



# **Idaho Falls: The Untold Story of America's First Nuclear Accident**

*William McKeown*

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Was the world's first fatal nuclear accident -- the 1961 explosion of a SL-1 military test reactor in Idaho -- the result of a crime of passion? Was the disaster promptly covered up to protect the burgeoning nuclear industry? Idaho Falls documents one of America's best-kept secrets and investigates the question of conspiracy.

## **Idaho Falls: The Untold Story of America's First Nuclear Accident Details**

Date : Published April 1st 2003 by ECW Press

ISBN : 9781550225624

Author : William McKeown

Format : Paperback 269 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Science, North American Hi..., American History

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## **From Reader Review Idaho Falls: The Untold Story of America's First Nuclear Accident for online ebook**

### **Skylar says**

Too short on technical details, too heavy on tabloid gossip.

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### **Gable Roth says**

It had a slight anti-nuclear slant but not nearly as much as I judged from the cover... Yes I know, don't judge a book by its cover... But I did. I wouldn't have read it at all if my brother hadn't recommended it. I am glad that I did. It provided a good history of the reactors at INL and it gave a well balanced analysis of the event at SL-1.

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### **Randy Robbins says**

My father in law was working out the that night. I borrow this book from him. Very interesting. I had no idea this had ever occurred.

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### **Bill says**

Unlike many reviewers, I lack inside knowledge regarding the incident outlined in this book. I was referred to it after reading a few books on the Chernobyl disaster. In its outline of the events surrounding the disaster, it's pedestrian. In its character assassination of two of the three men killed it is reprehensible. The author irresponsibly uses rumor and innuendo (third-hand in one case!) to suggest that one of these men might have intentionally caused the accident in the face of overwhelming evidence pointing to pure incompetence surrounded by a culture of dismissal and underestimation of the dangers involved. The most glaring issue for me is the following: All of these men were trained to believe that a boiling water reactor COULD NEVER EXPLODE! This being the case, how on earth would any of them plan to intentionally destroy the reactor through a manual removal of its control rod, when they were trained to believe it was impossible? This is pure, lazy nonsense. Were the two men in question angels? Certainly not. However, he trumps up character defects that are within the norm for human behavior; particularly young men looking to make their way in the world, under various pressures, and away from their support system in an effort to create an angle of drama and sensationalism that simply should not exist. I am glad to have learned about the incident. As to the author: shame on you. This is lazy work at best, and malicious at worst.

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### **Diogenes says**

What a fascinating and macabre real-life mystery written by a gifted historian and sleuth regarding a

basically brushed-off chapter of US nuclear history. Nevermind the cover resembles a heavy metal album from the '90s, or the apparently whispered rumor-mill that sporadically sparked over the decades. The saying that "truth is stranger [and far more compelling] than fiction" is proven through this read, and thankfully the author leaves ultimate decisions to the reader, since dead men can't talk.

To spur one's interest, here's the mathematical breakdown of the heart of this story, a small nuclear reactor going critical:

- "- 500 milliseconds: The central control rod withdrawal begins.
- 120 milliseconds: The reactor goes critical when the control rod reaches 16.7 inches; rod continues to its full 20-inch extension.
- 0 seconds: The power of the nuclear excursion peaks at 19,000 megawatts; the fuel plates begin to vaporize as temperatures hit 3,740 degrees Fahrenheit.
- 0.5 milliseconds: The nuclear energy release ends; the center fuel elements and central control rod blade and shroud are ejected from the core; the water column above the core begins to accelerate upward.
- 34 milliseconds: The water column rushes into the lid of the vessel; shield plugs are ejected from the lid at speeds of 85 feet per second; the vessel rises out of its sheath.
- 160 milliseconds: The first shield plug hits the reactor room ceiling; two-thirds of the water inside the reactor is expelled and 5 percent of the fission products are released.
- 800 milliseconds: The reactor vessel hits the ceiling.
- 2,000 - 4,000 milliseconds: The reactor vessel falls down and comes to rest in its sheath."

Now, imagine standing on top of and around this explosion. Three people were. What happened?

Enjoy\*

PS: Excellent additional reading: <http://theappendix.net/issues/2014/10...>

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### **Beth says**

I grew up in Idaho Falls and never really heard of this incident, but found McKeown's book to be interesting. I don't know if he's a local, but he does talk a little disparagingly about the Idaho Falls region (yes, I get it can be perceived as an "uptight" Mormon town, but I still felt it colored the book a bit). The writing was sometimes overhanded, but I still found it informative. My grandfather worked out Argonne National Laboratory (essentially next-door to the SL-1 reactor), but I don't know if it was during this time (but I'm going to find out!).

