

Isaac's Storm

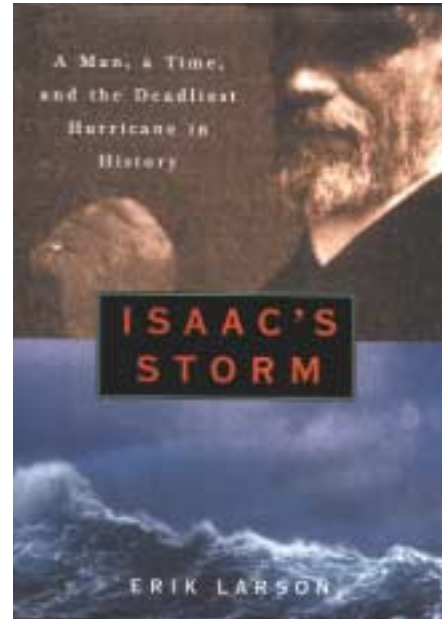
By Erik Larson, Crown Publishers, 1999

Long before the perfect storm, long before anyone even knew what a perfect storm was, there was the Galveston Hurricane of 1900.

The deadliest storm ever to hit this country, the hurricane killed 8,000 men, women, and children over the course of 24 hours. It ended forever Galveston's aspirations to civic preeminence. And it saddled Isaac Cline, director of the fledgling U.S. Weather Bureau's Galveston office, with permanent doubt.

Galveston, a booming port on the Texas coast of the Gulf of Mexico, was uniquely vulnerable to destruction. Situated on an island between the gulf to the south and Galveston Bay to the north, the city rode low in the water: "Visitors approaching Galveston from the sea saw it as a brilliant swath of light between sea and sky, like mercury floating on a deep blue plain."

Its highest point was only 8.7 feet above sea level, but its average altitude was half that, so that with each one-foot increase in tide, the city lost a thousand feet of beach. Flooding was common enough that street curbs were built high and many of the houses were settled on piers that raised them an additional four or five feet above the street. Yet by 1900, Galveston was the biggest cotton port in



the country and rivaled Houston as the most important city in Texas.

Cline, one of Galveston's prominent citizens, was a self-confident, self-made man. Larson writes: "Things were clear to him. He was loyal, a believer in dignity, honor, and effort. He taught Sunday school. He paid cash..." Trained as a physician, Cline had worked as a meteorologist for 18 years. His Galveston neighbors trusted him, then, when he assured them the storm would bypass the city.

Actually, as Larson points out, Cline's role in the disaster is ambiguous. He misread early signals that warned of the coming catastrophe, and he underestimated its destructive power when it hit.

But, says Larson, Cline was operating with bad intelligence. Operatives of the U.S. Weather Service in Havana, engaged in petty rivalry with their Cuban counterparts, deprecated the size and gravity of the tropical storm that washed over Cuba days before it engulfed Galveston. The U.S. Weather Service dismissed Cuban predictions in deference to official fears that hurricane warnings create panic. As Larson puts it: "The Cubans took a more romantic view, a psychoanalytic approach, that was the product of the island's long and tragic experience. Nearly every Cuban alive had experienced at least one major hurricane. Cuban meteorologists had the

1/3
 Actuarial Strategies
 Page 70

same instruments as their American counterparts, and took the same measurements, but read into them vastly greater potential for evil. The Cubans wrote of hunches and beliefs, sunsets and foreboding. Where the Americans saw numbers, the Cubans saw poetry.”

Larson’s writing serves his subject well. His descriptions are cinematic and he builds tension from the opening pages with strategically placed details. The book is anchored by exhaustive research yet reads like an airport thriller.

When the storm actually hits, Larson keeps pace, serving up page after page of hair-raising descriptions, culled from first-person accounts, that will keep you glued to your chair: “At the expensive Lucas Terrace apartment building, Edward Quayle of Liverpool, England, who had arrived in Galveston with his wife three days earlier, happened to walk past a window just as the room underwent a catastrophic depressurization. The window exploded

outward into the storm along with Mr. Quayle, who rocketed to his death trailing a slipstream of screams from his wife.”

This is good, muscular writing. But I would argue that even without it, this book would be a page-turner. The relentless nature of the tragedy that unfolds needs no embellishment.

— Linda Mallon

LINDA MALLON IS MANAGING EDITOR OF THE ACTUARIAL UPDATE AND THE EAR.

The Johnstown Flood

By David McCullough

Fascinating historical account of the flood that engulfed Johnstown, Pa., in May 1889, but the breaching of a dam above the hapless town was no simple Act of God. Faulty engineering in the construction of a man-made lake at a private fishing and hunting club, and indifferent maintenance of the dam that contained it,

combined with torrential rains to unleash a disaster that eventually claimed the lives of more than 2,000 townspeople.

The Perfect Storm

By Sebastian Junger



This tragic, true tale of a commercial fishing boat caught in the North Atlantic at the confluence of three horrific weather systems offers a graphic depiction of man los-

ing the battle against nature (nature, here, being 100-foot waves driven by hurricane-strength winds). Junger includes a parallel story, with a slightly happier ending, of a dramatic Coast Guard rescue of passengers from a 32-foot sailing yacht battered by the same weather system.

Outerbridge Reach

By Robert Stone

Offers a vivid fictional portrayal of a haunted man who decides to sail solo around the world. His boat is small, he is inexperienced, and he meets some very big storms. Compellingly written, Stone’s novel considers not only the motivations of someone who chooses to take such risks but also the havoc his choice wreaks on the loved ones he leaves behind.

Topsy-Turvy (video)

Written and directed by Mike Leigh

Wildly popular in Victorian England, Gilbert and Sullivan’s operettas are beginning to go stale and lose their luster at the box office. Their working relationship, prickly in the best of times, threatens to come undone. Then a cultural exhibition from Japan arrives in London and inspires “The Mikado,” the show that puts G&S back on the map. A fascinating look at how art arises from talent, egos, chance, and sweat.

1/3
Actex
Page 72