Reading Disasters: Science, Literary Devices, and the Culture of Reassurance in Children's Nonfiction Literature on Natural Disasters

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SEPTMBER 21, 1938, DAWNED chilly but calm on the Northeast coast of the United States. Weather forecasts indicated the possibility for rain and high tides from a storm brewing somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean, but nothing prepared Northeasterners for the nightmare that would be upon them that afternoon. By three o'clock p.m., the “Long Island Express,” a category three hurricane, barreled across New York and other parts of the New England coast, causing nearly $400 million in damages.1 “While forecasters attempted to stay one step ahead of the storm, they were caught off-guard,” states Sean Potter in a vignette on the hurricane written in the magazine Weatherwise.2 According to this view, a lack of science that properly interpreted the storm’s path resulted in little warning and ultimately led to the deaths of over six hundred people. “With the passing of the storm,” writes children’s nonfiction author Patricia Lauber, “weather scientists began trying to understand what had happened. How and why had this monster of a storm reached Long Island and New England?”3


Lauber’s frank analysis of how the storm encouraged scientists to search for a logical explanation exposes America’s obsession with using science to protect people from disasters—an attitude I refer to as the “culture of reassurance.”4 The “culture of reassurance” is the belief that scientific knowledge will one day fully protect us from disasters, and that until that day it is still our best bet at keeping safe during disasters.5

Children’s nonfiction literature is an excellent source for studying adult attitudes toward natural disasters. Adults write children’s nonfiction with the intent of educating their young readers.6 However, because children’s literature is traditionally shorter than adult books on the same topic, authors must distill the information to include only what they feel is most important for a child to learn, making children’s books an excellent source for ascertaining what adults think children should understand about disasters.7 After surveying fifty-one

4 Ted Steinberg, Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disasters in America (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000). Steinberg offers a critique of the culture of disasters in the US. He argues that there is nothing inherently “natural” about how disasters occur in America; rather they result from the inequalities and deficiencies inherent in our political, social, and economic systems.

5 I developed the term “culture of reassurance” largely in response to themes I observed in children’s nonfiction literature. It can be interpreted as one component of what historian J. Charles Schenking described as the “culture of catastrophe,” which he defined as “a mindset, discourse, and set of actions intimately shaped by . . . disaster[s] and [their] aftermath” (296). See J. Charles Schenking, “The Great Kanto Earthquake and the Culture of Catastrophe and Reconstruction in 1920s Japan,” Journal of Japanese Studies 34, no. 2 (2008), http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jjs/summary/v034/34.2.schenking.html (accessed October 26, 2012).

6 Jo Carr, ed., Beyond Fact: Nonfiction for Children and Young People. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1982). According to Carr, “The term [nonfiction] is useful simply because most of us assume it refers only to factual writing” (x). This is the definition used in this paper.

7 While some might consider children’s nonfiction literature to dilute facts and, therefore, be below serious academic consideration, Jo Carr, editor of Beyond Fact: Nonfiction for Children and Young People, argues the opposite. She writes that adults “might be surprised to find that a book written for children is livelier than an adult book on the same subject, and with no sacrifice in scholarship” (x). If this is the case, factuality is actually a strength of children’s literature, and the genre cannot be disregarded on these grounds. Children’s literature is by nature shorter and more concise than adult literature, meaning that what authors choose to include is a reflection of what adults consider most important for children to take away from the book. In this way, children’s literature reveals more about adult culture than children’s culture. However, there are some drawbacks to children’s literature. For example, many scholars argue that children’s literature is only valid if it actually makes it into the hands of the intended audience. See M.O. Grenby and Kimberley Reynolds, ed., Children’s Literature Studies: A Research Handbook, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 99. This study does not take into account whether or not the surveyed texts were popular among children. In addition, the texts were obtained from the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University rather than a public library that might be more responsive to the books popular among children at a given time. Another limitation is that only nonfiction books were surveyed. Despite Carr’s insistence that

https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thetean/vol42/iss1/12
children’s books on hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, and volcanoes, I argue that authors of children’s books use a variety of means to teach their readers to trust the culture of reassurance.  

