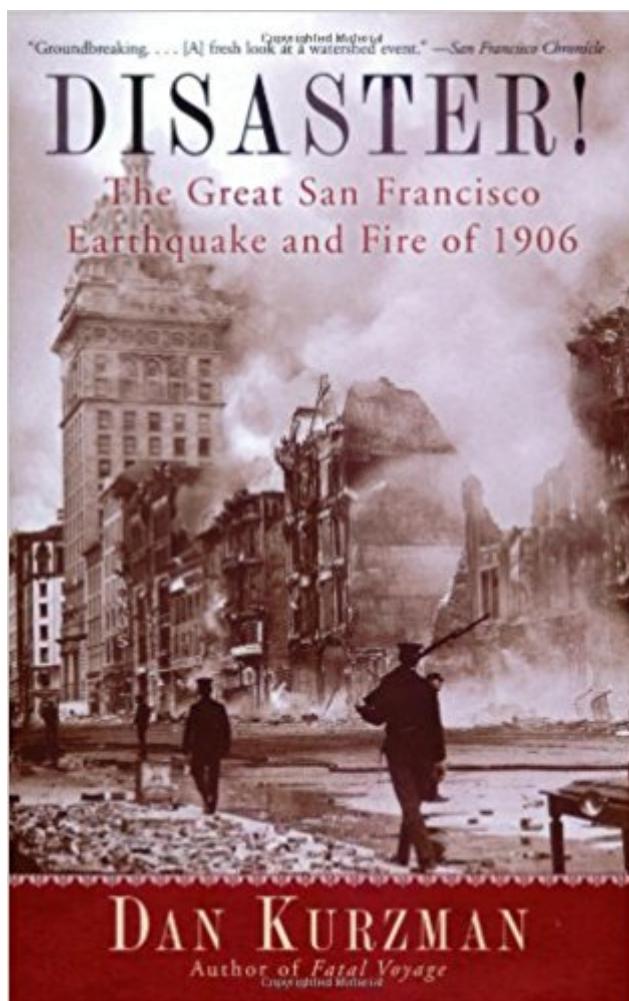


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# Disaster! The Great San Francisco Earthquake And Fire Of 1906



## **Synopsis**

On the morning of April 18, 1906, an earthquake measuring 8.3 on the Richter scale ripped through sleeping San Francisco. At the Palace Hotel, opera star Enrico Caruso fled, half dressed, into the street; John Barrymore searched through the chaos for a bar where he could get a whiskey; orphans screamed for parents crushed to death in their beds. Drawing on contemporary reports and eye-witness accounts, Dan Kurzman captures the fear and madness that raged through a city reduced to rubble. But in this breathtaking pastiche of real-life tragedies, the author also records acts of extraordinary courage. As many as 10,000 people died in the quake and fires that followed, yet the rugged populace refused to quit the city, vowing instead to resurrect it from the ashes. Now, the past comes alive again in this unforgettable history, a masterful account of nature at its worst...and indomitable American spirit at its best.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

On the morning of April 18, 1906, a monster earthquake struck San Francisco, leveling virtually the entire city and sparking a fire that would burn for three days. In this harrowing, exhaustively researched account, Kurzman calls the catastrophe "probably America's worst peacetime disaster," with 10,000 dead. The author focuses on the human drama, following more than 100 different characters over several days, to illustrate the extremes of courage and cowardice that tragedy can evoke. Some tried to ignore it, like actor John Barrymore, who put on his white tails and strolled to a Union Square club for a brandy. Others were utterly absorbed by it, like the San Francisco Call

