. In the end, it's all part of a pattern in which elite San Franciscans at-

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Then I apologized to myself: I forgot about you. Leave!
But I couldn't. I walked to the bedroom, Dream rushed toward me and embraced me asking: Have you changed? I said: I have changed, because dying at home is better than being run over by a car on my way to an empty square!

Mahmoud Darwish

Translated from the Arabic by Fady Joudah



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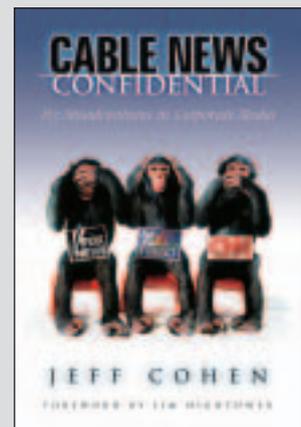
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tempted to use disaster to serve their political interests, to seize power or, in some cases, land.

For further evidence, Fradkin cites the notorious shoot-to-kill order issued by Mayor Schmitz during the crisis, and then the treatment of the city's Chinese community. As panic spread in the streets, Schmitz authorized troops patrolling the ruined city to shoot "looters." Absent martial law, did the mayor have the authority to do this? Probably not. But the courts later decided that, with so many of Funston's troops roaming the city, it was impossible to

know that martial law hadn't been declared. In other words, so great was the mayhem that San Francisco had become lawless. According to Fradkin, "If there was martial law, then that meant there was no civil law; if there was civil law, then there was no martial law. In reality, there was both and neither." More troubling: how to determine whether survivors were hunting for medicine and food or, in fact, rifling through the city's ruins for easy pickings? So much of San Francisco had become a crypt that such acts were akin to grave robbing. Nobody could say with any

certainty, especially not the triggermen on patrol. Fradkin suggests that the lack of clear direction gave free rein to cultural stereotypes. Police and soldiers, he notes, picked off the poor and people of color, while wealthy whites were spared.

The dispossession of San Francisco's Chinese was an even more appalling case of calamity transfigured into opportunity: for race-baiting and land grabs. First, Funston's fire brigade burned the city's vibrant Chinatown to the ground, perhaps destroying the community in order to save it. Then in the coming months, as the city consid-

SHORT TAKES

HALF OF A YELLOW SUN.

By Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Knopf. 433 pp. \$24.95.

After Nigerian war planes finish raining down bombs all around her, Olanna, the heroine of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, climbs out of the bunker in her backyard in eastern Nigeria, brooding over her near-death. "If she had died...the bunker would still smell like a freshly tilled farm and the sun would still rise and the crickets would still hop around," she thinks, and is filled with a "frothy rage." This moment, like so many others in Adichie's engrossing novel, incisively explores the disjunction between history as it is experienced personally and its result: that the world will continue to trundle on its way in spite of history's injustices.

Set during the turbulent first decade of Nigeria's independence in the 1960s, which saw the country torn apart by the Biafran Civil War of 1967-70, pitting the Igbo-dominated eastern region in a bid for secession against the rest of the country, the novel vividly brings to life the political and cultural crises that beset post-independence Nigeria. Moving back and forth in time between the euphoric optimism of independence in the early '60s and the nightmarish descent into civil war in the late '60s, Adichie probes the impact of politics and war on the psyche of ordinary people as she follows the lives of Olanna; her husband, Odenigbo, a professor impassioned about the Biafran cause; Ugwu, their houseboy; and Olanna's former lover, Richard, a British writer in eastern Nigeria who is now enamored of her twin sister, Kainene.

Although Adichie's characters are ultimately powerless to control the course of events that unravel their lives, the novel is not entirely pessimistic. It is only after Kainene is exposed to the violence of the war that she chooses to forgive Olanna for the affair that she had years earlier with Richard. "There are some things that are so unforgivable," she tells Olanna, referring to the mindless death and destruction of the war, "that they make other things easily forgivable." The only consolation for the trials of history, the novel seems to say, are the human bonds that individuals forge with one another.

In its deeply insightful portrayal of one of Nigeria's most traumatic epochs, Adichie's novel affirms a different kind of historical "truth"—not the facile truth of facts, figures and dates, but the deeper truth of throbbing, lived experience. —*Fatin Abbas*

ST. LUCY'S HOME FOR GIRLS RAISED BY WOLVES.

By Karen Russell. Knopf. 226 pp. \$22.