**HISTORIOGRAPHY OF NATURAL DISASTERS AND CHILDREN’S LITERATURE**

In December 1987, the United Nations General Assembly declared the 1990s the “International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction” and set up research and review committees made of disaster experts in the social and physical sciences. This move helped make disasters a legitimate area of study for numerous disciplines, and they continue to be an area of focus in the 2000s.

History lagged slightly behind many other social sciences in studying natural disasters. In 2000, Ted Steinberg, an environmental historian, branched into disasters with one of the first serious historical studies of disasters in the United States. His book, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disasters in America*, remains one of the best historical works on disasters. However, as J. Charles Schenking, a historian of modern Japan, notes, there are now a number of historians from various fields—environmental, political, cultural, and more—who recognize that disasters offer unique insights into the intricacies of society. Yet most of these studies focus on the impact disasters have (or more often, do not have) on policies. Few study the culture that Americans have created nonfiction is just as viable a form of literature as fiction works, the fact remains that fiction books tend to be more popular. No consideration of fiction is taken into account in this work.

8 I chose to focus on these four disasters types for a number of reasons. First, each threatens at least one area in the United States and, therefore, each is part of America’s disaster paradigm. Second, they can be grouped according to their genesis—volcanoes and earthquakes are geologic disasters and tornadoes and hurricanes are meteorological disasters—and I assumed this would have a major impact on the way they are presented in children’s literature; I discovered, however, that predictability played a much more significant role than genesis. Not all fifty-one books are referenced in this paper.


11 Schenking, “The Great Kanto Earthquake,” 297–299. Schenking cites one of the most common justifications for studying disasters. “In a way few other events can,” he wrote, “natural disasters compel states, societies, and individuals not only to respond to the immediate needs of an unnatural state of affairs but to also, over the longer term, reflect on the past and envisage the future” (296–297).
around disasters. This is where children’s literature offers a different perspective. No historical study has taken children’s literature into consideration when trying to reconstruct America’s version of what Schenking calls the “culture of catastrophe.” The culture of reassurance fits well within the framework of the culture of catastrophe.

Researchers of children’s literature—whether fiction or nonfiction—agree that these books are indispensable yet often overlooked sources for studying the cultures in which they were created. While there are no studies specifically looking at disasters, some researchers have written on how authors have presented other aspects of nature in children’s books and how those presentations have changed over time. One of the best examples of this is Debra Mitts-Smith’s book *Picturing the Wolf in Children’s Literature*. Mitts-Smith investigated how the wolf has been depicted in everything from the classic story of Little Red Riding Hood to photographic picture books of wolves sold in visitor’s center bookstores. In the introduction to her book she wrote, “Scientific understandings of nature are dynamic and biased, shaped and altered by ideological and political as well as technological and economic factors. Changes in research methods along with changes in technology often displace or modify earlier ‘facts’ and raise new questions.” Such is the case with disasters. Authors often employ science, whether or not it is backed by sufficient evidence, to assuage fears about disasters. While the goal remains the same over the years, changes in science certainly influence the content by providing more modern ways to reassure.

In social science literature on human interactions with disasters, researchers have criticized Western society’s tendency to give the largest share of responsibility

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12 Historiography on natural disasters in America has tended to focus on specific events rather than general social trends. For example, there are numerous works on the 1900 Galveston Hurricane, the 1906 San Francisco disaster, the 2005 Hurricane Katrina, and other massive and unique events. See the following for examples of such works: LaKisha Michelle Simmons, “Justice Mocked”: Violence and Accountability in New Orleans,” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2009): 477–498, http://muse.jhu.edu (accessed November 14, 2012); Erik Larson, *Isaac’s Storm: A Man, A Time, and the Deadliest Hurricane in History* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1999); and Dennis Smith, *San Francisco is Burning: The Untold Story of the 1906 Earthquake and Fire* (New York: Viking, 2005). Interestingly, children’s books tend to take a more general approach—what are disasters and what do we know about them—rather than focusing on specific disasters. In hurricane literature, for example, only Hurricane Katrina was singled out as important enough to have a few books focused solely on it.

