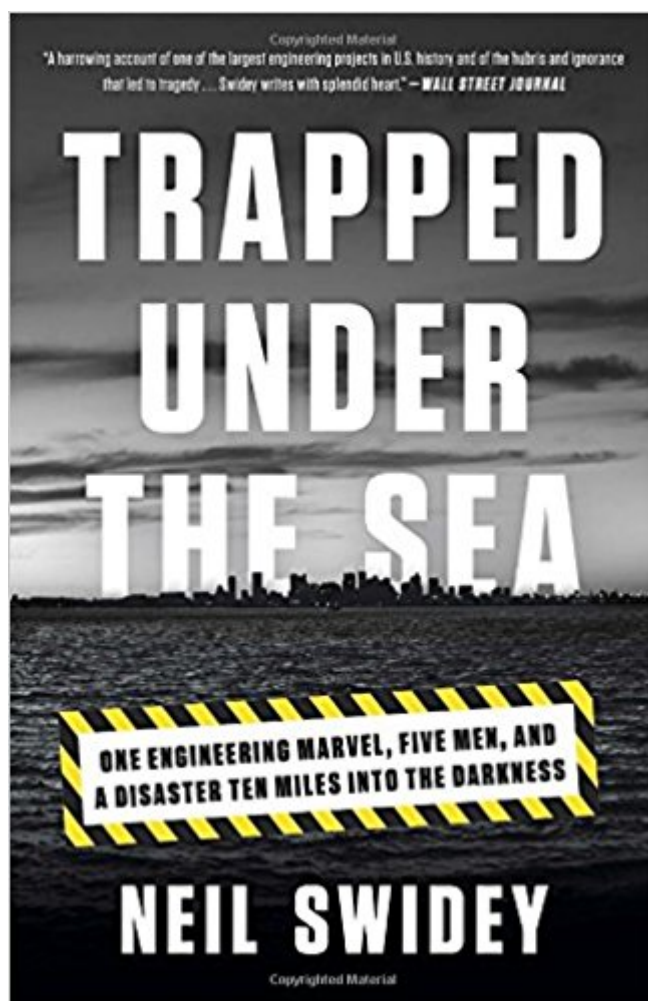


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# Trapped Under The Sea: One Engineering Marvel, Five Men, And A Disaster Ten Miles Into The Darkness



## Synopsis

The harrowing story of five men who were sent into a dark, airless, miles-long tunnel, hundreds of feet below the ocean, to do a nearly impossible job—•with deadly results. A quarter-century ago, Boston had the dirtiest harbor in America. The city had been dumping sewage into it for generations, coating the seafloor with a layer of “black mayonnaise.” Fisheries collapsed, wildlife fled, and locals referred to floating tampon applicators as “beach whistles.” In the 1990s, work began on a state-of-the-art treatment plant and a 10-mile-long tunnel—its endpoint stretching farther from civilization than the earth’s deepest ocean trench—to carry waste out of the harbor. With this impressive feat of engineering, Boston was poised to show the country how to rebound from environmental ruin. But when bad decisions and clashing corporations endangered the project, a team of commercial divers was sent on a perilous mission to rescue the stymied cleanup effort. Five divers went in; not all of them came out alive. Drawing on hundreds of interviews and thousands of documents collected over five years of reporting, award-winning writer Neil Swidey takes us deep into the lives of the divers, engineers, politicians, lawyers, and investigators involved in the tragedy and its aftermath, creating a taut, action-packed narrative. The climax comes just after the hard-partying DJ Gillis and his friend Billy Juse trade assignments as they head into the tunnel, sentencing one of them to death. An intimate portrait of the wreckage left in the wake of lives lost, the book—which Dennis Lehane calls “extraordinary” and compares with *The Perfect Storm*—is also a morality tale. What is the true cost of these large-scale construction projects, as designers and builders, emboldened by new technology and pressured to address a growing population’s rapacious needs, push the limits of the possible? This is a story about human risk—how it is calculated, discounted, and transferred—and the institutional failures that can lead to catastrophe. Suspenseful yet humane, *Trapped Under the Sea* reminds us that behind every bridge, tower, and tunnel—behind the infrastructure that makes modern life possible—lies unsung bravery and extraordinary sacrifice. From the Hardcover edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

**\*Starred Review\*** In the summer of 1999, after an extraordinary project to clean up filthy Boston Harbor was stalled, five commercial divers were brought in for a dangerous, high-stakes mission hundreds of feet beneath the ocean floor. To unstick the Deer Island sewer treatment plant project, the men entered a 10-mile-long tunnel, a dark and claustrophobic space in which oxygen was fed to each man through an umbilical hose. When the mission went wrong, the men found themselves fighting for their lives in a race to get out of the tunnel. Swidey spent five years poring over documents and interviewing all the major figures, including the surviving divers, who speak for the first time about the tragedy and its lasting impact on their lives. More than just an exploration of the elements of a mission gone wrong (the politics, engineering, and design), this is a look at the dangerous jobs done by countless workers executing the grand plans of politicians and engineers that are taken for granted. With the pacing and feel of a special-ops adventure and the insight of a public-policy investigation, Swidey details the lives of the divers, leading up to their fateful mission, the horrors of the ordeal, and its aftermath as the survivors coped with trauma and guilt. --Vanessa Bush --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