reporter who dashed around the crumbling city in a frenzy, agog at the opportunity to "record the end of the world." And yet others went berserk, like the drunk prostitutes and pimps who staged an orgy on the steps of the U.S. Mint, apparently deciding to meet the world's end "in the style to which they were accustomed." Heroism also manifested itself in many forms, such as the exhausted firefighters who fought literally at the water's edge to keep the blaze from consuming the last pier connecting San Francisco to the rest of the world. Kurzman, a veteran chronicler of catastrophe (*Fatal Voyage: The Sinking of the U.S.S. Indianapolis; etc.*) and winner of the George Polk Memorial Award and the National Jewish Book Award, has put his experience to good use here. A Titanic-like tragedy, absorbing characters and an astute and sympathetic storytellerthis book has it all. 16-page b&w photo insert; 1 map. (May)Forecast: Fatal Voyage sold a total (in cloth and paper) of 150,000. This new book, appearing exactly 95 years after the pivotal event, should be a natural in the Bay Area and among disaster enthusiasts, particularly those readers who enjoy the thrill of reliving danger from the safety of their favorite reading chair. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The San Francisco earthquake of April 18, 1906, destroyed most of the city. The fires afterward, however, leveled what remained and rendered the entire population homeless; perhaps ten thousand died all told. While the great opera singer Enrico Caruso rushed to save his clothes and valuables, the poor ran for their lives; and as firemen valiantly fought the firestorm in a futile effort to save the city, Mayor Eugene Schmitz organized an ad hoc committee to control panic, aid victims, and supervise relief efforts. The disaster made heroes out of beggars and beggars of rich men. Corruption reached new lows, and human generosity blossomed under adversity. Kurzman (former Washington Post correspondent and author of 14 books) portrays a city in panic as it faced the worst disaster in its history. Working from diaries and papers that survived the fires, Kurzman brings history alive as he weaves together individual stories. The concluding chapters summarize the new society that sprang from the ashes, based on a person's ability to work rather than the accident of birth. In addition, Kurzman reviews contemporary San Francisco's ability to combat disaster. This riveting history belongs in public and academic libraries. Grant A. Fredericksen, Illinois Prairie Dist. P.L., Metamora Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The format that Mr. Kurzman chose for this book works very well. The book is only about 250 pages long and is divided into 41 brief chapters. Mr. Kurzman darts back and forth, telling you about what

is happening to various people that he has chosen to zero in on. For the most part, these are "just common people" but he also tells you about Enrico Caruso and John Barrymore, who happened to be in the city at the time of the earthquake and fire. Caruso and Barrymore actually provide some comic relief from the tragic events described throughout most of the book. Caruso was supposed to have gone to Naples to perform, but went to San Francisco with the Metropolitan Opera Company instead. He had heard frightening tales about the "wild west" and so he bought a gun, learned how to use it, and kept it concealed under his clothing- "just in case"! Mount Vesuvius erupted at this time and Caruso thanked his lucky stars that he had chosen to go to San Francisco instead....well, he thanked his lucky stars for awhile, anyway. Barrymore had signed on to make a theatrical tour of Australia. After he thought about it, he regretted this decision and even after the earthquake hit he spent most of his time hoping he'd miss the boat to Australia. But, again, the book mostly describes the destruction of property and the loss of lives that accompanied the earthquake and fire. The rapid cutting from chapter to chapter effectively recreates the confusion and panic that enveloped the city. Mr. Kurzman widens the scope of the book to include information about political corruption, which contributed to the devastation. For example, the chief of the fire department had been pushing for new equipment but the mayor wasn't interested in spending money on something that couldn't provide him with kickbacks. Additionally, construction contractors tried to cut corners by using substandard mortar, which increased the number of buildings that just disintegrated during the earthquake. Mr. Kurzman writes about the people who charged vastly inflated prices for food and transportation during the crisis, and he also reports on the members of the militia who looted and even murdered when they were supposed to be upholding the law. Desperate homeowners, who knew that insurance wouldn't cover damage caused by earthquakes, set fire to their own homes when they began to be fear that Mother Nature wouldn't do the job herself. One image that has remained with me is of the 3 story hotel that collapsed into a huge crack in the street. The bottom 2 stories wound up underground and many people drowned in the water pouring out of broken water mains. Only the people on the 3rd floor, now at street level, could crawl to safety. Despite advances in construction and fire prevention and containment, could anything nearly this bad ever happen again? Unfortunately, we may find out. Mr. Kurzman quotes geologists who estimate that a quake of this magnitude could be expected to occur in the SF Bay area approximately every 60-100 years. 2006 will be the 100th anniversary of the great fire and quake...

