



Accident: A Day's News

Christa Wolf, Heike Schwarzbauer (Translator), Rick Takvorian (Translator)

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An East German writer, awaiting a call from the hospital where her brother is undergoing brain surgery, instead receives news of a massive nuclear accident at Chernobyl, one thousand miles away. In the space of a single day, in a potent, lyrical stream of thought, the narrator confronts both mortality and life and above all, the import of each moment lived-open, as Wolf reveals, to infinite analysis.

Accident: A Day's News Details

Date : Published May 29th 2001 by University of Chicago Press (first published January 1st 1987)

ISBN : 9780226905068

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Format : Paperback 121 pages

Genre : Fiction, European Literature, German Literature

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Tutti says

I found the juxtaposing of the two themes of the Chernobyl tragedy and the operation of the narrator's brother interesting and allowed for musing on many themes - scientific, access of 'knowledge', impact of others, nuclear science/ medicine, humanity- etc. Cassandra had a similar multiview point that I liked. I also think it needs to be read in the context of being written at the time of the event in then East Germany-not so removed from the location. Although the impact drifted off with too many introduced thoughts with little to tie it. At one point several lengthy sentences stretched for pages and my enthusiasm for this style waned.

Kate says

To quote the author herself, when her character was describing her response to Joseph Conrad while reading Heart of Darkness: "Finally, after all this time, I once again felt that thump against my heart which I feel only when a writer speaks to me from the depths of self-experience."

This book, about one day in the life of a woman in Germany (East) at the time of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor failure, whose brother is in the hospital for brain surgery, and who is trying to figure out how to live life hopefully while the threat of extinction, due entirely to human actions, literally hangs overhead. The book chronicles her thoughts, follows her tasks, keeps us posted on the progress of her brother's operation, intrigues us with vignettes around friends and family members, and progresses an opinion about humans-language and loss.

Obviously, this is weighty. It's only 109 pages but I read it deeply and slowly, and gratefully.

Pedro Alhinho says

Narrativa breve ou longo [quase] monólogo, escrito em 1986, quando a nuvem de Tchernobyl pairava sobre a europa. reflexões sobre o sentido da vida, sobre a verdade da ciência, sobre a legitimação das políticas. Nas últimas páginas o retorno ao Conrad do "Coração das Trevas", directamente citado como exemplar denúncia do mal de que o homem é capaz.

Geraldine says

It was a nice book but had some problems with the writingstyle of the author,

Lisa says

1986 - a year which defines a clear before-after moment in history. Before Chernobyl, the narrator feared a nuclear war, and after Chernobyl, she knows that human beings are capable of destroying themselves even in peaceful times.

A woman listens to the radio and worries about her children and grandchildren. The healthiest, freshest food is the greatest danger in a world where everybody all of a sudden talks like a scientist, referring to becquerel, Geiger counters, iodine 131, the half-life of radioactive substances and the destructive effect of taking a bath instead of a shower. Power plants in other countries have an impact on ordinary families' day-to-day lives, and the news feed the fear incessantly. Experts fight on television - a collective disaster that doesn't keep within the political borders of the Iron Curtain.

And yet, people have individual worries as well. "In-dividuum", like "a-tom", meaning that which can't be divided, as the narrator reflects. But what happens when it IS divided anyway? What happens when you split an atom or an individual open?

The woman waits for news from her brother, who on that specific day is having complicated brain surgery. They are opening up and splitting that part of him which makes him an individual - a unique personality. If the surgery goes wrong - because of involuntary human failure - he may wake up and find himself with a changed personality.

From the collective level down to the deeply personal worry, the narrator looks at life as a fragile gift, something that can be abruptly ended or changed forever, something that can get out of control within a split second.

A moving story of universal character and personal relevance - recommended!

Miri says

Everything I have been able to think and feel has gone beyond the boundaries of prose.

Difficult to follow at times because of the stream of consciousness style, which made me feel as though I were coming in to conversations already in progress—but that's not a criticism, rather a recognition of successful execution.

We have not said too much—rather, too little—and that little bit too timidly and too late. And why? For banal reasons. Because of insecurity. Because of fear. Because of lack of hope. And, strange as the claim may be: because of hope as well. Deceitful hope, which produces the same results as paralyzing despair.

The prehuman may also have approached another member of its horde with hands raised to symbolize peaceful intentions before it could speak. Yet only with the help of language . . . did the humans of one horde seem to have dissociated themselves from another horde: the one who spoke differently was the other, was not human, was not subject to the murder taboo . . .

Language which creates identity but which, at the same time, makes a decisive contribution to

the dismantling of the inhibition about killing that member of the species who speaks differently.

Kat says

Easily one of my favorite reads from last year. Wolf helped me better articulate my thoughts about the productivity of regret. While she acknowledges how larger contexts inform individual actions and reactions, she put the agency back into the hands of humanity, holding us as responsible as a collectivity of individuals who make choices. This book altered my perspective about my place in the world. In other words, I loved it.

