Blizzard!: The Storm That Changed America Short Guide

Blizzard!: The Storm That Changed America by Jim Murphy

Contents

Overview

In mid-March 1888, a blizzard paralyzed New York City and surrounding states. The unexpected storm surprised people who had become complacent after enjoying several days of unusually warm weather for late winter. People reacted to the devastating storm in various ways. Some adults and children insisted on going to work or school.

Others decided to stay home. Travelers were stranded on trains and boats. Ordinary people acted heroically to save strangers. Hundreds of people died during the blizzard.

This natural disaster resulted in improved weather forecasting techniques, municipal cleaning plans, and underground transit systems and wiring.

About the Author

As a child, Jim Murphy initially considered reading uninteresting until a teacher forbid him to read a book. Born on September 25, 1947, in Newark, New Jersey, James Murphy grew up in nearby Kearny. His parents, accountant James K. Murphy and, artist and bookkeeper Helen Irene (Grosso) Murphy, ensured that their son had a happy childhood. He enjoyed athletics, playing football and baseball. Murphy also explored along the Passaic River and created dramatic scenarios based on his vivid imagination. Curious about places that contrasted with his sedate suburb, Murphy accompanied friends on adventures to the New York City metropolitan area and Jersey Meadowlands. They daringly went into empty factories. Because he daydreamed, Murphy did not do well in elementary school.

In high school, a teacher told Murphy's class that they could not read Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms. As a result of this teacher's censorship, Murphy not only read that book but also read any books he thought that teacher would find questionable. He devoured books representing a variety of genres and topics but especially liked history. While he was discovering literary works, Murphy experimented with creating poetry, plays, and short stories. He met Harold Latham, Margaret Mitchell's editor, who advised him to stop imitating other writers and develop his own style.

In addition to schoolwork, Murphy was a nationally ranked sprinter on his high school track team and raced on national championship 440 and mile relay teams.

Murphy worked at various construction projects in the New York City area. He learned how to use and repair machinery, which helped his later work on nonfiction books about technology.

After graduating from high school, Murphy enrolled at Rutgers University. He received a bachelor of arts degree in 1970 and also took graduate courses at Radcliffe College that year. Murphy married Elaine A. Kelso in 1970. They have one son. Interested in children's books, Murphy began working as an editorial secretary in the juvenile department of Seabury Press, Inc., in New York City. That publisher was renamed Clarion Books. Promoted to managing editor, Murphy identified manuscripts he thought merited publication and he also started considering becoming an author.

On his thirtieth birthday, Murphy realized that if he wanted to write books he must devote all of his energy to that work.

He resigned his position. Since 1977, Murphy has worked from his Upper Montclair, New Jersey, home as a freelance editor and writer. In 1978, his first published book was the nonfiction work, Weird and Wacky Inventions, followed by fiction books for younger readers, including Rat's Christmas Party and Harold Thinks Big. His young adult novel, Death Run, was released in 1982. Murphy also contributed to Cricket magazine.

Murphy enjoys the detective work of research. He feels as if he is discovering secrets and unique details that he can share with readers. He carefully selects information to use from the vast data he collects.

Because he is a perfectionist, Murphy considers writing and revising excruciating at times. He has as many as seven writing projects in process at a time. If he has writer's block, he distracts himself by doing housework, taking a break, or switching to another project for awhile. Murphy thinks its important to write even when he does not feel like he is penning quality work because he will have something to work with and revise. He especially enjoys finding illustrations and quotes for his books. Murphy goes to archives and searches through old books and periodicals for information and pictures. Ironically, even though his Irish ancestors survived the 1888 blizzard in New York City, Murphy knows nothing about their experiences.

As an adult, Murphy reads as many books as he can about a topic that intrigues him. His research sometimes pinpoints a person or event that inspires a book. Murphy explains that The Great Fire resulted when he found a twelve-year-old girl's letter about being trapped by the fire and surviving. In a bookstore, he serendipitously located a book of other survivors' stories that was the first book printed after the fire.

He tries to write about dramatic events in which average people find themselves in extraordinary situations such as the 1793 Philadelphia yellow fever plague which will be featured in one of his future books.

Murphy also likes to find a new slant or way to address common topics.

Other primary accounts prepared him to write novels for Scholastic's historical fiction series. He read soldiers' diaries to create The Journal of James Edmond Pease: A Civil War Union Soldier for the "My Name Is America" series. Murphy says that such research teaches him new aspects about American history and insights about fictional characterization and plot development. Sometimes Murphy recreates characters' experiences in an attempt to make them more authentic. He imagined how his protagonist, Teresa Angelino Viscardi, traveled to the Idaho Territory from New York City for the Dear America book, West to a Land of Plenty: The Diary of Teresa Angelino Viscardi.

