

H-France Forum

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Richard C. Keller. *Fatal Isolation: The Devastating Paris Heat Wave of 2003*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 244 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 978-0-226-25111-0.

Review Essay by Paul Stephenson, Maastricht University

Richard C. Keller's book looks like a disaster movie. "FATAL" screams out to you in a massive sized font, its bold white type against a yellow background. Behind the blood red skyline of tower blocks far off in the horizon: "ISOLATION." In the foreground, dark and brooding, the Eiffel Tower, with the view out west to the business district in La Défense. The dust jacket radiates heat. The city is burning.

Paris sweltered in August 2003. For two weeks the daytime temperature barely dropped below 40 degrees centigrade. The mercury failed to fall as the death toll rose. And so the naming and shaming began as political elites, healthcare professionals, the media and citizens all engaged in the construction of a blistering narrative around who was responsible for, and irresponsible in, this large-scale human disaster. Like any framing game, there were heroes and villains (but mostly villains): society was heartless, politicians incompetent, hospitals understaffed, the elderly desperate and incapable, their children selfish and egotistical. Even the parliamentary enquiry into the affair was a discursive battle to decide what the heat wave was actually about.[1]

This richly detailed book is about much more than a few hot days of weather. What aggravates isn't the stifling air of seventh floor garrets. What lingers is not the stench of body fluids that seeped through the floorboards into the glass vases of bourgeois apartments as the corpses of elderly corpses lay decomposing for days. What remains and what needs to be kept alive are a series of "pathogens" within French (and arguably the West's) politics, culture and society. Many were reported at the time, but as Keller discusses, are all of them true?

Some concern the state: First, the (in)ability of the various administrative units and departments of the state to communicate and work together, to react quickly and effectively in times of crisis, including roles, chains of command and responsibility. Second, the (in)adequacy of budgets and government healthcare provisions in place to cater for old age. Third, the (poor) quality of much of the built environment and the precarious situations that the elderly end up "living" in, particularly in densely populated, urban environments.

Some concern the individual: First, the dependence of the citizen on the state to act in times of crisis and how society deals with risks from environmental threats. Second, societal attitudes towards the elderly, who are often ignored, marginalised and viewed as a burden. Third, contemporary models of family life and (lack of) community that may, due to hectic schedules, geographical separation, or massive cost, simply exclude the elderly, making them vulnerable to isolation, depression, and ultimately, premature death.[2]

Keller's authority on the subject stems from the fact that he has spoken to many of the key French elites in the heat wave affair, from epidemiologists to physicians, coroners and politicians. He challenges some of the conventional wisdom as to what exactly went so terribly wrong. The document analysis and interviews help with the process of tracing those crucial first few days, but the originality of the research lies in extensive fieldwork and interviews with local residents—and the physical demands of such an exhaustive feat—even if it appears to have been conducted several years after the 2003 heat wave (in one case leading him to realize that an elderly informant had since forgotten how exactly her neighbor had died).

The ultimate strength of the book is that he has given biographical life to the tragedy, by cataloging and accounting for the victims of the disaster, many of which are now otherwise forgotten. In this book, they are not just documented as corpses, but explored as people, as French citizens, neighbors, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, etc. The author's ethnographic approach meant hundreds of hours of tracking down and visiting the places and spaces they inhabited, talking to the people who might have known them, and who remember them. Based on these conversations, he has sought to paint a picture of their (often tragic) lives:

Marie France was a fixture in the building where she had lived for as long as anyone could remember. She lived in a tiny apartment on the seventh floor of the building, with windows that looked directly out onto the Bastille Opera. The apartment was a *chambre de bonne* of about 100 square feet with a toilet and a rudimentary shower corner. (p. 57)

But besides the basic accommodation we are told:

...the eighty-eight-year old took great care with her appearance. She regularly visited a salon to maintain her dyed blonde hair, and she was always sure to wear full makeup in public. She was quite reserved according to her neighbors, polite but standoffish. Only after knowing one of her neighbors for years did she open up to her, sharing details about her family history. She was quite proud of an older brother who had died honorably during the First World War. (p. 57)

The book weaves together lots of people from all over Paris, their life revived through conversations with neighbors, concierges and caretakers. Keller focuses on the individuals who were unclaimed, the people buried on the cheap at the public cemetery in Thiais in the southern suburbs of Paris, not far from Orly airport. He tells the story of as a very human tragedy, and effect is cumulative. The individuals become characters in a play, each a single episode in a soap opera where Paris is the setting, indeed, the set.

But we might ask ourselves: is Marie France's death more tragic because she kept up her appearance? Or is it less tragic because she was aloof? Was it more of a loss because her (supposed) sibling was a valiant soldier who fought for France? Or less so because she was guarded with her neighbors? By building these stories, Keller helps convey the fact that these are normal people—warts and all—everyday citizens who *had had* a life, who had known better days. The fact that some had chosen to cut themselves off from the world and were apparently mad, violent and

cantankerous, refusing social assistance, challenges the conventional image we have of the old as meek and feeble victims.

