



The Children's Blizzard

By David Laskin
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Introduction

On the morning of January 12, 1888, a snow storm of unprecedented ferocity and suddenness swept down on the American prairie. One moment the air was clear and mild, the next a blinding wall of ice dust engulfed the landscape in an instantaneous white-out. Thousands were caught out on the prairie without protection. Children on their way home from one-room prairie schools, farmers taking care of their livestock, families doing errands in towns -- all were overtaken by this terrible storm. But the blizzard itself was just the beginning of their peril. In the wake of the front that propelled the storm, some of the coldest air ever recorded spread over the region. As darkness fell, temperatures from Montana to Kansas plunged to double digits below zero. When the sun rose on the glittering windless morning of January 13, hundreds lay frozen to death on the open prairie -- many of them children.

This storm, which the pioneers called "the school children's blizzard," is the subject of David Laskin's non-fiction book. The settlers of the prairie, many of them recent immigrants from Scandinavia, Germany and Russian, had come to Nebraska, Iowa and Dakota Territory hoping to make new lives for their families. Instead they encountered plagues of grasshoppers, prairie fires, drought, terrible loneliness -- and, on January 12, 1888, a sudden wall of ice that forever changed their lives.

The Children's Blizzard unfolds this terrible event by tracing its impact on six pioneer families and their children. Here too is the story of the US Army Signal Corps officer who forecast the storm, his superior officer in Washington, DC, who headed the fledging US Weather Service, and the tangled bureaucracy that made it so difficult to spread word of the storm to the people of the region. Laskin also explains the meteorology behind this event -- why it was so intense and so sudden -- and gives a vivid picture of exactly what happens to the human body when exposed with no food or shelter to prolonged cold.

Blending history, meteorology, human interest, and vivid details about the settlement of the prairie, *The Children's Blizzard* is a work that brings to life both an era of American history and a single unforgettable day.

Questions for discussion

1. "The blizzard literally froze a single day in time," Laskin writes in the Prologue. "It sent a clean, fine blade through the history of the prairie." Talk about how the blizzard epitomized prairie history, how this single event came to symbolize the hardships and calamities of the pioneer period.
2. The biggest natural disaster of recent years is Hurricane Katrina, and there are some striking parallels between Katrina and *The Children's Blizzard*. Both affected large geographical areas; both were forecast well in advance but nonetheless caught residents unprepared; both provoked a huge response in the media. Do you think *The Children's Blizzard* was the Hurricane Katrina of its day? What, if anything, have we as a nation learned since 1888 about how to cope with natural disaster?
3. *The Children's Blizzard* is, at heart, the story of families -- immigrants who came to the prairie for a better life; Civil War veterans who moved west after the war; Mennonites in search of religious freedom. How do the stories in the book resonate to your own family stories of settlement, immigration, hardship and survival? Were any of your ancestors affected by natural disasters? Do you have any memoirs that relatives have written of their early experiences in this country?
4. Do you think anyone bore the responsibility for the deaths inflicted by the storm? To what extent do you think Lieutenant Woodruff is to blame for failing to get the word out in time? What about General Greely -- do you see him as a narrow-minded bureaucrat or an official trying to do his job? Could Greely or Woodruff have done anything differently before or after the storm hit?
5. The narrative of the book is driven by suspense and surprise: as you read, you simply don't know whether children like Walter Allen, Lena Woebbecke, and May Hunt's pupils will survive the night or freeze to death. Talk about how the author sets up suspense and expectation. Do you think the style of the book is well-suited to the subject matter?
6. Laskin has said that his intent was to make the book read like a novel while maintaining strict historical accuracy. Has he succeeded? Which "characters" in the book did you care about most and why?
7. One of the most haunting passages in the book is when Anna Kaufmann looks at the frozen bodies of her three sons and laughs. Discuss this reaction. What do you imagine was going through Anna's head at that moment? Have you heard of similarly strange reactions to trauma or tragedy?
8. "Exposure," the chapter about hypothermia and frostbite, is quite graphic and medically detailed in its depiction of exactly what happens to the body as it freezes to death. Why do you think Laskin chose to write it this way? Does this graphic approach deepen your understanding or distance you from what the boys were experiencing?
9. Compare *The Children's Blizzard* to other disaster books that have been published in recent years -- Isaac's Storm, The Johnstown Flood, The Perfect Storm. Talk about ways in which the various books dramatize the natural event and narrate the story of people battling the elements. Discuss the different ways in which the authors work in history and meteorology.

10. In the final pages, Laskin quotes columnist Nicholas D. Kristof's assertion that "It's time for us to acknowledge one of America's greatest mistakes, a 140-year scheme that has failed at a cost of trillions of dollars, countless lives and immeasurable heartbreak: the settlement of the Great Plains." Do you agree that this was a great mistake? Do you think the book supports this assertion? What kind of future do you see for farmers and families on the plains?

About the Author

A lifelong weather enthusiast and a student of history and literature, David Laskin has written a number of nonfiction books about weather history, American writers, artists, gardens, and travel. His recent book *Partisans: Marriage, Politics and Betrayal Among the New York Intellectuals*, won the Washington State Book Award in 2001 (*The Children's Blizzard* has won this same award for 2005). Laskin publishes regularly in the *New York Times* Travel Section and in *Preservation Magazine*, and has written for the *Wall Street Journal*, *Smithsonian*, *Horticulture*, *Newsday*, and the *Washington Post*. He lives in Seattle with his wife, law professor Kate O'Neill, their three daughters, two unruly dogs and a large unruly garden.