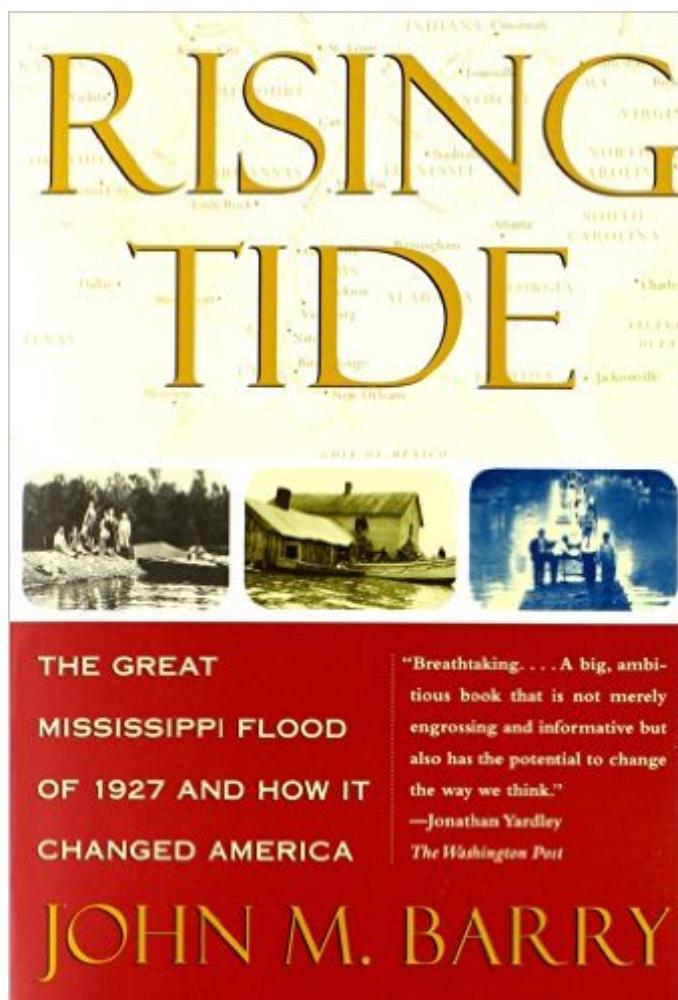


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Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood Of 1927 And How It Changed America



Synopsis

An American epic of science, politics, race, honor, high society, and the Mississippi River, *Rising Tide* tells the riveting and nearly forgotten story of the greatest natural disaster this country has ever known -- the Mississippi flood of 1927. The river inundated the homes of nearly one million people, helped elect Huey Long governor and made Herbert Hoover president, drove hundreds of thousands of blacks north, and transformed American society and politics forever. A New York Times Notable Book of the Year, winner of the Southern Book Critics Circle Award and the Lillian Smith Award.

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Customer Reviews

This is basically a story of how men with position, power, and money can mistreat their poorer neighbors, black and white, and walk away with lily-white hands, their aristocratic noses held high. I never thought I'd be rooting for Huey Long to become governor of Louisiana but compared to the power structure he was replacing, he was a knight in shining armor. The river that weaves through the story is of course, the Mississippi, and the author begins in the mid-1800s up through the great flood of 1927, and a few years beyond. He has some astounding history to tell us: The 1920s version of the Ku Klux Klan failed, not because it didn't have grassroots support, but because it had never been visualized as an organization like, say, the Kiwanis. It was basically set up as a pyramid scheme to sell memberships with weird titles like 'kleagle,' 'wizard,' 'exalted cyclop,' and 'hydra of the realm.' Klansmen ended up as elected officials in several states, but squabbled over the membership fees, defrauded members of their contributions, and sank quickly out of sight, although

