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The Children's Blizzard
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You've published on quite a range of subjects—from weather history to literary biography to gardening. Is there a common thread that runs through your work?

I don't think I could narrow it down to one thread, but I do see common passions and approaches in all my books. I like to think of myself as a "synthesist" — a writer who makes connections and puts things in perspective in a new way. The weather history books are really US history from the perspective of weather; my books on American literary friendship and marriage are examinations of how our most important relationships affect imaginative writing. As for gardening, the connection between weather and horticulture should be clear to anyone who has ever stuck a plant in the soil. All gardeners are, at some level, obsessed with weather.

Of course, at the most fundamental level, all of my books consider facets of our country's strange brief history from the point of view of individuals, both famous and obscure. So I guess I could say I'm an Americanist synthesist obsessed with fascinating people.

***The Children's Blizzard* is full of striking, intimate details — like Anna Kaufmann's tortured laughter (mentioned above) and Lieutenant Woodruff's interest in botany and Walter Allen's nearly fatal obsession with his perfume bottle. Where did you get this kind of information from? How did you begin your research?**

For the first couple of months I just read everything I could get my hands on, mostly histories of the prairie, accounts of pioneers, state and county histories, books about one-room school houses. Then I began traveling to the region and poking around archives — mostly state and county archives in South Dakota and Nebraska, as well as the excellent Minnesota History Center in Saint Paul. Old newspapers and archival records turned up detailed accounts of Lena Woebbecke and Robert and Johnny Chambers. I found a picture of Johnny Chambers with his dog at a small museum in Huron, South Dakota, and that helped me visualize the event from the boy's point of view.

But the most striking details came from interviews with descendants of blizzard victims — Walter Allen's daughter, Anna Kaufmann's grand-daughters, Mennonites whose families have been in Freeman, South Dakota for generations. I placed classified ads in every newspaper in Nebraska and South Dakota announcing that I was looking for blizzard stories and the response to that was terrific. Some of the details were just lucky — like tracking down the Woebbecke family on their farm outside of Seward, Nebraska, and learning from them the location of Lena Woebbecke's grave.

As for Woodruff, I had two sources: I contacted a descendant of his, who supplied me with a family tree. And I was also able to examine the extensive records of the US Army Signal Corps (which ran the original US weather service) at the National Archives. Our National Archives are amazing — everything is there! You just need patience (and some luck) to find it.

After the book was published, did you hear from any descendants of people you wrote about or others whose ancestors were in the storm?

Goodness, yes! I can't count the number of phone calls, e mail messages, and letters I have received from descendants. For the most part, people have written to say how much they enjoyed the book and how closely my account matches up to stories that have been passed down through their families. Several descendants of the Graber family contacted me with fascinating new details about how Peter Graber and his younger brother Andreas became separated during the storm. And a man from Oregon filled me in on the fate of a buffalo robe under which his relatives took cover that awful night. I have included passages from some of these letters in the "P.S." that was appended to the paperback edition of the book.

I now have a file of "new" blizzard stories sent by people who have read the book and felt compelled to share stories they had heard grandparents or great-aunts and uncles tell for years.

What surprised you most about the blizzard? Were there new revelations that came out in the course of your research?

My biggest surprise was how suddenly the storm came up. When I began researching, I assumed that accounts of how it slammed against the sides of buildings and blackened the sky in an instant were exaggerated — but after reading scores of these accounts, I concluded they were true. Then, again in the National Archives, I came upon a minute-by-minute account of the storm written by the Signal Corps weather observer in Huron, Dakota Territory, Sergeant Samuel Glenn, who clocked the wind shift, temperature drop, and incredible suddenness with which the storm hit. This was the "hard" scientific corroboration I'd been looking for — and it provided proof that the anecdotal accounts by the pioneers were indeed accurate.

Another surprise was how different the experiences of people caught in the storm turned out to be. Some wandered for hours and managed to survive the night with few ill effects. Others froze to death in a matter of hours. Some, like Lena Woebbecke, spent the entire night out on the open prairie and lived; others died just steps away their sod huts or inside when fuel ran out. Some people (kids at the time) even described the storm as a great lark. It was astonishing to me how differently different people reacted.

I was also struck at how emotional the history of the settlement of the prairie was and is. Many of the settlers of the region were tough,

terse farmers who seldom spoke of their feelings and tended to be stoic in the face of tragedy. But even these people became quite eloquent and passionate when recalling the hardships of the early days — the plagues of grasshoppers and prairie fires, the sickness and death of children, the near starvation they endured the first years. In a way it's similar to the history of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Colony — only this prairie history took place less than 150 years ago, so it's still fresh in the minds of family members. It seems odd that there are people still living whose parents were pioneers, but it's true. They're elderly, of course, but that only makes their memories and impressions the more precious.

The book has some fairly technical descriptions of atmospheric disturbances — the interaction between low pressure system systems and cold fronts, the influence of the jet stream, the impact of geography on upper air flow. How do you know about this? Are you a trained meteorologist?

To be honest, not only am I not a meteorologist, but I'll confess that I never even took a course in atmospheric science, though I dearly wish I had. I've always been fascinated by weather, but it really wasn't until I tried to write about it that I realized how little I knew about the working of the atmosphere. I've been blessed over the years to have the full and generous cooperation of weather experts in the National Weather Service and in the atmospheric science departments of major universities, especially the University of Washington in Seattle, where I live. Winter weather experts like Dr. Louis Uccellini, director of the National Centers for Environmental Prediction, have patiently taught me everything I know about blizzards — I just had to ask the right questions.

Part of what I love about being a nonfiction writer is having the opportunity to get to know and learn from people like Dr. Uccellini — it has been a continuing education. I still don't consider myself anything like an expert on weather, but I am a passionate amateur and passion always helps when you're writing about something.