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History

Goodbye Wifes and Daughters
Susan Kushner Resnick
University of Nebraska Press
978-0-8032-1784-3
(February 28, 2010)

On Saturday morning, February 27, 1943, workers on the day shift at Bearcreek, Montana's Smith Mine had been on the job for barely a couple of hours when something went terribly wrong. Suddenly, the author writes, "men battled: against nature, which assaulted them in the form of ancient methane; against themselves and the potent urge to lie down and sleep off their ferocious exhaustion; against dark, fear, odds, and time. Hearts pounding, eyes dilating, adrenaline surging, their fight-or-flight mechanisms cranked higher than ever, they struggled to see their children and wives and the sky one more time."

But the odds were stacked against them. Seventy-five of the seventy-eight men who entered the mine that morning died in the worst coal mine disaster in the state's history. The book's title comes from the words found scribbled in chalk on sides torn from a wooden box where five of the miners huddled together in an underground room two miles from the surface, trying to barricade themselves from the dangerous carbon monoxide and await the arrival of rescuers. Rescuers did arrive, but too late to save them.

Resnick traces this unfolding tragedy by introducing several of the families whose lives were ultimately and painfully altered by the tragedy and following them throughout the nine-day rescue attempt. She concludes with where they are today. Her extensive research and interviews have culminated in a story that makes readers feel as though they are personally invested in the lives of Bearcreek residents.

Resnick also explains the inner workings of the mining experience in easy-to-understand language so those unfamiliar with this occupation have little trouble following the action. The story of federal mine inspector Gerald Arnold, who'd visited the mine three months before the disaster, adds another facet to the account. Arnold noted many hazards; while there, he spotted a tiny orange light in the dark. As he got closer to its source, he was aghast: "These miners, surrounded by gas and coal dust and explosives, were smoking cigarettes." A final list of the

names of all those who perished that day would have rounded out this wonderful work.

The author has been a journalist for twenty-five years, and this is her second book. Her first, *Sleepless Days*, portrayed her struggle with postpartum depression. Resnick's writing has also appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* and *Parents*.

Those who enjoy reading history and about how the perseverance of the human spirit will not soon forget this story of the tragedy that left fifty-eight women widowed and 125 children fatherless.

Robin Farrell Edmunds