

"To injure no man,  
but to bless all mankind!"

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BOOKS

■ HISTORY

## When New York City's lights all went out

*Why the 1977 blackout remains a dark moment in city history*

By ROBERT KLARA

**O**n the night of Wednesday, July 13, 1977, patrons of Windows on the World restaurant, hovering 107 stories above New York City, put down their forks in astonishment as they watched the skyline at their feet vanish into blackness. The jazz band moved to the next number, men slid out of their blazers, waiters lit candles and poured drinks while the ice lasted.

Meanwhile, high up in another place — the South Bronx — the scene was decidedly different. A gang of looters battered their way into a Pontiac dealership and drove 50 new sedans straight through the plate-glass windows of the showroom into a night of police sirens and fires.

One city, one disaster, and a million different responses were the recipe for the blackout of 1977, when lightning strikes, a bottlenecked and antiquated grid, and a poorly trained operator at a Con Edison control center all conspired to plunge millions of New Yorkers into darkness.

It's a rare thing for a city of such disparities to be united by a single event. But that night, dowagers of the Upper East Side and welfare mothers of Bushwick were in similar straits: alone in the dark, hot, and scared.

In "Blackout" (published almost two years after another massive power outage plunged the northeastern United States and Canada into blackness in August 2003) professor and author James Goodman chooses to focus on, if you will, the darker side of the story.

And so he should. Because while a lucky few "stranded" in the lobby of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel sipped champagne on the house as they waited for the good men of Con Ed to turn the lights back on, the real story was out in the street, where things were not as pretty. There are questions lurking out there, too: big ones.

Such as why — 12 years after the largely peaceable power outage of 1965 — the blackout of '77 (unless it's a night of looting that ended in 4,000 arrests and \$350 million in damages. Or why looters who claimed they needed food for their families had elected to steal stereos and liquor. Or why most looters were minorities — as were most of their victims. Or why, despite having lost their lives' work, many plundered merchants rejoiced when their businesses burned. (Answer: because fire, not theft, insurance was the only kind for sale in the inner city.)

Those dualities, those contradictions, those itchy and burdensome issues of race and class are among the central questions that "Blackout" bravely takes up.

Having apparently combed every column of the city's six major papers of the time, Goodman not only reconstructs the events of that scary and bewitching evening, but also relies on a number of astute social commentators to take up the hardest question: Why did it happen — not so much the blackout itself, but the barbarous response some New Yorkers had to it?

The answer to both questions buzzes along the same lines. A witches' brew of electrical problems and human errors caused the blackout, just as a corresponding caldron of social problems triggered the violence in the streets.

Yet like citizens in the blackout itself,



**BLACKOUT**  
By James Goodman  
North Point Press  
272 pp., \$13

"Blackout" gropes but does not find the real answer — and it shouldn't. Because while any attempt to explain the motives of the dispossessed will fall short, the pursuit of the answer fascinates us to this day — because we're still after it.

In the mix of the book's many voices, the reader cannot help thinking of other confounding acts of mass violence closer to our own time — the Los Angeles riots, even 9/11 — and here, the observations of the 1977 looters become eerily transcendent: "They feel the world owes them something." "They don't have no chance out here. So when they see the opportunity they take it." ... for one night to let us have the opportunity to get back for all the times that we have been beat, for all the times that we have been oppressed."

Weighty issues aside, Goodman also does a fine job of weaving the quirky episodes of the night together, sometimes with great pathos.

At Shea Stadium, the battery-powered organist played "Jingle Bells" while thousands sang, tourists spent the night on the observation deck of the Empire State Building, and Bellevue Hospital doctors siphoned gas from a car to power the generators for their lifesaving equipment.

Like the troubled night itself, Goodman keeps most of his characters anonymous, and chooses a style that favors quick and vivid episodes drawn seemingly at random from all corners of the city, stitching them together in a spare and jagged narrative that hammers as often as it tells. This device can, especially after 100 pages, border on the torturous (like sleeping in a tent with a thousand leaks), but the stylistic sin is easily enough overlooked given the excitement of the subject matter.

"Blackout" pulls the reader into a world turned upside-down, one in which social conventions of order are as useless as the wall switch.

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PHOTO BY RAY STUBBERLING



**ALL OUT:** The city was plunged into darkness July 13, 1977. No lights are visible (below) except in one building with emergency power and from car headlights on the bridge. By the next night (left), power was 90 percent restored.

