



Everything Is Broken

John Shirley

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Twenty-year-old Russ arrives in the northern California town of Freedom to visit his dad. Freedom has peculiarities other than its odd name: the local mayor's ideas of "decentralization" have left it without normal connections to state or federal government and minimal public services. Russ meets an interesting young woman, Pendra, but before he can get to know much about Freedom or its people, a savage tsunami strikes the West Coast. The wave of human brutality that soon hits the isolated town proves more dangerous to the survivors than the natural disaster. Russ, his father, Pendra, and the other townsfolk must tap all their courage and ingenuity - and find strength they never knew they had - if they have any hope of living to find real freedom

Everything Is Broken Details

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Marsha says

Everything Is Broken by John Shirley

Ok, with a title like that, how do you NOT read this book? I read it with zero intro, so I super loved it. Freedom, CA starts out a bit separated from the outside because some rich guy (Lon) doesn't want government interference in his town. Freedom, CA, therefore does not have necessary emergency services when it is blasted by a tsunami. The aftermath is confusion, violence, death, and a happy ending. This book brought me more surprises than I even imagined. It is well plotted, well written and perfectly descriptive. I really had a good (?) time with it. Top ten of the year, for certain.

Rebecca says

I received this book free through a goodreads give away. Overall it isn't my cup of tea. The book came off as a badly done version of the dome by Stephen King. The comparison because they are both about small towns that get cut off, and corrupt city government officials. On the plus side it is an easy read written by someone who has a talent for the written word, and there is a lot of action. It's a good versus evil story that takes place in a small town cut off and devastated by a tidal wave. The gang of meth heads that take over after the disaster are really unlikeable (there are numerous sexual assaults in the book). The reader doesn't get enough information about the good guys to really to balance out the yuck factor that the gang brings to the book.

Kelly says

This is a good book that delineates possible scenarios that could happen if a tsunami or other natural disaster occurred in contemporary America. It explores the shortcomings of the extreme right wing's "cowboy" mentality, the childishness of Ayn Rand implications and how centralized services are needed for the general benefit of order in society. The prose is taut throughout with plenty of violence. Many of John's characters are reminiscent of characters in other books. Often in an existential quandary, struggling to find meaning, to simply feel, through extreme circumstances they discover their humanity. While many of his books are very dark, they're not without hope. The only criticism I'd have of this book is that it's perhaps a little too dualistic. But then, I found myself asking, in these times, are we being forced to take sides? Recommended to readers of dystopian fiction.

Kat says

Quite a dark and gritty read! I enjoyed it, though, it was the kind of thing I look for in a disaster scenario novel with the focus on the human side rather than government or something removed from the human element.

There are a lot of POV's going on and it changes every couple of chapters and it doesn't have any sort of order. Sometimes you get Russ's POV in two consecutive chapters, sometimes you go into Dickie or Nella's

head at the start of the chapter and then in the middle of the chapter there's a section break and we're in someone else's head.

Made it confusing, and when the penultimate point happens at the end of the story we have about three or four people who we've been in the heads of for the whole novel, but we only get this climatic scene through one person's eyes. And not the character that it would have made the most sense to see it through.

Another issue I had with it was that the women are very much treated like dainty, breakable objects who drink tea and stay safe in rooms while the men protect the town. Even the "lead" female only stays with a group of bad guys who rape her so bad she gets an infection because she figures it's safer for them to look after her. It gets taxing, and there's a point at the end where one of the lead male characters exclaims to his girlfriend "You got out by yourself!"

Still, it's an exciting read despite its flaws. Recommended if you like the survival/disaster type stories :)

John says

A Compelling Near Future Disaster Novel from John Shirley

One of the great masters of cyberpunk science fiction, John Shirley is also an overlooked, quite compelling, storyteller, whose latest novel, "Everything Is Broken", is an intelligent, well-written, near future thriller deserving of a substantially larger literary audience. It is one of the best disaster novels I have read, a compulsively compelling account of the aftermath of an earthquake-triggered tsunami on an isolated central Californian town, Freedom. "Everything Is Broken" is replete with the gritty realism of Shirley's earlier fiction, especially his celebrated cyberpunk trilogy, "A Song Called Youth"; a gritty realism that many may find far more plausible than anything Shirley has written previously. Relying on his mesmerizing prose, Shirley offers a dark tale of survival as the town's relatively few survivors fall under the sway of a lawless band of homicidal dope dealers and thieves. Though there are graphic, often horrific, scenes of violence, Shirley is such a fine storyteller that each of these scenes are presented as meaningful, if occasionally surprising, elements of the plot. "Everything is Broken" deserves ample recognition as a compelling first-rate literary thriller and as a notable addition to Shirley's literary oeuvre.

Squee says

This novel depicts a town that is severely damaged by a tsunami. Due to the mayor's expulsion of most of their government-run services (like the police and fire department) in favor of some nebulous free-market private-sector-worshipping magic, the town infrastructure is so crippled that chaos ensues and a lot more people end up dying than should have.

