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Book Review: The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl

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The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl. By Timothy Egan. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006. x + 340 pp. Map, Photographs, notes and sources, index. \$28.00 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

Egan's *The Worst Hard Time* is a literary and journalistic treatment of the Dust Bowl's impact on the southern Great Plains. He follows the history of the region from the agricultural development of the early twentieth century through the events of the 1930s, focusing on the states of Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Oklahoma, and Texas.

The book is far more of a literary and journalistic treatment of the area than a history because of the many problems with the

text, indicating a lack of attention to history. Among others, he has a tendency to confound Germans from Russia with Mennonites; the two are not the same group. He comments upon the production of whisky from broomcorn, something that a broomcorn expert assures me is not common practice, since broomcorn does not produce corn, but a type of sorghum. He implies that automobiles were slow to come to dust bowl communities, when, in fact, the Southern Plains were mechanized in terms of automobiles and agricultural technology very quickly. Egan writes about dust storms as if they were new in the thirties—they were not. He writes about low agricultural prices as if they were confined to the panhandles of Texas and Oklahoma—again they were not. Errors of this sort pepper the text.

Perhaps most disturbing is Egan's tone. He writes about people wanting to escape the area to find "a place where the routine of a day was not so full of random death." This kind of melodrama is extremely reminiscent of a series of articles about the dust bowl written during the 1930s entitled "Land Where Our Children Die." The tone and the melodrama seem inappropriate. In the 1980s, interviewing more than sixty dust bowl survivors, I found that the most common reaction to the experience of the 1930s was for these people to comment "we were as happy as if we had good sense." Yes, times were hard, but times were hard all over, and people got on with their lives.

Without a bibliography or proper citations, it is difficult to discover the sources of Egan's information. In particular, I would like to know when and where he conducted his interviews, since in the late 1980s it was already very difficult to find individuals who had experienced the dust bowl as adults, rather than children. The book can be recommended for its engaging style, but not as a work of history.

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