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Sports & Recreation

A Hard Chance: The Sydney-Hobart Race Disaster
Kim Leighton
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A newly discovered thirst for tales of adversity and mishap on the high seas has spawned several recent books, including this very fine account of a storm-ravaged 1998 sail boat race off the east coast of Australia.

Only hours after departing Sydney in flawless skies and steady breezes, 115 sailboats plunged unexpectedly into a conundrum of meteorological events generating eighty foot waves. The ensuing carnage (six deaths) and massive rescue operation (fifty-seven sailors plucked from the water by helicopter) stunned this island nation and the sailing community worldwide. Leighton describes the terrifying circumstances aboard the most periled yachts and deftly manages to capture the gritty, undeterred spirit of ocean sailors.

The author interviewed dozens of the participants, as well as racing officials, weather forecasters and member's of the victims? families. He is rightfully interested in the contentious debate between the racing community and non-sailors who are horrified by the loss of life and matter-of-factness shown by the surviving sailors. Of course, the most antagonistic sentiments were skillfully fanned by the sensationalist Australian press. The fact that ocean racing is viewed as an elitist, rich man's sport further inflamed the passions of Australia's down-to-earth nature.

Leighton far exceeds the bar set by some of the more notable works (The Perfect Storm, for example) on maritime disasters. This book delivers exactly as it should: with large doses of heroism, incompetence, ego and frightening insight into an unforgiving sea.

Seth McEvoy