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Book Review: Red River Rising: The Anatomy of a Flood and the Survival of an American City

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Red River Rising: The Anatomy of a Flood and the Survival of an American City. By Ashley Shelby. St. Paul, MN: Borealis Books, 2003. xii + 265 pp. Map, charts, notes, bibliography. \$24.95.

Red River Rising is a gripping read with all the tension and memorable characters of a good whodunit. The tale is the story of the 1997 flood that devastated a number of towns in the Northern Great Plains. Author Ashley Shelby chose to concentrate on Grand Forks, North Dakota, "because the story of the town's demise and recovery could be the story of any American community unexpectedly destroyed and then left to pick up the pieces and rebuild." Shelby said she learned from her journalist father "that the only way to tell the story is to talk to the people who lived it," and she talked to a great many of them. The first half of the book weaves a back-and-forth narrative between what was happening to city residents (record snowfall, seven blizzards, and an ice storm nicknamed Blizzard Hannah that knocked out power to more than 300,000 people) and what was going on in the National Weather Service offices: trying to determine a flood crest with outmoded equipment, lack of data because of Hannah, and a river acting in a way it never had before. The second half is a casebook study of what happens after a disaster, the anger and grief, the frustration and the arguments about what should happen next. Shelby's narrative follows several individuals through the flood's aftermath, including Kelly Straub, who argued with city officials for three years to get what she considered a fair price for

her house, and then Mayor Pat Owens who lost her bid for re-election after the flood.

Red River Rising is not a perfect book by any measure. Errors of fact include the demise of the Empire Theater which still stands and is used by many groups, though Shelby says on one page it was "knocked down" and two pages later that it was "irretrievably damaged." Classes at the University of North Dakota were not canceled until after the dikes broke and the downtown burned. The book also suffers from the lack of an index. Nevertheless, as a case study of a disaster, it should point the way to understanding some of the forces at work before and after a major catastrophe in any Great Plains community.

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