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Book review: Fukushima

Leigh Dale

University of Wollongong, ldale@uow.edu.au

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Book review: Fukushima

Abstract

Three years ago today, Japan was hit by the strongest earthquake ever measured in that country – and Fukushima became an international by-word for disaster.

Now, as Japan tries to put its past behind it, Fukushima is back in the news as hundreds of evacuees prepare to return to their homes near the crippled nuclear power plant for the first time next month. But how do any of us begin to understand a disaster that could mean 50,000 people never see their homes again?

ABC journalist Mark Willacy's Fukushima: Japan's Tsunami and the Inside Story of the Nuclear Meltdowns is a very good place to start.

On March 11, 2011, off the east coast of Japan's largest island, Honshu, the sea floor heaved. In the city of Sendai water surged 10 kilometres up the valley of the Abukuma River. Sendai is the largest city in Tohoku, the northern region of Honshu, made up of six prefectures. The tsunami hit hardest in the three prefectures on the east coast: from south to north, Fukushima, Miyagi, and Iwate.

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Author

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Leigh Dale

Professor at University of Wollongong

Disclosure Statement

Leigh Dale was an English language assistant at Fukushima Senior Girls' High School from August 1987 to July 1989. She was a collaborator on the first bilingual (Japanese/English) guidebook to Fukushima Prefecture, Hello Fukushima, by Toru Takeda, Tomio Hishinuma and Kinuyo Kamieda (1989), and is now professor of English at Wollongong University.

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Fishing boats stranded by the 2011 tsunami, with the crippled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in the background. [EPA/Kimimasa Mayama](#)

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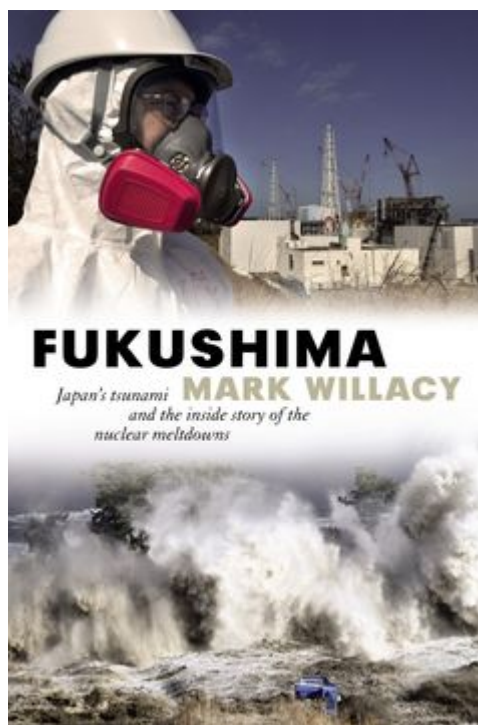
ITN shows the moment Japan's 2011 tsunami hit the Fukushima nuclear power plant.

The Fukushima Daiichi (Number One) nuclear plant, one of several in Tohoku operated by the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), was hit hard by the tsunami. A series of explosions spilled radioactive waste into air and water. The leak has made towns and farmland near the plant uninhabitable: Fukushima prefecture has been devastated.

Mark Willacy's Fukushima is the story of the tidal wave and the nuclear disaster, told through interviews with farmers, fishermen, teachers, bureaucrats, and the then Prime Minister Naoto Kan.

Willacy opens out a range of views of and reactions to the disasters, the latter ranging from suicide to stoicism to single-minded recreation of a new life. There is a glossary and maps; a "cast list" would have been helpful, although this is offered in part by the captions to photographs.

One of those photographs is a close-up of a woman looking serene, almost smiling; in a second photo she is almost unrecognisable as the intent operator of a mechanical digger. As her story builds, we understand why Naomi Hiratsuka obtained a licence to operate heavy machinery – a way of "doing something", and of coping with loss.



Fukushima, by former ABC North Asia correspondent Mark Willacy. [Pan Macmillan](#)

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A picture is developed of what went on inside Fukushima Daiichi: interviewees include a worker who kept notes of key events; the plant manager; the leader of the elite metropolitan fire-fighting team who set up an emergency cooling system amidst deadly radiation; and senior bureaucrats, politicians and company managers in Tokyo, who thought they were calling the shots.

The key factor in the nuclear disaster, as Willacy presents it, was the panic of those senior decision-makers, and their projection of this panic onto the population at large. This projection of hysteria onto those directly or potentially affected by radiation became a rationalisation for secrecy: better to keep others ignorant than alarmed.

The same thinking, coupled with good old-fashioned greed, was at work in the limp or hostile response to warnings by academics about the potential dangers of a tsunami back in 2002, as well as warnings in 2006 about the vulnerability of the plant to inundation.

Willacy's arrangement of conflicting views reveals a pattern. He shows how those with authority in or over the nuclear industry placed their own profit or equanimity above the lives of others.

The mendacity and malfeasance he reveals are in contrast to the courage and dignity often displayed by those faced with impossible demands, before and during the tsunami and the nuclear crisis.

National Geographic on the 2011 tsunami.

Willacy's conclusion is that the Fukushima nuclear disaster was "man-made": not in the sense that nuclear power plants are industrial constructions, but in that the location, design, maintenance, management, and regulatory oversight of the plant were badly flawed, as was the technical and political response to the disaster.

The toxicity of radiation and of lies about radiation is one of two main themes in the book. The other is that "those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it". The symbol of that idea is a marker stone from an ancient tsunami, below which houses should not be built. The implicit questions: who will read the warnings on the markers? And who will listen to Willacy's storytellers?

In ordering the story, Willacy has a nice sense of perspective: Naomi Hiratsuka's grief is as central to this story as the ambition of Prime Minister Kan. But there is a cruel contrast between the anger of the official whose lies or excuses collapse in interview, and the anger of the grieving family member.

I lived and worked in Fukushima for several years in the late 1980s, teaching English mainly at high schools and sometimes at junior highs. Although I have not been back since the tsunami, what is constantly in my mind is the children of those whom I taught, physically and emotionally vulnerable to that radiation and to those lies.

Even if you have never visited Japan, this is a mesmerising story, one I hope more people will revisit, even as memories fade of watching black waves inundate Japanese coastal cities, sweeping away cars, office towers and homes.

Fukushima: Japan's Tsunami and the Inside Story of the Nuclear Meltdowns by Mark Willacy [*is published*](#) by Pan Macmillan.