Press Release

The Worst Hard Time

by Timothy Egan

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"This is can't-put-it-down history." — Walter Cronkite

"Stark and powerful . . . a timely reminder that a Nature abused can exact a terrible retribution." — *Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

About the Book

The devastation caused this year by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita serves as a grim reminder of the destructive power of nature and the long-term effects of a single storm. In *The Worst Hard Time* (Houghton Mifflin; December 14, 2005), Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist Timothy Egan brilliantly captures the untold story of the Dust Bowl, the decade of brutally punishing dust storms that ravaged the American High Plains during the Depression and became the "worst weather event" in American history, through the eyes of those who survived it.

Once one of the greatest grasslands in the world, the High Plains of Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico went through a bonanza of overfarming in the 1920s. When the rains stopped and the wind picked up in the early 1930s, the stripped earth began to stir and blow to devastating effect, sending millions of tons of dust across much of the nation. In the High Plains, the power of these blinding black blizzards of dust was such that it was often impossible to "see your hand in front of your face," according to one survivor.

At its peak, the Dust Bowl covered close to one hundred million acres, and more than a quarter of a million Americans were forced to flee their ruined homes. In *The Worst Hard Time*, Egan follows a diverse cast of individuals and families in communities across the affected region, weaving together the eyewitness accounts of survivors now in their eighties and nineties, including:

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• **Ike Osteen**, who survives the Dirty Thirties in a home made of dirt and plank boards, with his widowed mother and eight brothers and sisters;
• **Bam White and his family**, Native Americans who live through the worst of the storms on the edge of town, in the shadows;
• **John McCarty**, a businessman, known as the Dust Bowl Cheerleader, who founds the Last Man Club, an association of people who vow never to flee;
• **The Doc**, a big-hearted, once wealthy man, who ends up a pauper after opening up a soup kitchen;
• **The Herzsteins**, a pioneering Jewish family, who try to maintain the rituals of daily life even after they lose a beloved uncle to a gunslinger;
• **Hazel Lucas Shaw**, who comes to the plains as a teenage bride only to see her baby girl killed by the dust.

The Worst Hard Time captures the full drama, heroism, and terror of this unwritten chapter of the Greatest Generation, a time when the simplest thing in life — taking a breath — was a threat. The book is a testament to the power of human perseverance in the face of the most wretched of conditions, as well as a reminder that the environmental catastrophe of the Dust Bowl may be only a preview of what is in store for us in our ever-warming future.

About the Author

Timothy Egan is a national enterprise reporter for the *New York Times*. In 2001, he was part of a team of reporters awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the *New York Times* series exploring racial experiences and attitudes across contemporary America.

Egan is the author of four books, including *The Good Rain*, a Pacific Northwest Booksellers Book Award winner and regional bestseller for over a decade, and *Lasso the Wind*, winner of the Mountains and Plains Booksellers Award. He lives in Seattle.

A Conversation with Timothy Egan

Why a book on the Dust Bowl now?

The story of the people who lived through the nation's hardest economic depression and its worst weather event is one of the great untold stories of the Greatest Generation. To me, there was an urgency to get this story now because the last of the people who lived through those dark years are in their final days. It's their story, and I didn't want them to take this narrative of horror and persistence to the grave. At the same time, this part of America — the rural counties of the Great Plains — looks like it's dying. Our rural past seems so distant, like Dorothy's Kansas in the *Wizard of Oz*. Yet it was within the lifetime of people living today that nearly one in three Americans worked on a farm. Now, the site of the old Dust Bowl — which covers parts of five states — is largely devoid of young families and emptying out by the day. It's flyover country to most Americans. But it holds this remarkable tale that should be a larger part of our shared national story.

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Do you see any parallels between the Dust Bowl and Hurricane Katrina, the worst natural disaster of our time?

There are so many echoes of what happened in the 1930s and the hurricane that hit the Gulf Coast in the summer of 2005. For starters, there were ample warnings that a large part of the United States could be rendered uninhabitable if people continued to live as they did — in this case, ripping up all the grass that held the earth in place. In one sense, the prairie grass was like the levees around New Orleans; the grass protected the land against ferocious winds, cycles of drought, and storms. Then after the big dusters hit, you had a massive exodus: more than a quarter million people left their homes and fled. Never before or since had so many Americans been on the move because of a single weather event — until Hurricane Katrina. And finally there was the whole restoration effort: President Franklin Roosevelt thought he could restore the land to grass, plant trees, and maybe bring it back.