His fiction and nonfiction techniques vary. For a nonfiction book, Murphy completes his research in primary and secondary sources and at historical societies and archives prior to writing and knows exactly what events will be covered. His novels, however, are written simultaneously as research enables him to figure out what would happen to the characters each day he writes.

Murphy emphasizes that he strives to incorporate humor in his historical fiction and nonfiction to lighten the tone. He stressed that people often react to adversity with humor and laughter as a coping method.

Murphy wants readers to approach life positively and have fun while discovering what interests them. He hopes his works enthuse readers to learn.

His books have received several significant awards. The Society of Children Book Writers and Illustrators presented its Golden Kite to The Boys' War: Confederate and Union Soldiers Talk About the Civil War and The Long Road to Gettysburg. The American Library Association named The Great Fire a Newbery Honor Book. Across America on an Blizzard'.: The Storm That Changed America Emigrant Train received a NCTE Orbis Pictus Award. In 2001, the first year that the Robert F. Sibert award for children's informational books was offered, Murphy's Blizzard!: The Storm That Changed America was selected as a honor book. That book, in addition to many of Murphy's works, was named to national and state best books lists and received starred reviews.

Setting

The northeastern United States suffered the impact of the March 1888 blizzard. Murphy mentions the storm's effect on several East Coast cities but concentrates on New York City and its surrounding neighborhoods. People were in shock as the storm descended, obliterating the landscape. Streets filled with drifts that reached to the second story of buildings. Some drifts were reported as high as eighty feet. Most people were unable to open their doors. Some people tunneled out in attempts to go to work or school. The Spuyten Duyvil cut was filled with ice and snow, trapping trains.

Grand Central Station was hauntingly empty.

Because transportation was stalled, many people walked home across the Brooklyn Bridge.

A few businesses opened hoping that customers would arrive, but most stores remained closed. Pedestrians often fell into drifts and had to be rescued by passersby.

Poor residents, mostly immigrants, lived in tenements that lacked sufficient heat and food supplies. The homeless relied on soup kitchens, churches, flophouses, and police stations for shelter.

On Long Island, farmers waded through snow to tend to livestock in nearby barns.

In the New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Connecticut countryside, trains were stopped by snow and ice drifts on tracks. Some passengers tried to walk to nearby communities. The snow blinded people from seeing. People caught outside resort to hiding in haystacks or building snow forts in an attempt to survive.

Some people were aboard ships such as the Caldwell F.Colt Pilot Boat No. 13 during the blizzard. These vessels emphasized how vulnerable humans are to nature. In addition to enduring snow and winds like people on land, crews risked being submerged in icy water if their ship flooded or disintegrated. Passengers also faced possibly being killed if ships violently blew into ports or other structures or were lost at sea if the crafts were carried away by currents or winds. Murphy describes such scenes in New York Harbor and at Lewes, Delaware.

The frozen Hudson River provides a fascinating setting in which people and dogs walked from one New York neighborhood to another across ice. Young entrepreneurs recognized the opportunity to profit from the blizzard by selling customers access to ladders to descend from the bank to the icy river. This temporary tundra provided drama when tugs broke the ice, and people floated away on ice chunks. Rescue efforts saved everyone before they were swept to sea.

Social Sensitivity

The 1888 blizzard altered life in the northeastern United States as people dealt with problems provoked by the storm. Murphy's book reveals how people can behave kindly and generously during a disaster. The blizzard forced people into life-and-death situations in which they acted expeditiously and heroically to save people, animals, and property. Self-sacrifice and sharing were important as people invited strangers into homes, restaurants, and buildings for shelter, warmth, and food. Realtor P. M. Wilson offered free coal to poor New Yorkers. A Good Samaritan pulled May Morrow's cape over her freezing ears to prevent her losing them to frostbite. Humanitarian responses to the blizzard tended to predominate.

Unfortunately, the storm also revealed societal dilemmas and some people's propensity for greediness. The poor and many immigrants suffered during the blizzard because of the inferior housing they could afford with low wages. Some people charged exorbitant fees to transport people by horsedrawn vehicles. Produce from outlying areas, which could not be shipped to the city, was destroyed. People were fired because their factories lost income during the blizzard.

