

Blazes & Brimstone

Linda Gruenberg

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A historic Michigan wildfire inspires Linda Gruenberg's sensitive novel *Blazes & Brimstone*, in which a boy teams up with his family during a crisis.

In October of 1871, a forest fire encroaches upon eleven-year-old Lyle's hometown. When a church service is interrupted by a change in the wind, adults spring into action. But jittery Lyle and his siblings, Aggie and Rudy, are separated from their father and pregnant stepmother when they stop to help their neighbor's horses.

The dangerous smoke-filled trek out of Holland, the children's determined urgency, and their attentiveness to both the horses in their care and their natural surroundings add up to an immersive story about finding ways to survive amid threatening uncertainty. Hope despite risk and strong community ties make up the book's other rich themes. Controversies are touched on in passing, too, including about loggers who burn and clear land, hinting at the conditions that contributed to the fire. And news about the simultaneous, better-known Chicago fire puts the events into period context.

Without minimizing the real hazards that the children face, including death, the novel savors upbeat moments: Lyle and his siblings find what they need at appropriate times, from food to water, and they feel gratitude for what little they've managed to save. Their acts of quiet concern mix with stories about Holland's origins and the help that the Ottawa people gave to the town's early settlers, all of which are conveyed during a noteworthy campsite gathering of fellow immigrant evacuees. This interlude delivers a subtle message about how people are more alike than they seem. In its thoughtful progression from loss to plans for renewal, this is a timeless wilderness adventure.

Between its suspenseful journey and warm reflections, *Blazes & Brimstone* is an inspiring novel about the bravery of children.

KAREN RIGBY (November / December 2022)

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