Karen Russell's stories can have a disorienting effect. In this, her first collection, child protagonists wrestle alligators, get trapped inside giant conch shells and go snorkeling for ghosts; one boy bonds with his father, who just happens to be a Minotaur. Russell loves to revel in strangeness—not only the fantastic quality of the Florida Everglades, her chosen setting, but also the weirdness of being a child in a world of bullies, parents and girl-wolves who simply refuse to act human. Readers may wish that so many of the stories (two of which originally appeared in *The New Yorker*) weren't left hanging at a point of crisis, but in a world where the voices of choirboys are expected to bring on an avalanche—every year—resolution may be one of the few impossibilities left.

Russell's prose is absolutely lovely: "I rub my naked eyes and try to stargaze," a Junior Astronomer-turned-"comical-ironical-criminal" narrates. "The moon shines down its eerie calligraphy from deep space." *St. Lucy's Home* is at once preternaturally wise and guileless, its stories letters from a parallel universe, where even the gravest of circumstances have no weight. —*Christine Smallwood*

THE CITY IS A RISING TIDE.

By Rebecca Lee. Simon & Schuster. 200 pp. \$21.

Rebecca Lee's beautiful first novel is a story of pasts that won't stay past. *The City Is a Rising Tide* opens with its narrator, Justine, in unrequited love with her boss, Peter, whom she has known since she was a child living in Beijing with her expat parents and he was a young man working for Richard Nixon. Their New York nonprofit, Aquinas, is dedicated to Peter's dream of building a retreat on the banks of the Yangtze River. Peter is a fellow sufferer of inconsolable longing, but the object of his affection is even farther out of reach—Su Chen, Justine's childhood nanny, who died during the Cultural Revolution. When Justine reconnects with an old boyfriend, she quietly begins siphoning money from Aquinas to help him finish a film. Lee is an elegant storyteller who gracefully interweaves her many threads and minor characters—nonprofit vultures, missionaries and assorted friends. Her themes ("Asia's in the heart!") are earnest but never sentimental. In Lee's hands, Justine's story is a poetic exploration of lives suspended between then and now, drawing strength from the very images of the past that threaten to pull them under.

—*Christine Smallwood*

ered its reconstruction options, businessmen, led by Phelan, suggested that what had been Chinatown could be put to more “progressive” purposes. By that these elites meant redevelopment by white landlords and relocation of the bulk of the city’s Chinese population. Phelan hoped his political career would rise from San Francisco’s ashes. And there was no better way to curry favor with voters than to kick the Asian community while it was down. Chinese San Franciscans, many still living in refugee camps ringing the city, were outraged. Fortunately, they had more than just indignation on their side. They owned much of the land in question. And when the Empress Dowager herself intervened with President Teddy Roosevelt, the game was over. San Francisco’s Chinatown ultimately resumed its position as a hub of West Coast Asian culture.

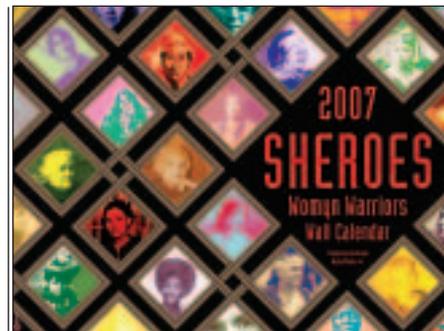
Around these two issues Smith and Winchester, whose books hew to the same basic narrative of the disaster as *The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906*, differ with Fradkin. Smith’s *San Francisco Is Burning* is a near-perfect example of a literary genre that seems to have arisen from the ruins of the World Trade Center: the cult of the first responder. Smith reveres firefighters. Soldiers and police officers too, so long as they’re fighting fires. Consequently, when the fire department’s Chief Sullivan fell in the line of duty, the city’s fate was sealed, in Smith’s eyes. Had Sullivan lived, Smith writes, he “would have, in all probability, saved the City of San Francisco.” Presumably this assessment includes Chinatown, though how this would have been so is anybody’s guess. The quake had cracked most of the city’s water mains, leaving firefighters virtually powerless to stop the spreading blaze. As for Schmitz’s execrable order, in Smith’s view it was hardly surprising. After all, Schmitz wasn’t a firefighter, and only firefighters can be counted on to perform in a time of crisis. This is insider’s history; everything about the quake and fires is filtered through the experience of those fighting the blazes.