13 Schenking, 296.


16 Mitts-Smith, 12.
to an ambiguous “nature” and little to humans.¹⁷ This approach emphasizes humanity's desire to "forget" that the disaster ever occurred and to quickly return to "normalcy" as the dominant coping method.¹⁸ However, Viviana Castelli argues in “Lest We Forget: A Preliminary Map of the Collective Earthquake Rituals of Italy” that there are two kinds of coping methods: those that encourage forgetting and those that encourage remembering. The method that dominates in a particular society is not a programmed human response; rather it is largely determined by the cultural context in which the disaster occurs. Castelli notes that in Italy, for example, eighty villages used in the study had each developed distinct cultural practices that actually preserved the memory of disasters and the way the events impacted that particular village.¹⁹ In modern America, children’s disaster books can be seen as a bridge between these two coping methods as they offer children and adults the opportunity to remember disasters, although the memory is skewed in favor of scientific control and understanding rather than human frailty.

**Disasters in the Popular Conscience**

How adults portray disasters in children’s literature is of little importance unless disasters matter to the American people. A query on the online library database WorldCat shows publication trends that imply an increase in the importance of disasters in the American conscience. Before 1970, books published on hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, and volcanoes were few and far between; after 1970, the number increased in a nonlinear fashion.²⁰ As might be

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¹⁷ Steinberg, 24, 47, 68; John Lidstone, “Disaster Education: Where We Are and Where We Should Be,” in *International Perspectives on Teaching about Hazards and Disasters*, ed. John Lidstone (Philadelphia: Channel View Publications, 1996), 7. According to geographer John Lidstone, responses to disasters can be broken into three major categories. First, disasters are caused by nature and are outside human influence. Second, disasters are nature-caused but can be positively influenced with proper mitigation or negatively influenced by unequal societies. Third, vulnerability to disasters is solely the responsibility of human-controlled processes, such as economics.

¹⁸ Steinberg, 79.

¹⁹ Viviana Castelli, “Lest We Forget: A Preliminary Map of the Collective Earthquake Rituals of Italy” (paper presented at the First European Conference on Earthquake Engineering and Seismology, Geneva, Switzerland, September 3–8, 2006), 1–2. Castelli’s argument seems ironic in the face of the L’Aquila earthquake and lawsuit since in at least one area the Italians forgot their seismic history.

²⁰ The upward trend in the number of disaster books published after 1970 is probably linked to television’s ability to place immediate—and often gruesome—footage in family’s homes. Television made disasters such as the Good Friday Earthquake in 1964 and Hurricane Camille in 1969 into
expected, there are spikes in the number of books published within two or three years after a major disaster. For example, in 2004, the year before Hurricane Katrina, WorldCat lists only seventeen books under the search terms “children’s literature” and “hurricane.” That number almost doubles for 2005 and 2006 when the list contains thirty-one books each; it more than doubles in 2007 when the number is forty.21

Some of the variation in availability of disaster books over the last forty years can be attributed to a rise in the total number of all books being published. However, this explanation does not account for the spikes seen after a major disaster is publicized. This means that whether or not these books are being read by children, adults find it important to tell the stories of the disasters, typically in a way that remolds them into events about which reassurance can be easily offered.22

THE CULTURE OF REASSURANCE

The culture of reassurance dominates children’s nonfiction literature about natural disasters as authors employ a variety of means to help readers feel that we truly understand disasters. This permeates every aspect of the books, even the general structure and the illustrations used to define the boundaries of disasters. The historical accounts of disasters that authors include are presented not to remind readers of lessons learned but to emphasize the science-aided progress we have made toward being safe. Reassurance crosses boundaries between types of disasters, and differences in their depiction are influenced by the disaster’s level of predictability rather than its genesis (meteorological versus geological). Although the science behind each disaster varies, the goal remains the same: to remind readers that what is understood about disasters far outweighs what still needs to be learned.

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BOOK STRUCTURE

The culture of reassurance is visible even at the most basic level, including the books’ organization and structure. A majority of the books follow the same basic outline, interweaving the culture of reassurance with shocking facts and details. This approach not only keeps readers interested, but also balances the frightening facts of disasters by juxtaposing them with ways that humans can control nature, helping children cope with the fear that accompanies such events. 

