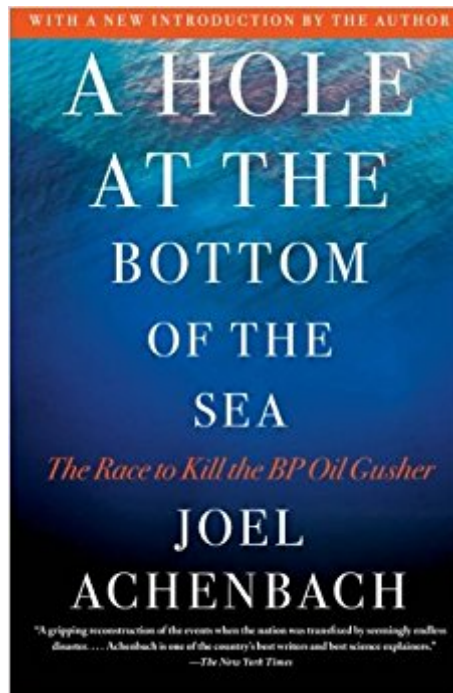




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A Hole At The Bottom Of The Sea: The Race To Kill The BP Oil Gusher



Synopsis

The struggle to kill the BP Macondo gusher in the Gulf of Mexico is the Apollo 13 of our time. This is the story of the nightmare well and of the men who conquered it in dangerous waters. It is a technological thriller for the ages. It was a technological crisis in an alien realm: a blown-out oil well in mile-deep water in the Gulf of Mexico. For the engineers who had to kill the well, this was like Apollo 13, a crisis of untold danger and an unprecedented challenge. A suspense story, a mystery, a human tragedy: Achenbach has written a cautionary tale that doubles as a technological thriller.

Book Information

Paperback: 304 pages

Publisher: Simon & Schuster; Reprint edition (April 3, 2012)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1451625375

ISBN-13: 978-1451625370

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.8 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 49 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #842,031 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #75 in [Books > Engineering & Transportation > Engineering > Energy Production & Extraction > Drilling Procedures](#) #291 in [Books > Engineering & Transportation > Engineering > Energy Production & Extraction > Fossil Fuels](#) #356 in [Books > Business & Money > Industries > Energy & Mining > Oil & Energy](#)

Customer Reviews

“Achenbach lives up to his promises to make the disaster into a tale that everyone can comprehend, with fluid, often Spartan prose and a candid tone. . . .” --Los Angeles Times
“A gripping, insightful, sobering and at times heroic tale of the struggle to find a solution to a technological problem whose precise source is still a mystery.” --The Globe and Mail (Canada)
“Briskly informative and even-handed. . . . A Hole at the Bottom of the Sea will not make anyone feel better about the BP spill. But with economic and political pressure on to resume deepwater drilling in the Gulf of Mexico, it’s a book anyone who lives along its shores needs to read.” --St. Petersburg Times

Joel Achenbach is a senior writer for The Washington Post’s national news desk, writing

on science and politics. He started the newsroom's first online column in 1999 and the paper's first blog, Achenblog, in 2005, and led The Washington Post's coverage of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster. He has taught journalism at Princeton and Georgetown. He lives in Washington, D.C., with his wife, Mary Stapp, and their three daughters.

This book less about the details of how the the blow-out happened and how the problems were solved than about how BP and the government presented the problems to the public and some of the public reactions. Some pictures and diagrams would have been enormously helpful. Henry Petroski in another book on engineering failures notes that the sheer ram in the blowout preventer did not function correctly because the riser pipe was slightly tilted. Petroski notes that this was clearly a design failure since it would be expected that if you were going to activate the sheer ram, you knew that things had gone badly wrong. While the failure of the sheer ram was not the cause of the disaster, the failure was symptomatic of the sloppy approach taken in both the engineering and the activities in drilling this well. None of this is described in this book. In the end, this book is more of a public relations critique and a description of the politics of the disaster than about what actually happened in the gulf.