The blizzard forced federal, state, and city governments to recognize their shortcomings. Officials began enforcing laws requiring utility companies to place telegraph and electrical cables underground. They also approved plans to build subway transportation systems, which some politicians had blocked because they profited from above-ground transportation. Cities developed better policies regarding sanitation and clearing streets after snowstorms. The location of the U.S. president during possible natural disasters was better monitored in order to prevent possible coups or assassination attempts while the nation's executive was isolated from Congress.

Authorities realized that the U.S. Army Signal Corps should transfer weather forecasting duties to a new national weather service, the U.S. Weather Bureau. According to new regulations, this non-military weather bureau would continually monitor the weather, even on weekends, and synchronize reports from across the country.

Literary Qualities

Murphy's writing style causes readers to feel as if they are experiencing the blizzard and how it literally froze life in New England. He carefully researched the history of the storm to select images and sensory details he wanted to share with readers in order to personalize and supplement statistical information about the storm. Murphy utilized primary resources preserved by historical societies and archives to determine how people who lived in New England during the blizzard perceived that experience. He also bought antiquarian books, newspapers, and illustrations. Through his narrative, he wanted to give voice to both ordinary and famous people who were affected by the blizzard and make the historical storm seem real to modern readers.

He effectively shows what life was like for people before, during, and after the blizzard, explaining why that storm was significant to American history.

Murphy consulted contemporary periodicals, especially newspapers, to provide details about people's immediate reactions to the storm. The recollections of members of the Blizzard Men and Ladies of 1888 were of particular interest to Murphy. From thousands of possibilities, he carefully chose individuals whom he felt best represented incidents that conveyed heroism, drama, humor, and even tragedy. Murphy generously includes quotes from letters, journals, oral histories, and other personal accounts so that people can tell their story as they perceived it. He wants to show how people have differing opinions about how to deal with disasters.

The blizzard's history is presented chronologically, showing why the approaching storm fronts were not identified as posing weather threats through the blizzard and its repercussions. The words Murphy chooses to use, both historical and his own, effectively reveal the severity of the situation.

He skillfully builds tension as he relates each person's ordeal. Macabre descriptions, such as frozen birds falling to the streets or horses being electrocuted by fallen wires, intensify the horrors people endured. Murphy does not sensationalize such incidents but reports them in a matter-of-fact manner and without bias.

Sensory details cause readers to feel as if they are immersed in the blizzard. They can feel the cold snow stinging their faces or seeping into their shoes. Murphy creates the sense of fear, apprehension, and frustration that people felt during the blizzard.

As a result, readers develop concern and empathy for the storm's victims. Murphy's inclusion of humor, particularly a store owner posting a sign about a lost diamond ring underneath the snow in hopes of having his sidewalk cleaned, help readers understand how people persevered despite being overwhelmed.

The photographs, drawings, and newspaper pages Murphy chose to include in this photoessay assist readers to visualize the incidents he and the participants describe. Murphy interprets the illustrations to explain why certain scenes are relevant to the text

and can expand on meanings presented in documents. His bibliography guides readers to locate sources to illuminate certain aspects of the blizzard. Inclusion of Murphy's personal experience of being lost in a snowdrift as a boy helps readers identify with the 1888 blizzard survivors and seek familiar parallels in their lives.

Themes and Characters

Endurance and survival are the primary themes of Murphy's history. Called "The Great White Hurricane," the blizzard is the main character. The snowstorm is personified as being an overwhelming monster that swoops in two fronts from the west and south and menaces the area nonstop for three days. The two storm systems are characterized as menacing because one stalls over New York while the other reverses and returns to hit the city again. Pummeling New England with gales that witnesses compared to a hurricane, the blizzard's winds forced the heavy snow accumulation into deep drifts. With the exception of special newspaper editions, communications are temporarily stopped.

The human characters represent both survivors and victims. These people, both children and adults, are members of different social classes, emphasizing that the blizzard did not discriminate based on age or income. Both urban and rural people are depicted. Because the mild spring-like weather was so pleasant days prior to the blizzard, people enjoyed picnics and read poetry inspired by the warmth. Before weather forecasters left their offices for the weekend, they said that fair weather would continue. Then rain began to fall and turned to sleet then snow in the night. Murphy realistically shows that not everyone experienced a happy conclusion to the storm. The themes of tragedy and despair permeate his account. The people Murphy profiled suffered discomforts such as lack of heat and food and sometimes sadly lost family members or friends who succumbed to the storm.