I would have given this book 5 stars but in the end I felt the author just didn't put enough heart into the telling. Surprising because the first book I read by this author, "Fatal Voyage" was a superb

telling of the sinking of the USS Indianapolis with much more body to the characters and their story, I was expecting the same with this telling of the devastation of San Francisco by quake and fire, but alas... Even so it's worth a read if you're interested in the city's history, the book serves honorably as an overview of this chapter in San Francisco's past, but if you're looking for gripping personal tales, it's just shake and bake basics.

I was starting from scratch in my knowledge about the San Francisco earthquake when I began this book. What I especially enjoyed was the number of human interest stories regarding different people such as future baseball pitcher, but then a ten year old, Del Crespi, (not to be confused with Cardinals' infielder Frank "Creepy" Crespi), searching in vain for his beloved girl friend Lillian and singer Enrico Caruso looking forward to reading the newspapers' reviews of his singing performance shortly before the quake struck. Mansions and other temporal possessions of the wealthy were destroyed and many individuals resorted to looting. Explosives were used to create a gap wide enough where fires would not be able to "jump" over. Human nature demonstrates itself both for good and for evil during calamities and this was shown in numerous cases throughout the book. Ethnic groups such as the Chinese and whites both realized they were in this problem together, and the result was a strengthening of their shared cultures. I especially enjoyed the number of individual human nature stories provided by the author.

Disaster! Dan Kurzman Dan Kurzman is a former 'Washington Post' correspondent who wrote fourteen books and won five literary and journalistic awards. As a native San Franciscan he wanted to write about the famous earthquake and fire of April 18, 1906 ('Preface'). San Francisco was the city of top financial, manufacturing, railroad, shipping, lumber, and distribution businesses ('Prologue'). In case of fire the commercial district would be saved even if residential areas burned (p.15). Chapter 3 tells of the Union Labor Party. 'Sugar Daddy' Spreckels hated Schmitz because he was outbid for monopoly control of the streetcar system (p.28). General Funston ordered martial law, an illegal act (p.77). Mayor Schmitz ordered the killing of all those committing any crime, an illegal act (p.91). In the Mechanics Pavilion 350 seriously wounded were killed (p.117). Looting and killing went on (Chapter 23). Even policemen refused to enter areas patrolled by militia or irregulars (p.132). Killings were covered up (p.135). The use of black powder to destroy buildings spread the fire (p.152). Funston ordered buildings destroyed even when they lay far in advance of the fire (Chapter 35). When people fought the fire their homes were saved (p.196). Employees saved the Post Office against military orders (p.198), and the US Mint (p.200). A private house was saved

when they fought the fire (p.217). There were complaints about relief distribution (p.232). Bubonic plague struck the following year. Some people survived buried under rubble (p.235). Mayor Schmitz was convicted on graft and bribery, but remained popular (p.238). Crime continued (p.239), so did a spirit of optimism (p.241). The official death toll was 498 ('Epilogue'). The actual estimate is from five to ten thousand. The earthquake was downplayed or censored (p.249). Over 490 city blocks and 28,000 buildings were destroyed (p.287). Insurance companies paid much less because the earthquake ruined the property before the fire. There was a boom in construction and a new pumping system (p.253). Yet another earthquake or fire could create greater damage and deaths (p.254). This book has 'Notes' by page numbers, a Bibliography, and an Index. [I think Dennis Smith's "San Francisco is Burning" is the better book, but the stories here complement it. Is it madness that packs people into an earthquake-prone peninsula? This book does not mention the big landowners or industrialists that control the city, or the lobby that fought against a municipal water supply before 1906.

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