What about the people? Did they ever return?

Not really. The southern plains never fully recovered from the ravages of the Dust Bowl. There was a fascinating debate within the Roosevelt administration about whether to even try to lure people back. Many thought it was futile, that the whole settlement of the area had been a mistake. One pundit, H. L. Mencken, said the people who lived there were too stupid and should be sterilized. "They are simply inferior men," he wrote.

But there was another, more optimistic impulse — reclaim the land to its original state, and then get people to farm in a different fashion. At one point, Hugh Bennett, who led the soil conservation effort, told his restoration army, "We are not merely crusaders, but soldiers on the firing line of defending the vital substance of our homeland."

Beyond the hurricane, what is the relevance of the Dust Bowl to our times?

Remember what Lincoln said: We cannot escape history. That goes for the natural world as well. The Dust Bowl story is a parable, in a way, about what happens when people push the limits of the land. Many people think what happened in the 1930s — with drought, endless hot days, white skies, plants dying and the earth blowing — is a precursor to what could happen as the climate continues to change and the earth heats up.

Yes, you hear a lot of references about a "new Dust Bowl."

But thus far, there has been nothing like the one that took hold of a big part of our country seventy years ago and lasted nearly a decade. Some of these folks I interviewed, they fought in World War II, saw the worst kind of carnage that human beings can inflict on each other, and they say the Dust Bowl was more traumatic.

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Why is that?

I think it was because of the uncertainty. The world they had known was changing before their eyes, dying, being swept away. They didn't know what has happening. Many thought the end was near, and not just the Biblical end. It was a risk to your life just to step outside on some days. It was risk simply to take a breath. People wore masks and rubbed Vaseline in their noses as filters. At the same time, twenty-five percent of adults were out of work. If you could find a job, you were lucky to make two dollars a day, which is barely enough to feed a family.

What do you mean when you call the Dust Bowl "the great untold story of the Greatest Generation"?

We know a lot about the Dust Bowl refugees, the so-called Okies and Arkies who migrated west to California and into the Pacific Northwest in the 1930s. Much of this we know from John Steinbeck's masterpiece *The Grapes of Wrath*, and from the government photographers and writers who did a terrific job of recording this migration. But very little is known about the people who did not leave the Dust Bowl. And as it turns out, most people never moved away. Nearly two-thirds of the Dust Bowl inhabitants hunkered down and lived through the Dirty Thirties. How did they get by? There was no food from the land, no jobs during the Depression, no money from the government until much later. This was my starting point.

And what kind of story is it?

It's a story of survival, of perseverance, of the most corrosive poverty. Of days when the sky turned ink-black at noon, and times when parents gave up their children because they feared they would starve. Of days with no Social Security, no accurate weather forecasts. Most of the Dust Bowlers didn't even have electricity. They ate things like tumbleweeds — salted and canned — or roadkill, cooked over an open fire. And when they would slaughter a pig, as one woman told me, "We ate everything but the squeal."

What kind of peril did the Dust Bowlers face?

Everything the sky could throw at them, it did. In addition to the usual horrors — violent thunderstorms that produced hail the size of baseballs, wildfires that swept over the prairie, tornadoes that could level a town in the blink of an eye — there were these massive, almost otherworldly dust storms. A typical duster was a corrosive mix of sand and high-velocity air that could make cattle go blind and people cough until it hurt. The sky would blacken as these great waves of dust rose up and fell. Sometimes the leading edge of one of these storms was a mile-high. Charles Lindbergh, the greatest aviator of his age, got stuck at the edge of one of these storms and had to make an emergency landing. He said it was the most frightful thing he ever saw as a pilot. And the storms could be lethal. Makeshift hospitals were set up in school gyms for children who fell ill and then died suddenly from something the doctors called "dust pneumonia."

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What caused the Dust Bowl?

Most of the people who lived through it say it was a human tragedy — one part hubris, one part greed, one part bad luck — not some freak of nature. When you look at the relevant weather data and compare it to the historical record, it's very revealing. The wind speeds were about the same as always. The high temperatures in summer and the lows in winter were not that much out of the norm. Yes, there was a terrible drought. But the Great Plains has always had these elements — high winds, heat, cold, and drought. There was not some extraordinary combination of rare and traumatic weather.

