

EXCERPTS TO WRITE ABOUT

***Years of Dust: The Story
of the Dust Bowl***

by Albert Marrin

- ▶ Look at the title. What do you think the major topic of this book is?
- ▶ Here is the introduction to the book. Does it help explain things more for a reader who doesn't have knowledge of this period in American history?

In April 1935, Reporter Robert Geiger set out by car across the Great Plains. As he headed east, heat waves made the air shimmer, causing him to squint. Temperatures rose to over one hundred degrees in the shade. There was nothing green visible in the fields; obviously, no rain had fallen for many weeks. Then, while driving across Oklahoma, Geiger encountered a "black blizzard," an immense dust storm. He had never imagined, let alone experienced, anything like it before. It was as if nature had gone insane.

At noon, darkness enveloped the earth. It seemed like an evil spirit had splashed an immense bucket of black paint across the sky. Within minutes, from horizon to horizon, the sun disappeared and noontime became "midnight." But such a midnight! There was no moon, no stars, no meteorites flashing across the heavens. Instead, billowing clouds of dust, some rising more than two miles into the air, whipped across the plains. Driven by howling winds, the clouds easily overtook speeding cars. As the dust fell back to earth, it drifted like dirty crunchy snow, choking roads and bringing trains to a grinding halt. Worse, the dust buried crops and livestock, destroying farmers' homes and livelihoods.

The storm left Geiger shaken. Afterward, he interviewed some farmers. These old-timers, bony fellows with calloused hands and deep crease lines in their thin faces, seemed desperate. This was not the first dust storm they had experienced, nor, they reckoned, would it be the last. "Three little words," Geiger concluded, "achingly familiar on a Western farmer's tongue, rule life in the dust bowl of the continent—if it rains."

Dust bowl! Geiger used the phrase as a way to make fun of gala sports events, like the Rose Bowl and Orange Bowl, two well-known football games. Geiger's phrase, however, took on a new meaning. It stuck, instantly grabbing the public's imagination. During the 1930's, as today, "Dust Bowl" became a dramatic term for the parts of the Great Plains stricken by the worst environmental disaster in American history.

Coming at the same time as the Great Depression, the dust storms not only ravaged the land, they tore at the human spirit. . . . Could it be that our nation's best years were over? Could our future ever be as bright as our past? . . .

Now we know that the dream is not finished. It continues, as vivid as ever. The Great Depression eased, and time proved that America would become stronger and richer than any nation in the history of the world. After nearly a decade, the rains returned to the Great Plains. The dust storms ended. The land blossomed again and the nation's spirits revived. The Dust Bowl became a bad memory.

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This book aims to tell the story of the Dust Bowl disaster. It is really two stories. The first story focuses on ecology—the natural world of the Great Plains. The second story is about how people invited disaster by changing the ecology of the Great Plains; “assaulting” might be a better word. Both stories hold important lessons for us today because the Dust Bowl was caused less by natural forces than by people’s abuse of the land.

The Dust Bowl story is not finished, nor can it ever be. If we do not learn from past mistakes, the future is as certain as tomorrow’s sunrise. We must change our ways or there will be more dust bowls. The storms of the future may very well be even worse than the ones that ravaged the Great Plains in the 1930s.

- ▶ **What are the two main ideas that *the author* seems to want to get across? Highlight the sentences and details that support this. What themes or central ideas would you watch for as you read the book?**
- ▶ **Now read excerpts from the conclusion and notice whether these two main ideas are still present. What does the author want you to take away after reading this book?**

On a bright, cool day in 1941, a group of Kansas wheat farmers gathered on the steps of their town courthouse. The drought was over and prosperity had returned to the Great Plains, so most were hopeful about the future. “People are thinking differently about taking care of the land,” one said, smiling. The other nodded in agreement—all, that is, except one. “Don’t fool yourself,” he growled. “You can’t convince me we’ve learned our lesson. It’s just not in our blood to play a safe game.” Time would prove this doubter right. . . .

The good times could not last forever; they never do, particularly on the Great Plains. In 1952, farmers saw a replay of the dirty thirties. They called it the “filthy fifties.” Drought and record heat waves returned, and with them dust storms. In 1945, just one major dust storm rolled across the plains; in 1952, there were ten. For the next five years, until the rains returned, crops wilted, cattle starved, highways became impassable, and people died of dust pneumonia. Had the drought continued longer, another full-scale Dust Bowl might have occurred. Drought returned in 1974, and again dust storms raged. Luckily, this drought lasted “only” three years.

In a drought that lasted from 1998 to 2002, rainfall was 30 percent less than what fell during the thirties. Yet the dust storms did not compare to those of the past. One reason is that many farmers have accepted government payments to take land out of production, allowing it to return to grass. The lesson is clear: serious droughts are inevitable. We should expect them and plan for them. If not, we will see more Dust Bowls.

History is more than a record of politics, wars, and economic changes. It is also an encyclopedia of human folly and lesson for the future. Seen in this light, the Dust Bowl has serious implications not only for Americans, but for all people. As world population grows in the twenty-first century, humanity will place greater demands on nature. However, nature operates according to its own laws, which have nothing to do with our needs and desires. Whether we like it or not, we are bound by nature’s laws. If the Dust Bowl experience teaches anything, it is that the natural world is not merely a “resource” humans can exploit for profit, without thought for the consequences.

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- ▶ **What new information do you get about the main ideas from reading the conclusion?**
- ▶ **Write a summary of this text stating the topic, the two main ideas, and how the author presents and develops these ideas in the introduction and the conclusion.**

Note: Albert Marrin is an expert nonfiction writer. He introduces an ecological/science account by making us feel what it would be like to experience a “black blizzard”—a dust storm. Even if you don’t know where the Great Plains are, or that the event occurred in the early 1930s, Marrin’s descriptions make it fresh and vivid. Notice the second paragraph, in particular. He tells us that noon seemed like midnight; it seemed like an evil spirit had come upon the land. We learn the force of the dust-blowing winds with his detail about clouds overtaking speeding cars. What other details make you feel the peril of being amidst that storm? What else do you learn about the cause and effect of these dust storms? Compare and contrast this paragraph to a Wikipedia entry on the Dust Bowl. Taken together, these excerpts show the way Marrin captures the interconnectedness of humankind and the natural world. He also doesn’t hide that he has a lesson he wants us to learn from the hardship of the Dust Bowl. Here is just one of several sentences where his point of view is explicit: “Whether we like it or not, we are bound by nature’s laws. If the Dust Bowl experience teaches us anything, it is that the natural world is not merely a ‘resource’ humans can exploit for profit, without thought for the consequences.”