The book is a pretty damning condemnation of certain breeds of "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" libertarianism and conservatism, and that's great and all, but I just wasn't impressed. It was brutal, felt rushed, and the parts that followed the "bad guys" had an awkward point-of-view. I never really grew to care about the characters and I wasn't convinced by the character development.

I just didn't like this book as much as I thought I would. I'd love to see this concept done better.

Steve says

Young Russ arrives in the Northern California town of Freedom to stay with his father and reconcile with him. Alas, not long after his arrival, a terrible tsunami strikes California, killing many in Freedom, and isolating it from the rest of the world. A libertarian mayor has come into office recently, and wants to maintain the town's isolation from the rest of the country, to prove the truth of his libertarian principles. It quickly disintegrates into power plays where some gangs attempt to take over.

The opening scenes of the tsunami were very well done, and the story proceeded apace. The book does illustrate the perils of the so-called libertarian philosophy which is basically let the strong rule. But the book wasn't very compelling and seemed pretty predictable. If the mayor had been a stronger character and not so obviously a fool and a tool, the point would have been better made.

Kim says

I'm on a sci-fi kick lately, this was shelved in sci-fi section, I don't consider it that at all. It was a natural disaster book with a lot of political undertones to it. I wish the world building was better, there was a LOT of characters and I couldn't picture any of them in my mind, all of them had really odd names and it was hard to differentiate one with the other. The author was really heavy with the men rule, women are weak in this book, women were good for raping and being used pretty much. One of the main characters Russ was evidentially 20 years old, but he felt like he was 13-16, I don't really understand why he was moving in with dad, why wasn't he going to school, living on his own, working?

I did read the entire thing, and I liked the concept of the natural disaster, and I also liked that the author wasn't afraid to kill off people that some would hesitate to do so.

Sharyn says

There are way too many characters in this book with odd names. How many people do you know with names like Nella, Sten, Cholo, Liddy, Hilly, etc. etc. Maybe druggie gang members don't go by their given names? I probably just don't have enough experience in the world.

What amused me are the parallels to the worst book ever written - Patriots by James Rawles. Now this book is hundreds of times better than that one but it amuses me that in Patriots the bad guys are the socialistic sheep who wander around with Mao's little red book in their back pocket eating babies (literally!!) and the self-sufficient anti-government gun hoarders are the heroes. Here the bad guys are supposedly self-sufficient anti-government FEMA camp conspiracy subscribers. How amusing.

But the final take away is always that the veneer of civilization is very thin.

John Defrog says

Another thought exercise from Shirley who takes on Ayn Rand fetishists and Tea Party paranoia over Big Govt™. The premise: the mayor of Freedom, CA has shrunk the city government to the point of dismissing fire & rescue services and cutting off all federal funding. Then a massive tidal wave hits the California coast, and residents must fend for themselves against local gangs as the mayor goes to deadly extremes to keep FEMA from assisting them. A great idea that's let down by weak characterization and perhaps a little too much restraint on Shirley's part in highlighting the flaws of Randian self-sufficiency. Not that he shies away from it, but he probably could have done more to build up the ideology that leads to disaster in the story. It's actually a decent book, but one that Shirley's own back catalog proves could have been better.

David Agranoff says

Everything is Broken by John Shirley

320 pages

Prime Books

It is no secret that John Shirley is my favorite author. I have devoted many posts on my blog to his work. I have been following the progress of this novel from its early stages and I am glad to say it lived up to my high expectations. If you follow Shirley's blog you'll know that he is not a big fan of Librarians or the Tea party. Known for his politically charged fiction Shirley is back with a novel that has engaged more than a few tea-baggers.

It's too bad because they are the one that could really think about the issues that Shirley raises in this novel. I think this book has more of a chance to effect those readers who are on the right leaning moderates. Those who think that Regan was right about government needing to be small enough to drown in a bathtub are probably beyond help at this point.

Everything is Broken is not as subtle as Shirley's liberal end times answers to the left behind series "The Other End," but that novel at its heart was a spiritual tale. This novel is a nasty grime covered baseball bat to the head of cold hard reality. Makes sense when you consider the event that starts the novel off is a Tsunami, and the setting is a small coastal California town filled with Live wire villains. That is the reality though, who is keeping the jerks in line when the world falls apart.

This novel reminded me of how Stephen King creates vivid and anger inducing bullies better than anyone. Shirley goes a great job of creating characters just ripe for justice and imagine this, it didn't take thousands of pages.

There is nothing subtle about this novel what so ever, it might easy to get turned away but the ugly-ness of the characters but that is a very important part of the story. The characters are strongly written and Fully realized almost instantly. A favorite moment of Characterization happened on page 196 – "He couldn't even stare back at the guy. It was like looking at a harsh light." The suspense and horror at the root of it is also perfectly done.

At first glance the monster of this novel might seem to be the Tsunami, but this is just a Maguffin. This novel could just as easily been about a tornado in Oklahoma, or a zombie novel for that matter. Romero always used the zombie tale to highlight social issues, and that is at the heart of this story. Don't get me wrong the tsunami generated plenty of horror in this tale but the monsters are the people who the main characters considered neighbors in Freedom, California.

