

Writer on the Storm

Bechtel follows path

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In the twilight of an August evening 12 years ago, Thomas Huffman made his way across the Oak Hill Baptist Cemetery in Nelson County.

The slender, bespectacled man stopped in front of two long rows of granite markers, each of which bore his family name. As he walked by each tombstone he pointed and quietly said, "sixty-nine."

The tragic events of a single night, Aug. 19, 1969, caused Huffman soul-scouring anguish. In the roar and darkness of unimaginable fury, 22 members of his family were swept away by the merciless ferocity generated by the remnants of Hurricane Camille.

The storm took the lives of an estimated 325 people, more than 120 of them from Nelson County.

In the weeks and months after the worst natural disaster in inland Virginia's history, Paige and Jerry Simpson, former editor and reporter for The Daily Progress, recorded eyewitness accounts of the cataclysm from area residents.

In 1970 the Simpsons published their findings in the book "Torn Land." More than 30 years later, that book became a stepping-off point for a more wide-ranging account of the storm by local writer Stefan Bechtel.

The author will be discussing and signing copies of his new book, "Roar of the Heavens," at noon Tuesday at New Dominion Bookshop on Charlottesville's Downtown Mall.

"When I moved here 20 years ago, I immediately started hearing these stories about Camille," Bechtel said in his second-story office overlooking Court Square. "Having grown up in the Midwest, far away from hurricanes, these stories didn't register with me at first.

"We're 900 miles from the Gulf. How could you possibly have a hurricane in Central Virginia? But then I saw the historical marker at Wood's Mill about 124

people being killed in Nelson County, 100 bridges wiped out, 900 buildings destroyed.

"I was like, 'What?' Then a few years ago, I read 'Torn Land,' which was very useful, but dealt with the local stories. What I wanted to do was tell the entire story, and tell it so that it would read like a novel by choosing a handful of key characters and then follow them all the way through the storm."

The lead-off character in the book that John Grisham described as "riveting" is meteorologist Nash C. Roberts Jr. Since the late 1940s, Roberts had built a reputation for having what some have called an "uncanny" ability to forecast what serious storms are going to do.

Roberts' meteorological work centered on providing offshore drilling companies operating in the Gulf of Mexico with information on storms that could affect their operations. Since the early 1950s, he also had been the weather forecaster that television station WDSU in New Orleans called on when hurricanes threatened the Gulf Coast.

By 1969, Roberts had become something of a legend. When he said a storm was going to be bad, viewers took him at his word. When he started tracking the storm that became Hurricane Camille, he quickly realized it was going to be extraordinary.

"From the time I started tracking Camille, the thing that was really outstanding about it had to do with what we call the pressure gradient," Roberts said during a telephone interview from his home near New Orleans. "This is the change of pressure with distance.

"Camille was a relatively small storm, but very violent and tightly wound. From the center of the storm, where the lowest pressure was, to the outer rim of the storm was not a great distance, but the change in pressure was phenomenal.

"That's what gives you your wind velocity, and, at times, the winds in that storm were around 200 mph. It wasn't a hard storm to forecast or track, because it had all the dynamics you needed to do that.

"What made the big difference in Virginia was that it stalled when it got hung up on the mountains. And when the storm had to go up and over the mountains that produced heavier rains."

Damaging rain

When Camille slammed into Central Virginia, it wasn't its winds that caused the most damage, but rain. In his book, Bechtel quotes the Office of Hydrology of the Weather Bureau, now the National Weather Service, as estimating that the deluge approached "the probable maximum rainfall which meteorologists compute to be theoretically possible."

Although it couldn't be verified, it's believed that in the Davis Creek area, the section of Nelson County hit hardest by the storm, 46 inches of rain fell in six hours. The confirmed rainfall is 31.5 inches in Nelson County and 25 to 27 inches in other areas of the state.

This was not raindrops falling, but more like standing under a waterfall. During an interview in 1994, Huffman, who lived in the Davis Creek area, said he had to bend his head over and shield his nose and mouth with his hands to breathe.

As Bechtel's book makes clear, this was not a once-in-a-100-year storm or even a thousand year storm. It was a storm for the ages.