There are six major elements that make up the books. First, they open with some kind of shocking truth, whether an alarming fact or a personal account of an experience during a disaster. The stories employed by the authors are typically sensational in some manner, often because the specific event is so extreme. This grabs the reader’s attention and pulls them in as they respond to the fear the story evokes. The initial shock and fear can either be intense, as in Patricia Lauber’s book Hurricanes: Earth’s Mightiest Storms’ terrifying description of the 1938 New England hurricane, or more mild, as in the generalized description of a tornado day in Franklyn Mansfield Branley’s Tornado Alert.

The book quickly moves beyond this initial shock to the second element, focused on the science that is understood about the disaster. The science section takes up a majority of the book, emphasizing the power and extent of human knowledge. In this manner, the panic that exceptional stories evoke is balanced by the rational science that enables humans to control nature. The discussion of science also hedges the third element, which mentions limitations to our knowledge. This third section tends to be very brief in comparison to the discussion of what is understood. In Lauber’s book on hurricanes, for example, the caption to a computer-generated graphic of the potential paths of a hurricane plotted against the actual path begins by celebrating the advancements in science that made such data analysis possible. It then admits that even these high-tech computer programs cannot predict with certainty where the hurricane will make

23 Castelli, 1.
landfall. In this way, the second and third elements combine within the same explanation so that science and technology, rather than the unpredictable nature of the storms, is highlighted.

As if in an effort to keep children from being frightened by a lack of knowledge, the fourth subtopic describes prediction methods, and the fifth instigates a closely related discussion of mitigation and preparation practices on both community and individual scales. Forces of Nature by Catherine O’Neill Grace describes a day in the life of scientists who study volcanoes, earthquakes, and tornadoes. Grace ends each of the three sections with a page called “How to Survive a [Volcanic Eruption, Earthquake, or Tornado].” The lists, comprised of suggestions from each of the experts, instruct readers on what they can do to personally prepare for and survive a given disaster while the scientists work with governments and others to give timely warnings and build disaster-resistant communities. Inherent in the personal safety instructions and community preparedness plans is the idea that if they heed what the experts say, the readers will be safe.

The books, then, end in one of three ways: a return to the shock factor used at the beginning, a reemphasis on how much safer we are or soon will be thanks to science, or a combination of these endings. Almost half of the books end with some variation of the last lines to Lucille Recht Penner’s Twisters!, “Scientists, hurricane hunters, and storm chasers are learning the secrets of twisters and hurricanes. And the more we know, the safer we will be.” Readers are thus left with a sense of reassurance that even though nature is out of control, we need not fear if we properly wield science both now and in the future. Through these six elements, the writing style hedges between the shocking and scary aspects of disasters and the comforting theories about science and preparation.

Bounded by History

Geographic boundaries are commonly used to support the culture of reassurance by limiting the areas of the nation where each disaster might hit. Seventy

28 Lauber, Hurricanes, 33.
30 Grace, Forces of Nature, 27, 45, 57.
32 Penner, Twisters!, last page.
percent of the books contain some kind of map and textual description of disaster boundaries. Maps and boundaries are found in books on all four disasters. In books on earthquakes, for instance, the most common map is that of plate boundaries along which, the authors explain, most earthquakes take place. Science, it would seem, has enabled humans to plot where earthquakes will likely strike even though we cannot yet predict when. However, the earthquake maps can be misleading because they downplay or even exclude areas where earthquakes have occurred away from plate boundaries.

Perhaps illustrators avoid mapping these earthquakes because little is understood about the science behind them, a reality that does not fit well within the belief that science can keep us safe.

In hurricane books, satellite imagery often takes the place of maps. Because it seems so high-tech and is based entirely on scientific data, the satellite imagery carries more authority and makes readers feel confident that science is protecting us more than brightly colored and simplified maps do. Examples include those found in Do Tornadoes Really Twist?: Questions and Answers About Tornadoes and Hurricanes and the image on the cover of Jules Archer’s Hurricane.

Maps are particularly common in tornado books since there is a generally accepted definition of Tornado Alley. However, a comparison of the maps found in two tornado books indicates the truly variable nature of any disaster suggesting the fragility of the culture of reassurance when it is scrutinized. In Tornado Alert by Franklyn Mansfield Branley, the Tornado Alley map is geographically limited, showing only the Midwestern states and Florida. This reassures readers that if they do not live in these areas, they are not at risk from tornadoes.