Maaike says

Hoe zeer ik ook mijn best doe om altijd onbevoordeeld aan haar boeken te beginnen, meestal mislukt mijn poging en begin ik me vrij snel te ergeren. Ik vind de 'connexen' die Wolf in dit verhaal maakt ongemeen boeiend (de hersenoperatie van haar broer, de ramp in Tchernobyl op dezelfde dag, de bruggen naar WOII en naar haar eigen kleinkinderen, naar de toekomst, de gedachtes over taal en hoe ze werkt/niet werkt, ...), maar haar drammerige, dreunige toon en de gedetailleerde beschrijving van banaliteiten hebben ook hier mijn beoordeling danig negatief beïnvloed. Sorry, Christa!

Terry Pitts says

Accident takes place on a single day shortly after the Chernobyl atomic plant disaster. An East German writer (much like Christa Wolf) goes about her day. She ponders the implications of radiation drifting over Europe and alternately imagines the operation her brother is undergoing for brain cancer on the very same day. Wolf seamlessly interweaves meditations on technology, medicine, and the ordinary daily activities of life into a book that is powerful for its brevity. "We live in the flicker," she thinks, suddenly, deeply aware of life's fragility.

Jill says

This is what I wish Clarice Lispector novels were: twisting streams of consciousness, heavily peppered with personal reflection --- but expertly guided to an open conclusion. Not that it's conclusive in any sense -- just that it's heading somewhere in the first place; just that there's a driving force. No rambling, here.

This novella amounts to a spiral of feelings, narratives, reflections, anecdotes, all centered on the concerns of technological progress. Plotwise, what little there is: over the course of a single day, our narrator semi-gratefully awaits medical news of her brother while wondering if the Chernobyl accident will cause her garden to radioactively spoil. Questionwise: how has language held us back; thrust us too far forward? Can we stop ourselves from changing the world irreparably? How much do we, as individuals, matter in all this?

Answerwise: about as much as an atom.

Overall: this is beautiful, winding but succinct, and slicing writing. It's a quick read, but it'll require your full attention -- and if none of the insights are new to you, the permeating feeling of a late April day will be worth it.

Kara Kilgore says

Can't wait to read this! This author is one of the most stunning female authors of our time. Her prose is beautiful. She doesn't have to insist upon herself either & I've noticed that she steers clear of hot button reactionary words. Just honest, clear, refreshing prose completely devoid of ego. Now that, I can appreciate.

Medea was spectacular! No one could handle the retelling of that tale quite like she did. If you're looking for timeless prose instead of the flavor of the month, search no further. This is your author.

Sandy says

incredibly depressing, maybe not a good idea to read as a teenager...

Jess says

Wolf uses the Chernobyl disaster and a fictional brother's brain tumor to explore the greater concepts of human's capacity for destruction, of science and its attempt to know everything (about the brain and technology) before knowing the consequences of such knowledge, of the ridiculousness of ideological boundaries and how events like Chernobyl - which sent radiation throughout all of Europe and even into North America - can dissolve those boundaries. Wolf, who was a teenager in Germany during WWII, lived in East Germany and truly believed in the tenets of socialism but was an outspoken writer against East Germany's censorship and tight control of its citizen's lives.

This is a short book but is packed with a few central themes that become intertwined with the narrator's thoughts and the quotidian events of one day. It's not the easiest read and its plot is scant and hidden among the stream of consciousness. In any case, I really like it.

Casey (Myshkin) Buell says

Accident: A Day's News is a strange and fascinating little novel. Our narrator (never named, though intimated to be Christa Wolf herself) waits for a call to tell her how her brother's brain surgery went, while ruminating on the recent nuclear disaster at Chernobyl. As she goes about her daily business, gardening, shopping, answering her mail, she contemplates humanity, and human responsibility. Imagining the details of her brother's surgery she juxtaposes it with the spreading nuclear crisis. The pursuit of technology, without clear understanding of its ramifications, may well be the tumor nestled in the brain that is humanity. This is a

short novel, but the dense stream-of-consciousness prose packs the punch of a much larger book.

Mikael Kuoppala says

East German author Christa Wolf examines uncertainty, fragility and the power of information both on a global and a psychological level in a novel about a woman whose brother is nearly killed in an accident the very same day the Chernobyl nuclear accident occurs. Wolf follows the woman through the course of that one day.

The narration is stream of consciousness in form, making the text somewhat heavy, but still very readable and communicative. Thankfully this deeply personal approach still allows for some universal analysis of the main themes. What the Chernobyl disaster tells about the safety of the world? How easily does our race handle and implement information we have without the realization that more is needed? How come do politics get in the way when issues affecting the whole of Humanity are being decided?
