

Nonfiction

A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster

Rebecca Solnit. Viking, \$27.95 (432p) ISBN 978-0-670-02107-9

Natural and man-made disasters can be “utopias” that showcase human solidarity and point the way to a freer society, according to this stimulating contrarian study. Solnit (*River of Shadows*) reproves civil defense planners, media alarmists and Hollywood directors who insist that disasters produce terrified mobs prone to looting, murder and cannibalism unless controlled by armed force and government expertise. Surveying disasters from the 1906 San Francisco earthquake to 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, she shows that the typical response to calamity is spontaneous altruism, self-organization and mutual aid, with neighbors and strangers calmly rescuing, feeding and housing each other. Indeed, the main problem in such emergencies, she contends, is the “elite panic” of officials who clamp down with National Guardsmen and stifling regulations. Solnit falters when she generalizes her populist brief into an anarchist critique of everyday society that lapses into fuzzy what-ifs and uplifting volunteer testimonials. Still, this vividly written, cogently argued book makes a compelling—and timely—case for the ability of ordinary people to collectively surmount the direst of challenges. (Sept.)

The Retail Revolution: How Wal-Mart Created a Brave New World of Business

Nelson Lichtenstein. Metropolitan, \$25 (320p) ISBN 978-0-8050-7966-1

Lichtenstein (*Walter Reuther*) offers a comprehensive if dry discussion of Wal-Mart—the world’s largest private sector employer—and its place in the changing global economy. The author covers the company’s rise from a group of tiny rural Arkansas stores to an enormous international entity, plagued by equally enormous problems: accusations of widespread sexual and racial discrimination, a history of dodging minimum wage law and unemployment claims,



Girl with Fan, 1936, from Paul Outerbridge (reviewed on p. 125).

union-busting, destruction of smaller companies, chronic employee theft and bad publicity following the discovery of goods produced by child laborers. Though Lichtenstein speaks with bemused awe of Wal-Mart’s omnipresence in commerce and culture, advanced logistics system and evangelical background, the message is that Wal-Mart—whose eerie motto “Our long-term strategy is to be where we’re not”—has gotten too large and unwieldy to support its own weight. While it serves well as a primer on the company many Americans love to hate, the distant tone and ponderous detail will not help this book stand out from the rank and file of Wal-Mart exposés. (Aug.)

★ Free: The Future of a Radical Price

Chris Anderson. Hyperion, \$26.99 (288p) ISBN 978-1-4013-2290-8

In the digital marketplace, the most effective price is no price at all, argues Anderson (*The Long Tail*). He illustrates how savvy businesses are raking it in with indirect routes from product to revenue with such models as cross-subsidies (giving away a DVR to sell cable service) and freemiums (offering Flickr for free while selling the superior FlickrPro to serious users). New media models have allowed successes like Obama’s campaign “billboards” on Xbox Live, Webkinz dolls and Radiohead’s name-your-own-price experiment with its latest album. A generational and global shift is at

play—those below 30 won’t pay for information, knowing it will be available somewhere for free, and in China, piracy accounts for about 95% of music consumption—to the delight of artists and labels, who profit off free publicity through concerts and merchandising. Anderson provides a thorough overview of the history of pricing and commerce, the “mental transaction costs” that differentiate zero and any other price into two entirely different markets, the psychology of digital piracy and the open-source war between Microsoft and Linux. As in Anderson’s previous book, the thought-provoking material is matched by a delivery that is nothing short of scintillating. (July)

Devil’s Sanctuary: An Eyewitness History of Mississippi Hate Crimes

Alex A. Alston Jr. and James L. Dickerson. Lawrence Hill, \$26.95 (400p) ISBN 978-1-55652-763-0

Mississippi State history mixes with the authors’ personal memories in this vivid, often shocking look at the state’s legacy of racism. Focusing on several of the most notorious racial incidents of the 1950s and ’60s, including the violent opposition to the integration of the University of Mississippi; the murder of Mississippi’s first NAACP field secretary, Medgar Evers; and the murders of civil rights activists Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Chaney, the book examines the complicity—and, just as often, outright support and collaboration—of the state’s media, legal system and clergy in upholding a racial system that the authors persuasively refer to as “state-sponsored terror.” Alston Jr., a former president of the Mississippi Bar Association, and Dickerson (*Goin’ Back to Memphis*) describe the activities of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, a quasi-independent spy agency created in 1956 to monitor and intimidate supporters of civil rights and to “protect” Mississippi against integration efforts by the federal government. This thorough, absorbing overview of Mississippi’s racist past is only impeded when the authors linger too long over irrelevant personal or professional history. (July)