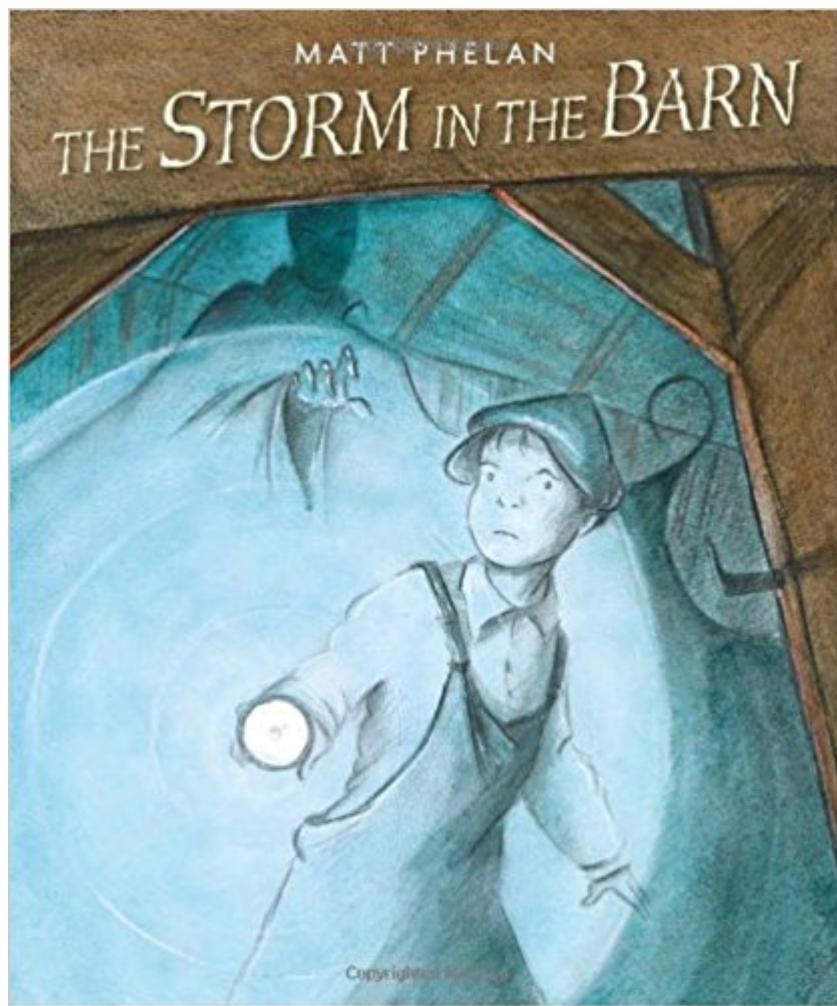


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# The Storm In The Barn (Scott O'Dell Award For Historical Fiction)



## **Synopsis**

Tall tale. Thriller. Gripping historical fiction. This artful, sparely told graphic novel — a tale of a boy in Dust Bowl America — will resonate with young readers today. In Kansas in the year 1937, eleven-year-old Jack Clark faces his share of ordinary challenges: local bullies, his father's failed expectations, a little sister with an eye for trouble. But he also has to deal with the effects of the Dust Bowl, including rising tensions in his small town and the spread of a shadowy illness. Certainly a case of "dust dementia" would explain who (or what) Jack has glimpsed in the Talbot's abandoned barn — a sinister figure with a face like rain. In a land where it never rains, it's hard to trust what you see with your own eyes — and harder still to take heart and be a hero when the time comes. With phenomenal pacing, sensitivity, and a sure command of suspense, Matt Phelan ushers us into a world where desperation is transformed by unexpected courage.

## **Book Information**

Lexile Measure: GN430L (What's this?)

Series: Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction

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Publisher: Candlewick; First Edition edition (September 8, 2009)

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Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 19 customer reviews

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Age Range: 10 and up

Grade Level: 5 and up

## **Customer Reviews**

Set during the 1930s, when Kansas farmers tried to survive during a terrible drought, this graphic novel for younger readers shows a boy discovering that he can save his family by bringing back the

rain. Jack Clark is a shy 11-year-old whose father thinks he's useless at practical chores. The boy is not used to having any responsibilities, so when he sees a dark figure lurking in an abandoned barn near their house, he doesn't want to do anything about it. He'd rather chalk it up to dust dementia, until he realizes that the brooding shape is the rain, which has withdrawn from the land so that people will yearn for it until they are willing to worship it as a god. What Jack does next won't surprise readers who've seen countless puny but plucky heroes in juvenile fiction. The big novelty here is the Dust Bowl setting, and Phelan's art emphasizes the swirling, billowing clouds of fine grit that obscure even nearby objects. Older readers might have appreciated more text to make up for the lack of visual clarity, but kids will identify with Jack and appreciate his success. (Sept.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

