WATER DAMAGED: DISASTER HISTORY IN NEW ORLEANS AND ON THE GULF COAST

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John Barry. *The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998. 524 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. $16.00.

Erik Larson. *Isaac's Storm: A Man, A Time, and the Deadliest Hurricane in History*. New York: Crown, 2000. 336 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. $25.00 (cloth); $14.00 (paper).

The hurricane slammed into the city, with sustained winds of more than 150 miles per hour. Mundane objects became deadly as they hurtled through the air. Flying bricks, for instance, killed several people unlucky enough to be caught outside. Roofs blew off and traveled for miles. Buildings collapsed from the pressure of the gale. And then the flood came, carrying away whole blocks of houses, erasing entire neighborhoods. The aftermath was no better: searching for corpses amidst the wreckage of ruined lives; cataloging the missing, while hoping a child, a sibling, a cousin, a friend might turn up despite the long odds; worrying about disease, insult atop injury; and considering what sort of future a place so badly damaged might have in a new century.

Sound familiar? The following may strike as close to home.

When the floodwaters came, they lingered, leaving not just a single city but parts of an entire region under water for months. Hundreds of thousands of victims lost their homes, beginning a mass migration too huge and disparate to be measured accurately, a sudden diaspora stretching across the country. White skin and class privilege insulated many people from the worst perils. People of color, the impoverished, the elderly, and the frail suffered disproportionately. But there was plenty of anguish to cut through all social strata. Media descended; journalists provided non-stop coverage that captivated the nation and helped shift the political landscape for years. Onlookers, overwhelmed by the scope of the calamity, opened bibles to the Book of Revelations.

Despite countless parallels, neither of these descriptions refers to the impact of Hurricane Katrina. Instead, both are composite sketches—first of Galveston's 1900 hurricane and then of the 1927 Mississippi River flood—drawn from books

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that have renewed significance in these seasons of catastrophe. The country is still grappling with the magnitude and meaning of a disaster so massive that it, even months later, seems incomprehensible. Context might help. Eric Larson's *Isaac's Storm: A Man, A Time, and the Deadliest Hurricane in History* and John Barry's *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* provide this context. If these books aren't entirely comforting, they at least suggest that the struggles facing the Gulf Coast today are not without precedent. For this reason alone, they merit attention. They're also page-turners, expertly crafted genre pieces—works of literary non-fiction—so a wide variety of readers will be engaged by their content.

In 1900, Galveston was perched on the brink of greatness. Its setting was breathtaking. Situated on an island off the Texas coast, the town was built right on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico. It was a medium-sized city for the era, boasting a year-round population of fewer than forty thousand people. Its residents, though, were unusually wealthy and well educated. Its port had recently become the world's busiest handler of cotton, a staple that if no longer King in the South was still part of a royal family of commodities. Buoyed by the region's cotton trade, Galveston boasted some of the South's most beautiful homes and a thriving business district. Culturally, it was outsized: the city had fashioned itself into a hub of music, good food, and theater. Turn-of-the-century Galveston was confident, certain of its bright prospects.

Into this optimistic scene, the anonymous—storms weren't named in the United States until World War II—hurricane of 1900 roared. Larson is writer enough to recognize drama when he finds it. And disasters, as most Americans have learned anew, carry the key elements of the highest drama: tension builds in a violent crescendo; people of character, later called heroes, emerge; villains are unmasked; and then, in the aftermath of destruction, there is calm, as survivors count the bodies, take stock, and begin rebuilding their lives. These are the building blocks of gripping narrative. This is likely one explanation for the popular fascination with a catastrophe like Hurricane Katrina. Observers see in such an event stories they recognize, a chance to measure humanity, to catalog its strengths, and, as importantly, to witness its limitations. Even the heroes are human and therefore overwhelmed next to the enormity of the mayhem unleashed around them. Otherwise, collective interest in disaster may just be voyeurism: rubbernecking at a highway crash played out on the grandest of stages.

