

Visit Sunny Chernobyl
Andrew Blackwell

Blackwell's Chernobyl is an interesting yarn, related in an offhand, first person way.

He recounts casual conversations with exotic foreigners. A simplified tour of the science for the benefit of liberal arts majors. I'm curious how Mister Blackwell accomplished all this.

I was hoping for a clear explanation of Chernobyl which I could share with friends, as I live in Kiev and have been to all the places he describes. His is not bad. I am a bit suspicious as to the authenticity of his dialogue. Unless he is awfully modest on his Facebook page, he speaks only French and Spanish, but not Russian or Ukrainian. No surprise there - I've been trying for five years to learn and could probably just barely managed to conversations that he reports. And a by the way, Russian is the first language in most of this part of Ukraine. Blackwell speaks of Russkrainian - the locals call the mixture Surjik.

Blackwell is absolutely on the money and the most important thing. Chernobyl was not that big of a deal, in terms of human deaths. The UN puts the outside death toll at 100 at the time of the accident, and 5,000 maximum for lifetime exposure to radiation. As Blackwell says, this drives Greenpeace crazy. They have their own estimates, reaching as high as 100,000. Certainly nobody in Ukraine would give credence to such a number.

He also talks about the way that the disaster has been exploited. The Ireland-based Children of Chernobyl charity has milked it pretty well for 25 years, with large charity balls here in Kiev every year and Lord knows what going on elsewhere in the world. The question in my mind is always been, what children? Those who were children at the time of the disaster are all well into adulthood. There aren't any widespread, documented pathologies among them. The charity itself is a credit to fundraising skill and the credulity of donors rather than the magnitude of the supposedly problem.

Blackwell makes the point that the background radiation in Kiev is only 50 microrentgens per hour, compared with 40 for New York City. This disagrees with the numbers which you find on Google, or I should say rather rather, the information you find on Google is all over the lot, mostly lower than these figures. Denver Colorado, where one is seldom notices bodies lying in the street, has quite a bit more radiation simply due to its elevation.

He doesn't go into depth about the accident itself. Specifically, he misses the fact that the Soviets had no plan for dealing with such a disaster. The firemen who arrived were brave but unprepared heroes. Their mistake of pouring water on the reactor almost certainly compounded the problem, creating radioactive steam and spreading the contamination. Water works by denying oxygen to a fire and cooling it down. A nuclear meltdown isn't a fire, except for the graphite, and attempting to cool one with water is rather futile.

He should talk of ionization, why radiation is dangerous, what it does to living tissue. Basically, the radiation breaks up molecules of living organisms. Do it enough and those organisms give up. It also causes mutations which show up in subsequent generations. To his credit, he does report how normal the wildlife is, in fact, how it is flourishing in the absence of people.

He also doesn't talk about the long-term effects. He doesn't name the products of nuclear fission, chiefly cesium and strontium, which make up a large part of the contamination. They have half-lives on the order of 30 years, which means that they have quieted down a bit. They have also been dispersed by wind and water. It is supposed that a fair amount of it has accumulated on the bottom of the Kiev Sea, the lake behind the hydroelectric dam just north of the city.

Blackwell also doesn't go into the implications of Chernobyl for nuclear power around the world. If you look at it, Chernobyl has all the aspects of worst-case scenario. The Soviets were notoriously careless with both human life and the environment. The bozos who caused the problem were operating wildly outside of the rules that even the Soviets imposed. Reactor design has improved immensely in the half-century or so since Chernobyl was commissioned. Add all this up, and you would have to say that nuclear power is a pretty reasonable energy source. The worst disaster of all times cost, at the outside, fewer than a quarter of the lives that are lost annually in coal mining in China alone.

The first review I read called this a humorous travelogue. I would say the lighthearted is a more appropriate word. Blackwell has a pleasant style and makes good use of imagery and irony in his reporting, but he has not gone out of his way to make a knee slapper, nor does his material warrant it. It is no more than a pleasant, easy read about a curious part of the world. He does us the favor of sharing it via some very accessible writing

Blackwell's self-description certainly fits the tone of the book. He writes "I will admit to a certain excitement about it all, even though the responsible attitude, as a sensitive, eco-friendly liberal, would have been one of grave concern, or even horror. But I'm also the son and grandson of engineers: intelligent, bull****-allergic men out of Alaska and South Dakota, men who lived by their knowledge of roads and of pipelines, and of rocks, and of how things get done."

He appreciates the working men that he talks to, whatever impact their work has on the environment, and appreciates that they are only bit players in the human tragedy. This comes out especially well in his pieces on the Alberta tar sands and the Port Arthur refineries. He understands the engineers who work there and the things that they get paid to do. He is sympathetic with a Texan driller's disdain for President Obama, the antithesis of West Texas WASP values. He shares a Canadian's ambivalence toward the tar sands, which put meat on the table but are also contributing vastly to greenhouse gases. A Blackwell statistic: tar sands operations in Fort McMurray generate twice as much CO2 as the city of Los Angeles.

His ear for the dialogue is most acute, of course, with his native language and his own generation. He brings us along on a saunter into the garbage patch in the North Pacific, the quiet vortex or Gyre where the ocean sweeps together all of the detritus it gathers from rivers, beaches, and seagoing sources. The whole venture is kind of nutty, reminding me of the hippies who loved nothing more than finding some old boat and going to sea, with vast optimism and a void of nautical knowledge. He understands their efforts, their values, their good intentions, and their motivations or lack thereof, i.e., drifting through life on whatever convenient vessel they find, in this case the one they shared with Blackwell.

Blackwell gets onto his soapbox when he gets to the Amazon. It is being deforested at a fairly substantial clip. He writes about Santarem, in the northwest corner of the state of Para. I spent a month with Indians in the Southeast corner - writeup on the anthropological studies link of my website. He saw the rain forest being cut down to grow soy - I saw cattle. The difference is largely access to market. And I was told, though I still find it hard to believe, that much of the wood was used simply to fuel the smelting of iron from the Grandes Carajas mines. Brazil doesn't have coal.

Blackwell's goes into a riff on the "nature" with which sensitive modern liberal souls are so enamored. He notes, correctly, that Native Americans are certainly part of the ecology of the Amazon. Moreover, Native Americans have changed nature vastly since their arrival 15,000 years ago. Even in the depths of the rain forest, they made sure that beneficial trees such as Brazil nuts were there to be harvested. Elsewhere in the Americas they made extensive use of fire both to flush out game and to create habitats where animals such as deer could be hunted. He notes wryly that "we cling to the ideal of a separate and perfect nature as though to give it up would be the same as paving over the Garden of Eden." Although modernity is certainly taking Brazil in an unfortunate direction, there is no state of nature to which to return. The argument is more complex.

His asides on the girls of Brazil are halfway right. As he notes, Brazil is so obsessed with sexuality that even the priests talk about it. The obsession has been there since the Portuguese arrived half a millennium ago, leaving their womenfolk at home, and was stoked by their importation of similarly situated African slaves. Available? Yes. Most beautiful in the world? Debatable. He should have spent more time in Ukraine, and perhaps visited Vietnam. Still, refreshing to see someone write with candor about whorehouses.

This is a long review of five of the seven chapters. It is highly engaging - you'll have to read other reviews to get the rest of it. Most important thing to me is that Blackwell sees the world as it is. He is able to speak the languages of the blue state elites and the real world impacted by environmental policies. Voices like his are essential to bridge an immense gap in understanding and appreciation.