ForeWord Reviews

Lifeboat
John R. Stilgoe
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Technologically advanced humanity insists that people surround themselves with the appurtenances of civilization, but into this catalog by necessity creeps the fixtures of disaster, such as fire extinguishers, fallout shelters, airline safety protocols, and lifeboats. To even look at these fixtures, let alone study them, is to give a measure of reality to a side of life that mortals ignore-their own demise-and lay bare the tissue-thin veneer of civil society.

This gripping historical narrative, in the hues of a page-turner, is as ponderous and insightful as a Bergsonian apologetic. The research is stunning. When the author (a Harvard professor and a lifeboat sailor himself, whose other works include Borderland and Outside Lies Magic) begins to wade a bit deeply into geo-political obscura, he circles back, like the nineteenth-century ketch rounding Java Head, into the sunny open waters of reason and introspection.

Pondering modern-day sea-rescue, Stilgoe posits: “If anything happened, ‘they’ would come and rescue everyone. But suppose they do not come? Suppose the radio operator fails to send an SOS or shout ‘mayday’ into the microphone? Suppose the automatic radio beacon fails to turn on when the life raft or lifeboat hits the water? Suppose they are too busy, or just do not care? Suppose the ship carries some dirty state secret, and they would rather everyone die than have it revealed?” Eventually, the author reveals that these are not just provocative questions, but hard cold reality lived out in the slime and bilge and broiling sun of countless open lifeboats, adrift and lost, never “making passage.”

It might be tempting to catalog this work as a bit baroque in its nautical lexicon, especially for landlubbers. But it works, and works well. There are lessons upon lessons (modern technology is a bomb waiting to go off in the hands of the inexperienced; willful ignorance of geography is ultimately isolating), and the sea-speak is so well contextualized that these bumps in the prose are often turned to velvet.

Finally, this is ultimately not a dark and fearful laundry list of disasters, toward which a book about lifeboats might seem naturally to devolve. The book begins on a cold and gloomy note, and ends on a sunlit beach. Stilgoe writes: “The lifeboat, long ago secured beneath davits and canvas cover but now sailing on a July afternoon, reminds everyone that things go wrong.

Ships sink. Skyscrapers collapse. It speaks honestly and bluntly of a way out of trouble that depends on no one but its castaway occupants."

Every once in a while, a reader is blessed to run across a book that fulfills the promise of the writers' craft. This is such a book.

John Arens