So there's no shortage of suspense built into Larson's tale. To be great drama, though, a story must also have strong characters. And here Larson has to earn his royalties. His protagonist is Isaac Cline: a weatherman (hardly a stock hero in American culture), a man of science as meteorology is professionalizing, a Victorian gentleman struggling with *fin de siecle* structural changes beyond his ken and control, and a family man. Cline is a complicated figure to play

the lead. He's dull. He's hardly heroic, by most measures, though he spilled much ink arguing this point in his memoirs. And then there are those memoirs, which, along with just a very few bits of his professional correspondence, provide the only material Larson has to depict this man. The author labels Cline one "of history's little men" (p. 275). This may be layman's code for social history, but the description actually is an apt reading of Cline's rather ordinary qualities. Larson, then, needs another character to work with as well, someone bigger to drive his narrative. Instead of someone, he chooses something: the storm itself.

It's a good move. As readers wade through Isaac Cline, the early years—his insatiable curiosity, his long road to the U.S. Weather Bureau and Galveston—Larson intersperses chapters on the hurricane's genesis. These portraits of a cyclone as a young storm are beautifully rendered: filled with foreboding, complex science, including dashes of chaos theory, simplified for mass consumption, and lovely imagery. The storm was born in Africa, then made its way across the Atlantic, gathering strength before battering Cuba. Meteorologists there tried to warn their colleagues in the United States that foul weather was on the way. But jingoism coupled with professional rivalries to blind the Weather Bureau to the information. The storm, which had matured, was capable of great violence. Still, to Larson's credit, the hurricane is never humanized. It had agency but wasn't sentient and therefore can't play the part of a villain. The bureaucrats in the Weather Bureau who thumbed their noses at the Cubans fill that role. Any wounds that followed the storm's arrival on the mainland would be self-inflicted because of their prejudices. And so, as the hurricane approaches Galveston, Larson writes of Cline, standing by the beach near his home, reading long lines of swells with a sense of dread. Cline, though, was a company man. When his superiors told him there was no cause for alarm, and certainly no room for alarmism, he kept his worries to himself.

What happened next will haunt readers still shaken by images of Katrina's fury. On September 8, 1900, the storm pummeled Galveston. By mid morning, the ocean had begun rolling into the city's streets, which, on average, were just six feet above sea level. By early evening water covered two-story homes. Galveston's residents suffered terribly. Here Larson moves beyond Cline to families like the Rollfings, German immigrants who had paid off their piano on September 7 only to lose everything save for each other the next day. Approximately six thousand of their neighbors, including Cline's wife, weren't so lucky. They drowned. Cline, in his memoirs, contends that his warnings saved as many or more people. But Larson has doubts. It seems Cline was haunted by survivor's guilt and allowed wishful thinking to shape his recollections. As for Galveston, after burning the dead, the city never recovered. Houston, it turns out, was also primed for success. Because of better links to the nation's

interior, a shrewd decision to dredge out a route to the Gulf, and a well-timed oil strike in 1901, Houston became the region's dominant metropolis. It still is today. Galveston, once a site of production, became a landscape of consumption, a beach town for wealthy residents of its inland rival.

This is the story as Larson tells it. It's a gripping tale, well told, and especially poignant now. But it settles for exposition, rather than offering explanations or analysis that might help readers understand the past or present. In short, *Isaac's Storm* is fine reportage but not great history. What's missing is a sense of change over time and an argument. The book is a snapshot, frozen in a moment, with Galveston a stage set: two-dimensional and too quaint. Readers learn nothing about how the place worked, about who was in charge, about race relations, class antagonisms, or ethnic rivalries. Instead they get a lovely postcard, too idyllic to be believed. And then the town is gone. As for the book's argument, it seems that hubris, abetted by technological advance and nascent scientific discovery, leads to the wrath of the gods. Oh, and nature, no matter how much people think they can control it, bats last—reap the whirlwind indeed.

