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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

Riding the Giant Catfish

Robert L. Wilson
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Unknown $19.98 (312pp)
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Los Angeles has just been hit by a massive earthquake. There is a huge loss of life from building and highway collapses, natural gas explosions, and fires. The runways at LAX are damaged, a tsunami has taken out the harbor, and there are radiation leaks at the nuclear power plant. Cool rainy weather prevents the military from entering the quake area to provide emergency help by air. However, one family high on the hills has a gun-toting, motorcycle riding patriarch to guide them as they "ride the giant catfish" and its subsequent aftershocks.

Author Robert L. Wilson, a physician who served in the Active US Army Reserves Medical Corps, offers a fictionalized version of this worst case scenario and spins an interesting survivalist action thriller based on his medical background and long-standing interest in disaster preparedness. Readers who are in synch with Wilson's conservative philosophies, which are heavily laced throughout, will enjoy this post-apocalyptic tale. However, it is unlikely that the book will appeal to those who do not share his views on global warming, immigration, firearms, abortion, the JFK assassination, military strategy, and many other topics.

Political asides detract from an otherwise enlightening and interesting way to learn about surviving a natural disaster. Wilson offers a wealth of information about what to do immediately after an earthquake (get some warm clothes and shoes on and get outside), how to trap rainwater, the geology of earthquakes, the importance of aggressively treating minor wounds in the absence of medical treatment, and what types of supplies to have in storage (water, water, and more water!). Sometimes this information gets too specific, as when Wilson names certain brand names and models of equipment, and these details may quickly make the book outdated.

A novel is a great vehicle for learning these skills, as readers will have a natural desire to see how the family will fare during this emergency. Wilson's use of first-person, present-tense narrative adds greater punch. As an entertainment, Riding the Catfish certainly has a lot of action and adventure. The anonymous patriarch doesn't just stay at home protecting his flock, but rides out to gather other family members and friends, raids stores for diapers, clothing, and gas, and provides national interviews through ham radio. Sometimes the action is over-the-top, as when he raids damaged explosives warehouses and uses the loot to blow up evil government buildings and foreign embassies, but it makes for an exciting scenario.

The novel is heavy on plot, but the characters are thinly described. One doesn't learn much about the family other than their names and occupations, and the dialogue is unnatural and stiff. Wilson's father hero is one preachy patriarch and there too many tiresome mea culpas from family members who apologize or congratulate him on his foresight. For example, his daughter tells him:

> *It's so fortunate for us that you started planning for this type of problem and teaching us about what to do, so long ago. I remember how your ideas and suggestions were met with such derision and skepticism from so many people, including some of your closest friends. Not only did they not believe you, but they thought you were daffy. I'd like to see what they think now, providing they're still alive, and how they would respond today. I feel really sorry for their kids, who have to pay the price of their parent's ignorance or stupidity.*

The book has the potential to provide great information to a wide readership, as it straddles the genres of

novel and how-to manual, but with its third layer of political/social commentary, this hybrid loses some of its appeal.
RACHEL JAGARESKI (July 27, 2010)

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