



“A landmark book . . . the freshest, deepest, most optimistic account of human nature I’ve come across in many years.” —Bill McKibben



A
PARADISE
BUILT IN
HELL

THE EXTRAORDINARY COMMUNITIES
THAT ARISE IN DISASTER



REBECCA SOLNIT

author of *Wanderlust*

DISCUSSION GUIDE

a paradise built in hell

WELCOME!

Welcome to *California Reads*, a statewide program that brings Californians together to explore important topics through reading and discussion. This year, our theme is *Searching For Democracy*. What does democracy mean to us? What challenges has American democracy faced in the past? How can we strengthen our democracy in the future? How can we talk and work together despite our differences? What can we learn from the experiences of others who have struggled with these questions?

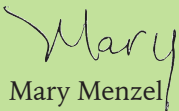
California Reads offers a choice of five superb books to act as a springboard for community discussion. These works include fiction as well as non-fiction, and were written by men and women of diverse backgrounds and viewpoints. There are many ways to experience and explore what democracy means, strives for in its promise, and requires for its success. No singular book can capture all of these complexities, and each selection offers the reader an opportunity to discover new perspectives by inviting us to think about individual responsibility, the importance of a free press, the collective good, and what it is needed from each of us to sustain a healthy democracy.

Cal Humanities and the California Center for the Book are partnering on this project because we feel books—and the conversations they spark—can make a difference in the world. We hope this will be just the first of many statewide conversations under our *California Reads* banner, providing Californians with opportunities to read and discuss stories and ideas that matter. Whether you are joining the discussion through a program at your local library, bookstore, school or elsewhere, we hope you will be inspired by these books and enjoy a new connection with your community and your state.

With gratitude,



Ralph Lewin
President and CEO
Cal Humanities



Mary Menzel
Director
California Center for the Book

california READS OVERVIEW

California Reads is a new program of Cal Humanities developed in partnership with the California Center for the Book and the California State Library. It invites Californians from all walks of life throughout our state to participate in reading and discussion programs and related activities hosted by libraries, schools, colleges, bookstores and other community institutions.

We have selected a slate of books this year to stimulate a thoughtful reflection of, and lively discussion among, friends and neighbors, family and strangers about the past, present, and future of democracy. Five thought-provoking books were chosen from a pool of over 300 titles nominated by members of the public, and based upon the final recommendations of an advisory group of librarians, authors, scholars, publishers and critics.

These five books were selected:

- *The Penguin Guide to the United States Constitution: A Fully Annotated Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution and Amendments, and Selections from The Federalist Papers*, by Richard Beeman. Annotated by one of the nation's foremost Constitutional scholars, this compact edition of our nation's founding documents provides text and context for readers seeking to understand the framework of our democracy as well as its meaning, past and present.
- *Farewell to Manzanar*, by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston. A heartbreaking and compelling memoir about the Japanese American internment experience as seen through the eyes of young girl, this personal story bears witness to a failure of American democracy.
- *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*, by Rebecca Solnit. A masterwork of narrative nonfiction by a contemporary California writer reaches some surprising conclusions about our need for community and common purpose, which she argues are fundamental to democratic forms of social and political life.
- *It Can't Happen Here*, by Sinclair Lewis. This underappreciated classic by one of America's greatest novelists, first published in 1935, imagines a chillingly undemocratic America. It details the rise of a populist politician as he creates a fascist regime, and reminds us of the fragility of our democratic institutions.
- *Lost City Radio*, by Daniel Alarcon. A haunting novel by a young California writer explores the aftermath of a traumatic civil war in a fictitious South American country, and raises questions about the importance of historical knowledge, collective memory, and public access to information in a democratic society.

The discussion guides for each book—like this one—provide an overview of the book and author, a series of discussion questions to begin conversations, a brief author interview, bibliographies and other supplemental resources for interested readers. A K-12 curriculum guide for each book is also available to further support classroom activities. All of these materials, along with additional resources and information about *Searching for Democracy* and *California Reads* public programs and activities at libraries and other community venues, can be found at our web site at www.calhum.org/searchingfordemocracy.