In Do Tornadoes Really Twist?, however, the map extends far beyond the Midwest into the Northeast and even indicates an area of higher tornado probability in Arizona. Although the map in Do Tornadoes Really Twist? is titled “Tornado Alley,” the legend informs readers that it actually reports other areas of the United States where a relatively large number of tornadoes have been reported. The misleading title may encourage those living outside the most tornado-prone areas to be more concerned about the disaster than might be appropriate for

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36 Grace, Forces of Nature, 52.
37 Branley, Tornado Alert, 8.
38 Berger, Do Tornadoes Really Twist?, 13.
their area, particularly because they might be aware that the warning systems set up in other parts of the country do not exist in their home town.39 On the other hand, providing a more historically accurate definition of tornado country may inspire people to prepare for a disaster about which they would otherwise be uninformed and unconcerned, thus increasing reassurance through better preparation and awareness.

**HISTORIC NARRATIVE**

Although knowing the history of disastrous events can broaden people’s conception of the impacts of disasters, authors of children’s nonfiction books limit history’s value to its ability to substantiate the culture of reassurance. “Weather scientists learned a lot as they worked out what had happened on September 21, 1938. They also set a goal: to make sure that no big storm would ever again come as a terrifying surprise. In time, they would succeed. But first they needed a better understanding of hurricanes and better tools for studying the storms.”40 In these words, Patricia Lauber summed up how the historical narrative of disasters is used in nonfiction children’s literature. History’s value comes not in its ability to help readers remember the disasters and the lessons earlier generations learned about living and building in disaster-prone areas, but in its capacity to show how scientific advancement has carried us beyond the possibility for similar disasters to occur.

Isaac Asimov follows the culture of reassurance in his book *How Did We Find Out About Volcanoes?* by using historic accounts of volcanoes to explain developments in volcanology. Although ancient Greeks and Romans explained volcanoes as the power of the god of fire or the rumblings of angry giants, through careful observation over thousands of years, modern societies have made huge strides in science that provide a more rational definition: volcanoes are weaknesses in the earth’s crust where the heated magma seeps through.41 Recognizing volcanoes as processes of the natural world has allowed scientists to develop tools that can measure changes in volcanic activity, supposedly making it possible for the modern world to prevent another Pompeii from occurring. Asimov uses the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens to illustrate this idea. Despite the force of the eruption, which Asimov describes in full detail, only fifty-seven deaths occurred compared to the entire villages that were annihilated by the AD 69 eruption of

39 Berger, 13.
41 Asimov, *How Did We Find Out About Volcanoes?*, 52–55.
Mount Vesuvius. In Asimov’s opinion, the significantly different outcomes were a direct result of greater understanding of the science behind volcanoes. He does admit that there are limitations to our knowledge—specifically our ability to predict both the when and the where of the next disaster. Still, he leaves readers confident in the culture of reassurance, reminding them that while volcanic predictions are limited there is “no substitute for knowledge.”

**Predictability**

In regards to predictability, the culture of reassurance must deal with the fact that not all disasters are created equal; earthquakes are more difficult to predict than volcanoes, and tornades strike with less warning than hurricanes. In children’s literature, the goal of developing the ability to predict disasters is presented almost as an obsession for those involved with disaster research and writing. All of the fifty-one books discuss predicting disasters in some form or another. For hurricanes and tornades, it is often in terms of the progress that has been made with warning systems, although each author also admits that not even these disasters can be predicted with exactness. Volcano predictability is discussed in terms of plate tectonics that allow scientists to identify active volcanoes as well as the technology used to measure variations in volcanic activity.

Humans’ inability to predict anything about earthquakes, except a general understanding of where the faults are and how frequently quakes have occurred in the geologic record, sets earthquakes apart from the other disasters in the culture of reassurance. Particularly in books written between 1980 and 2000, authors cite any way that scientists had potentially predicted earthquakes. One commonly cited example was an earthquake supposedly predicted by Chinese seismologists in the mid-1970s. *Earthquake*, written in 1980 by John Gabriel Navarra, devotes an entire subheading to the discussion of the Chinese ability to predict earthquakes. The enthusiasm seismologists displayed in potentially being able to crack the earthquake question and the enthusiasm with which children’s nonfiction authors reported these exciting possibilities provides

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42 Asimov, 40–44.
43 Asimov, 55.
insight into the concern both groups felt about humanity’s inability to “tame earthquakes.”

