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# Blackout



## Synopsis

On July 13, 1977, there was a blackout in New York City. With the dark came excitement, adventure, and fright in subway tunnels, office towers, busy intersections, high-rise stairwells, hotel lobbies, elevators, and hospitals. There was revelry in bars and restaurants, music and dancing in the streets. On block after block, men and women proved themselves heroes by helping neighbors and strangers make it through the night. Unfortunately, there was also widespread looting, vandalism, and arson. Even before police restored order, people began to ask and argue about why. Why did people do what they did when the lights went out? The argument raged for weeks but it was just like the night: lots of heat, little light--a shouting match between those who held fast to one explanation and those who held fast to another. James Goodman cuts between accidents, encounters, conversations, exchanges, and arguments to re-create that night and its aftermath in a dizzying accumulation of detail. Rejecting simple dichotomies and one-dimensional explanations for why people act as they do in moments of conflict and crisis, Goodman illuminates attitudes, ideas, and experiences that have been lost in facile generalizations and analyses. Journalistic re-creation at its most exciting, *Blackout* provides a whirlwind tour of 1970s New York and a challenge to conventional thinking.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Fear and looting in New York. That's how many remember the 1977 blackout. While Son of Sam was still at large and unemployment was high, nine million people were suddenly plunged into darkness on a hot July evening. Unlike the comparative calm that characterized the 1965 and 2003

blackouts, in 1977 mobs went on a violent rampage. Adults, teens and children torched buildings, yanked protective metal grills off storefronts and smashed windows to fill their shopping carts with food, appliances, jewelry and clothing. These groups outnumbered police (only 14 officers were on duty in Bushwick, Brooklyn, that evening) and robbed more than 2,000 stores city-wide. By the time power was restored after 25 hours, damages from the devastation had climbed toward \$61 million. Rutgers history professor Goodman, a Pulitzer finalist for his first book (*Stories of Scottsboro*), carries the reader beyond conventional journalism for a multidimensional, kaleidoscopic narrative history, covering the events and aftermath from all angles: "I tell my story in bursts, recreating incidents, deeds, accidents, encounters, conversations, exchanges, and arguments, trying to evoke mood and place and time." He recalls the 1977 blackout through personal accounts, studies, public reports and period articles from magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*) and newspapers (*the New York Times*, *Daily News*, *New York Post*, *Village Voice*, *Amsterdam News*). While the more mundane tales of revelry and inconvenience will appear familiar to many readers after blackouts this past year in the U.S., Canada, England and Italy, Goodman reminds us that the excessive looting of 1977 is the looming dark side of power outages in the electrified world. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Rushed out by its publisher after the Northeast's most recent major power outage, the latest from Pulitzer finalist Goodman (*Stories of Scottsboro*, 1994) captures New York City during the blackout of 1977. It's a portrait of a city hurting from unemployment, spooked by the Son of Sam murders, and dizzy with inflation. Goodman uses a staccato style that is reminiscent of John Dos Passos' socioliterary snapshots, catching citizens in the midst of daily routines, at work and play, barhopping and making love. The narrative's relentless drumbeat becomes somewhat annoying at times, but as the story turns to looting, vandalism, and arson, Goodman's true abilities take over, and the reader is caught up in a nonfiction mystery that cries out for a solution--why do people act as they do under these circumstances? Almost lost is the puerile behavior of the Con Edison executives, who seemed to have spent their time "flak-catching" rather than problem solving. Goodman sheds light on a dark episode in the life of the Big Apple. Allen Weakland Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

This is an enjoyable look at the complexities of 7/13/77. The writer takes an interesting, scatter-shot approach at explanation and description. All in all a very good book.

I really enjoyed reading this book! It's astonishing how people can react to abrupt changes! Some show empathy towards mankind while others are simply downright mean. The facts are there.... so much confusion...so many reasons....so much history!

Anyone who has experienced last summer's blackout and is old enough to remember the previous Big One - 1977 - ought to read "Blackout" just to transport himself back into the era: How different things were! Those who aren't old enough or weren't there should do the same for educational reasons. We are frequently blinded by today's events and forget how things got the way they are. James Goodman does a great job reminding us of the many good and bad parts in our fairly recent past - and you don't have to be a New Yorker to appreciate the story he tells.