SEARCHING *for* DEMOCRACY OVERVIEW

Leading into the national 2012 elections, *Searching for Democracy* is the culmination of a two year-long initiative that provides Californians with various ways to explore how the humanities can provide insight and opportunities to converse about the nature, state and needs of our vibrant American democracy. Cal Humanities and its partners will explore these complexities—through a series of local, regional, and statewide humanities-inspired activities—to accomplish a greater understanding of what is needed to sustain a healthy democracy in an increasingly interdependent world.

Students, families and people from all walks of life will explore—online and in person—what discoveries and lessons lie in works of fiction and nonfiction, provocative cultural exhibits and public conversations. The Cal Humanities website (www.calhum.org) will be an online hub for all activities, where participants in events, readers of the initiative's books, and people new to our effort can learn more and share what they have discovered.

Our *Searching For Democracy* program partners include: California libraries, California Center for the Book, California History-Social Science Project, Exhibit Envoy, and Zócalo Public Square, in collaboration with California State Library, California Community Colleges, California State University, and University of California Television.

about the book *A Paradise Built In Hell:* *The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*



If democracy is “people power,” Rebecca Solnit argues in *A Paradise Built in Hell* that power lies in individuals rather than institutions. The book began as an essay published by *Harper's Magazine* the day that Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, and was partially inspired by the author's experiences immediately following the Bay Area's 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. Blending reportage and analysis, the book surveys natural and man-made disasters including the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the Halifax explosion of 1917, the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, the September 11th attacks, and Hurricane Katrina.

Solnit contrasts conventional portrayals of negative human behavior and social deterioration in times of crisis with a much more positive view: that disasters can actually give us a sense of community and purposefulness. A community's typical response to catastrophe is self-organization and mutual aid—truly democracy in action—with neighbors and strangers rescuing, feeding and housing each other. She contends that often the main problem in emergencies is the “elite panic” of officials who feel the need for armed force and stifling regulations. *A Paradise Built in Hell* explores the implications for everyday democracy by asking how we can harness the power of the individual and make society more collaborative, trusting, optimistic, and purposeful.

A Paradise Built in Hell was named a 2009 Notable Book of the Year by the *New York Times* and a 2009 Best Book of the Year by the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New Yorker*, the *Washington Post*, the *Christian Science Monitor* and many others.

about the author Rebecca Solnit



Rebecca Solnit was born in 1961. She resides in San Francisco, California. Solnit is the recipient of numerous awards including a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Lannan Literary Fellowship, two NEA Literature Fellowships, and the National Book Critics Circle Award in Criticism. In 2010, the *Utne Reader* listed Solnit as one of the “25 Visionaries Who Are Changing Your World.”

Her work covers a wide range of subjects including art, landscape, public and collective life, ecology, activism, politics, hope, and memory. Solnit is the author of more than a dozen books as well as numerous essays in museum catalogues and anthologies. She is a contributing editor to *Harper's* and a frequent contributor to the political site *Tomdispatch.com*. In a recent interview Solnit listed Eduardo Galeano, Pablo Neruda, Ariel Dorfman, Elena Poniatowska, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Virginia Woolf as writers who have influenced her. In addition to her writing Solnit is an activist and has been involved in many causes including climate change, Native American land rights, the anti-nuclear movement, human rights and the antiwar movement.

Solnit worked as a museum researcher and art critic until 1988, at which time she began to devote herself to writing. She holds a BA in English from San Francisco State University, and an MA in Journalism from University of California, Berkeley.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

A Paradise Built in Hell by Rebecca Solnit

1 The book begins and ends with the questions, “Who are you? Who are we?” How did the book help you reflect on the dividing line between individual and community? What does the individual owe the community? What does the community owe the individual?

2 Have you yourself experienced a moment (on a large or small scale) when disaster is a path to a place “in which we are who we hope to be, do the work we desire, and are each our sister’s and brother’s keeper”?

