



Ablaze: The Story of the Heroes and Victims of Chernobyl

Piers Paul Read

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The bestselling author of *Blaze* presents a heart-pounding account of the world's greatest nuclear disaster, based on sources not available before the fall of the Soviet Union. Read's enthralling account is filled with acts of courage--and also bumbling confusion, secrecy, lies, and coverups. Read spent many months in Russia interviewing hundreds of survivors and experts. Photographs. 3 maps.

Ablaze: The Story of the Heroes and Victims of Chernobyl Details

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From Reader Review Ablaze: The Story of the Heroes and Victims of Chernobyl for online ebook

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Christopher says

I wanted to know about both the technical aspects of the Chernobyl disaster and the human aspects in terms of how the meltdown occurred and how it was dealt with in the more or less immediate aftermath. The title of this book certainly suggested that it would fit the bill, but while parts of it were interesting, I was disappointed overall. First, the technical side isn't explained very clearly, and the author seemed not to have much interest in those details. The actual test that resulted in the destruction of Unit Four is described rather briefly and confusingly. I didn't even actual think that the whole event had been described until after the book moved on to the next part of the story ("Wait, was that it?"). The story as told here is more about the social context of the event in terms of the late Soviet period and the aftermath during the successor states. There are a lot of Slavic names floating around, but you don't get a personal feeling about a great deal of them, so the story didn't have much emotional appeal.

The author is actually a novelist, but somehow I didn't get a novel-like feeling from the book. It didn't have a clear focus, and the last third or so of it is more about the later political repercussions, which didn't really "blaze" even in a metaphorical sense. The book sort of peters out at the end, and the actual "ending" didn't seem very satisfying to me. The emphasis of the plot line often seemed ill-advised to me. Some things of comparatively little importance are covered in great detail (e.g., some American doctor who has a minor role in treating the immediate victims), while much more significant ones are treated cursorily (e.g., the building of the "sarcophagus" for the remains of the reactors get thrown up in a page without any trouble at all).

While I came away better informed about the overall course of events, I'm still not entirely clear about what went wrong or why.

Marilyn says

This book took me a while to get through, but I enjoyed the ride. One drawback was the many characters to keep track of, with beautiful but difficult to remember Russian names; the author does include a cast of characters at the beginning of the book. At times it dragged, but for the most part it was a good read and I learned a lot. The book encompasses the whole story, not only about the actual Chernobyl disaster, but events leading up to it, and all that went wrong with the communist system that led up to the accident at Chernobyl in 1986.

Katie says

If you've never read anything about Chernobyl, this book will tell you a great deal. There are real-life villains and real-life heroes, and Read interviewed both. But this book was also very obviously written in a huge hurry- Read clearly wanted to be the first to come out with a Western account of the 1986 nuclear disaster after the USSR dissolved. There are typos on (literally) almost every page, there are no footnotes, and no explanation at the end of the book which of the interviews the jacket claims he conducted provided which of the details. The result is that the facts seem confident with no backing, the details (what a husband said to his wife before leaving for work the night of the explosion, what people ate, whether Gorbachev's heart was ever pounding) seem plucked from thin air. It felt while reading that the author couldn't decide whether to write a nonfiction, documentarian account, or a straight true-crime thriller. Chernobyl can certainly provide both, but not in the same book.

Chris Steeden says

This book is split into three parts. The first looking at how the Russians began trying to keep up with the US by building a nuclear bomb and then using that technology for more peaceful purposes - by splitting the atom mass it could be converted to energy and the heat generated could be converted into electrical power. The second part looks at the construction of Chernobyl itself and giving an overview of the leading figures that worked there, the explosion of the reactor, the evacuation and then how the wind circulated that radioactivity to other countries. Also looks at the trial which is held in a typically Russian way. The third part is looking at how that radioactivity effected land, people and animals.

I was a little concerned a first that I would not be able to follow due to the nature of the subject and all the different players involved but that was not the case at all. The author states that he has written this with no agenda attached. I am not sure you can ever do that but still, the facts are laid out for all to see and it is up to you to draw the conclusions on the world's nuclear program. It does not matter if you are pro, anti or just do not know, this book will make you think. Does this show that nuclear is just too dangerous or that in the case of Chernobyl that the Soviets were just not competent in the design and operation of a nuclear facility?

Ajitabh Pandey says

Quite detailed account of the Chernobyl disaster. Unlike the other book which I read on the same subject - Chernobyl 01:23:40: The Incredible True Story of the World's Worst Nuclear Disaster, this is a better book in my opinion.

Jamie Schoffman says

Great topic, but it feels like this book was rushed. Way too many typos for any book, let alone one published by Random House. Love this author, I thought Alive was a phenomenal book, but this one falls short.

Paul says

A fascinating read. Covers the history of the Soviet nuclear programme, the accident itself and the aftermath. The Soviet government is shown at its shoddy, corrupt worst, while Western journalists were little better using the accident as a cold war stick and causing panic. What is most shocking is the treatment of the ordinary people. They had little information when the accident occurred, as those at the top wished to hide their culpability.

