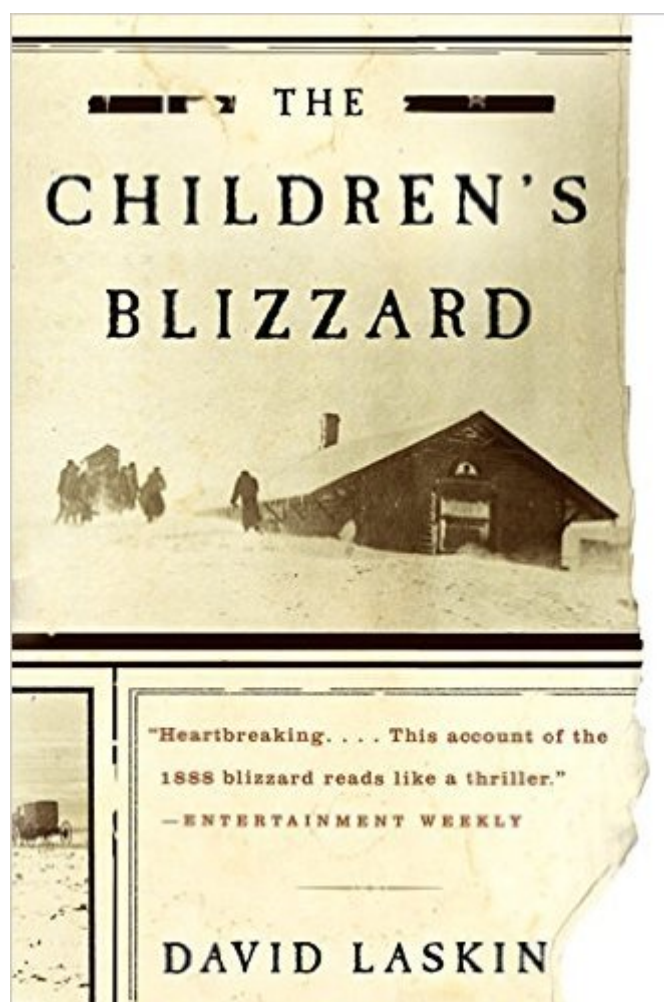


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The Children's Blizzard



Synopsis

Thousands of impoverished Northern European immigrants were promised that the prairie offered "land, freedom, and hope." The disastrous blizzard of 1888 revealed that their free homestead was not a paradise but a hard, unforgiving place governed by natural forces they neither understood nor controlled, and America's heartland would never be the same. This P.S. edition features an extra 16 pages of insights into the book, including author interviews, recommended reading, and more.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I bought this book at the airport when I needed reading material, and it was a wonderful surprise! I can't believe that I'd never heard of it before! I'm an avid nonfiction reader, and I love survival/adventure stories like 'The Worst Journey in the World,' 'Into Thin Air,' 'The Wreck of the Medusa,' and 'The Whaleship Essex.' 'The Children's Blizzard' has all the elements to make it a genre classic! The first third of the book is spent putting the storm into historical, cultural, and scientific context, and readers who want fast action may become impatient. The effect of all this discussion is cumulative, however. The book--and the suspense--really sneaks up on you; I read each chapter with a steadily growing sense of dismay and fear. By the time the snow started falling, I was enthralled. The historical information also serves to humanize--and better dramatize--the event. Mr. Laskin treats the immigrant pioneers, and their hardships, with dignity and respect. I never felt that the author was exploiting the tragedy for artistic or professional purposes. The subjects are difficult for modern readers to relate to--profoundly religious, parochial, Scandinavian, agrarian, (mostly) poor. Many writers would be tempted to either romanticize or condescend them.

Laskin tries to let them speak for themselves. Stylistically, I found the book to be very well-written. The language is clear, precise, and elegant. Lastly, some reviewers found the scientific explanation of the storm and the history of weather forecasting to be tedious, but I enjoyed all of it! It's always nice when an author gives his/her audience credit for having a brain. I love books that I can learn things from, and this book was full of informative treats! Mr. Laskin makes the science very accessible to the layperson. 'The Children's Blizzard' is a gem!

David Laskin sets up the story of the January 12, 1888, blizzard well. He provides the back story of the Mennonite and Norwegian immigrants, the valiant teachers and students, and the Civil War veteran, whose daughter took refuge in a haystack during the storm. The reader learns to care about the participants before the blizzard starts and there is gut-wrenching suspense as the victims head out into the storm. Which of them will survive? Will any of them survive? The main characters are the Schweizers, Swiss-German Mennonites who had emigrated to America from the Ukraine, the Rollags from Norway, and Walter Allen, a mischievous little boy who adds comic relief to an otherwise tragic story. The day of the blizzard starts off unusually warm and the kids on their way to school and the farmers working in the fields aren't dressed properly. The temperature drops precipitously and the snow isn't ordinary snow; it's more like blinding sleet. Laskin is also a weather geek; he provides more than we want to know about the cause of this "Storm of the Century." He provides info about lows and highs, jet streams and jet streaks (this little bugger is a main culprit), fronts, and St. Elmo's Fire. He also shows how the Signal Corps weathermen bungled the forecast. It's all very informative but we want to know what happened to the Schweizer children and Will Allen. An especially riveting scene is when Laskin explains hypothermia, using the Schweizer boys as an example. In an epilogue, Laskin tells us what happened to the survivors and he makes a rather specious statement, suggesting that this storm put an end to the land boom on the Great Plains and that eventually immigrants learned that, although the soil was some of the best in the world, because of droughts and blizzards this land was uninhabitable. Apparently white people are leaving in droves and the land is returning to the buffalo and the Indians. When Wovoka told his people to dance and the buffalo would return, he wasn't too far wrong.

We forget sometimes just how vicious nature can be. In hurricanes this year, in 1991's Perfect Storm, the tri-State Tornado in 1925, and the Children's Blizzard of 1888 nature showed what it can do. Of these disasters, the Children's Blizzard is the least well known. Finally we have a book that chronicles this incident. January 12, 1888 was a nice balmy day, the first after a fairly hard few

weeks. Children went off to school without coats and gloves, farmers went out to work on projects they had been putting off. Then the cold front came through. In three minutes the temperature dropped 18 degrees. A vicious wind blowing heavy snow caused a whiteout that dropped visibility to near zero. By midnight the windchill was down to 40 below zero. By morning (Friday the thirteenth) some 500 people were dead, many of them children trying to get home from school. 1888 was, by our standards, a primitive time. There were certainly no satellite imagery put on television by the local weather forecaster. To be sure, there was some indication of a drop in temperature and snow at the weather forecasting office, but extremely limited communications prevented this warning from being widely circulated. Well researched, well written, this is a book for reading in front of the fire in a strongly built house (the storm ripped the roof off of many schools, exposing the inside to the full fury of the storm) maybe with a hot buttered rum at hand.

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