It would be convenient and gratifying to think that these failings are endemic to all literary non-fiction, to authors who sacrifice a thesis on the alter of narrative (and book sales), and that "real," meaning academic, historians do better. John Barry, though, demonstrates that writers needn't choose between story and argument, that the two are compatible, even mutually reinforcing. *Rising Tide* is a great story, filled with drama no less intense than in *Isaac's Storm*. And if Barry doesn't write quite as well as Larson, his prose is typically elegant and sometimes even inspired. More than that, though, *Rising Tide* is well argued, complicated, and deeply researched. Barry, like Larson, tut-tuts at his share of hubris along the way. But the real engine driving his disaster story is complex political culture, profit motive, and struggles over race. In short, this is fine history. As such, it not only illuminates the past but also provides readers with tools for understanding what has brought the nation to its present condition, including the tragedy on the Gulf Coast and New Orleans's fate in Katrina's wake.

It is April 15, 1927 in Greenville, Mississippi. It is raining. Pouring, actually, throughout much of the Mississippi Valley, the vast swath of the continent drained by the great river. The Valley stretches west to the eastern face of the Rockies and east to the western slope of the Alleghenies. Any rain that falls in this area eventually finds its way into the Mississippi. It is Good Friday. Prayer is the order of the day in Greenville, hometown to Leroy Percy, scion of one of the South's "best" families. Percy, a man of immense power and even greater self-control, is anxious—and not about his standing in the eyes of God. Or at least not just about that. The Mississippi is rising, you see. It has been for months. Now it might destroy the levee protecting Greenville. Barry's message is clear and affecting: when Percy worries, you'd be wise to as well.

Here begins *Rising Tide*, but it doesn't linger for long in one place or time. Barry, unlike Larson in *Isaac's Storm*, will not stand pat with a single locale, a narrow temporal band, or a small cast. The book hops back and forth from Greenville to New Orleans, stops in Washington, DC, and occasionally visits other parts of the country. This wide geographic reach is matched by a long arc of time, from detailed study of events during the antebellum era to foreshadowing of the New Deal and beyond. The extraordinary characters include: the Percy clan, especially Leroy; squabbling engineers, who believe that they have mastered the vagaries of the Mississippi, and, perhaps, nature itself; a scheming collection of commercial elites in New Orleans, a group Barry labels a "cabal"; Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, the man President Calvin Coolidge tapped to head up flood relief; and countless unnamed people uprooted by the flood, including tens of thousands of African-Americans interned in grim refugee camps (p. 215).

The engineers appear first. In the wake of an 1849 inundation that submerged parts of New Orleans for months, the federal government commissioned two studies of flood control on the Mississippi. So started one of the great scientific feuds in the nation's history. The maniacal military engineer, A.A. Humphreys, first squared off with Charles Ellet, a civilian, and, from Barry's perspective, an admirable fellow. Humphreys then took on James Eads: eccentric genius, patriot, and gifted huckster who understood finance in the Gilded Age. Ellet filed his study first, before the Civil War began. His findings were intuitive, and, it turned out, brilliant. He suggested a multi-tiered approach to flood control: artificial levees, outlets to shunt water from the river, and wetlands to act as reservoirs for inundations. Humphreys took more time, embraced empiricism, which served him well in an era much taken with the power of data, and concluded in his report that levees alone could be trusted to protect against flooding.

By the time Humphreys published, Ellet was dead, killed in the war. So Humphreys carried the day and became head of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. As Barry tells it, his greatest challenge then came from Eads, who had built gunboats for the Union during the war, bridged the Mississippi at St. Louis after, and then, for an encore, constructed jetties that kept the passes at the river's mouth clear. His reward? Congress created the Mississippi River Commission (MRC) in 1879, stripping power from the Corps—and Humphreys. Upon hearing the news, Humphreys retired. The story of these rivalries is taut, to be sure. There's just one problem: by making Eads the hero to Humphreys's goat, Barry underplays the role of the former in institutionalizing a policy later known as "levees only." Eads became the lead member of the MRC and fought for levees for years, just as the federal government was becoming far more involved in flood control. Humphreys was gone by then. *Rising Tide's* architecture, though, implies that he was more culpable than Eads, whose river myth endures untarnished.

