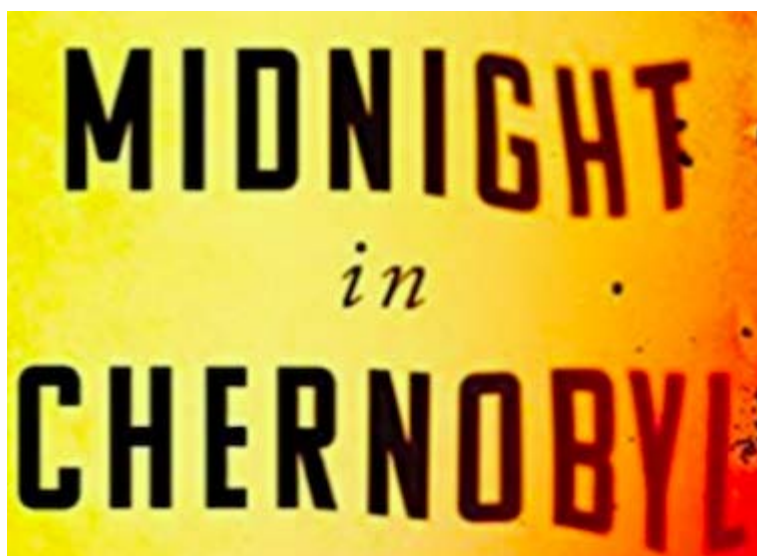


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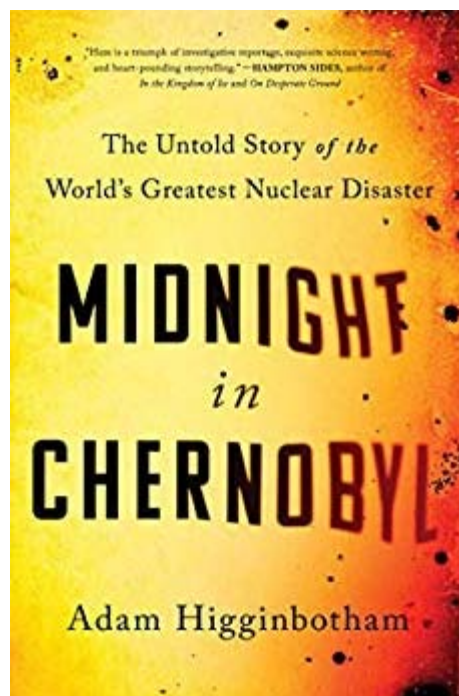
NON-FICTION

It's the Final Countdown

The Black Comedy of 'Midnight In Chernobyl'

February 18, 2019 · Michael Giltz

I kept laughing out loud while reading this marvelous, remarkably-detailed look at the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown. That made it a little awkward when someone asked, “What are you reading?” and I had to say “a nonfiction book about the worst nuclear disaster in history (so far).” I wasn’t ha-ha laughing. It was a bleak, “Dr. Strangelove” sort of laugh. I couldn’t do anything else in face of the idiocy and incompetence and sheer, frightening, dear-god-did-they-really detail I found on every page of Adam Higginbotham’s book *Midnight In Chernobyl*.



The tragedy begins with the very design of the nuclear reactors built at Chernobyl and throughout the Soviet Union. People knew they were deeply flawed. But that totalitarian state didn’t like admitting error. Disastrous accidents happened throughout the USSR, but they deemed each one a state secret. The state didn’t even tell the nuclear scientists and engineers at other power plants about them. And they certainly didn’t learn from the accidents, improve designs, or share what they learned with others. They made roofs of asbestos when other material wasn’t available. They used subpar building material. And on and on and on.

Thanks to the fall of that empire, and a mountain of declassified documents, Higginbotham gives a blow-by-blow account of the tragedy. He recounts the shame and bravery of those involved (sometimes the shame and then bravery of the same person). Then he continues the story through the cover-up and the blowback from Mikhail Gorbachev’s attempt at perestroika. Most importantly, he details the ongoing environmental and personal disaster impacting the earth and the people involved.

Higginbotham captures the voices and personalities of so many vivid characters, from high-ranking Party officials to the first responder who was luckily drunk the night he responded to the fire at the plant. This gained him some all-important protection from radiation.

Most memorably, he profiles Maria Protsenko, a diminutive architect, formidable, talented and no-nonsense. She was born in China to Sino-Russian parents and probably had two strikes against her from the start in the USSR. Her grandfather disappeared during a Stalinist purge. Two siblings died unnecessarily because of a curfew that kept her family from taking them to a doctor. Her father descended into opium addiction. And *still* Protsenko became a model Communist.

She planned the city where workers at Chernobyl lived. During the sudden evacuation, she proved a model of efficiency. Then she worked with soldiers trying to deal with the crisis and ultimately wall off the devastated area. Towards the end of the book, the author interviews her. When he can't discern the smell of a book she brought out of Chernobyl, Protsenko puckishly blows dust from it into his face. When he's understandably horrified, she laughs off his concern. Who couldn't love her?

Whether you read it for the drama, for the careful and fascinating science around this tragedy, as a warning for the future or simply as a horror story to share with unsuspecting brunch companions, *Midnight In Chernobyl* is first-rate, funny and ultimately so very, very sad.

(Simon & Schuster, February 12, 2019)

Tags: Adam Higginbotham, *Midnight In Chernobyl*

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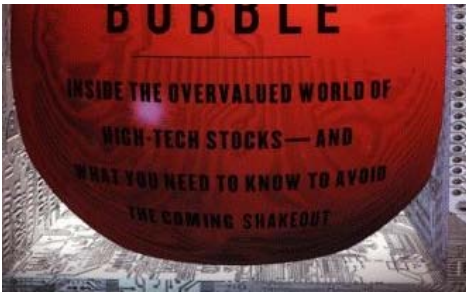
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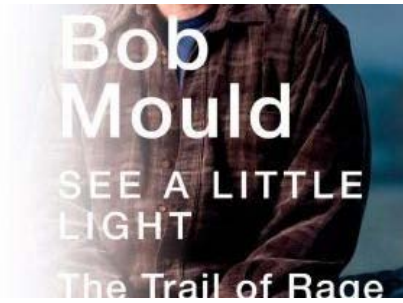
Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the *New York Post*, *New York Daily News*, *New York Magazine*, *The Advocate*, *Out*, *Huffington Post*, *Premiere Magazine*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *BookFilter*, *USA Today* and the *Los Angeles Times*. He co-hosts the long-running podcast *Showbiz Sandbox*.

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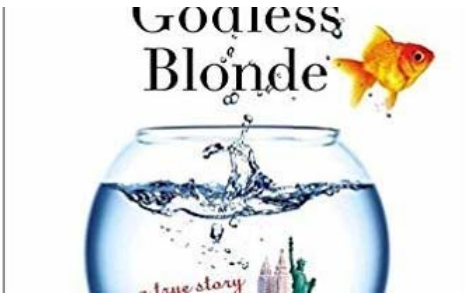
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June 2019

May 2019

April 2019

March 2019

February 2019

January 2019
December 2018
November 2018
October 2018
September 2018
August 2018
July 2018
May 2017
February 2016
May 2015
February 2015
January 2015
December 2014
November 2014
March 2014
December 2013
September 2013
April 2013
February 2013
January 2013
December 2012
July 2012
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