So what was different?

The grass — "North America's characteristic landscape," as the poet Walt Whitman called it — was wiped off the face of the southern plains. This great sea of green had anchored the Great Plains for eternity, covering nearly one-fourth of the continent.

The southern plains was a frontier well into the twentieth century. It was the last place to be truly settled by Anglos during the western expansion. Then suddenly came a gold rush of sorts — a gold rush for grain. The price of wheat doubled, tripled, and quadrupled, prompting a stampede to rip up the prairie grass and replace it with wheat. When grain prices crashed, people walked away, or stopped planting. Then the land was barren, with no grass, and it started to blow.

By 1935, more than eight hundred-fifty million tons of topsoil had blown off the southern plains - nearly eight tons of dirt for every resident of the United States. More than one hundred million acres, an area about the size of Pennsylvania, lie in ruin. One of these storms fell on New York, and another one blew dust into the White House and out to ships at sea in the Atlantic.

Do you blame the people who farmed the southern plains for bringing this disaster on themselves?

No. The people who dug up this hard sod, who lived in dirt houses for a while, or underground in homes they called dugouts, who built churches and schools from the raw scraps of the ground, who raised large families and prospered, for a time — these people were doing what Americans have always done. These were Last Chancers: persecuted Germans from Russia, Scots-Irish from the South, Mexicans who platted out homesteads. The southern plains was the last chance for them to own something. But they were encouraged by the railroads and the government to take unrealistic risks. They were told to take out cheap loans and plant as much wheat as possible as a patriotic act. In the same way that people in the cities were speculating, wildly, in the stock market, these farmers took a gamble that the price of wheat would only go up. They took land that was suited for grass and animals that eat grass and turned it into something else. Only a few cowboys and some defeated Comanche Indians tried to warn them off.

Tell us a little bit about the people in your story.

There's a part-Apache cowboy family we follow throughout the story. The father loved horses and empty sky and the grasslands. What happened to the land broke his heart. Some days, he'd come home to see his wife in tears, trembling in the corner of their tiny house, muttering, "The dust, I just can't take it anymore."

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There's a woman named Hazel Lucas, with southern charm and a big heart. We see her first as a teenage bride, teaching kids in a one-room sodhouse, and then we watch her try to raise a family and keep her dignity through these awful storms.

There's a hero of the New Deal, Big Hugh Bennett, a farm boy from the south who tried to save the grass in the Dust Bowl and convince people that the grasslands could be restored.

There's an extraordinary, pioneering Jewish family, the Herzsteins, who tried to maintain the rituals of daily life even after they lost a beloved uncle to a gunslinger.

There's a town booster and newspaper man, John McCarty, who tried to make a virtue of the dust storms.

And there was a free-spirited kid, one of nine children living in a hole in the ground, whose only goal was to make it to his senior year in high school.

People do some strange things during the worst years. Tell us about that.

The land was sick, and I think that had an effect on how people lived and acted. Towns would hold rabbit-clubbing rallies. Basically, they'd get everybody out on a Sunday afternoon with clubs and round up thousands of rabbits and club them to death. Strangely, rabbits flourished during the Dust Bowl, living on bugs. And speaking of bugs, some states had to call out the National Guard to try to control the locusts and other pests that descended on this desperate land.

You've written a lot about the Pacific Northwest, where you live. What was it like to shift your focus to the southern plains?

Like going from one planet to the other. I'm used to green — forests, rain country, grass that never turns brown but for the driest month of the year. When I was in the southern plains, I suffered from brownshock! But it's fascinating. For me, like visiting a foreign country. The Plains have a wondrous, savage beauty, but you have to take the time to let it get in your bones, to feel a little bit of the haunt and tease and risk of the land. In some respects, it has the worst weather in the world — tornadoes, whiteout blizzards, flash floods, soul-sapping heat waves. But it's lovely, in its way, especially in the early part of the day before the wind kicks up. I also like the drama of the land — the thunderstorms that come out of nowhere, the sky the stretches to infinity, the sense of being alone, even lost in the eternity of the flatness.

What about the grasslands? Is there anything left?

Yes. And this was one of the big surprises. The land really has healed — in places, at least. When I used to see a "national grassland" on the map, I wondered if it was some kind of joke. It's heartening to see some restoration, but the scars of the Dust Bowl are big, and deep, and lasting.

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