The theme of failure is emphasized by the U.S. Army Signal Corps's inability to prepare people for the storm. In 1888, weather monitors, such as Arctic veteran Sergeant Francis Long, lacked sophisticated technology necessary to detect the potential intensity of the blizzard. At that time, local weather observers telegraphed information about temperature, barometric pressure, and humidity based on thermometers, other instruments, and eyewitness accounts. Regional and national offices interpreted this information to make weather forecasts. These predictions were limited to statements that storms were possible.

Often weather data from varying regions was disregarded as inconsequential to other areas. There was minimal national uniformity of weather coverage. Without computer models and radar equipment, weather forecasters were limited. Their forecasts were also affected by work schedules which resulted in offices being empty from Saturday night to Sunday night thus not receiving reports about sudden weather changes and developments to issue timely warnings such as occurred in March 1888. Because they did not have access to information over the weekend, the army weather officials believed that the warm weather in the eastern United States would continue.

Murphy shows how the blizzard affected children and young adults. Innocence, imagination, and vulnerability are themes relevant to these characters. Excited by the possibility of adventure, ten-year-old Sam Strong was determined to buy everything on his aunt's shopping list but was deterred by closed stores. Strangers kept plucking him

out of snowdrifts, and he felt ashamed that he had not succeeded. Gurdon and Legrand Chapell tried to reach their grandparents' Connecticut home across a field but became lost. They survived by tunneling underneath the snow. Seven-year-old George Steidler endured the blizzard in a tenement house where his family rationed pieces of cabbage, bread, and cheese and burned furniture because they ran out of coal. Some children attempted to go to school only to find empty classrooms. Youngsters played practical jokes such as digging mazes in the snow to confuse adults.

Adults represented themes of duty, courage, and foolishness. Many workers reported to work because they were afraid they would lose their jobs in a depressed market if they did show up. Night-shift employees already at work were unable to go home or risked their lives as they navigated through drifts.

Police and firemen helped pedestrians and took care of emergencies. Newspaper editors, reporters, and artists gathered information for articles and illustrations for special icicle editions and snow sheets. William Inglis, a New York World reporter writing a feature, spent the blizzard seasick on the Caldwell F. Colt in New York Harbor.

At the weather station, Sergeant Long bravely climbed a pole waving in the gusts 200 feet above the street to repair the anemometer which measured wind velocity and was crucial for keeping storm records.

P. T. Barnum performed his circus for a crowd of approximately 100 people. Former Senator Roscoe Conkling insisted on going to the office because he considered the blizzard less hazardous than any of the conflicts he had faced as a politician. Conkling perceived himself as a strong man who would not let anything or anyone deter him. When he reached the courtroom, Conkling was disgusted that no one else was there. Conkling returned home but soon died of an ailment doctors blamed on his exposure to the blizzard.

Murphy provides examples of what happened to other people when they ventured outside. William Brubaker delivered milk, even chipping off ice from iceboxes and clearing porches, until it was too cold for him to continue. A. C. Chadbourne and a friend traversed the streets, their faces embedded with frozen debris. As she walked home from her office, May Morrow, obey ing social codes about being a lady, ignored men saying her ears were freezing an refused to go in a tavern where she could warm up. James Marshall and two friends went to their job at the Singer Sewing Machine Company in a rowboat. When they headed home, they became lost and landed at an unfamiliar site. Marshall placed his friends in a haystack and ran around it all night. They died, and he survived but had to have his feet amputated. Farmer Sam Randall died when he went out to feed his livestock.

People stuck on trains initially fretted about being delayed then worried about having sufficient quantities of food. Divinity student John H. Marshall rescued sailors from ships damaged at the Lewes, Delaware, pier then was trapped on a snowbound train to Princeton. Seventeen-yearold Sara Wilson was excited about her first train trip to

Albany and took care of her Empress Eugenie hat. When the train's engineers tried to crash through a snowdrift, the train caught on fire from spilled coal.

Sarah died of exposure because she was not dressed to walk through the storm. Only her hat feather was visible in the snow.

Opportunists took advantage of emergency conditions. Some people charged fifty dollars for horse-drawn transportation.

Because all supplies were cut off and rumors of famine spread, some grocers charged high prices. Other people profited but not to the detriment of storm victims. John J. Meisinger, whom people had made fun of only days before because he bought several thousand snow shovels when the weather was warm, sold snow shovels for $1 each at a department store. Immigrants earned good wages freeing trains and clearing roads.

Topics for Discussion

1. How well does Murphy utilize primary sources to personalize the history of the blizzard? Why is narrative the best way to present this information?

2. Discuss how people reacted to the initial onslaught of the storm. In what ways did people act logically? How did anyone respond irrationally?