A very thin book on an interesting topic. Very few interesting photos, and an indifferently written text by a writer who could stand with some improvement. Don't bother is my advice. The PBS documentary recently was much more interesting & informative.

This book deserves four stars because it is well researched, thoughtful and original. Goodman transports the reader to the New York of the 1970s - grimy, crime ridden, corrupt... wildly exciting. For those of us who given the 'any historical period' choice, would choose New York in the 1977, the book is made to measure. Having said that, it takes some getting in-to at the start, particularly in stylistic terms. After a while though, the tricky repetition does recede, or perhaps one gets used to it, and becomes more a matter of narrative flow than stylistic irritation. The book has a number of interwoven strands, including a somewhat technical account of the titular blackout's possible causes. Also given possibly overextended coverage is the issue of looting, from the perspective of both looters and merchants. Whilst one does tire somewhat of the looting in descriptive terms, the socio-historical debate around its causes is very nicely done. There are some nice references to popular, and indeed high cultural responses during the blackout, and I would have liked some more of these, and less of from the looters and merchants. In trying to treat both groups even handedly, the looting angle becomes a little plodding at times, as I say. At least the discussion of looting and arson in different areas helps the reader build up a mental map of a lost New York they never knew. Not an easy read then, but for the New York aficionado for whom such books are their only real window on this distant metropolis, an often engaging and always enlightening one.

It has been more than a quarter century since that fateful night. Most folks have long since forgotten

all about it. But the New York City blackout of 1977 is an event worth remembering. Who or what was the real cause of the blackout? And what prompted some people in a number of neighborhoods around the city to engage in looting, vandalism and arson that would in the end destroy over 2000 stores citywide? As author James Goodman points out, these were not the best of times in the City of New York. Crime was out of control, unemployment was high, and confidence in the political leadership of the city was extremely low. And to make matters much worse the city was suffering the effects of debilitating heat wave. The blackout it seems came at just the wrong time. Using an interesting and at times dizzying writing style, Goodman has a dozen or more storylines going at any one time. He presents the story from all sides. What was the Mayor saying and doing about this crisis? And the suits at Con Edison....how were they responding? What motivated those doing the looting? And how did store owners try to protect their property? How did the police respond and were the measures they took correct and appropriate? And when it was all over what was reaction of community leaders, the media and the politicians? So many questions. James Goodman has given us a remarkable and thought provoking book. I certainly enjoyed it and if you are a student of history I suspect you will as well.

This book is a collection of short bursts of information, designed to give readers a feel what it must have been like to live through the bad old days of New York: in particular, the looting-ridden 1977 New York City blackout and its aftermath. I think it succeeds in its basic mission; however, it could use quite a bit of cutting down, since it contains quite a few selections of prose that are not really blackout-related and thus don't add anything to the discussion (for example: "Some shot heroin. Some shot hoops ...Some studied: for summer school, for the real-estate-licensing exam, for the LSATs.")

I had been looking forward to this book for some time and was quasi-disappointed. The book is written in short bursts of information, rarely attributed to any person by name, that detail the 1977 NYC blackout. Emphasis, of course, is placed on the looting and the aftermath, with a few sprinklings of anecdotes from Broadway and the Mets home game, but most of the narrative takes place in the more impoverished neighborhood. This lacks the "big picture" insight that a book devoted to this one event deserves. What, for instance, happened in 1977 Times Square? Not even mentioned! The blackout is covered in much more detail in the amazing 2005 Jonathan Mahler book *LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THE BRONX IS BURNING: 1977, BASEBALL, POLITICS, AND THE BATTLE FOR THE SOUL OF A CITY* and Spike Lee's underrated 1999 film *SUMMER OF SAM*.

The book naturally becomes the editorial page arguments over the actions of the looters - did they do it as a cry for help from the depths of poverty and hunger, or did they do just because they wanted to steal. Plus, there shoulda been pictures!

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