Winchester’s view of the treatment of the city’s Chinese community is far more troubling. Chinatown’s destruction was regrettable, he admits. From there, though, he flirts with musty strains of colonialism still apparently lingering in parts of England’s upper classes. In 1882 Congress passed the noxious Chinese Exclusion Act, bowing to anti-Asian sentiment prevalent on the West Coast. Historians still debate whether the act created a

“bachelor culture” among Chinese immigrants, overwhelmingly men who came looking for economic opportunity created by the 1849 Gold Rush, which also birthed San Francisco. The 1906 fires provided a reprieve from the law. With immigration records burned, untold thousands of “paper sons,” “paper daughters,” “paper wives,” sometimes whole “paper families,” claimed legal immigrant status. Winchester depicts this turn of events, a rare instance in which the poor or people of color benefited from the quake, as its own kind of disaster: “What began after 1906 was, then, the invasion of the ‘paper people.’ Official America’s job was now to identify any fictions and to prevent their authors from coming, settling, and establishing a beachhead in San Francisco.” Why the language of war: “invasion” and “beachhead”? The Chinese apparently are the enemy army for Winchester, using the quake to mask their advance.

Just a few years ago it seemed that Winchester was becoming a hallowed literary type: the British polymath author, a gentleman generalist adept at handling any subject, from cartography to lexicography, from Asia to North America. Then he stumbled with *Krakatoa*. He has fallen here. *A Crack in the Edge of the World* is ostensibly about the 1906 quake. In fact, it’s about Winchester’s politics, which seem to have been nurtured in the nostalgic environs of an Oxford tutorial as the Queen’s empire faded. About the shoot-to-kill order, he opines that “it is indeed quite hard to imagine anyone—no matter how well armed or endowed with authority he may be—feeling anything but the utmost reluctance to carry out a summary execution in the midst of a tragedy like this.” That may be true, but only if you ignore the cultural climate in San Francisco at the time, the class antagonisms and strained race relations. Winchester does exactly that, because from his perspective the quake acted as a social leveler while having a salutary influence on San Francisco’s working class. The homeless people huddled in refugee camps after the quake, he writes, “found that being compelled to live and work in the fresh air, barred from drinking hard liquor, and forced to survive on rationed food and tobacco kept them fitter and leaner than they had been for years. Hardship, to a measured degree, can be beneficial to at least some aspects of society.” Ah, the stiff upper lip. If only the people left homeless by Katrina understood how lucky they are.

Politics, or priorities, if you prefer, again inflect the authors’ depictions of the city’s



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reconstruction. Smith mostly doesn't care about the rebuilding. Once the flames are extinguished, he's likely off to the next blaze, though he does express concern that San Francisco's fire department is currently underfunded. Winchester, too, rushes out of town. He's on his way north to Alaska, where he's relieved to find a lovely bistro in the wilderness. "The oysters were from Halibut Bay, the salmon was freshly caught that morning, the wine was crisp and cold, and someone was smoking Gitanes at the bar. It seemed like heaven." As for the post-quake reconstruction, it went reasonably well, in Winchester's opinion. The city rose again, a civilized island in the rough-and-tumble American West. Winchester even has friends there. For Fradkin, though, the rebuilding happened too quickly, without adequate planning and on the cheap. It was a lost opportunity to honor the quake's victims by making the city safer. The San Francisco that emerged after the disaster, battered but lovely, was a tourist town, a site of consumption instead of production. By Fradkin's lights, at least, the city had begun "its long slide toward becoming an imitation of itself for outsiders."

What all three authors agree on is that San Francisco will be destroyed again. Quite soon. If the devastation following Katrina was not just predictable but predicted, the disaster looming in San Francisco's future is even better understood. There is a 62 percent chance of another large quake centered in the Bay Area before 2032. By that time, 10 million people will be living in the region; there were fewer than half a million there in 1906. Somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 people died in the 1906 quake, which was kind enough to arrive at an off hour. There is no simple equation to predict how many will perish next time. And yet San Francisco continues to grow, its residents every day whistling by a graveyard that may soon be theirs. It's a chilling thought, particularly as the forced calm is another legacy of the 1906 quake, when the city succeeded, for a time, in cleansing the word "earthquake" from accounts of the disaster. When the Big One comes, one expects that Fradkin will mourn the dead, who will be drawn largely from the ranks of the city's poor and working class, and bite his tongue to keep from saying, I told you so. Smith will worry for the city's firefighters, as they battle yet another huge blaze. And Winchester? If his callous book is any indication, he'll light another cigarette, call his editor and inquire about an uptick in his sales. ■

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