Barry then returns to Greenville, where Leroy Percy's imperial ambitions forced him to confront the Ku Klux Klan. Percy, by his own lights, was progressive. For Barry, this means he was more enlightened on what was then called the "Negro question" than most of his peers. In fact, Percy's views on race boiled down to this: economic growth trumped white supremacy. He wasn't for equality so much as cheap, ready labor. African Americans were close at hand and knew the land. So they had to be protected like any other valuable commodity. To tie this material—which is fascinating back story—to the flood narrative, Barry highlights Percy's relationship with the river. Like so many other places in the Delta, for Greenville the Mississippi was the reason for being, its waters the place's lifeblood. The river had deposited the Delta's rich, dark soil, some of the finest agricultural land in the world. The Mississippi, though, was also terrifying, more dangerous for Percy than any social problem—and harder to solve.

Which brought Percy to levees, a method of bending the river to his will. By the early twentieth century, the levees had grown into miniature mountains looming over the endless flats of the Delta. With each passing year and each new foot added to the levee, engineers promised that people were safer, that the river finally was tame. They weren't; it wasn't. Evidence began mounting that levees actually exacerbated flooding. Water, which previously had spread across the Mississippi's floodplain, was now being trapped within its banks. As a result, catastrophic inundations seemed to occur more frequently. Worse still, the river was rising higher during floods even as it carried smaller volumes of water. Floods in 1897, 1903, 1912, and 1913 all set new high-water marks. Then, in 1922, the river again rose more than ever before. That year, the levee gave way below New Orleans. As quickly as that, the Mississippi dropped. Here, finally, was ironclad proof of the folly of levees only. But the Corps of Engineers was not ready to abandon the policy. And thus, at last, does Barry arrive back in 1927, 173 pages into *Rising Tide*. Factoring in font size and lines of text per page, all of *Isaac's Storm* could fit easily in this early part of Barry's book, with ample room for a movie treatment left over. This is not to suggest that Barry is windy. Thorough, though, would be fair.

It is Good Friday 1927 again, this time in New Orleans. A storm hangs over the city, generating a deluge. Fifteen inches of rain fall, more precipitation in a day than New Orleans usually gets in its wettest month. A stray bolt of lightening, historical contingency almost too cinematic to be believed, suddenly strikes the power station that provides electricity to the city's drainage system. New Orleans is a bowl, built on low-lying land as much as ten feet below sea level, surrounded by a rim of raised levees. The river and lake sit high above, voyeuristic neighbors peering into the city below. Their waters are held back only by levees that keep New Orleans from being washed away. The levees also prevent rain that does fall in the city from leaving; there's no natural drainage. Meanwhile, throughout the Mississippi Valley, the worst

flood in the nation's history has left hundreds of thousands of people homeless. Although the river isn't yet a threat in New Orleans—the levees are fine—the city has been hearing about the regional disaster for weeks, waiting anxiously downstream. And then, without the pumps working on Good Friday, the water begins rising in New Orleans. Panic ensues.

What happened next in New Orleans demonstrates how much clout the city once wielded regionally and nationally, a sharp contrast to today's downtrodden metropolis. With floodwaters from the storm still rising, worried businessmen gathered and decided to dynamite the river's levee fifteen miles downstream, a spectacle intended to prove that the city was safe for business. That these men—bank presidents, media magnates, advertising executives—had no authority to make public policy, and that their plan meant sacrificing two downriver parishes gave them no pause. They promised reparations to the victims of the flood they would release. They then convinced city, state, and federal officials to sign off on the plan by raising the specter of a drowning New Orleans. They even browbeat poor Isaac Cline, who had moved from Galveston to the city (talk about leaping from the frying pan into the fire) to recant forecasts suggesting that the river wasn't a threat to New Orleans. Upstream levees, Cline had said, would fail long before the city faced danger. Two weeks after Good Friday, crews demolished the levee in a lurid display of urban power. A river flood then swept away Plaquemines and St. Bernard Parishes. New Orleans's commercial community heaved a sigh of relief before starting to scheme about how to minimize compensation for the victims.

