The Children's Blizzard

by Melanie Benjamin



About the Book

From the *New York Times* bestselling author of THE AVIATOR?S WIFE comes a story of courage on the prairie, inspired by the devastating storm that struck the Great Plains in 1888, threatening the lives of hundreds of immigrant homesteaders, especially schoolchildren.

The morning of January 12, 1888, was unusually mild, following a punishing cold spell. It was warm enough for the homesteaders of the Dakota Territory to venture out again, and for their children to return to school without their heavy coats --- leaving them unprepared when disaster struck. At the hour when most prairie schools were letting out for the day, a terrifying, fast-moving blizzard blew in without warning. Schoolteachers as young as 16 were suddenly faced with life and death decisions: Keep the children inside, to risk freezing to death when fuel ran out, or send them home, praying they wouldn?t get lost in the storm.

Based on actual oral histories of survivors, this gripping novel follows the stories of Raina and Gerda Olsen, two sisters, both schoolteachers --- one becomes a hero of the storm and the other finds herself ostracized in the aftermath. It?s also the story of Anette Pedersen, a servant girl whose miraculous survival serves as a turning point in her life and touches the heart of Gavin Woodson, a newspaperman seeking redemption. It was Woodson and others like him who wrote the embellished news stories that lured northern European immigrants across the sea to settle a pitiless land. Boosters needed them to settle territories into states, and they didn?t care what lies they told these families to get them there --- or whose land it originally was.

At its heart, this is a story of courage, of children forced to grow up too soon, tied to the land because of their parents? choices. It is a story of love taking root in the hard prairie ground, and of families being torn asunder by a ferocious storm that is little remembered today --- because so many of its victims were immigrants to this country.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss Raina and Gerda and their relationship. How do their personalities and their relationships with each other change over the course of the novel?

2. Both Raina and Gerda find their hearts involved in unlikely --- and even illicit --- entanglements. How does the blizzard change their perception of love?

3. Anette Pedersen is given away by her family. Why do you think her mother made the decision to sell her to another family?

4. Nebraska bills itself as the Garden of Eden. But Gavin Woodson, who writes the articles that lure foreigners from their homeland to the prairie, leaves "Godforsaken Omaha" to find and connect with surviving homesteaders. Why do you think he does that?

5. What modern-day parallels do you see in this story?

6. What does the memory of the young woman he encountered prior to the storm come to mean to Gavin?

7. The storm seems to level the playing field between men and women --- Anette and Frederick, Raina and Tor, Anna and Gunnar. What are your observations on the similarities and differences between these pairs of characters when it comes to their survival and resilience in harsh conditions?

8. How does the storm effect Ollie, or change his views towards Omaha?

9. What did it mean to pick up and move across an ocean in the late 19th century? What type of sacrifice was required of these immigrants?

10. Were you aware of this historic weather event? Were you familiar with the Homestead Act?

11. "Moving forward" seems to be an overarching theme of the novel --- whether it means heading out into the blizzard or dealing with relationships. How does each character move forward throughout the storm and beyond?

12. Raina asks the doctor why he came to Nebraska. Why do you think the characters who came to Nebraska remain there?

13. Discuss Raina and Gerda's relationships with and perceptions of their parents before and after the storm. What are Mama and Papa's expectations of their daughters?

14. What are your thoughts about the end of the book, about the path each sister took?

Author Bio

Melanie Benjamin is the *New York Times* bestselling author of nine works of historical fiction: ALICE I HAVE BEEN, THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MRS. TOM THUMB, THE AVIATOR?S WIFE, THE SWANS OF FIFTH AVENUE, THE GIRLS IN THE PICTURE, MISTRESS OF THE RITZ, THE CHILDREN?S BLIZZARD, CALIFORNIA GOLDEN and THE WINDSOR AFFAIR.

Her novels have been translated in over 15 languages, featured in national magazines such as *Good Housekeeping*, *People* and *Entertainment Weekly*, and optioned for film.

Melanie is a native of the Midwest, having grown up in Indianapolis, Indiana, where she pursued her first love, theater. After raising her two sons, Melanie, a lifelong reader (including being the proud winner, two years in a row, of her hometown library?s summer reading program!), decided to pursue a writing career. After writing her own parenting column for a local magazine, and winning a short story contest, Melanie published two contemporary novels under her real name, Melanie Hauser, before turning to historical fiction.

Melanie lives in Chicago with her husband. In addition to writing, she puts her theatrical training to good use by being a member of the Authors Unbound speakers bureau. When she isn?t writing or speaking, she?s reading. And always looking for new stories to tell.

Photo Credit: Maria Rivera

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Publication Date: January 11, 2022
Genres: Fiction, Historical Fiction
Paperback: 384 pages
Publisher: Bantam
ISBN-10: 0399182306
ISBN-13: 9780399182303