I enjoyed parts of the book. At a time when the movie of the accident brought BP & deep water drilling back into discussion, this book certainly covered interesting parts of the entire incident. However, I found the author repetitive and overly technical, even for someone around the Texas oil patch for a long time. In my opinion, this book will lose a lot of readers in miniscule details rather than the real issues. I would still read it, but it lost some of my rating due to the way it was written

A very interesting telling of the Deepwater Horizon disaster, with particular focus on the efforts after the blowout and sinking of the rig to stop the oil spilling into the Gulf of Mexico. Very interesting look at the overall complexity of modern technological systems that make serious problems like the blowout and oil rig disaster that killed 11 men and possibly fully unknowable environmental damage should not be unexpected.

I, too, had a hard time putting this book down. Author is very skilled in telling a complicated story, full of industry jargon and ever-changing relationships between the 2 major players. I would have given 5 stars except for lack of two things: a glossary and a few simple figures. Despite the author's efforts, I could not visualize this BOP and how it connected to (or housed?) various risers, side taps,

and the non-functioning disconnect mechanism. Late in the book, Joel is explaining how the unexpected and disastrous flows made their way, ultimately, up to the drilling floor. Although attempted, the pathway was not revealed by the text, due to jargon, at least. Again, a simple diagram would do wonders. These two are simple things to create (although not by most) and lend themselves to a job for a junior research assistant (intern, newbie, etc) with results vetted by some experts who would enjoy such a review task. I am such in several fields not related to petroleum, the hardware, the flowing things, and so forth. I welcome such review requests. Although the author mentions the huge water amounts being sprayed onto the burning gusher and its possibly endangering the rig, he doesn't tell us who wanted to keep the water going and why. You can't put out a burning gusher with water, as Red Adair became famous for providing the alternates. All you can do is sink the rig and they did. Is that how the authorities meant to change the pollution coming from that flare into liquid pollution? Perhaps; but I'd have liked the author to enlighten us. This is a very good book; I believe it could have been a great one. I'll read more of Mr. Achenbach, now.

A Hole at the Bottom of the Sea reads like a great educational mystery (even though I had followed the spill closely in the news). It was intriguing to get to know the characters; peering over their shoulders on a daily basis as decisions were made, unmade and questioned during ever changing, dramatic events. I felt like I was there during the hours before the blow, watching as unsuspecting workers dealt first with confusing data and then as they scrambled in horror on a burning, tilting rig. The book allows us to witness government workers and BP personnel forced to dance a complex, never before choreographed composition together under 18,000 feet of water. I laughed and cringed and rooted for them. My world view and complacency were altered by Achenbach's observations and insights. "The Deepwater Horizon tragedy is a reminder of how little most of know about modern technology" and "The engineered planet challenges all of us to be a little smarter, to pay more attention" because "low probability, high consequence events become more likely given enough time and opportunity". As recent events in Japan prove all too well: Everyone should read this book.

As many others have stated, this is an excellent view behind the scenes of all parties involved in the BP blowout and subsequent gusher. The only significant flaw is the lack of diagrams of the blowout preventer. Much relies on how this device was supposed to work, was actually configured, and how it was reconfigured for the penultimate solution. As this is a complex problem, the author did not try to find "a" reason for the tragedy; he parted the curtain for the reader to observe and consider the

complexities. The blowout preventer (BOP) is one example. On page 52 (after the explosion), the BOP was made to close its pinchers, but the well still flowed. And on page 80, a Transocean engineer announced to the other investigators, "This stack [BOP] is plumbed wrong." Another puzzle handed to the reader is that, as the containment dome was lowered onto the leak (pages 89-90), it filled with hydrates, making it useless. We are told the dome should have first been lowered next to the leak, then moved sideways to cover the leak. It was never explained why this correct deployment of the dome was never tried. The author smoothly shifts the story from the rig workers to the politicians, to the oil company workers, to the government consultants, and even gives space to the gulf coast locals. This is a great "you are there" experience.

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