3 How do you think contemporary social protests such as the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring rebellions fit into Solnit’s rubric?

4 What do you think of this claim by Solnit: “The elite often believe that if they themselves are not in control, the situation is out of control, and in their fear take repressive measures that become secondary disasters.” Does this seem valid?

5 In her epilogue, Solnit quotes Nietzsche: “Man... does not deny suffering per se: he wants it, he even seeks it out, provided it can be given a meaning...He who has a ‘why’ to live for can bear almost any ‘how’.” Do you agree or disagree? What gives our lives meaning?

6 Disaster researcher Enrico Quarantelli is quoted as saying, “Most of the disaster funding, even to this day, is based on the notion of how can we prevent people from panicking or engaging in antisocial behavior...they just assumed the real problem was the citizens and the people at large, even though the studies from the beginning argued against that.” Is there any way we can encourage our civil agencies to refocus disaster planning on how to harness the power of the public, rather than treating the people as “the real problem”?

7 During the press coverage of Hurricane Katrina, CNN pointed out that many news photographs of African Americans gathering necessities were captioned “looting,” while whites doing the same thing were “gathering supplies.” Why do you think this happened? What does it reveal about racial attitudes in America?

8 What did you think about the press coverage of Hurricane Katrina as the disaster was unfolding? What do you think the role of the press is in a disaster? In a democracy?

9 Solnit and others have characterized 9/11 as a missed opportunity on behalf of our nation, given the “spirit of brave resolve and deep attention” that was allowed to slip away. Solnit posits that “people yearning to sacrifice” could have been asked to make personal and societal changes that would have, for instance, lessened American dependence on foreign oil. Do you agree?

10 In the section on 9/11, Solnit quotes a financier who escaped the World Trade Center, “If you want to make us stronger, attack and we unite. This is the ultimate failure of terrorism against the United States. The very moment the first plane was hijacked, democracy won.” What do you think about that statement? How does it square with civil liberties that have been restricted by the Patriot Act and other policies?

11 The Halifax chapter criticizes Hollywood filmmakers, among other media alarmists, who repeatedly show disasters producing terrified mobs prone to looting, murder—even cannibalism. Does mass entertainment have any responsibility to counter conventional wisdom or stereotypes about disasters?

12 *The Reason* review of the book called Solnit’s treatise “disaster utopianism” and said that she was naïve about human nature. Do you agree or did you find her arguments persuasive?

AN INTERVIEW

with author *Rebecca Solnit*



In what ways is your book a book about democracy?

Democracy is a system, but a system that depends on widespread participation. And to participate you have to believe in that system. To believe in it, you have to have some faith in your fellow citizens and some commitment to public life, from elections to forums to public plazas. Yet the prevailing social philosophies of our time suggest that we are selfish individualistic animals, or even competitive barbaric animals. That justifies an authoritarian state, a withdrawal into the private space of your own home, your gated community, distrust of strangers, a life of fear. And a lot of media and many politicians encourage this view. My book is about how people behave in the aftermath of overwhelming disasters. The assumption has been that we revert to our original nature, and that original nature is chaotic, selfish, panicky, opportunistic. But the actual evidence, over and over again, is that we are orderly, calm, generous, even selfless, creative, and resourceful. The communities people build in emergencies are often utopian. They don't last, but they suggest both what we most desire and that it might be possible. And that we are not who we think we are. And these self-organized communities are also direct democracies, where decisions are made by the group, where everyone matters.

Do writers have special roles or responsibilities in democratic societies?