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### **Thomas says**

William McKeown's "Idaho Falls, about the Idaho Falls SL-1 reactor incident in 1961, may be the most awful non-fiction book I have ever read -- and believe me, there's a hell of a lot of competition for that "honor."

I can't possibly go into everything I hate about this book, since there's probably more words to be written about how bad this book is than there is in the original work. This is a textbook example of how bad popular

science writing can be. Imagine The Hot Zone with ONLY the overwrought tones of terror present in the most overblown scary segments about how ebola rips you apart from the inside. Now imagine that kind of narrative style applied to such speculative scenes as how much liquor was consumed by Idaho Falls workers on a given night, or what a husband and wife or a commanding officer and subordinate may have said to each other while they were having a fight...in 1960.

What it boils down to is that the author tries to whip up drama from complete speculation, using overheated language for the most simplistic claims. He goes into great detail about very sketchy personal interactions, speculating wildly about what happened off the record -- which is not a hanging offense -- and, far worse, doing so in a crazed, overheated narrative voice that made me feel like I have been buttonholed at a backyard party by a crazed conspiracy theorist whose conspiracies are without a doubt the **MOST BORING CONSPIRACIES IN HISTORY**.

Obviously, this is a book that's been padded from relatively sketchy information. The author does not really seem to understand the milieu of nuclear power, and repeatedly refers to atoms buzzing like "angry bees." Such language is ridiculous the first time, and by what seems like the ten thousandth, the author has completely exhausted any chance of being taken seriously in my mind.

This dissonance becomes particularly evident near the end, when the author introduces some essentially unrelated questions (in quotations) about nuclear waste, as if it is a huge revelation, and as profound as the author thinks every other word in this book is. Unfortunately, such a sentiment is pretty pointless...since the SL-1 incident had nothing at all to do with waste. It was an operational accident, not a waste accident. That just goes to illustrate the incoherence central to this book's narrative. As a reader, I was left with no real picture of what actually happened, in operational terms, or what the institutional failings were that led to the SL-1 incident. That makes the author's completely credulous delivery of the "suicide" and "love triangle" hypotheses seem like I've stumbled on to the set of The Jerry Springer Show.

Ultimately, the lack of credibility in this book is not about specific problems but about something ineffable. I felt like the author either knows virtually nothing about nuclear history, or is simply a terrible writer...and not that smart. I find that last point somewhat impolite of me to make, and unlikely. But I can't resist making it after suffering through this book's delirious overblown and largely content-free narrative.

I'm not suggesting there's not a story in the Idaho Falls incident, but this author was apparently unable to find it. Instead, he gave us an incoherent mess of a book with a clear agenda to whip the reader up into a frenzy.

Avoid this book like you would a swarm of angry bees.

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### **Brian says**

I gave this a 4 star mainly because it was so informative to me, where I live, where I work, and the accident that helped to shape the nuclear industry with the only fatalities in the industry attributed directly to a nuclear accident. I really enjoyed this book and explaining more of what happened compared to the rumors that still swirl around this fatal accident at work. The history was very informative of Idaho falls and the INL. It was also interesting to see their dilemma with such a new 'science' and how to safely deal with the meltdown. The last few chapters were a bit long for me, but still a really good book to read.

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### **Diane says**

This is an interesting book about a little known nuclear accident (the first in U.S history) at the Idaho Nuclear Laboratory (then known as INL) back in 1961. Since this facility is located 40 miles from where I live in Idaho Falls, you would think I would have been aware of the accident. I wasn't, until I saw the book in our local Barnes and Noble one day. The author researched this book by obtaining records under the Freedom of Information Act. The accident actually killed three people immediately, and may have been responsible for three other deaths of the emergency responders years later. The description of IF back in the 60s, the culture of the Cold War, the description of the early years of nuclear technology, the investigation of the incident and discovery of what actually may have caused the explosion were all fascinating.

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### **Rebecca says**

This book certainly felt more like a popular crime novel than a history of the SL-1 accident. There is a good deal of information here that hasn't been addressed in other works that I've read, so it was a very interesting read. The author includes information on the men involved in the accident and certain events that may have influenced what happened.

