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THE STORM IN THE BARN

BY
MATT PHELAN

About the Book

It's 1937, four years since the last rainfall, and the folks in Jack Clark's small Kansas town are losing hope. Some have already left for California, and the Clarks might be going too, once Jack's father fixes their car. But something in an abandoned barn has a hold on the eleven-year-old boy. It could be a monster, or maybe it's proof that Jack has "dust dementia." Or maybe it's his salvation.

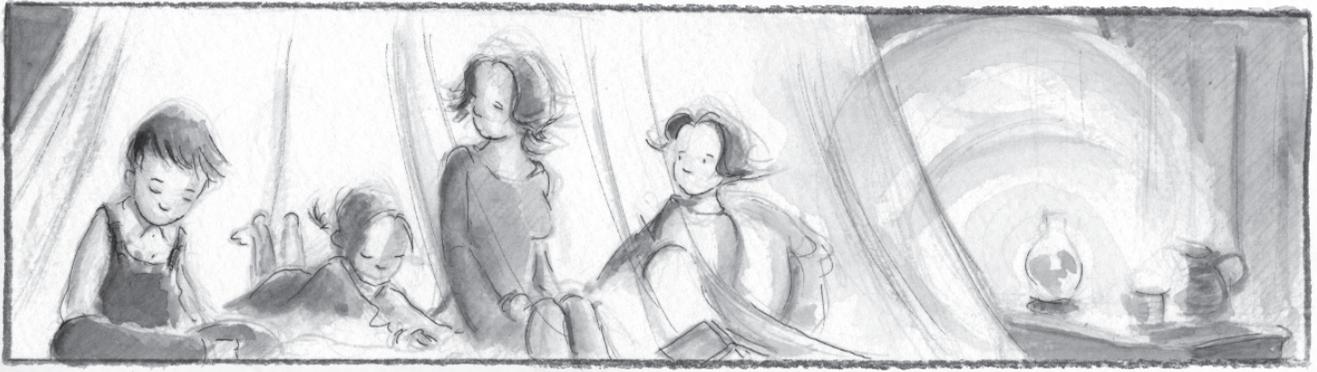
The first graphic novel by a celebrated children's book illustrator, *The Storm in the Barn* is part tall tale, part thriller, part historical fiction, and thoroughly unforgettable.

About the Dust Bowl

The 1930s was one of the most difficult decades in American history, and perhaps no area suffered as much as the Dust Bowl — which included parts of Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Colorado, and Kansas, the latter of which is the setting for *The Storm in the Barn*. Weakened after years of severe drought and over-farming, the soil of the region turned into dust. Communities that had thrived in earlier years fell to pieces as enormous dust storms swept across the Southern Plains.

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Discussion Questions

1. Although it tells a complex story, this graphic novel uses very little text. How does the author convey so much feeling with so few words? Can drawings be more eloquent than dialogue? Would Jack's story be fundamentally different if it were written as a conventional novel?
2. The book opens with an intriguing quote from an unusual source, Sir Napier Shaw's *Manual of Meteorology*. Discuss its meaning. How does it set the stage for what is to come?
3. Discuss Jack's parents. Why is his father so angry? Why is his mother so sad?
4. "You got older, but the farm didn't. The dust stopped everything — except you getting older," Dorothy tells her brother, Jack. "When the rain went away, it took away your chance to grow up" (p. 115). What does she mean? Do you agree? How can a person get older without growing up?
5. Why is the story of *The Wizard of Oz* so important to Jack and his family? What do you think attracts Jack's older sister to the books? What character captures Jack's attention? Does he help inspire Jack's heroism?
6. What happens to the men and boys during the rabbit drive? Study the three illustrations on page 131. What stays the same in each panel? What changes? How does the art convey the mob's shifting emotions? What does Jack mean after the drive when he says, "This must end" (p. 138)?
7. *Magic realism* is a literary term for fiction that incorporates magical elements into an otherwise realistic story. Where is the magic in this tale? How does it deepen our understanding of Jack and his community? Would the story be as satisfying without magic?
8. Jack was taunted by bullies and dismissed by his father, yet he triumphs over a superhuman enemy. Where does he get the strength to accomplish such a feat? Why does Ernie, the storekeeper, keep believing in Jack? Did you always share Ernie's faith in Jack?

Activities

- *The Storm in the Barn* unfolds like a nearly silent movie, with many powerful images and very limited dialogue. Challenge your students to become screenwriters. Choose a wordless or almost wordless scene and ask your class to compose original dialogue for it.
- Explore the geography of the Dust Bowl. In what part of the country did it occur? Which states did it affect? How populated is the area today?
- Investigate the science of the Dust Bowl. What were its meteorological causes? How did the farming practices of the time worsen its effects? What are its ecological lessons for today? Break your class into small groups to study these topics, and have them orally present their findings to the class.
- What happened to Jack Clark? Have your students imagine his later years and write a brief biography or create a short graphic novel about his adult life. Did he stay on the farm? Did he work other miracles? Is he still alive today?
- In his concluding note, the author says that film footage and still photographs from the era helped spark his interest in the Dust Bowl years. Introduce these powerful images to your students. The photography of Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, and Walker Evans has been widely reproduced, and good historical documentaries should be readily available in libraries.
- Where are today's extended droughts? How are the affected populations coping? Are droughts as devastating now as they were in Jack's time? As an ongoing current events project, keep a bulletin board or create a website with news postings about national or international sites of long-running droughts.
- How did your community survive the 1930s? The devastating dust storms of the era were regional, but no part of the United States was spared from the Great Depression. Invite an older member of your community to discuss what your area was like during those difficult years.