not quick enough for some.* One of the chief Mississippi Delta plantation owners, LeRoy Percy, kicked the Klan out of his county, calling them 'spies, liars, [and] cowards.' Later, he blocked the transportation of black flood refugees from his county, afraid that once they left they'd never return. So his sharecroppers spent a miserable few months on the levee with inadequate food, shelter, and medical attention, forced into work gangs to repair the levees.* The engineers who originally surveyed the Mississippi River in order to recommend flood-control measures were flatly opposed to a levees-only policy. Yet through cronyism, bad compromises, and ignorance, levees-only became the official standard. This author proves that it was absolutely doomed to failure.* New Orleans was never in any real danger from the flood of 1927. Too many levees had given way upstream for the flood waters to threaten the great port city. Nevertheless, the bankers and businessmen decided prop up the confidence of their investors by dynamiting the levees downriver from their city and turning 10,000 of their neighbors into refugees. The refugees with very few exceptions were never reimbursed for their lost property and mangled lives. There is one heroic man in this book: the engineer James Buchanan Eads who understood the Mississippi River better than any living man. He had spent the first part of his career salvaging wrecks from the bottom of the river, and was bitterly opposed to the policies of the Army Corps of Engineers. Eads was ultimately proved correct in almost every policy he advocated, almost every engineering project he drove forward on the river, including the jetties that deepened the South Pass of the river, and allowed ocean vessels to dock at the Port of New Orleans. If only all of the capitalists and engineers in this book had been like Eads, the Great Flood of 1927 which forced nearly a million people from their homes, might never have come to pass. This book is an absorbing, original look at an era in the Deep South that most of us would rather pass quickly by. The great natural disaster that Barry so vividly describes was a turning point in our nation: a death blow to share-cropping practices in the Delta bottomlands; and the robber-baron elite of New Orleans (Huey Long saw to the latter).

No one remembers the 1927 flood, or even that it happened; but it was the events surrounding that single event which more than anything else gave us modern America, and John Barry's book is essential to understanding it. Obviously the book gives a full account of the flood itself, of the history of the river and of the delta, of the people who carved a nation out of wilderness and who lived and died in the catastrophe; without a doubt, Barry does all this, and does it in gripping style: the book is hard to put down. But Barry does far more. In telling the story, he shows how a heretofore anti-socialist America was forced by unprecedeted circumstance to embrace an enormous, Washington-based big-government solution to the greatest natural catastrophe in our history,

preparing the way (psychologically and otherwise) for the New Deal. He shows how this was accomplished through the Republican (but left-wing) Herbert Hoover, who would never have become President without the flood. Most importantly, he shows how Hoover's foolish, all-encompassing arrogance single-handedly drove the backbone of the Republican Party -- African Americans -- away from the GOP and into the arms of the segregationist, generally pro-KKK Democrats (a truly amazing feat). It is an amazing tale indeed. It holds important lessons for the future as well. Hoover's loss of the black community is a lesson virtually unknown to modern readers (who generally assume they just drifted away under the New Deal), and holds important (and perhaps urgent) lessons for modern Democrats and Republicans alike. But on a more fundamental level, the book teaches us the power of the river, a lesson we've forgotten even in the face of some reasonably large modern floods. Someday, possibly very soon, the levy system will likely be destroyed by the long-predicted earthquake along the New Madrid Fault: when that day comes, the lessons of Rising Tide will be life and death matters. Southerners in particular may ignore Rising Tide only at their peril.

John Barry's account of the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 includes the roles that members of my family played in the flood's aftermath and also in the creation of Delta levees during the 19th century. He got almost everything right - including his depiction of the homosexuality of my cousin, William Alexander Percy, who published a classic memoir of Southern life, *Lanterns on the Levee*, a bestseller still in print today. When the flood hit, inundating Will's home town of Greenville, Mississippi, the mayor appointed him chief of an emergency relief committee. All went well until Will's father LeRoy objected to Will's plan to evacuate thousands of black sharecroppers marooned on the levee. LeRoy feared that if the sharecroppers left the Delta they would never return. He insisted they go for a walk together. The only first-hand report we have of what Will and LeRoy discussed is Will's description in *Lanterns*. I do not think that Will told the full story, but we do know that LeRoy extracted an agreement to consult one last time the members of his emergency committee, and that not long after, the barges waiting on the river to take the refugees were sent down the Mississippi empty. John Barry does not speculate as I do that LeRoy threatened Will on account of his homosexuality, but he rightly concludes that the frail, literary gay son could not stand up to his domineering father. Rising Tide provides an accurate analysis of their relationship, in the process giving the fullest public account to date of Will's sexual nature. He describes Will's affairs with three of his black chauffeurs--a subject that not even Bertram Wyatt-Brown, author of *House of Percy*, discusses. Barry's book is important for our family pride, though most of my Southern

cousins do not agree.(..._

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