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## Book Review: The Children's Blizzard

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*The Children's Blizzard.* By David Laskin. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004. ix + 307 pp. Map, sources, index. \$24.95 cloth, \$13.95 paper.

In 1888 a blizzard of epic proportions hit a broad swath of the Dakota Territory, Nebraska, Iowa, and Minnesota. In many areas a mild winter day changed to a total whiteout in a matter of minutes just as schools were dismissing for the day, resulting in a disproportionate number of children dying. The blizzard came to be known as the schoolchildren's blizzard and is still talked about today. My own grandfather as a nine-year-old schoolboy was caught in the storm near Columbus, Nebraska, and saved by an older brother who led his siblings along a creek to their farmstead. David Laskin's account focuses on both the weather conditions that made this blizzard possible and the experiences of some of the families swept up in it.

Laskin looks at the immigration of roughly half a dozen families to the region and follows their lives through such trials of early Great Plains settlement as drought, grasshoppers, prairie fire, and prior blizzards. Finally we are with them as they are caught in the 1888 blizzard and we relive their various fates. We learn in heart-rending detail the stages that the bodies of five schoolboys, all Mennonites from Russia, must have gone through as they froze to death trying to find shelter. We are cheered to hear of those who survived in a haystack or followed a tree line to safety.

Equally fascinating is the story of Thomas Mayhew Woodruff, a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army and chief weather forecaster in a newly opened office in St. Paul, Minnesota. He may have contributed to the tragedy by not telegraphing a cold wave warning to Signal Service stations across the Midwest until late morning on the day of the blizzard.

Although there have been previous compilations of stories from this blizzard, Laskin brings us the whole picture: the unique weather conditions, the situations of settlers on the Plains, and the state of weather forecasting at the time. A helpful map traces the advance of the low-pressure system as it brought the arctic air mass from Canada, with lines showing its progression at three critical times during this fateful day.

*The Children's Blizzard* will be of interest to anyone desiring insight into either the weather or the lives of settlers in the Great Plains during the late nineteenth century.

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