I think we all have important roles to play as citizens, as members of families, neighborhoods, workplaces, cities, states. There are so many kinds of writers but journalists and nonfiction writers often have particularly important tools for discovering and communicating the truth of the matter, whether it's about long-ago historical events or who's poisoning the river upstream of you. *A Paradise Built in Hell* takes the great research of the disaster sociologists and the hundreds of first-person accounts of disaster survi-

vors I heard firsthand or read to provide a radically different sense of who we are in disaster and maybe who we are the rest of the time. As a researcher I have special access, as a writer I have special ability to find patterns, draw pictures, and make them available. Poets and novelists often have other gifts—to speak to the meaning of the moment, to invoke our ideals and principles, to remind us of who we are and want to be. Nonfiction writers do that too, of course. So yes, we do have special responsibilities. We are also the alternative media and sometimes even the mainstream media, and this is one of the pillars that upholds a democracy—when it works right and works for the people, not for the elites.

What relationship do the literary arts and humanities have to democracy?

A democracy is first of all an idea, and we have to be able to imagine it, understand it, value it, and think about how it could be better. For that we need to know our history, be able to think critically, and live within a big dialogue about what matters, who we want to be, what's possible, and what the causes and solutions of our problems are. We need a language in which we can talk about where we've been, where we're going, and how to get there.

For me, politics is a plant—sometimes a weed—that grows out of the deep soil of culture. Culture comes first, goes deeper. After all politics is just how we administer our vision of the world, and that vision is cultural. So they don't just have a relationship; they are the foundation.

Do you think American democracy is fragile or robust? What concerns you about the current state and the future of our democracy? What makes you hopeful?

Both! Parts of it are really thriving and growing stronger and parts of it are really in trouble. I'm disturbed by the incredible power of corporations in this country and the role of the super-wealthy in shaping our policy. I'm disturbed by how many people are just checked out, living in total disengagement with the circumstances that shape their life. We just had an important mayoral election in San Francisco with 31% voter turnout. But so many other people are deeply engaged, whether you're talking about longterm organizations and groups or new phenomena like the Occupy Wall Street movement. When people have a window through which they can engage with each other, with the big ideas, with their own potential power, they take it, generally. Or so I think. But first they have to see how this affects their lives; first they have to see that they do have power and are connected; and this is not the vision of self they are often given.

What questions would you like readers to keep in mind as they read your book?

What would they do in a disaster? Do they trust their city authorities to do better than, say, the San Francisco authorities in 1906? Are they prepared? When have they been in circumstances when these things matter? But more than that, have they had experiences of community, of solidarity and possibility that make them feel the kind of hope and joy I describe? Do they crave it? Do they see places where these things happen without disasters, such as festivals or celebrations when people come together? What version of human nature do they believe in? Do they believe a better society is possible? What would it look like?

Your book celebrates the capacity of people for self-governance. In the course of researching and writing the book, did you ever doubt this?

Well, there was a brief moment when I wavered and believed the crazy stories coming out of New Orleans, before I began the book but when my essay on disaster in *Harper's Magazine* had just gone to press (it went to press the day Katrina hit in 2005). My editor told me to hold fast, stand strong, and I would be proved right. I was relatively new to this stuff—to how much the media spreads rumors and revives terrible clichés, so I was broadsided, but he was right. When the earthquake in Haiti happened last year I saw the trouble coming and wrote about it: those old clichés, rumors, and slanders were used to demonize a desperate population, misinterpret what was going on, and justify treating a disaster as a law-enforcement rather than humanitarian relief crisis.

And I should add—people don't self-govern beautifully and perfectly every time, and over time problems can develop. But a disaster often begets a beautiful beginning.

You say that through consideration of disasters, *A Paradise Built in Hell* provides “a lens to look at race and class.” Could you say something about how these factors affect democracy more broadly?

Did I? Oh dear. I think they are often set aside in a major emergency, but then they reemerge—not so much as how people in dire circumstances respond to each other, but how they move on after. Black people were demonized in Hurricane Katrina; Latinos were treated as less deserving of relief or as people to be interrogated during San Diego's fires, and people had their ID checked and some of the undocumented were handed over to the authorities. That kind of treatment will make people unwilling to evacuate, to receive the relief that should go to everyone, and will create unnecessary dangers for victims and rescuers next time.