Barry relates all of this with thinly veiled contempt. The city overreacted to a bad storm, he concludes, by executing two poorer neighboring communities. And all just to bolster investor confidence. Following Katrina, though, readers may wonder if New Orleans had more reason to worry than the author allows. The levee's destruction in 1927 *was* likely unnecessary and driven by greed as much as fear for the city's safety. Reneging on promises to the victims of the flood that ensued *was*, of course, craven. Still, it's hard not to think that Barry's tone would, perhaps, be muted somewhat in light of Katrina's destruction. It likely was premonitions of a similar disaster that motivated elected officials to sanction destroying the levee below New Orleans in 1927. Gambling with the city's fate was too risky, the political and social consequences too high. On that count, at least, recent events have proven them right. Or perhaps this is all just storm-induced teleology. One thing amidst the speculation is certain: this episode of the city's history has lingering consequences today, fueling rumors circulating in the Ninth Ward, where some residents believe the levee fronting their district of New Orleans was blown up so that more affluent, whiter, neighborhoods would be spared.

Returning to 1927, events upriver in Greenville also suggest that the region's current post-hurricane racial tensions are at least partly rooted in its disaster history. The levee failed above Greenville in 1927. Swamped by

the Mississippi's waters, the city had to struggle to survive. For Leroy Percy, though, the real dilemma wasn't how to keep treading water until the flood receded; he lived, like most wealthy whites in the Delta, on high ground. No, Percy was far more concerned with keeping African Americans from migrating north, leaving Greenville without cheap labor. The method he settled on was coercion. Barry writes that "the Mississippi River would show that in race matters Percy's self-interest was not consistent with morality" (p. 118). At Percy's urging, troops rounded up African American flood survivors and forced them into "concentration camps" (p. 311). These refugees couldn't leave the tent colonies without passes, which generated a scandal that nearly tarnished Herbert Hoover's reputation.

But not quite. The flood, after all, had to change America, not just the Mississippi Valley, for the book to make good on the bold claims embedded in its title. So Barry argues that Hoover emerged from the disaster a national hero, beloved for his ability to help the Mississippi Valley clean up from the flood: a technocrat with a heart of gold on the fast track to the White House. Another change: African Americans, livid at Hoover for his role in the Greenville refugee scandal, began flirting with Democratic candidates, starting a transformation by which the party of Lincoln became the party of Nixon's southern strategy. And still another: Americans, because of the flood, became more comfortable with the notion of a federal government that would provide relief, presaging broader trends during the New Deal. All of these arguments, though perhaps forced, are plausible—though Barry lacks the detailed evidence to convince a political scientist or historian—especially after Hurricane Katrina, whose winds seem to have blown change through even the most hermetically sealed chambers in Washington.

Perhaps when he wrote *Rising Tide*, Barry believed such claims were needed to sell books. No longer, though. The story of disaster, on its own terms, is marketing tool enough now. *Rising Tide* received a sales bump following Katrina. And when, weeks later, it appeared that Hurricane Rita might deal Galveston another direct hit, *Isaac's Storm* received a similar boost. But Rita turned away at the last moment, relegating Isaac Cline once again to history's dustbin. Still, the book has been selling, though not nearly so briskly as Larson's *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America*. Which raises the question: must an event change America to be worthy of an excursion into literary non-fiction? Barry, incidentally, has gone on since *Rising Tide* to write about influenza. His prescience is a bit creepy.

Now, the value of these books isn't commercial, though don't bother telling that to their publishers. Nor is it artistic. Instead, they're useful, especially in tandem, for what they tell us about the past, suggest about the present, and hint at for the future. Unfortunately, the message readers are left with is grim, especially for New Orleans. Disasters like Katrina aren't natural,

though people persist in employing this misleading label. They also aren't an inevitable result of hubris—despite Larson's argument. Instead, catastrophes are socially produced. As Barry writes, they're outgrowths of politics, culture, and economics. In 1927, New Orleans was able to avoid one flood and create another because it remained a center of power in the South. The city's business elites could do pretty much as they pleased. No longer. Now the region's power is in Houston, as readers learn in *Isaac's Storm*, in Dallas, and in Atlanta. This time, without power to protect it, New Orleans was battered by an avoidable disaster, not just predictable but predicted. It now seems possible that the city will become another Galveston: a water-damaged tourist attraction with a glorious past.

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