Based on years of class notes and presentations, this book has an informal style that makes it ideal for younger students and a compelling invitation to the serious study of disasters. The volume would also make an excellent addition to the library of any city manager, mayor, or other local government executive. Drabek is one of the most important names in any accounting of the history of disaster studies. His sociological analyses are widely known and well respected. With this volume he should become familiar to an even wider audience. Drabek draws largely on the Disaster Research Center case studies, which cover many years and virtually every type of disaster. In addition he has used material from other researchers, and includes a list of Suggested Readings comprising books published after 2000. Other sources are documented in the voluminous Notes for each chapter located at the end of the volume.

The first chapter is a set of imagined scenarios set in historical events. Though fictionalized, the protagonists and their situations are research-based examples of typical people and their experiences during the disaster impact phase and beyond. These vignettes serve as examples, and are referenced throughout the rest of the book whenever the more general principles they illustrate are covered.

The second chapter recounts the familiar tale of our increasing levels of hazard exposure and the most widely-accepted reasons for this phenomenon, including population increase and migration. The most useful section is the explanation of how social science has studied disasters following four key principles: objectivity, typicality, patterned variability, and generalization. Disaster researchers do not claim total objectivity, but do attempt to explain and control for their biases. They try to avoid the tendency to focus on the outstanding or exceptional cases, attempting instead “to identify the range of behavior that comprises the typical response set” (p. 38). In addition, they seek to discern patterns within the typical response set, and try to understand what findings can be generalized beyond each particular disaster.

The following eight chapters examine common disaster problems—such as information delivery, evacuation, volunteering, and psychological impacts—and their accompanying myths. These chapters are rich in detail and are written in an everyday, down-to-earth style that is sure to please those with little exposure to the vast scholarly literature on which they are based. For example, the following paragraph occurs in the middle of a long discussion of Wallace’s “disaster syndrome.”
Okay, so what is it like seconds after a massive explosion or down in a cellar after a funnel of death has danced by? It depends, but in general, despite great variability regarding what is being felt inside, Americans react. They don’t go bonkers. They don’t become hysterical. They don’t become zombies. In an extremely horrifying situation, a few might crack. But the overwhelming majority will reach inside and cope, behaving in a manner reflective of what? I know of only one word—heroes (p. 111).

Drabek does his best to make complex topics clear, for example he has an excellent discussion of the history of Crisis Relocation Planning and the failings of the Homeland Security Advisory System. He is particularly strong in explaining the convergence phenomenon and emphasizing the importance of incorporating volunteers into disaster response. The chapter on “Organized Disorganization” should dispel any illusions budding emergency managers have about maintaining command and control structures within the highly fluid disaster response scene, and “Life in a Fishbowl” is an equally instructive look at the volatile emotions common among disaster victims and emergency managers during the transition from response to recovery.

Drabek believes “there is much more to being a local emergency manager than NIMS and ICS reflect. While both of these address some of the technical management issues local emergency managers confront, they do not speak to the political and community resource issues that become most important during disaster responses” (p. 226). This opinion is probably shared by most social science disaster researchers. The richly detailed cases he sprinkles throughout the book provide compelling evidence of the need to think and act as the specific situation requires, which sometimes means using varied tactics. However, there are common strategies needed to address the key managerial functions of emergency management—mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.

Each chapter ends with a brief summary of its main points, another feature that makes it useful for students who always appreciate such a recapitulation. The final chapter covers material on recent history and society’s developing understanding of risk, disasters and emergency management. He advocates maintaining organizational integrity based on a strategic rather than tactical understanding of emergency management in hopes that local emergency managers can serve as community change agents in developing more sustainable communities. There are brief sections on mitigation and preparedness strategies, but most of Drabek’s attention goes to disaster response. Here he lists Core, Consequence, Customer, Control, and Cultural Strategies. Broadly, he advocates local control of most decision-making, greater activism on the part of local emergency management, and enhancing citizen volunteerism.

Drabek does not shy away from pointing out the links between social problems and disaster impacts, broadly known as vulnerability. He demonstrates over and over again that there is a “patterned variability” in disaster impacts, and provides examples of strategies that can successfully address such problems in a variety of jurisdictions, such as understanding cultural differences between responding agencies and segments of the community.
One shortcoming of the book is the lack of attention to disasters and emergency management outside the United States. This is understandable because the book is such a personal statement of “lessons learned”. Drabek never claims universality for any of his conclusions and recommendations, and occasionally refers to research done in other contexts—such as Fred Bates’ work in Guatemala. He does attempt to provide broad principles that can be absorbed and applied across a wide range of contexts including other countries.

The reader should also be aware that the main focus of the book is on the response function, since this is where Drabek has been most active as a researcher. He recognizes the interactions between strategies adopted for the various functions, and his recommendations for mitigation and preparedness are similar to those for response. Across the board, coalition building, joint ventures and group decision-making processes are emphasized. Drabek’s main contribution may be in convincing local government executives that emergency management is a critical function for their jurisdictional government, and local emergency managers that working with the executives and other parts of the local government is worth the trouble because of the long-term benefits such a strategy provides.