The author seems to base most of this information on interviews with people involved in the event, which gives a less than authoritative feel to the book. Not to say I didn't enjoy it. While other works have discussed this event, they did not go into the kind of detail found here. The fascinating (if not gruesome) aftermath of the event is discussed in great detail, such as the recovery of the bodies and the autopsies.

The author's style is a bit odd at times. He refers to the reactor as buzzing like bees multiple times, which I found distracting. I've never been close enough to a reactor to hear it, but I doubt it resembles bees very much. The author also seems to dance around the big love-triangle theory that is associated with this accident. While I found the love-triangle referred to multiple times, the author doesn't give a solid description of what was alleged to have happened, or any evidence to support this was the case at all. This was quite frustrating and makes me resistant to the idea that a love triangle was really responsible for what happened.

To the book's credit, some of the photos included were excellent and really added to my understanding of the accident and the aftermath.

Despite the flaws, this would be an interesting read for anyone interested in those odd historical events that aren't well known; as well as those interested in atomic history. In the end, I have to say I liked it, despite the flaws.

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### **Peter Hiller says**

A book that is both informative, and highly lacking.

When writing a book about an accident at a scientific research station, it's probably a good idea to focus on the science of what happened, not the hookers. The author goes in extreme detail all the events and tussles that could have potentially led to the "suicide" theory. And this theory is the "official" one, if if it's officialness is still spoken of in hushed tones.

While the story is certainly salacious, the author does put a significant amount of effort into ensuring that we have all the (rather scant) details and then saying that he of course doesn't believe the story. Then he completely fails to go into further details about the other potential causes. Major scientific threads are mentioned, then left to wither without being explored. Frankly it's just not up to scratch.

The saving grace of the book is that it does detail some aspects of the attempt to brush over the issues. Like the film industry of the 1930s, fixers are used when required to sweep problems under the rug. But even this isn't quite looked at in enough detail. Instead we have what appears to be a minute by minute account of a party where some men invited a hooker back and a distinct lack of discussion about neutron cross-section and the effects of temperature on criticality.

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### **Dkolacinski says**

The story of the first nuclear meltdown in U.S. history. As fascinating tale that reads like a true crime thriller. I note that those who rated this low wanted it to read like a scientific thesis. That wasn't it's purpose. It's a real story of real people and that makes it worth reading.

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### **Glenn says**

Excellent look at the 1961 nuclear reactor accident in Idaho. I'd heard of the incident in documentaries, and knew it caused the first deaths at a nuclear reactor, but I didn't know much more. This great book is very well researched, unfolds in a very engaging manner, and the authors writing style is really wonderful and so readable. I definitely recommend this book if you are interested in the history of the nuclear industry, especially how it impacted the people involved in the work.

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### **Gene says**

Fukushima, Chernobyl and Three Mile Island are the top three answers on the board when you're asked about the world's worse nuclear disasters. Until I read this book, I would never have added reactor SL-1 at the National Reactor Testing Station. I just didn't know about it.

Notably absent in the history I studied in school, this accident near Idaho Falls in 1961 was perhaps the world's first death by nuclear accident. The world's first meltdowns occurred at the NRTS. The highest concentration of active nuclear reactors on the planet was kept at this facility. And all of this is a quiet, not often discussed, footnote in our history.

William McKeown packs a lot of interesting information and covers a lot of conjecture regarding the cause of the SL-1 explosion in January, 1961. His writing style is a bit slow and he covers things more than once. He's informative and teases you with some of the alleged "hanky-panky" of the principle actors. But the book is a bit of a struggle to get through. Fortunately, it isn't very long (it probably could have been 1/2 to 2/3 it's current size and still had the same impact.)

For those interested in history, this is a decent book. For those interested in nuclear technology, I'd say it's a must-read. For those looking for a thriller with a nuclear explosion as it's central point, look elsewhere.

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**L.A.B. says**

You might recall the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island that happened in 1979. It put quite a damper on America's nuclear industry. But you might not know that the incident was not the country's first nuclear accident. That happened in 1961 at a small reactor at a remote government reservation in Idaho's Lost River Desert. Three people died immediately; many rescuers died later.

You were probably unaware of the accident and deaths because the government didn't want you to be. They didn't want the explosion or grotesque details of radiation poisoning to stifle their research or curtail the birth of the nuclear power industry. But author William McKeown has written his version of the events and subsequent investigations that lays out the details, but leaves the final verdict to the reader. Was it a murder-suicide? Was it caused by mismanagement? It is a well-presented case, a real-life mystery. I liked it.

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