"I had a long conversation with geologist Tom Gathright, who worked for the Virginia Department of Mines and Minerals at the time of the storm," said Bechtel, who has authored or co-authored six books, which have sold in total more than 2 million copies. "He said for a long time in geology, it was believed that the Earth has been shaped by these very slow, long processes of erosion.

"But after these catastrophic sudden events like Camille, there was sort of a new way of thinking that the Earth may have been shaped not so much by tedium as by drama. This is where you have 2,000 years of erosion occurring in a single night like what happened in Nelson County.

"One of the things that drew me to this story is hearing all the time about the magnificence of man. But then you get a natural disaster like this, and we're so ephemeral and so puny that we're like mayflies. It's important to remember this, and I guess that's an essential point of this book."

Bechtel said he was emotionally moved many times during the researching and writing of the book. This was especially true when Warren Raines told him about his experience that night.

Raines was 14 at the time. He lost his mother, father, two sisters and younger brother in the storm. Only he and his older brother, Carl Jr., survived.

"I had two long interviews with Warren Raines, and he's an amazing guy," Bechtel said as stiff winds from tropical depression Ernesto made the American flag hanging outside his office pop and snap. "He told the story of being orphaned because of this storm and also about the aftermath and how he, more or less, built his life back all by himself.

"He only choked up one time during that whole retelling. There are plenty of people down in Nelson who still don't want to talk about the storm at all.

"But a writer's goal in this world is to remember. I just wanted people to remember this thing and not let it be forgotten. I dedicated the book to the victims of Camille."

Roberts said he found the book to be not only well written, but "very well researched." The 88-year-old meteorologist said the book also should serve as a cautionary tale.

Well researched

"He [Bechtel] went to the trouble to go to the people who knew something about it and were involved in it," said Roberts, who evacuated with his wife, Lydia, from New Orleans only once during his long career. That was for Hurricane Katrina.

"The book is technically very good," he said, "and it's a good story of the human response and the effects on the individual families.

"Camille was a tremendously strong and vicious storm. I think it's very important that people realize that once these things come ashore, the media tend to forget about them.

"More damage and deaths often occur in the interior than where they come ashore. Camille proved, without any doubt, that hurricanes can be as disastrous three or four days after coming ashore as they were when they first made landfall."

Although Camille pulverized Nelson County and tore away entire branches from family trees, it also brought out the best in people. In "Roar of the Heavens" a woman is quoted as saying, "If you want to know who helped after Camille, go up in an airplane and look down. Everyone helped."

In the span of several hours a county known for its pastoral beauty had been transformed into something very much like a war zone. Scientists calculated that the storm hit Nelson County with the destructive force of a 40,000-megaton nuclear bomb.

"There were all these eerie echoes of the Vietnam War," Bechtel said. "In Nelson County, a lot of veteran pilots who had flown in Vietnam were expertly flying these Huey helicopters down into these tiny little gullies and along steep inclines.

"Tommy Huffman's wife, Adelaide, mentioned that the most vivid thing she remembered were Huey helicopters going over with body bags dangling beneath them like these terrible insects."

In early January this year, during a pouring rain Adelaide Huffman and a large group of mourners filed into Oak Hill Baptist Cemetery to lay her beloved husband to rest among their kin.

During those terrible days and weeks after Camille, he had attended the funerals of every one of his relatives taken by the storm.

"While writing the book, I felt a certain urgency, because many of the survivors are getting on in years," Bechtel said. "In fact, two of my main characters in the book, Tommy Huffman and Sheriff Bill Whitehead, died between the time I finished the book in July 2005 and when it was released in June.

"I'm so sorry I never got the chance to give them a copy of it."

As the wind blew a steady breeze into his office through a slightly open window, Bechtel grew silent. After several seconds he spoke.

"They talk about how all these stories are out there that you could write about, but what you should write about are the stories that pick you," Bechtel said. "The stories you dream about, the ones that you can't get rid of.

"The 'Roar of the Heavens' was like that for me. I thought about it all the time and even started dreaming about it.

"During my research, I discovered that Camille in Latin means 'child attendant at a sacrifice.' There's something so eerie about that."

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