Katie says

I finally gave this back to the library 'cause it was overdue (not that the TCL is very stringent with their fines). (I'm a big supporter.) It's a fairly good book, and I'd have been interested to see what Read had to say about the effect of Chernobyl on the future of the nuclear power industry. In fact, I'm still interested enough to maybe check the book out again. I got a little bogged down in the middle, where he was talking about the legal aftermath in the USSR and the health and agriculture consequences.

The best parts of the book are the actual narratives throughout. Of course, Read offers many stories of operators and firemen trying to find out what had gone wrong in the reactor, and trying to put out the fire, and of doctors trying to save the dying. He also tells about the serious problems in the building of the power plant, and offers some newsmagazine articles written shortly before the accident. My favorite story is of three officers detailed to remove a piece of uranium fuel from a field where it had landed during the explosion, on pain of demotion if they refused. The man in charge suggested that demotion was better than death. He eventually got the order cancelled. They sent him two bottles of chardonnay. What Read neglects to mention is that the wine probably cost them a couple months' pay.

I would give the book 3.5 stars, actually. One real weakness is that it begins with a history of the Soviet nuclear industry rather than the drama of the accident. I mean, in 2009 who wants to read 30 pages about the development of different kinds of nuclear plants? This strict chronological sequencing might have worked better in the early '90's when the book was written, but not now, 20 years afterwards, when memories are fading. And anyway, as the author makes clear, the whole accident was carefully hushed up by the Soviets, so we didn't know enough about it to begin with. The ordering shows a lack of foresight.

Another weakness is a failure to adequately explain the design failures that contributed to the accident at reactor #4. Read glosses over them in Chapter 1 and then refers to them frequently, but never explains them again. I found it helpful to refer to another, engineering-related, book by one Medvedev(whose title I've forgotten). However, he does make it clear that the accident was not mostly due to the failures of the operators, as the Soviets wanted the world to believe, but to a combination of design flaws, shoddy building materials, rushed construction, and operation errors. In the end, it owed a lot to the Soviet system itself, in which delay, corruption and coverup were routine.

Leslie says

According to Soviet authorities, the Chernobyl accident claimed only 31 lives. Piers Paul Read cites a

projection that "Chernobyl will ultimately claim more victims than did World War II." (Twenty million Soviets were killed during World War II.) After reading this detailed look about nuclear radiation and Soviet truth-dodging, I'm thinking the projection may be closer to the truth.

Another interesting comparative statistic from the book: Three Mile Island released 15 curies of radioactive Iodine-131 into the atmosphere. Chernobyl released 50,000,000 curies, according to the Soviet Union. According to the U.S. National Argonne Laboratory, Chernobyl released 3,000,000,000 curies. According to the Union of Concerned Scientists, it was approximately 9,000,000,000 curies.

Alessandro Argenti says

E' senza ombra di dubbio un libro eccellente per quanto riguarda la documentazione storica e tecnica relativa al disastro nucleare a Chernobyl, di sicuro il più completo che abbia letto. Viene tutto spiegato in modo dettagliatissimo, senza però far uso di terminologie che appesantirebbero la lettura. Devo altresì dire però che tutto questo si esaurisce non appena la ricostruzione dell'incidente è terminata, ovvero a metà libro, perchè la restante parte tratta le conseguenze dell'accaduto da un punto di vista unicamente politico, inserendovi una marea di nomi e di personaggi che mi hanno immediatamente fatto perdere non solo il filo conduttore, ma anche -e soprattutto- la voglia di leggerlo. Resta comunque un'opera preziosa per chi vuole trovare una risposta (e la risposta c'è, lo voglio sottolineare) a quel lontano 1986.

MrsPyramidhead says

This book is very interesting but I struggled quite a bit with the beginning and end of the book when it was covering the political part of the story. I also struggled some with names but not during the sections where the author discussed the disaster. If you're interested in Chernobyl I definitely would suggest reading this as it is very interesting just be prepared to work through the difficult parts if you're like me.

Meg - A Bookish Affair says

This book was definitely interesting. I didn't know much about the Chernobyl accident. One of my friends who is getting ready to go into the Peace Corps in Ukraine recommended the book to me. What was most interesting to me is that so much of the aftermath of the accident was totally mishandled because of the government that was in place at the time (Remember, this still happened under the Soviet Union). I wonder how much of the damage of the town and the sickness of the people could have been prevented or at least lessened had the government not been in the way.

I also thought it was interesting how the author lined up how the aftermath was carried out in alignment with *glasnost* (Gorbachev's political push for openness in the government, something that definitely hadn't happened under the Soviets before). It was definitely an interesting book.

Tanja Berg says

I read this book in 1994 or 1995. It was very useful for a school project in the spring of 1995. I was in Finland when the Chernobyl accident happened in the mid 80's. It was frightening and the news speculative because the Soviets would not admit anything at first. In comparison this book is very sober, lucid and informative. Recommended!

Dave McCormick says

A pretty thorough account of the Chernobyl disaster and it's direct impact in causing the breakup of the Soviet Union. The first half of the book, which covers the history of nuclear power in the Soviet Union through the accident and the immediate aftermath, is very compelling. The second half isn't quite as good but offers quite a lot to think about. I think that Ablaze is the most balanced of the books that I have read about Chernobyl and Piers Paul Read doesn't offer up an easy scapegoat - while the operators are not exonerated he points out that there were many other factors that led to the disaster. For anyone interested in what happened at Chernobyl this is almost a must read.
