

Children's Blizzard Discussion Questions

by Melanie Benjamin

Author Bio: (from Fantastic Fiction & website)

Melanie Benjamin was born in Indianapolis, Indiana. While attending Indiana University, Melanie performed in many community theater productions before meeting her husband, moving to the Chicago area.



After raising her two sons, Melanie, decided to pursue a writing career. After writing her own parenting column for a local magazine, and winning a short story contest, Melanie published two contemporary novels under her real name, Melanie Hauser, before turning to historical fiction.

When she's not writing, she's gardening, taking long walks, rooting for the Cubs.

Characters:

- **Raina Olsen** – (16) – Teacher in a one-room schoolhouse in Nebraska. Boarding with the Pedersen family. Even though Raina speaks Norwegian, she is only allowed to speak English while at school – to help integrate the immigrants into American culture.
- **Anette Pedersen** – “Hired girl.” Bought from her mother by Gunner Pedersen to help with the housework. Referred to as a Pedersen daughter, but worked like a maid. Fredrik Halvorsan is her only friend. Shares the loft with Raina Olsen.
- **Fredrik Halvorsan** – Tor’s younger brother. Likes to run with Anette.
- **Tor Halvorsan** – (15) – Oldest and biggest pupil at the schoolhouse. Brother is Fredrik.
- **Anna Pedersen** – Married to Gunner Pedersen. Beautiful. Shows signs of depression and mania. Misses the town-life of Minneapolis. Has 3 children. Resents both Anette and Raina being brought into the family/house.
- **Mrs. Thorkelsen** – Anette’s mother. Sold her daughter to the Pederson’s.
- **Gunner Pedersen** – Horse breeder and homesteader. Father of the Pedersen household. Married to Anna “Mother” Pedersen. Has 3 children: Liane, Martin, and a baby. Gunner was part of the horse brigade in the Norway army. Bought Anette (as a hired girl) to help Anna with the household. Raina Olsen, the schoolteacher, is boarding with them.
- **Gerda Olsen** – (18) – Raina’s older sister. Teaching in a one-room schoolhouse in Dakota Territory. Being courted by Tiny Svenson, who wants to be a cowboy and go West. Boarding with the Andersons, an elderly couple. The Andersons live next door to the Nillsen family. Minna and Ingrid Nillsen are her pupils.
- **Gavin Woodson** – Was a newspaper reporter back East, but ended up in Omaha, Nebraska. His job is to advertise Nebraska and get homesteaders and settlers into the state. Works in the Omaha Daily Bee office writing puff pieces. Misses the civility of the East Coast.

- **Corporal Findlay** – Army Signal Corps. His job is to take weather readings and make weather predictions available to the public. Lieutenant Woodruff is his superior officer in the Army Signal Corps.
- **Dan Forsythe** – Star reporter for the Omaha Daily Bee.
- **Edward Rosewater** – Publisher and editor of the Daily Bee.
- **Ollie “O Lieutenant” Tennant** – Owner and bartender of The Lily, a bar in downtown Omaha. Likes to read. Black. Married to Alma. Has two children, Francis (9) and Melissa (11). White city leaders are trying to get him to sell The Lily.

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. This story is told from many different points of view. Did it work? Did you like seeing the same situation through differing points of view? Why or why not?
3. Were you aware of this historic weather event? Were you familiar with the Homestead Act?
4. Discuss Raina and Gerda and their relationship. How do their personalities and their relationships with each other change over the course of the novel?
5. Both Raina and Gerda find their hearts involved in unlikely - and even illicit - entanglements. How does the blizzard change their perception of love?
6. Anette Pedersen is given away by her family. Why do you think her mother made the decision to sell her to another family?
7. Nebraska bills itself as the Garden of Eden. But Gavin Woodson, who writes the articles that lure foreigners from their homeland to the prairie, leaves "Godforsaken Omaha" to find and connect with surviving homesteaders. Why do you think he does that?
8. What does the memory of the young woman he encountered prior to the storm come to mean to Gavin? How does this morph into Anette being is “Maiden of the Plains”?
9. What do you think happened to Frederik at the end? Did he try to save Anette or were his actions a result of the cold?
10. What would you do in a storm like this? What is the modern day equivalent?
11. The storm seems to level the playing field between men and women—Anette and Frederick, Raina and Tor, Anna and Gunnar. What are your observations on the similarities and differences between these pairs of characters when it comes to their survival and resilience in harsh conditions?
12. Finding Anette after the storm changes Anna Pedersen. Were these changes for the good or bad? Why was she so affected? Do you think this will be a lasting change?

13. How does the storm effect Ollie Tennant, the owner of The Lily? How do his views and beliefs about Omaha change?
14. What did it mean to pick up and move across an ocean in the late nineteenth century? What type of sacrifice was required of these immigrants?
15. Raina asks the doctor why he came to Nebraska. Why do you think the characters who came to Nebraska remain there?
16. "Moving forward" seems to be an overarching theme of the novel - whether it means heading out into the blizzard or dealing with relationships. How does each character move forward throughout the storm and beyond?
17. Discuss Raina and Gerda's relationships with and perceptions of their parents before and after the storm. What were Mama and Papa's expectations of their daughters?
18. What do you think about Anette's new life in Omaha? Where do you think she will end up? Do you think she will be happy?
19. Was Gerda at fault for what happened to her pupils? Why or why not? Does her punishment fit her crime? Do you think she will ever be able to forgive herself?
20. What are your thoughts about the end of the book, about the path each sister took?
21. Melanie Benjamin has written other books. Will you read them?