At the same time, this resurrection of the dead in all the flourishes of detail—“the dying plant in the hallway was a symptom of Marie’s gradual slide into death” (p. 81)—and imagined domesticity at times left me fidgeting in my seat. I couldn’t help wondering if the names had become caricatures of the elderly, if they had been rendered cartoon-like. A bit Amélie Poulian, like the elderly cripple with the telescope who spies on his neighbors and never leaves the apartment but who forges a friendship with the sad, lonely girl. But perhaps it is inevitable when we imagine—and attempt to retell of—the elderly, in a city as weighed down with artistic heritage/baggage as Paris, that whatever their circumstances, no matter how abject, the reader will fall into the trap of romanticizing their plight, as if there is something defiant and stalwart, brave and honest about their poverty and isolation.

The author is conscious of our common perceptions, going on to question the way in which we imagine the elderly on the basis of contemporary French culture, particularly literature and film. Recent novels written in the wake of the heat wave have offered striking contrasts in how they portray the elderly, from Gavalda’s rose-tinted view of a life still to be lived, in the embrace of younger generations, to Houellebecq’s polemical and scathing dismissal of old age. Keller explores the old age in recent French cinema as well as documentary, and brings in insights from modern French sociologists too with Foucault and Bourdieu, as well as the Italian, Agamben. (In my own exploration of the “Solidarity Day” introduced two years later in 2005 to raise money for the elderly and vulnerable, I also brought in Marcel Mauss.[3])

Keller also reflects on the opportunities, but also challenges and pitfalls, of such a biographical approach that reconstructs events through anecdotal evidence. To what extent can he rely on what he has been told? In his second chapter on isolation, vulnerability and social marginalization, he posits that these stories have a “redemptive function,” casting the storyteller (his informants) in a positive light by signaling their own intervention in the lives of the forgotten. It is true that in so doing he also provides us with portraits of the living, of those who continue to live in what are often cramped, badly ventilated and badly equipped buildings, those who could be the victims of a future heat wave, be it in Paris or Chicago.

As the author asserts, Marie France (mentioned in the excerpts above) was technically an “enfranchised” subject of the state, but her citizenship failed her. Though she chose not to claim the state assistance that could have saved her, should we expect the state to have somehow recognized her precarious living conditions and stepped in? The author posits that the “marginalizing violence” of her death (the caretaker found her splayed on the floor, dead) “suggests the limits of social citizenship in the contemporary welfare state” (p. 86), but it also makes clear the responsibilities upon the individual, and how the choices we each make determine our fate.

In his 1986 article on the “biographical illusion,” Foucault argued that biography—or the story of life—is an inherently fictional process. As Keller discusses, we organize our lives as a history and in so doing there is a rhetorical illusion to what we tell, from the specific beginning to the end. Life happens—or is written—on the pages between the birth certificate and the death

certificate. But this life is not only a series of events, but a series of “placements and displacements in social space” (p. 85). In Paris, this social space was often the apartments, the corridors and hallways, the entrances and passageways, the lifts and stairwells, the basements and garrets of Haussmann’s nineteenth century buildings.

In the third chapter of the book, the author provides a fascinating insight into the social history of the built environment, exploring the link between where you live and how likely you are to fall ill and die. In so doing, the author maps vulnerability across the city over time, with striking similarities between the 1849 cholera epidemic and the 2003 heat wave. There were many deaths in the traditionally poorer 13th arrondissement of south Paris and fewer in the supposedly wealthy 16th arrondissement of west Paris. But wealth is by no means the only indicator of vulnerability.

Across Paris, Keller takes us through the front door and through the courtyard, up the seven-story spiral staircase, and past the low sink in the attic hallway. We feel the temperature increase dramatically as we climb. We try to catch our breath at ninety degrees as we crouch beneath the mansard roof. The stairs are steep, and it’s a long way down.

I was living and working in Lille, two hundred kilometers to the north of Paris, during the 2003 heat wave and since 2013 have lived in the capital. I am only too aware of how the city will shut down and empty out once more in August, leaving many people at risk. As I finish this review, on a wet morning in early June, the British newspaper *The Guardian* reads: “The body of an 86-year old woman was found in her flooded house in Souppes-sur-Loing in central France, were some towns have been hit by the worst flooding in more than 100 years.” The Seine continues to rise. The Louvre is shut. Central Paris is on orange alert. More anecdotes of freak weather deaths will follow. Here lurks another silent killer.

NOTES

[1] P. J. Stephenson, “Solidarity as Political Strategy: Post-Crisis Reform Following the French Heatwave,” *Public Management Review* 15, no. 3 (2013): 402-415.

[2] P. Stephenson, “Hot Under the Collar: Lessons from the 2003 Heatwave in France and the Security Implications for Coping with Environmental Threats in the EU,” *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 5, no. 2 (2009): 293-311.

[3] P. J. Stephenson, “Gift and Reciprocity at Work? Using Mauss to Explore Justifications for the Solidarity Day in the Aftermath of the 2003 Heatwave,” *Modern and Contemporary France* 22, no. 3 (2014): 343-361.

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