A 2014 Booklist Editor's Choice#1 [Boston Globe](#) bestsellerA NEIBA bestseller"While corporate boardrooms are the usual point of entry for dramas involving big money and technological hubris, Swidey, a journalist and author, works instead from the bottom up in his impressively reported account...His is a skillful examination into the basic fragility of such huge infrastructural projects and a lesson in how worker fatalities result not so much from single catastrophic mistakes as from a series of small, bad decisions made by many individuals." [New York Times Book Review](#)"A harrowing account of one of the largest engineering projects in U.S. history and of the hubris and ignorance that led to tragedyA cautionary tale, which Mr. Swidey writes with

splendid heart." **Wall Street Journal** "Intense" | A Perfect Storm of public works: the great, awful narrative about the building of a ten-mile tunnel that ends in a very dark place beneath the Atlantic. Maybe not for claustrophobes; definitely for everyone else." **New York** "Dramatic... Through his meticulous reporting, Swidey sheds light on how the largest monuments to our collective genius are also the most likely to be seriously flawed. Audacious, brilliant, imaginative construction projects are really, really hard to build" and ultimately they're built not by the dreamers who conceived them, but by the sandhogs and divers sent deep into the earth." **Chris Jones, The Atlantic** "A harrowing account of how commercial divers risk their lives to improve ours. After reading Neil Swidey's engrossing *Trapped Under the Sea*, you will never look at a bridge or tunnel in the same way." **Men's Journal** "[Trapped Under the Sea] transcends narrow geography in many ways: as exemplary investigative reporting, as superb narrative writing, as a cautionary tale of capitalistic greed, as a case study of how government agencies can protect or harm, and as a rare glimpse into the scary world of underwater dive crews.... [Swidey] masterfully portrays the lives of the five divers, their loved ones, their work colleagues and their supervisors. It is a rare book that portrays blue-collar skilled laborers so thoroughly and compellingly." **Steve Weinberg, Dallas Morning News** "Perhaps Swidey's greatest accomplishment is how through it all the bravery, the bungling, and the loss he manages to attain a level of suspense akin to that accomplished by Sebastian Junger in *The Perfect Storm*... [A] masterfully crafted saga." **Boston Globe** "[A] riveting, tragic true story... Fascinating." **Parade** "Captivating... Swidey brands the disaster with a human face by introducing the men to the reader and extracting lessons learned through a careful examination that he passes along in a narrative nonfiction piece that would no doubt make his glorious predecessors in the investigative magazine genre of the early 20th century proud." **Fort Worth Star-Telegram** "Reads like a thriller." **Sacramento Bee** "Neil Swidey's detail-rich account of this unlikely disaster is a stirring tribute to the men, how they lived, and how they died." **Mother Jones** "Neil Swidey's *Trapped Under the Sea* combines rich characters with a thrilling and tragic story that offers something for readers of all stripes... At once tragic and ironic, insightful and enraging." **The Blaze** "Swidey's book is, at its core, a story about people: the people who risked their lives. The people who loved them. And the people who should have seen the disaster to come." **Macleans** "A gripping (and true) tale told in a you-are-there narrative style that recalls Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*." **Civil Engineering** "Unforgettable... Seems destined to become a nonfiction

classic." **Engineering News-Record** "Trapped Under the Sea" is extraordinary. It bears comparison with *The Perfect Storm* in its brilliant evocation of everyday, working class men thrust into a harrowing, at times heroic confrontation with death and disaster.

**Dennis Lehane**, author of *Live By Night* and *Shutter Island* "This book will take you on a journey into a fascinating but little-known world as the anatomy of a tragedy, a dramatic tale with a cast of vividly drawn characters, superbly written and researched."

**Jonathan Harr**, author of *A Civil Action* and *The Lost Painting* "Trapped Under the Sea is a heartbreaking tale of real-life bravery, real-life bungling, and real-life tragedy. Neil Swidey is a terrific storyteller."

**Elizabeth Kolbert**, author of *Field Notes from a Catastrophe* and *The Sixth Extinction* "Thrilling and beautifully told, Trapped Under the Sea delivers us into a dangerous and mysterious world, a place that speaks to our darkest fears and where heroes work, as Swidey so masterfully shows us, just beneath the surface of our everyday lives."

**Robert Kurson**, author of *Shadow Divers* "A fascinating, sympathetic, and suspenseful look at a doomed, high-risk engineering job, the working class men who dared to undertake it, and its ripple effect on the survivors. Claustrophobic and compelling."

**Chuck Hogan**, author of *Devils in Exile* and *The Town* "A marvel of masterful reporting and suspenseful writing. Neil Swidey has delivered a gripping, action-filled account of the human costs deep inside a feat of modern engineering. He has a remarkable knack for bringing to life indelible characters and making readers hold our breath as these brave men enter the claustrophobic world of their undersea lives."

