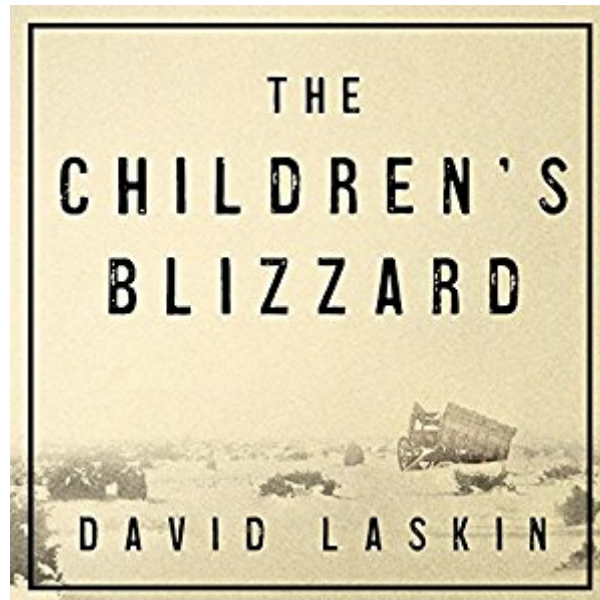




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The Children's Blizzard



Synopsis

January 12, 1888, began as an unseasonably warm morning across Nebraska, the Dakotas, and Minnesota, the weather so mild that children walked to school without coats and gloves. But that afternoon, without warning, the atmosphere suddenly, violently changed. One moment the air was calm; the next the sky exploded in a raging chaos of horizontal snow and hurricane-force winds. Temperatures plunged as an unprecedented cold front ripped through the center of the continent. By Friday morning, January 13, some 500 people lay dead on the drifted prairie, many of them children who had perished on their way home from country schools. In a few terrifying hours, the hopes of the pioneers had been blasted by the bitter realities of their harsh environment. Recent immigrants from Germany, Norway, Denmark, and Ukraine learned that their free homestead was not a paradise but a hard, unforgiving place governed by natural forces they neither understood nor controlled.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It is almost unbelievable how quickly nature can turn on you. If one has never lived through a natural disaster, it is almost like you do not speak the language, or language falls short in allowing a description to match the horror. This story tells of a disastrous blizzard in 1888 which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of people, many of them school children on the Great Plains. The author does a good job of creating a sense of the horror for those who lived through it, those who did not, and those who lost their loved ones. He records the important corollary story of the failure of the fledgling weather service, which failed to warn the public of the approaching storm. Many lives

would have been saved if children had been kept home from school, farmers had secured their animals in advance, and left the fields for home. While I appreciated his description of the weather forces that created this monster, it was very drawn out and difficult for me to comprehend all the details. He does a great job in describing what happens to the human body when trapped in a vicious cold one can not escape. How medical care was not quickly available and when it was, their primary treatment was amputation, given that this occurred before antibiotics and the science of survival after rescue from hypothermia. A great piece of history, both about the blizzard, the history of how this part of the country became peopled with non-Native Americans, and how they endured, despite the vicissitudes of nature.

This fascinating and tragic account of the nineteenth-century blizzard that killed scores of people is rich with personal, political and scientific detail that placed the storm in the context of America's push to settle its frontier. Laskin traces the fate of several families induced by the Homestead Act to travel to the Dakotas, Minnesota, Nebraska and Iowa from their native European and Ukranian homelands, to establish new farms in the harsh environment of the Plains states. Focusing on their children - caught by the blizzard on the way home from school - made the story all the more poignant. The best parts of the book focused on the personal stories of these families, how they were caught in the storm, and affected in its aftermath. One schoolteacher braved the storm after (possibly) tying schoolchildren together and all survived. Another lost more than half of his class trying to travel less than a quarter mile to safety. However, Laskin pulled too many people into the narrative, which made their stories difficult to follow at times. Likewise, the evolution and fate of Army Signal Corp. officers who failed to predict the storm, while interesting, was cluttered with too many backstories, that seemed to bear little or no relationship to the tragedy unfolding in the Plains. Some of the most fascinating passages just talked about the weather. Laskin made dry meteorological details equal parts magical and terrifying as seen through the recollections of nineteenth century pioneers. "The air popped and sizzled when a hand was passed over someone's head," because the violent storm generated so much static electricity. p. 176. One man found that "when his fingers snapped [] fire came from them," and another watched "sparks of electricity leap from the gilt molding used for hanging pictures." p.176-177. Likewise, reports of powdered snow, pulverized by the storm, suffocating and blinding people as it clogged airways and sealed frozen eyelids together, made it easier to understand how tough pioneers became lost and frozen a hundred feet from safety. At times, though, the meteorological details weighed down the narrative. An early passage describing how cold and warm fronts converge, and speculating on the impact of

Rocky Mountain topography on storm development, was mind-numbing. Though the author valiantly tried to rescue the description with thoughtful metaphors, those fragments of understanding seemed randomly cobbled together. Pictures - perhaps extracts from historical meteorological maps (referred to in the text, but unseen by the reader) - would have been a welcome shortcut. While these few dense passages lack the finesse of more polished works (such as Isaac's *Storm*), persistence is well-rewarded by the overall story. Finally, in the aftermath of the storm, Laskin's reflection that the "140-year-old scheme" to settle the Plains "has failed at the cost of trillions of dollars, countless lives and immeasurable heartbreak," was food for thought. In sum, though slow at times, Laskin's account of the "Childrens' Blizzard" was often insightful and evocative, and I highly recommend the book.

"In three minutes the front subtracted 18 degrees from the air temperature. [. . .] Before midnight, windchills were down to 40 below zero. That was when the killing happened. By morning on Friday the thirteenth, hundreds of people lay dead on the Dakota and Nebraska prairie, many of them children who had fled or been dismissed from country schools at the moment when the wind shifted and the sky exploded." (pp. 1-2). Exhaustively researched, extensively detailed, yet eminently readable; *The Childrens' Blizzard*, by David Laskin relates the heartrending, frightening, story of the vicious blizzard of January 12, 1888 across America's midwestern prairie. Some of the narrative gets lost in the details, but, then, this must have been a very hard tale too tell. It's not exactly an easy one to read, either. Recommendation: If you read and enjoyed Eric Larson's book, *Isaac's Storm*; you'll like this one too. "Fiber by fiber, the cold was paralyzing their hearts. Eventually the signals were so faint that they failed to trigger any cardiac response at all. Circulation ceased. With no oxygen the brain guttered and went dark." (p. 197) HarperCollins. Kindle Edition, 307 pages

Wow, I had not heard of the great blizzard of 1888 and of all the deaths. What an enlightening book. Beautiful prose descriptions of prairie life, the immigrant experience, the individual players in the various dramas, etc. The author explained very clearly and in an interesting way how this blizzard developed and the weather patterns and geography that contributed to it -- a perfect storm. The history of the U.S. weather service at the time run by the Signal Corps and the various political and employee machinations were also fascinating. And then the individual tragic stories told like cliff

hanger tales made me want to race to the next page to see what happened. Very well edited which was much appreciated after reading many other Kindle books. A great slice of history in the Midwest well told!!!

Laskin provides vivid description of the several and varied people who populated the northern great plains in the nineteenth century. His development of the story brings the reader to an inescapable sense of foreboding in the face of nature's unrelenting ability to dominate our lives. I shivered, grieved and rejoiced in turn with the pioneers who faced, survived or succumbed to The Children's Blizzard of January 12, 1888.

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