At the start of her book, *There Are No Accidents: The Deadly Rise of Injury and Disaster—Who Profits and Who Pays the Price*, journalist Jessie Singer writes, “Outside these pages, I do not use the word ‘accident’—I haven’t for years because, as the title says, there are no accidents” (p. 13). Drawing on history, sociology, engineering, and public health, Singer sets out to explain how powerful stakeholders have knowingly allowed “accidents” to happen from the early twentieth century to the present. For Singer and her interviewees, most programs to prevent injuries are based on two contradictory frameworks: the “Bad Apple Theory” and the “New View” (pp. 16, 17). Whereas the “Bad Apple Theory” attributes most accidents to personal mistakes or outright carelessness and calls on ordinary Americans to live more safely, the “New View” focuses on the effects of risky conditions and prioritizes fail-safe engineering over safety education. Singer identifies the prior outlook with corporations and lobbyists, including Purdue Pharma, the Georgia-Pacific paper company, and the American Automobile Association, which downplay how hazardous products and workplaces contribute to accidents. Safety experts and advocates for workers, citizens, and consumers, conversely, search for the mechanical and systemic causes of injuries. Singer convincingly pushes her readers not to pin accidents on their casualties but to hold industry and the government accountable for the increasing and unequal burden of injuries across the United States.

The book consists of ten chapters and charts accidents from their real and perceived causes to injuries and their aftermaths. The first two chapters, “Error” and “Conditions,” use historical case studies to compare the initial motives and applications of behavioral and object-centered approaches to injury control. Citing the projects of twentieth-century automakers like General Motors to shift responsibility for traffic fatalities from dangerous cars and roadways to reckless drivers and “jaywalkers,” “Error” describes the playbook of actors who support the “Bad Apple Theory” and safety education to fend off more sweeping, costly, and effective interventions. “Conditions” exam-
ines the contemporary safety efforts of labor reformer Crystal Eastman and aviation specialist Hugh DeHaven to show how professionals have contested this playbook with statistics and biomechanics. The next three chapters cover the ways Americans respond to accidents based on their scales, the cultural perception of different risks, and the stigma attached to drug users and other vulnerable populations. Moving on to the root causes of accidents, Singer showcases how social determinants of health—especially race and socioeconomic status—account for the disproportionate injury rates, worse medical outcomes, and unreasonable legal penalties experienced within underserved communities. The book ends with two chapters on injury prevention and government regulation, which Singer believes have unrealized potential to keep the public safe.

Singer synthesizes an impressive array of evidence from the past and the recent present to set the stage for her conclusion: “Accidents are not a design problem—we know how to design the built environment to prevent death and injury in accidents. And accidents are not a regulatory problem—we know the regulations that will reduce the accidental death toll. Rather, accidents are a political and social problem” (p. 250). The opioid crisis, for example, has resulted not from technical or administrative uncertainty about how to prevent overdoses but from the deceptive advertising of medicines like OxyContin as “nonaddictive,” the War on Drugs, and the refusal to make naloxone widely available for emergencies. Singer correspondingly expands the “New View” from fail-safe engineering to history, policy, and ethics, asking how Americans can reform US society to improve its safety for everyone. Her book adds to previous literature on accidents from historians, including Mark Aldrich (Safety First: Technology, Labor, and Business in the Building of American Work Safety, 1870–1939 [1997]), John Burnham (Accident Prone: A History of Technology, Psychology, and Misfits of the Machine Age [2009]), Scott Gabriel Knowles (The Disaster Experts: Mastering Risk in Modern America [2011]), and Arwen Mohun (Risk: Negotiating Safety in American Society [2013]), underlining the extent to which sociopolitical interests as well as scientific facts and cultural norms influence injury prevention. Singer also indirectly introduces her readers to the modern theory and practice of health equity. Overall, the broad chronological and thematic scope, accessible prose, and clear arguments of the book make There Are No Accidents a useful resource for research and teaching.

At the same time, Singer pays more attention to deaths than to disabling and apparently “minor” injuries and oversimplifies the interplay between state and non-state regulation. Even as Singer analyzes the opioid crisis and fall prevention programs like STEADI (Stopping Elderly Accidents, Deaths, and Injuries), she only briefly explores how the perceived risks and realities of nonfatal accidents inform everyday life. This tendency has led social scientists and public health practitioners to focus on single disasters and the risks of workplaces and transportation networks at the expense of home safety. Singer also attributes the failure of the government to protect the public from injuries to agency capture, the process whereby corporations allegedly take over the very institutions meant to oversee their activities. This explanation, however, misses how agencies including the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) arise from and often end up replicating the patterns of industry self-regulation. Although the CPSC, for example, relies too heavily on businesses and nonprofits to set standards, to release warnings, and to administer recalls, the agency does not have the resources to carry out these duties itself. The government has never had absolute authority over safety and routinely grants private efforts to inform the public and to engineer safer goods and material environments the force of law. Rather than being captured after their initial formation, most federal agencies are grafted onto existing systems of non-state control. The gaps
within this infrastructure cannot be filled with stricter regulation alone.

Despite overstating the degree to which powerful companies and their allies have co-opted the US safety movement, Singer skillfully traces how the ideals of personal responsibility and free enterprise have constrained injury prevention since the 1900s. There Are No Accidents should appeal to audiences across multiple fields, and it provides a perfect introduction to accidents and their social contexts for undergraduate courses. Perhaps most crucially, the book demonstrates the promise of applied history as a method to clarify the causes and effects of accidents and to propose forward-looking policy solutions.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-sci-med-tech


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57673

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.