**Mitchell Zuckoff**, author of *Frozen in Time* and *Lost in Shangri-La* "Trapped Under the Sea offers vital insights into how organizations work or fail to work and how very smart people can make very bad decisions. Neil Swidey's riveting account of the Deer Island disaster should be essential reading for anyone in a position of leadership. I couldn't put it down."

**Amy Edmondson**, Harvard Business School Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management and author of *Teaming* "A masterfully reported, grippingly written, and moving case study of how the emotional way we assess risk can lead to deadly mistakes. Nearly everyone in this sad story, driven by their own unique motivations, misjudged a deadly danger that was staring them in the face, and the results were tragic. There are lessons here, for all of us."

**David Ropeik**, author of *Risk!* "With the pacing and feel of a special-ops adventure and the insight of a public-policy investigation, Swidey details the lives of the divers, leading up to their fateful mission, the horrors of the ordeal, and its aftermath as the survivors coped with trauma and guilt."

**Booklist**, starred review "Gripping" "This virtuoso performance combines insights into massive engineering

projects, corporate litigation, environmental science, and cutthroat free-market behavior with vivid personal stories." — Publishers Weekly, starred review "Enlightening...Provides immense detail about the challenges, solutions, politics, management, legalities, and personnel involved in a huge, expensive, necessary project that transformed Boston Harbor from an open sewer into a recreational area...yet never loses sight of the people involved." — Library Journal, starred review "A story of infrastructure told on a human scale and a trenchant reminder that the modern metropolis comes with high risks and savage costs." — Kirkus Reviews From the Hardcover edition.

This book is a wonderfully detailed account of a needless tragedy. Faulty design, bad science, poor engineering, lack of oversight, and some extremely bad decisions all contributed to the deaths of these unfortunate men. To say "I couldn't put this book down" is an understatement. The author brings you right into the tunnel with these men. You can actually feel the cold, the dampness, and the cramped, claustrophobic conditions that they had to endure. Highly recommended.

The story provides a snapshot of the five men who accepted the challenge of meeting the requirements of so many government agencies to accomplish a difficult task. The book is an example of the lack of flexibility and understanding of government officials tasked to oversee projects which they don't understand. Equally responsible for the disaster and success of the outcome is the workings of big business. Delegation of authority and lack of responsibility appeared regularly as each obstacle was approached. The waste of tax payer money to complete the harbor clean up project in Boston shows how good men can get caught up in taking chances, disregarding safety and accepting risks which they knew were not reasonable. Luck was depended on to get each part of the job done. After the disaster the lives of the remaining crew were presented with the examples of how some overcame events and memories and others failed and suffered as well as those that were close to them. The book provides a great factual timeline with major evolutions fully discussed and leaves the reader to draw their own opinions as to who was at fault.

This was an interesting read and turned out to be something a little different than what I'd expected. My expectation was a book about a harrowing mission gone bad and the rescue of the workers in the tunnel. Well, of course it was that, but that part of the story was the smallest part of the book. Swidey spent most of his narrative laying the back story and aftermath out in detail. And that's what made the book interesting. The construction efforts and story of the tunnel, the divers and project

managers, etc. were/are all interesting characters, and how the events of the failed assignment affected all of them. Turned out to be a very compelling story, and tragic in terms of how the people's lives were impacted by what happened in the tunnel. All in all this was a very readable and interesting story, mostly about people's lives before and after the tragedy, and well worth the read.

As others have remarked, this book is a page turner. Most of the credit goes to the writer who clearly knows his craft. The storyline is not new. Worker safety taking a back seat to other priorities, lax governance, shirking responsibility, wishful thinking, incompetence, and arrogance. The physical set-up is unique (9 mile construction tunnel under 100+ swf), but whether workers are killed in mines, building dams, offshore oil rigs, related factors collude to create catastrophic events including deaths. And "ordinary heroes" as quoted in the book may draw the short end of the stick. In less capable hands, the story could easily have been matter-of-fact, monotone, factual, but void of spirit. The author, through extensive interviews and leg work, brings the characters to life. Workers become pawns in games played by competing factions, big and small. And we invariably root for the five divers, two of whom perish in the tunnel due to inadequate equipment and safety procedures. And Massachusetts lacks effective criminal means to prosecute such potential wrong-doings, still as the author noted in the epilogue. A familiar state of affair in many parts of the world.

Fascinating and suspenseful book. The prologue drew me in immediately; couldn't put the book down as I read the story of the 5 divers and their families. This was not a book I could read in pieces-started in Baltimore, read for my entire plane trip home to Nashville and finished at 2AM. This is a thoroughly researched and detailed account of a needless tragedy. Neil made the details of building a 9 mile long tunnel under Boston Harbor interesting. Neil honored the 5 divers and all the men who worked on this project by telling a story not often told. Usually we hear about the engineers and politicians; this book tells the story of the workers who risk their lives to build engineering marvels we all take for granted. The book made me tear up and so angry I wanted to throw my Kindle across the room but I am so glad I read; a story that needed to be told. There are lessons here that don't just apply to big construction projects but to so many projects/work environments.

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