When the dust settles – book review

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Lucy Easthope's autobiographical account of disaster response provides insight into the importance of empathy

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‘When the Dust Settles’ is an autobiographical account of Lucy Easthope’s experience in both disaster planning and post-disaster intervention. It details several high-profile disasters, including a flooding in Doncaster, the MH17 plane crash and the Fukushima nuclear reactor disaster.

As well as providing the reader with the complexities of disaster response, the book also reflects on the personal costs involved. This includes not only loss of life and serious injuries, but also the ‘furniture of self’, a term coined by sociologist Kai Erikson to describe photographs, clothing and items that hold sentimental value and make us who we are.

This was evident in the property left in the aftermath of the London 7/7 bombings. Easthope lists items such as Tupperware with salads inside, laptops and an unfinished PhD thesis, still being annotated up until the point when the bomb exploded. These objects are reminders that it was a normal commute until it wasn’t.

An early chapter informs us that the word ‘disaster’ originates from the Latin ‘dis’ and ‘astro’, meaning ‘bad stars’. This can be viewed as the opposite to the proverb ‘when the stars align’, with both trying to explain an experience as an astronomical phenomenon. Whatever the cause, this book details the profound impact on individuals, families and communities. (A trigger warning is warranted here, as the book features graphic content.)

One deeply saddening example is Easthope’s description of distressed children who lived near Grenfell Tower. Looking out of their bedroom window, some of the children saw the silhouettes of police officers carrying large bags and assumed they were bodies.

Easthope’s respect for the deceased, including those who are unaccounted for, is evidenced throughout the book.

The importance of a formal identification using primary – and not secondary – indicators was well advocated by the author. Misidentifications were described from historic cases, demonstrating the need for a professional disaster victim identification (DVI) process, the governance of which sits with HM Coroner. A family member may consider a birth mark or a personalised tattoo to be a unique indicator proving identify, but Easthope makes a strong argument for a scientific conclusive process. This gives more certainty and minimises the avoidance of giving the wrong person back to the wrong family, which sadly has happened.

As a detective inspector trained and experienced in family liaison and disaster victim identification, I found this book to be professionally interesting. Professor Easthope's academic and operational background makes this book an authentic read, and I valued her empathy and insight. As I have witnessed first-hand, if we take care in protecting the personal effects of people caught up in disasters, this can have a significant impact for families. If you are interested in – or are already – working in disaster planning or response, I encourage you to read 'When the Dust Settles'.

- This article was peer reviewed by Shrey Jhalani, Business Change and Engagement Manager, Police Digital Service

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