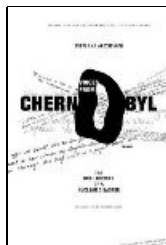


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Book Review
Voices from Chernobyl
The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster
by [Svetlana Alexievich](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer
Posted: March 23, 2006

Voices from Chernobyl is an oral history of the 20th century's worst nuclear accident: the meltdown of the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl in the Soviet Union.

The site of Chernobyl is now in the independent country of Ukraine. Much of the fallout from the disaster came down on what is now the independent country of Belarus, where Svetlana Alexievich seems to have interviewed most of the people whose voices fill this book: "workers at the nuclear plant, the scientists, the former Party bureaucrats, doctors, soldiers, helicopter pilots, miners, refugees, re-settlers."

The result is not only a horrifying cautionary tale, as one might expect, but a real work of literature. Like Ryszard Kapuscinski in *The Emperor*, Alexievich has left herself, the interviewer has kept herself in the background and shaped the responses of those she talked to into soliloquies of anger and melancholy, to which she gives names like "About a Single Bullet," "About Loving Physics," "About Expensive Salami," and "About a Damaged Child."

In his excellent preface, the translator notes a basic difference between the disaster of Chernobyl and the disaster of 9/11. When the World Trade Center fell, thousands of people were killed at once. When the nuclear reactor blew up at Chernobyl, only one worker died at once but the death toll climbed afterwards and is no doubt still climbing today. The Soviet authorities covered up the magnitude of the disaster and failed even to tell people the simple things they could do — sealing doors and windows, taking iodine — that might help protect them. At the same time they threw battalions of workers in street clothes into the task of containing the fire and the radiation leaks.

One of the most striking things about this book is the picture it presents of a 20th century disaster that erupted in a world that was in many ways still 19th century. "We drank juice from birch and maple trees," says one survivor. "We steamed beans on the stove. We made sugared cranberries. And during the war we gathered stinging-nettle and goose-foot.... There were berries in the forest, and mushrooms. But not that's all gone."

About the Reviewer

[Geoff Wisner](#) is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at www.geoffwisner.com.



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