3. In what ways did people sacrifice their comfort to help others?

4. How were sharing and kindness essential to many people's survival? How did tending to livestock reinforce the characterization of some people as being responsible?

5. What was the relationship between work and the storm both during the blizzard and after?

6. Who do you think took the greatest risks during the blizzard? Do you think their actions merited public recognition?

7. Where do you think it was most dangerous to be during the blizzard and why?

8. Why do you think Murphy selected the people he described in this book? What groups do you think he overlooked and why? Are any groups over represented?

9. Which accounts most inspired you and why? Which profiles would you prefer Murphy had omitted?

10. Do you think anyone or any group should be held accountable for not forecasting the storm, enforcing placement of underground wires, building a subway, or enacting street cleaning policies?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Prepare a report about a significant historical natural disaster that occurred in or near your community or state. Use newspapers, oral histories, and other sources to show how the storm affected individuals.

2. Locate a primary account of the 1888 blizzard and write a character sketch, explaining where it should be placed in Murphy's book.

3. Create an act for a readers' theater featuring passengers stranded on a train during the blizzard.

4. Write a paper about the element of humor expressed by blizzard survivors.

5. Gather weather information for your community during the period of a week.

Consult your local paper, a television station, and the Weather Channel's site http://www.weather.com and/or Weather Underground http://www.weatherunderground.com. Report how accurate the forecasts are with your observations.

6. Find an account of someone who has survived a blizzard in the wilderness by staying in his or her car or in some isolated shelter. What did they do to survive? Write a report comparing that experience with one of Murphy's survivors?

7. Research the history of weather forecasting. In which countries were weather forecasts first developed and why. What technology has improved humans efforts to recognize the development of potentially damaging storms?

8. Pretend you are in New York during the 1888 blizzard and write a journal entry about your experiences. Did you go outside or stay inside? Were you on land or at sea? Did you help others?

9. Prepare a survival manual to prepare people for blizzards. What clothes and supplies should they have? What should they do if they are trapped in a rural area?

10. Learn the scientific reasons that blizzards occur and make a list of the deadliest blizzards in world history. Are certain locations frequently hit and why?

For Further Reference

Bush, Elizabeth. Review of Blizzard! Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, vol. 54 (January 2001): 190. Bush commends Murphy for creating a "riveting account" and "masterful piece of storytelling."

She notes how Murphy shows how the blizzard affected long-term societal changes and how weather continues to be unpredictable despite technological forecasting advances.

Carter, Betty. Review of Blizzard! Horn Book Magazine, vol. 77 (January/February 2001): 113-114. Carter praises Murphy's depiction of diverse groups during the blizzard and tying "their triumphs and tragedies" to the greater context of political and socioeconomic issues.

Medlar, Andrew. Review of Blizzard! School Library Journal, vol. 46 (December 2000): 164. Medlar declares this book to be "Overall, a superb piece of writing and history." Like other reviewers, Medlar admires the illustrations and use of pri mary accounts and Murphy's contextual discussion of how the blizzard impacted politics, science, and the economy.

Russell, Mary Harris. "Children's Books: Snow Day." New York Times (November 19, 2000): 40. Russell praises "Murphy's gift for dealing with disasters," stating "that he manages to make them, simultaneously, both larger than we'd thought and smaller, more human than we'd imagined."

Related Titles/Adaptations

Murphy's The Great Fire (1995) resembles the research methods and writing style he used for the history of the 1888 blizzard.

Blizzards have been a frequent topic of children's literature. Fictional depictions of the 1888 blizzard include Marietta D. Moskin's, Day of the Blizzard (1978), which is set in New York City and tells how Katie went on an errand in the storm because her mother was sick. Carla Stevens's Anna, Grandpa, and the Big Storm (1982) is a book for younger readers in which the characters are stranded on elevated tracks.

Other children's novels about snow storms are Laura Ingalls Wilder's, The Long Winter (1953); Kathleen Duey's and K. A. Bale's, Blizzard, Estes Park, Colorado, 1886 (1998); E. J. Bird's The Blizzard of 1896 (1990); Susan Fleming's, Trapped in the Golden Flyer (1978); Phyllis Reynolds Naylor's, Blizzard's Wake (2002); Peg Kehret's, The Blizzard Disaster (1998); Liza Frenette's, Soft Shoulders (1998); and Eth Clifford's, Help! I'm a Prisoner in the Library (1979). The adult account of a New England storm, Sebastian Junger, The Perfect Storm: A True Story of Men Against the Sea (1997), has elements similar to those expressed in Murphy's history.

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