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Juvenile Fiction

Terror at Turtle Mountain
Penny Draper
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Early on an April morning in 1903, the mountain moved. During its ninety-second shake, Turtle Mountain sent ninety million tons of limestone roaring into the valley below, the site of a small Canadian mining town. Miners were trapped underground and entire families were buried in what remains Canada's worst rock-slide disaster.

As this novel opens, Nathalie is preparing for just another day on milk duty. A typical school day ensues, with the usual tasks of practising penmanship, trying to master the feather stitch, and a little storytelling. After school and before chores, there's time for a creation myth as her friend Andy tells the Blackfoot tale of "Napi and the Spirit Wife." And through all this activity, Nathalie keeps her secret buried deep. No one need know that her self-esteem is almost non-existent because of her grandfather's unloving attitude: "no matter how hard she tried, she was still that child. The disappointment."

Lying awake that night, anticipating her cousin Helena's visit, Nathalie hears a thunderous roar. But it's not thunder: "It felt like some great ogre was rearing up within the mountain and breaking through the top, hurling monstrous chunks of limestone angrily down into the valley." Nathalie's home is spared but many others are destroyed, and she must somehow find the strength to join in the dark and depressing search for survivors.

This is the author's first novel. She has many years of experience as a storyteller, and it shows: the pace is just right, so the reader's attention never flags. She also pays careful attention to historical accuracy, and bases her writing on solid research. Although Nathalie herself is fictional, many of the other characters, including baby Marion whose survival seems miraculous, are historical. A helpful ten-page author's note complete with photos and website references, provides the historical background and describes the aftermath of the tragedy. Readers who want to know even more will find the brief bibliography useful.

In this compelling story, Nathalie is the most memorable character. She is

understandably overwhelmed by the scale of the disaster: “Past Lester’s house, Ruby’s was nothing more than firewood. Past that, the Clarkes’ house was just plain gone. She couldn’t help here. She couldn’t stay here. Nathalie wanted her mother.” But through the long dark hours, she fights her fears and begins to believe in herself.

At Turtle Mountain in 1903, ninety seconds of terror gave way to remarkable courage and resilience. Through Nathalie’s story, Draper has captured that transformation in a captivating debut novel.

Julie Falkner