



The Last Minute

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Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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On the first page, a map of Heathwick High Street (airport nearby, right?). Then a Prologue, subtitled 'Eleven minutes later?' which reports a situation shortly after an explosion on that High Street. The next 228 pages record a second-by-second, one minute countdown towards the explosion (hence **The Last Minute**). The final 20 pages comprise a transcript of a post-catastrophe radio interview and a list of victims and survivors. The publishers promise supporting 'online documentation and reference material including radio and press coverage of the disaster, tribute sites to the victims and the official government report'. Such material, they suggest, will reveal 'how people are perceived before and after tragic incidents, and how the media report on tragedy?', including the manipulation of facts by the Press.

Eleanor Updale worked in radio and television news and has a PhD in History, so everything seems to point to an intriguing and authentic docu-novel. But that list of 65 victims reflects a basic flaw in this promising structure. We glimpse these 'ordinary people' in the preceding pages, going about their mundane business in the minute before the explosion. Given time and incident through which readers could get to know them as characters, we might find that nobody is 'ordinary'. But we have only one minute of time in which to meet everybody; children on a school outing, women in a fitness class, people in a bakery and a petrol station, on the street between the bank and the church, in the coffee shop, passengers in a plane on its descent to Heathwick Airport. One or two are sketched a little more sharply than others: an unfaithful prospective MP, a sign painter up a ladder outside the church, the teacher on the school bus, a drunken beggar telling a feeble joke 'but even they remain little more than ciphers.

Within just a few minutes of finishing **The Last Minute**, I couldn't remember any of them; and because I had no reasons to care about them, I was not at all inclined to spend long raking over the clues to work out which of the possible causes of the disaster (chance, carelessness, terrorism, whatever) might be 'the truth'. Too many people, too little time and circumstance to know them, too little depth. So an exciting, different idea became little more than an exercise.

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