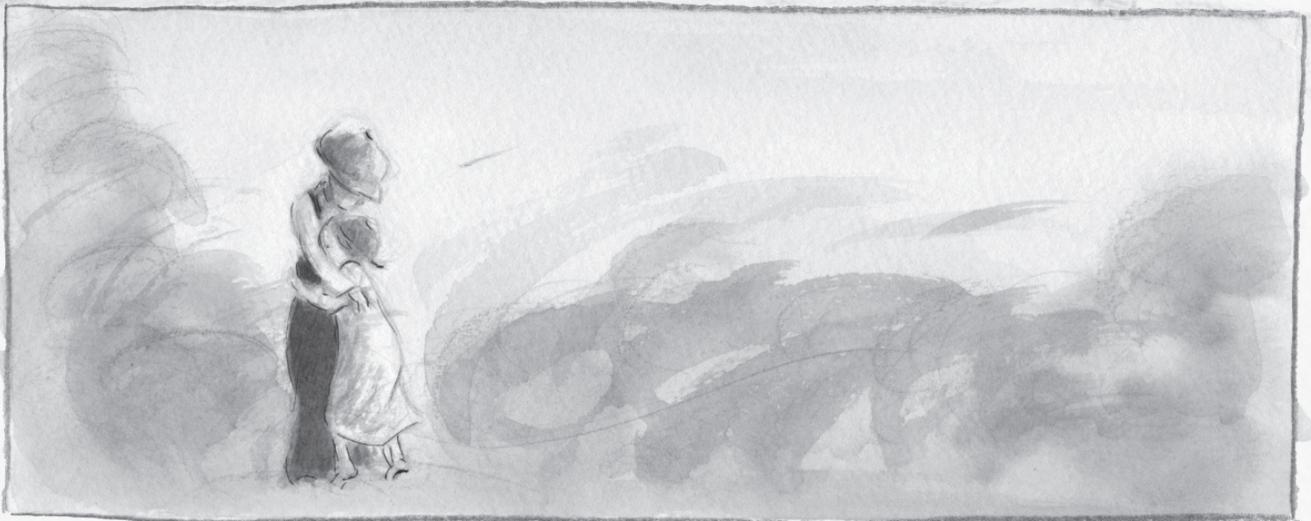


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A Note from the Author

Fifteen years ago, I was prowling through a used bookstore, not searching for anything in particular. The book that caught my eye was a slim paperback by Donald Worster called *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*. It was a full account of the Dust Bowl years — the various causes, the impact on the people, the implications for the future. The selling point for me, however, was the photography.

I had seen some of these photos before. As a kid, I poured over my dad's oversized hardback volumes of Works Progress Administration (WPA) photography. The stark black-and-white images captured by Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, Walker Evans, and others grabbed my attention. It was the faces. Against a backdrop of a vanishing farmland, these faces stared at the camera with haunting directness. They were beaten down, but somehow they weren't yet beaten.

Ten years ago, I watched an *American Experience* documentary called "Surviving the Dust Bowl." It included actual film footage — not just still photos — of massive dust clouds covering whole towns, people scrambling for cover, and even a brutal jackrabbit drive. This last event still haunted survivors of the time who, now in their old age, were interviewed for the documentary. This was what struck me most. I began to imagine what the experience of living in the Dust Bowl must have been like through the eyes of a kid. Without the complicated explanation of the history of over-planting, soil erosion, and other factors, a young boy or girl would only know a world that could suddenly vanish in a moving mountain of dark dust. The rain had gone away. But where?

Five years ago, for reasons I can't explain, I sketched a tall, dark, sinister figure with a face like a thunderstorm.

I knew I wanted this book to be a story set in the Dust Bowl but not a story directly about the Dust Bowl. I wanted to bring in elements of American folklore, like the Jack tales that were still being told and the Oz books that had been enthralling kids for thirty-odd years at that point. In the next two years, *The Wizard of Oz* would become a movie and Superman would leap from the pages of comic books, but in 1937 there were mostly just stories — stories a boy in Kansas would think about as he looked at a land apparently as cursed as any in the fairy tales.

Many years have passed since I first discovered those iconic photographs. They still have the power to stop me cold whenever I see them. I went back to those photos many times during the making of this book. Each time, I tried to absorb some small feeling for that strange era, so that I could tell this Dust Bowl story with pictures of my own.

About Matt Phelan

Born and raised in the Philadelphia area, where he still lives, Matt Phelan has illustrated many books for children, including the 2007 Newbery Medal-winning *The Higher Power of Lucky* by Susan Patron and *Always* by first-time author Ann Stott.