And class: if you have resources you can extract yourself from a bad situation, whether you just literally go somewhere else, or whether you're great at paperwork and have lots of documentation and are a homeowner FEMA is eager to reimburse. A renter might not get the same consideration. While people who suddenly became homeless were put up in nice hotels after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, homeless people remained homeless. I know that after Katrina the bureaucracy people had to work through to get Road Home funding was extraordinary, and doing so would take practical resources (a working phone, maybe a fax, Internet access) and real talent with paperwork—in a part of the country with high functional illiteracy and serious poverty. So after a disaster we return to the everyday world where some people have more opportunities, some people are treated better, some people don't get a piece of the pie.

SUPPLEMENTARY LISTS *for further reading & viewing*

“A landmark book . . .
human nature I’ve c

for adults

Zeitoun by Dave Eggers (2009): Nonfiction about a Syrian-born survivor of Hurricane Katrina and his experiences coping with natural disaster and the U.S. government’s war on terror.

And the Pursuit of Happiness by Maira Kalman (2010): Inspired by the Obama inauguration, artist and author Kalman embarks on a year-long discovery of the meaning of democracy in the U.S.

The Curse of the Narrows by Laura Mac Donald (2005): Examination of the Great Halifax Explosion (the world’s largest pre-atomic explosion) and the ensuing relief effort.

Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community by Robert Putnam (2001): Changing behaviors erode social structures and collective caring communities.

for teens & tweens

A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge by Josh Neufeld (2010): Graphic novel depicts the lives of seven disparate survivors of Hurricane Katrina.

Seedfolks by Paul Fleischman (2002): Thirteen narrators describe the meaning and effect of a vacant lot in their city on their lives.

A People’s History of the American Empire by Howard Zinn, Mike Konopacke, and Paul Buhle (2008): The history of the “American Empire” from 1890 to present day is told in comics form.

for children

City Green by Dyanne DiSalvo-Ryan (1994): A girl and her adult friend turn a vacant city lot into a community garden and thus inspire a neighborhood to coalesce.

14 Cows for America by Carmen Agra Deedy (2009): True story of a Maasai tribe’s touching gift of 14 cows to the U.S. after the 9/11 attacks.

Smoky Night by Eve Bunting (1994): Squabbling neighbors and their squabbling pets unite in friendship when their neighborhood is threatened during the L.A. riots.

for viewing

When the Levees Broke (2006): Spike Lee’s documentary about the chaos of Hurricane Katrina and the government response.

We Were Here: Voices from the AIDS Years in San Francisco (2011): Documentary celebrates the individuals and activists who rose to the occasion when the city endured the early years of the AIDS epidemic.

9/11: The Filmmaker’s Commemorative Edition (2002): Documentarians turn what was to be a film about firefighters into one about 9/11.

online resources

www.commongroundrelief.org

Common Ground Relief’s mission is to provide short term relief for victims of hurricane disasters in the Gulf Coast region, and long term support in rebuilding the communities affected in the New Orleans area. It is a community-initiated volunteer organization offering assistance, mutual aid and support.

hereisnewyorkv911.org/2011/

“Voices of 9.11” is a unique online collection of personal video testimonies recorded in 2002 and 2003. The project team traveled from New York City, to Shanksville, PA, Washington DC and the Pentagon to record over 500 video narratives of people whose lives were touched by the September 11th attacks.

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Cal Humanities is an independent, non-profit organization dedicated to promoting a greater understanding of the human condition. We produce, fund, and support cultural experiences in media, literature, discussion programs and more. Through engaging and inspiring work, we encourage our audiences to learn more, dig deeper, and start conversations that matter to create a State of Open Mind.

To learn more about us, please visit www.calhum.org

about the california center for the book

As part of a network of Centers for the Book in every state of the Union, all affiliated with the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress, the California Center for the Book develops statewide programs that celebrate California's rich literary heritage, encourage reading and discussion, and promote libraries as centers for community engagement and lifelong learning. It is supported by the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act, administered in California by the State Librarian.

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