

LEE CLARKE

Worst Cases

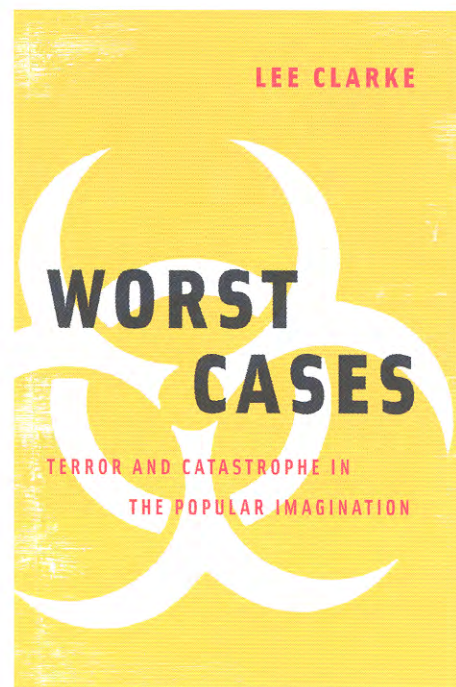
Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination

Al Qaeda detonates a nuclear weapon in Times Square during rush hour, wiping out half of Manhattan and killing 500,000 people. A virulent strain of bird flu jumps to humans in Thailand, sweeps across Asia, and claims more than fifty million lives. A single freight car of chlorine derailed on the outskirts of Los Angeles, spilling its contents and killing seven million. An asteroid ten kilometers wide slams into the Atlantic Ocean, unleashing a tsunami that renders life on the planet as we know it extinct.

We consider the few who live in fear of such scenarios to be alarmist or even paranoid. But *Worst Cases* shows that such individuals—like Cassandra foreseeing the fall of Troy—are more reasonable and prescient than you might think. In this book, Lee Clarke surveys the full range of possible catastrophes that animate and dominate the popular imagination, from toxic spills and terrorism to plane crashes and pandemics. Along the way, he explores how the ubiquity of worst cases in everyday life has rendered them ordinary and mundane: very real threats like a killer flu or an American Hiroshima have become so common that they have lost their ability to shock us. Fear and dread, Clarke argues, have actually become too rare: only when the public has more substantial information and more credible warnings will it take worst cases as seriously as it should.

A timely and necessary look into how we think about the unthinkable, *Worst Cases* will be must reading for anyone attuned to our current climate of threat and fear.

Lee Clarke is a sociologist at Rutgers University. He is the author of *Mission Improbable: Using Fantasy Documents to Tame Disaster*, published by the University of Chicago Press, and *Acceptable Risk? Making Decisions in a Toxic Environment*. He is also the editor of *Terrorism and Disaster: New Threats, New Ideas*.



“The timing of *Worst Cases* could not be better. It considers what is on everyone’s mind but has remained, until this point, the elephant in the room. While many books have addressed this worst case or that one, none have confronted the extensiveness of the problem or the accumulation of worst cases, the concerns they have raised, how we think about them, and what should be done. This is an excellent and important book that needs to be widely read.”

—Diane Vaughan,
author of *The Challenger
Launch Decision*

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