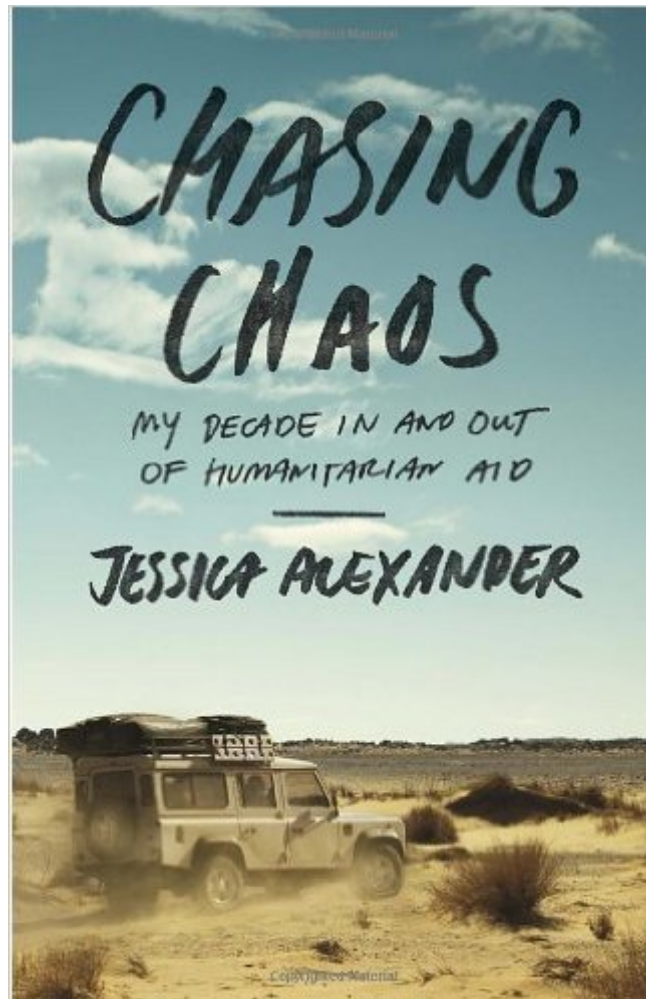


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Chasing Chaos: My Decade In And Out Of Humanitarian Aid



Synopsis

Jessica Alexander arrived in Rwanda in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide as an idealistic intern, eager to contribute to the work of the international humanitarian aid community. But the world that she encountered in the field was dramatically different than anything she could have imagined. It was messy, chaotic, and difficult—but she was hooked. In this honest and irreverent memoir, she introduces readers to the realities of life as an aid worker. We watch as she manages a 24,000-person camp in Darfur, collects evidence for the Charles Taylor trial in Sierra Leone, and contributes to the massive aid effort to clean up a shattered Haiti. But we also see the alcohol-fueled parties and fleeting romances, the burnouts and self-doubt, and the struggle to do good in places that have long endured suffering. Tracing her personal journey from wide-eyed and naïve newcomer to hardened cynic and, ultimately, to hopeful but critical realist, Alexander transports readers to some of the most troubled locations around the world and shows us not only the seemingly impossible challenges, but also the moments of resilience and recovery.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I bought this book when I went to one of her public appearances. As another reviewer noted, Ms Alexander is an impressive speaker, thoughtful and knowledgeable, and I was hoping the book would follow through. Although her prose was as excellent as her public speaking, I thought the book was disappointing. It's more of a "coming of age" story, complete with failed relationships, occasional hookups, idealism sullied by harsh realities, and late-night discussions about the

meaning of life with her girlfriends. I was amused when "years later" and "years ago" turned out to be 3-year spans of time....really she could benefit from a little perspective; her lifetime is just beginning! And really no one should be surprised that aid agencies staffed by real human beings and dependent on donations fall prey to politics, image-burnishing, and inefficiencies. Hardly a revelation! All that being said, I learned a lot about the particular catastrophes she was involved in; I'll admit I'm one of the people who has trouble with African geography. And her descriptions of the maturing aid "community" which is really a late-20th century development are enlightening. With people like her involved, I'm sure it will continue to improve in effectiveness and efficiency. Summary--excellent writing and informative about some recent history, but way too chatty. Perhaps her next book will provide a more thorough perspective on international aid.

I've often wondered what draws people to save the world by traveling around the globe and offering aid to those in other countries. While it sounds xenophobic, I've often thought that with all the needs in our own nation, why go somewhere else and why would you think you can make a difference. That's what led me to *Chasing Chaos* by Jessica Alexander. While I can't say that the book answers all of my questions, it does an excellent job in providing information and a personal experience that I found informative, thought-provoking and important. Ms. Alexander has spent considerable time in places in Africa, Haiti and other locales and has provided an excellent account and analysis of foreign aid and the world of NGOs, the U.N. and disaster recovery efforts. Her description and re-telling of her time in Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Haiti were excellent and I feel much better informed after reading it. I recommend this book wholeheartedly. Ms. Alexander walks the lines between autobiographer, journalist and scholar in this book and the end product is exceptional.

If you've ever wanted to save the world and wondered how (and how not) to do it, *Chasing Chaos* is the book to read. *Chasing Chaos* is neither an academic treatise nor a muckraking expose, and readers should not expect to find either prescriptions for or blanket condemnations of the current aid effort. The book is an extremely readable and engaging personal memoir that charts one young woman's education in the challenging, maddening, and ultimately heartbreaking world of humanitarian aid. The reader will learn a great deal about the ways that valiant aid workers like Jessica Alexander strive to confront some of the most difficult humanitarian situations of our time. In her years of work in the field, Alexander experienced a wide range of different aid scenarios and the book does an excellent job of revealing the particular complexities and challenges of each, giving

the reader a compelling and thought-stimulating overview of the significant challenges that "doing good" poses for everyone concerned, and it does so in a way that is engrossing, sympathetic, and often quite funny. Readers will be drawn in by Alexander's personality and the way she vividly writes about her own development in the developing world, from wide-eyed ingénue to someone who is critical of many aspects of the aid effort, but also deeply hopeful about the difference that coordinated aid can make in people's lives. There will always be disasters, both natural and man-made, so you can read this book and be thankful that people like Jessica Alexander are willing to go to places that most of us would not want to visit, much less live, and marshal their intelligence, financial resources, and empathy in humanitarian service to some of the most dispossessed people on our fraught planet.

This is a perfectly OK book for what it is, which is the views and experience of a twenty-something yuppie who wanted to do international aid work without having to enlist herself in a two-year commitment. She takes herself pretty seriously and is obviously annoyed that no one else did, and if you can't sympathize with the casual egotism of the young I can see you finding the narrative more than a little irritating at times. Gilbert does a lot of griping over things that are at least inevitable and in some cases probably the very reasons people support international charities at all; there are a lot of moments where she comes across as more than a little naive, and not in a good way; at other times her little chin quivers with smugness. However if you are interested in the human side of bureaucracy, it's more than worth a read.

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