Even before the Tsunami came, the town's mayor moved to cut ties with big government, by firing the majority of the cops, closing the fire department and encouraging Private industry to take over. Of course

that didn't happen so when the big wave comes, it means it is up to the twenty year old hero Russ and his dad to organize the town.

The mayor sees a chance to re-make the town to his beliefs, He has to do something as the storm has knocked out most of what he owns. Thus begins a relationship with Dickie, the local thug has similar ideas about riding the wave into a new era of "Freedom." With the town cut-off from civilization the ideas of freedom and big government are tested.

Shirley's Original title was "Welcome to Freedom," While probably a more proper title it might have been a bit too much on the nose. It would be easy to say this novel is a 280 page argument against libertarianism, but it is much deeper than that. It is also about social controls that hold the socio-paths among us from running wild.

I'd put it up there with some of the great non-supernatural horror novels like David Morrell's Testament or Jack Ketchum's Girl Next Door. At the same time it's an important novel that explores issues we as a society need to discuss. The question is do you have the stomach to read it?

I think you should read this John Shirley novel, but if you were planning on voting for Ron Paul to might want to put it a bit higher on your TBR pile.

You have a "To Be Read" Pile right?

Jacqui Talbot says

When twenty-year-old Russ arrives in the northern California town of Freedom to visit his dad, he finds a town cut off from state and federal government. Thanks to the local mayor's ideas of "decentralization," Freedom enjoys minimal public services including medical care and law enforcement. Before Russ can get to know much about the town and its people – including an interesting young woman named Pendra – a massive tsunami strikes the West Coast, killing most of the town's inhabitants and leaving Freedom helpless to combat the wave of human brutality that soon follows. A local gangster, Dickie Rockwell, has plans for Freedom and they include the town's increasingly unhinged mayor and a whole lot of killing. Now, it's up to Russ, his father, Pendra, and the other townsfolk to find the strength to survive and find real freedom.

On his website, John Shirley describes this book as a "thriller and political allegory," but it's so much more than that. In just a few hundred pages, this book manages to shock, frighten, and enrage, all while making the reader think. What struck me most about this book was Shirley's powerful use of imagery, both during the tsunami and in the aftermath. He has this unique ability to observe people, places, and events and then distill them down to their purest, most basic forms.

Word of caution: packed with action, violence, and depravity in its purest form, this book is not for the faint of heart or the weak of stomach. Seriously, after I finished reading it, my first instinct was to go out and buy a whole bunch of guns. Then, I remembered how clumsy and absent-minded I am and decided against it. (But I still sleep with a switchblade under my pillow...just in case.)

Bottom line: A different kind of disaster novel. One well worth reading.

Favorite Line/Image (WARNING – disturbing imagery): "A little later: A gasping, semiconscious young woman trapped in her slime-swamped Audi, mud up to her neck. People digging her out. Finding that her belly was sheared open by a big shard of metal from the car door, mud crammed up inside her, she hadn't lived long after they'd dug her out. Russ had made the mistake of letting her get a grip on his hand as she lay dying. Just couldn't bring himself to break the grip. Had to watch her die."

What I learned: Details matter. The line above isn't really my favorite, but it's one of the many images that kept repeating in my head long after I'd put the book down. I think what makes this book so compelling is Shirley's exquisite attention to detail, even in the midst of huge events like the tsunami. He knows which details to include and which to leave out. This makes for a realistic experience without overwhelming the reader with information.

Tom says

Dystopian vision of the West coast after a tsunami. I found it very compelling.

Barry says

This had the potential as a nice bit of pulp nihilism. The novel's politics, while central to the story in many regards, are presented with such a lack of subtlety as to actually interfere with the overall mood of the story. Characters declare their stances in asides so forced the reader almost yearns for the more nuanced propaganda of an Ayn Rand. I share the author's disdain for "decentralization" (read: right-leaning libertarianism), I just wish he would have had more confidence in the reader's ability to sort out the politics over the natural flow of the story. The final act involves some marginally suspenseful violence, and offers a full-on group meth tweakout as a guilty pleasure leading into the last scenes.

The more glaring problem is that the story's main premise (community is under the heel of thugs following a natural disaster) relies on some very implausible plot points. I get the motivations of the main players, but there are key points which rely on peripheral characters abandoning common sense in the service of the storyline. One wonders how much more interesting a story could have arisen with the most egregious villains removed entirely, to be replaced by the fallout from the very political developments the author decries. Watching this community collapse under the weight of good intentions might have made even nastier fun.

Ali says

I almost put this book down for good, I hated the first few pages so much. The characters you are initially introduced to are so unpleasant, I just didn't want to spend a whole book with them! Thankfully, they aren't the main perspective.

I LOVE LOVE LOVE disaster and dystopian fiction, and I will totally admit that I'm not exactly picky. You throw in a volcano, looming asteroid, zombies, tsunami, whatever, and some survival activities, and I'm pretty happy, but I was really happy with this book. Tsunamis really haven't been done so much, and a lot of books deal just with the aftermath, and not the destructive event.

More than anything though, I think I was most pleased to read an adult fiction book in this genre! So much dystopian type fiction is YA.

This book probably isn't for everyone, but if you like disaster stuff, you'd probably like it.