References:

- Melanie Benjamin – <https://melaniebenjamin.com/melanie.php>
- Fantastic Fiction – <https://www.fantasticfiction.com/b/melanie-benjamin>
- Novelist – <https://web-p-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.clevnet.org/novp/results?vid=1&sid=17aee5a8-2c2a-49b6-a1dc-3a64efb7c98c%40redis&bquery=childrens+blizzard&bdata=JnR5cGU9MCZzZWZyY2hNb2RlPUFuZCZzaXRlPW5vdnAtbGl2Q%3d%3d>

Melanie Benjamin's Books

Stand Alone Novels

- Alice I Have Been (2009)
- The Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb (2011)
- The Ambassador's Daughter (aka The Aviator's Wife) (2013)
 - The Swans of Fifth Avenue (2016)
 - The Girls in the Picture (2018)
 - Mistress of the Ritz (2019)
 - The Children's Blizzard (2021)

If you liked The Children's Blizzard, try...

- How Much of these Hills is Gold – Pam Zhang
- Answer Creek – Ashley Sweeney
- The Meaning of Names – Karen Shoemaker
- Book of Lost Friends – Lisa Wingate
- The Children's Blizzard (Nonfiction) – David Laskin

Frostbite

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frostbite>)

Frostbite is a skin injury that occurs when exposed to extreme low temperatures, causing the freezing of the skin or other tissues, commonly affecting the fingers, toes, nose, ears, cheeks and chin areas. Most often, frostbite occurs in the hands and feet. The initial symptom is typically numbness. This may be followed by clumsiness with a white or bluish color to the skin. Swelling or blistering may occur following treatment. Complications may include hypothermia or compartment syndrome.

Signs and symptoms:

First degree

- Superficial, surface skin damage that is usually not permanent.
- Early on, the primary symptom is loss of feeling in the skin. In the affected areas, the skin is numb, and possibly swollen, with a reddened border.
- In the weeks after injury, the skin's surface may slough off.

Second degree

- The skin develops clear blisters early on, and the skin's surface hardens.
- In the weeks after injury, this hardened, blistered skin dries, blackens, and peels.
- Lasting cold sensitivity and numbness can develop.

Third degree

- The layers of tissue below the skin freeze.
- Symptoms: blood blisters and "blue-grey discoloration of the skin".
- In the weeks after injury, pain persists and a blackened crust develops.
- There can be long-term ulceration and damage to growth plates.



Fourth degree

- Structures below the skin are involved like muscles, tendon, and bone.
- Early symptoms include a colorless appearance of the skin, a hard texture, and painless rewarming.
- Later, the skin becomes black and mummified. The amount of permanent damage can take one month or more to determine. Autoamputation can occur after two months.

Schoolhouse Blizzard

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schoolhouse_Blizzard)

The Schoolhouse Blizzard, also known as the Schoolchildren's Blizzard, School Children's Blizzard, or Children's Blizzard, hit the U.S. plains states on January 12, 1888. The blizzard came unexpectedly on a relatively warm day, and many people were caught unaware, including children in one-room schoolhouses.

The weather prediction for the day was issued by the Weather Bureau, which at the time was managed by Adolphus Greely; it said: "A cold wave is indicated for Dakota and Nebraska tonight and tomorrow; the snow will drift heavily today and tomorrow in Dakota, Nebraska, Minnesota, and Wisconsin."

The blizzard was precipitated by the collision of an immense Arctic cold front with warm moisture-laden air from the Gulf of Mexico. Within a few hours, the advancing cold front caused a temperature drop from a few degrees above freezing to -20 degrees Fahrenheit (-29 degrees Celsius) [-40 °F (-40 °C) in some places]. This wave of cold was accompanied by high winds and heavy snow. The fast-moving storm first struck Montana in the early hours of January 12, swept through Dakota Territory from midmorning to early afternoon, and reached Lincoln, Nebraska at 3 p.m.

Many who were caught unaware misjudged the weather due to a warm spell. What made the storm so deadly was the timing (during work and school hours), the suddenness of the storm, and the brief spell of warmer weather that preceded it. In addition, the very strong wind fields behind the cold front and the powdery nature of the snow reduced visibilities on the open plains to zero. People ventured from the safety of their homes to do chores, go to town, attend school, or simply enjoy the relative warmth of the day. As a result, thousands of people - including many schoolchildren - got caught in the blizzard. The official death toll was 235. Teachers generally kept children in their schoolrooms. Exceptions nearly always resulted in disaster.

Homestead Act

(<https://www.nps.gov/home/learn/historyculture/abouthomesteadactlaw.htm>)

The Homestead Act of 1862 has been called one of the most important pieces of Legislation in the history of the United States. The act was signed into law by Abraham Lincoln after the southern states seceded.

It was a revolutionary concept for distributing public land. This law turned over vast amounts of the public domain to private citizens. 270 million acres, or 10% of the area of the United States was claimed and settled under this act. Repercussions of this monumental piece of legislation can be detected throughout America today.

A homesteader had to be the head of a household or at least 21 years of age to claim a 160-acre parcel of land. Settlers from all walks of life worked to meet the challenge of "proving up". Settlers included immigrants, farmers without land of their own, single women, and formerly enslaved people.

A filing fee was the only money required, but sacrifice and hard work exacted a different price from the hopeful settlers. Each homesteader had to live on the land for 5 years, build a home, make improvements and farm to get the land. The patent they received represented the culmination of hard work and determination. Nearly four million homesteaders settled land across 30 states over 123 years.