*Earthquake*, written in 1991 by Jules Archer, is perhaps the most extreme example of the search for the culture of reassurance through earthquake predictions. Although Archer is typically credited with being a level-headed biographer and historian, his book on earthquakes suggests a deep desire to reassure his audience that human ingenuity will come up with some way to predict earthquakes. He cites every means by which earthquakes could possibly be predicted, including claims that there are more quakes during the winter, when the moon is closest to the earth, and during solar flares. He ends this hodge-podge list of correlations with the caveat, “These are not surefire indications. Many earthquakes occur suddenly, without warning.” In many ways, Archer’s approach to earthquakes is like the culture of reassurance run rampant.

Although the examples used in Archer’s book are on the extreme, the themes and ideas are similar to what other authors have written about earthquakes and other disasters. In all of the books, prediction is painted as the ultimate end of scientific research into disasters. As tornado chaser Dr. Josh Wurman stated, “I am working on problems that can be solved, and it won’t take a hundred years to do it.” Not only is prediction the goal, but scientists and others are sure that it can be achieved, a confidence gained from decades of living within the culture of reassurance.

**CONCLUSION**

Children’s nonfiction books on tornadoes, hurricanes, volcanoes, and earthquakes portray Americans’ desire to feel confident about the ability of science to overcome disasters. Authors use literary devices and scientific knowledge to assuage readers’ fears, emphasizing the culture of reassurance—a culture with real-life implications as seen in a recent tropical storm that hit the Northeast.

Late in October 2012, nearly seventy-five years after the Long Island Express hurricane, the Northeastern United States was once again threatened by a post-tropical storm. This time, unlike the earlier storm, the science to track the hurricane’s progression had long been in place. As a result, most people were able to

51 Grace, *Forces of Nature*, 57.
escape from the fury of Hurricane Sandy and the death toll was below three hundred people in the United States, a decrease of approximately five hundred people from the earlier storm despite the fact that the population in the region experienced substantial growth in the last seven decades. In this instance, the culture of reassurance worked to protect people. However, as the $65.6 billion of property damage attributed to Sandy suggests, many people developed an over-reliance on science and continued building in areas which a lesson in history would teach people to avoid.\textsuperscript{52}

Of the 1938 New England hurricane, Patricia Lauber wrote, "Weather scientists . . . set a goal: to make sure that no big storm would ever again come as a terrifying surprise. In time, they would succeed."\textsuperscript{53} And so they did. Hurricanes no longer make landfall in the United States without some advance notice thanks to new science and technologies. It remains to be seen whether or not Hurricane Sandy will have a similar impact on discouraging sole reliance on science and technology and encouraging people to build in less disaster-prone areas. But history would suggest that that lesson is yet to be learned as Americans continue to live by the culture of reassurance.

Emily Willis is a senior at BYU pursuing a major in history and a minor in environmental science. She has always been fascinated by both history and science and loves researching the history of natural disasters as a way to combine the disciplines. Emily first became interested in the history of natural disasters as a sophomore at BYU; since that time, she has written numerous original research papers on some aspect of natural disasters. In 2008, she received an ORCA (Office of Research and Creative Activities) Undergraduate Research Grant to research the role of women in natural disasters. Versions of the resulting paper, "Calamity Jane: LDS Women and the Teton Dam Disaster of 1976," were published in the Thetean and The Rocky Mountain Undergraduate Review in 2009. She recently presented "Reading Disasters" at the Phi Alpha Theta regional conference. The paper was also awarded the BYU History Department's LeRoy R. Hafen award for North American History. After graduating from BYU, she plans to attend graduate school where she will pursue a master's degree and PhD in environmental history. This essay was written for the History Capstone taught by Dr. Shawn Miller.


\textsuperscript{53} Lauber, Hurricanes: Earth's Mightiest Storms, 25.