

Ferguson, Niall. *Doom: The Politics of Catastrophe*. New York: Penguin Press, 2021. xvii + 472 pages. Hardcover, \$30.00.

The book's ambitious title provides a clue that this is not a narrowly focused monograph. The author delivers on the promise and covers several issues in great depth and advances a clear argument about how societies, throughout time, have dealt with major unfortunate events. He is by no means restricted to disasters caused by diseases, rather, his analysis is applied to earthquakes and volcanoes and other natural phenomenon of that ilk. One sentence encapsulates the thesis: "The extent to which the exogenous shock causes a disaster is generally a function of the social network structure that comes under stress" (283). In other words, the earthquake or the virus do not discriminate against their victims, and their impacts will depend on the nature of the victims themselves.

In covering so much ground, from scientific material about Covid-19 and earlier "plagues" to global financial interactions, the author weaves together historical and contemporary strands. While the book has weaknesses, its strengths are plenty. The author's task is to put the Covid pandemic into historical context. It is important to note that the book was completed in August 2020 and though the pandemic was far from over, the author nonetheless interprets it for us. For example, he found the Covid pandemic to be more similar to the 1957-8 pandemic than to the Spanish Flu of 1918-1919. He also discusses and largely discounts many scholarly accounts of why disasters occur and why some have minor impacts while others have major impacts. In particular, he embraces what he terms the "Napoleon Fallacy." This pertains to the tendency to attach far too much importance to the actions or inactions of important people. By contrast, his approach argues that the institutions that a society has when the disaster strikes deserve more attention. Thus, while matter-of-factly listing the errors that President Trump made in relation to Covid in 2020, he then argues that even if he had

not made those mistakes the pandemic would have played out very much the same. The culprit in that case is the institutional framework of the Center for Disease Control, the Department of Health and Human Services, and so forth.

Ferguson recognizes that some governments acted wisely and effectively in facing the pandemic but the larger and supposedly better prepared countries failed. That fits with his view that big governments are more prone to major mistakes than are smaller governments. Part of the problem is that “Cassandras” that warn of impending problems face biases. Politicians rarely get rewarded for averting a disaster that has not hit, thus, efforts in that direction are not high priorities. Even worse, the expenses required to avert a disaster seem to be wasted money since the disaster never happened.

While he rejects the great men of history approach, he also challenges methods that explain phenomenon by tracing its origins back generations or centuries. This is an interesting position for a historian to adopt but Ferguson’s territory is contemporary history. He utilizes a tripartite system for categorizing the type of events that can generate catastrophes. First are the Grey Rhinos, which are dangers which are known to be dangerous and highly probable. Hurricanes are examples of these. Black Swans are things that seem impossible. Unpredicted wars such as World War I are examples here. Dragon Kings are extreme occurrences that differ from others in terms of causing large-scale social disruptions. These are notoriously difficult to predict until they happen.

Ferguson doubts the ability of anyone to make accurate predictions which seems appropriate given that he is discussing the next major disaster whenever and wherever it might appear. Nonetheless, he dismisses his own advice and offers predictions about Covid and how other ill-defined catastrophes will play out. For this, he surveys science fiction, new and old, to

put his ideas into perspective. Nonetheless, the book unavoidably risks having sections read as though they were written long in the past, because the changes in the pandemic have been so quick in historical terms and so profound in some ways.

Ferguson is not shy about taking controversial positions or standing against the conventional wisdom. If anyone reads the book and doesn't find an argument they don't like, then I am sure Ferguson would be disappointed. One example is his embrace of the Cold War II that he envisions for the United States' relationship with China. Ferguson notes that in these very polarized times in America, growing animosity towards China is one of the few issues with bipartisan support. The opposition to the Russian invasion of Crimea might be another case.

As an academic, the line that irked me the most pertained to what he characterized as the "woke" university that is more interested in pursuing ideology than it is in pursuing truth. This type of trolling does not sit well within a very well researched and important book. Beyond these quibbles, one of the strengths and weaknesses of the book is the naming of chapters and subheadings. Most of them are very entertaining and memorable, but some do not seem to align well with the content within. For the entertaining titles, my favorite is the chapter "From the Boogie Woogie Flu to Ebola in Town." One example of the latter is in a chapter titled "The Scientific Delusion" with a section subtitled "Quacks," but the narrative surveys the advances in legitimate health sciences.

Ferguson's book is very well-researched and it has dozens of endnotes and an extensive index of his sources. Stylistically, the book is a joy to read. The scope of the book is impressive as is the clarity of the writing. The narrative is very lively and prone to jump from quoting Italian poetry to Monty Python. Everyone will find something they appreciate and fits with their world view and everyone will find something they dislike and contradicts their world view.

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