**Starred Review.** Grade 5-7-It is 1937 in Kansas, during the Dust Bowl, and 11-year-old Jack can barely remember a world with plentiful water and crops. Unable to help his father with a harvest that isn't there, and bullied by the other boys his age, he feels like a useless baby. Stories offer a refuge, and there are multiple stories in this work. Jack's mother tells about the time when the land was a fertile paradise. Jack's invalid sister, Dorothy, is reading *The Wizard of Oz*, gaining inspiration from the adventures of another Kansan of the same name. Jack's friend comforts him with folktales about a brave man named Jack who masters nature, battling the King of the West Wind, the King of Blizzards, and the King of the Northeast Winds. In the end, Phelan turns the Dust Bowl into another one of Ernie's Jack tales when the real Jack encounters the Storm King in an abandoned barn and finds out that he has been holding back the rain. The boy must then gather the strength to determine his own narrative, as well as his parched town's future. Children can read this as a work of historical fiction, a piece of folklore, a scary story, a graphic novel, or all four. Written with simple, direct language, it's an almost wordless book: the illustrations' shadowy grays and blurry lines eloquently depict the haze of the dust. A complex but accessible and fascinating book.

—Lisa Goldstein, Brooklyn Public Library, NY END

My students are really enjoying this graphic novel. The pictures lend themselves to in depth thinking and inferring. The message is pretty powerful and there are a few swear words but it helps build the character of the dad.

This fabulous book got my son and I started on our quest to get all Matt Phelan's graphic books. Storm almost wordlessly tells the story of the Dustbowl in the U.S. in a way that relates to kids and

adults alike. We first found this book in the library and after we renewed it twice and my son still wanted to read it (he read it almost every day), we had to buy it. And he still often reads it. You will not be sorry if you buy this book. I enjoyed the illustrations and story as much as my son.

It is another avenue to present information to readers with limited abilities.

I've enjoyed his illustrations in the books written by others. With this, the first both written and illustrated by Matt Phelan, he delivers a well paced graphic story. Set in and during the dust-bowl, the young protagonist is looking for his place in the world, and his family. Tall tales help, and adventures await.

Beautiful and engrossing, this book is essentially historical fiction but has elements of fantasy as well. My own children (ages 8 and 10) read it for pleasure; my 4th grade students enjoyed and learned from it as a companion piece to studying the Dust Bowl. I don't read many graphic novels, but I couldn't put this one down!

I admit to not being a huge fan of historical fiction, but am always willing to expand my horizons if a book looks compelling enough. "The Storm in the Barn" didn't catch my eye at first, but when I picked it up and found it wasn't pure historical fiction, but had elements of fantasy and even horror within its pages, I was immediately intrigued. And I wasn't disappointed -- not only is the artwork lovely, spare but evocative and beautifully styled, but the story is a compelling one that tells about a difficult period of time in American history, while at the same time being unafraid to take its own path and use its time period to weave a chilling fantasy-thriller tale. "The Storm in the Barn" takes place during the Dust Bowl, a period during the early 20th century when the Midwestern states were hit by dust storms and severe drought that destroyed crops, livelihoods, and entire communities. Jack, a boy living on a failing farm in Kansas, feels useless to help his father with the farm or even comfort his sister, who suffers from a terrible sickness brought on by the dust. As the community struggles to survive however they can, the lonely and despondent Jack discovers something strange in an abandoned barn -- a tall and menacing stranger with a face like rain. The stranger turns out to be something not quite human, and may be the key to ending the drought and saving the farm... if Jack can gather the courage to face and defeat the personification of a storm... The artwork in this book is sketchy and colorless, but somehow is even stronger for both those traits. The sepia-toned drawings evoke the feel of the time period, a world of dust and bleached colors and tired faces. The

author makes great use of shadows, sketched lines, and billows of dust to convey the tired, drained look of the world... and when color is used, such as during a brutal jackrabbit roundup, it's all the more powerful for its use. The story itself does a great job of capturing the hardscrabble, desperate life of people living in the Dust Bowl, and shows a young boy's coming of age during a difficult time. Readers of all ages should be able to sympathize with Jack, a boy who just wants to make a difference even during a seemingly hopeless time. And the fantasy elements don't feel tacked on, but blended seamlessly into the story. Historical fiction is often seen as a dry and uninteresting genre, and the adding of a little bit of the supernatural doesn't weaken it but rather adds flavor and fascination, especially for younger readers. Warning to parents -- this book does have some shocking elements, notably violence from a gang of bullies and a rabbit roundup that ends in a massacre. These elements are handled fairly tastefully, but all the same, parents may want to give this a read before handing it to a sensitive child. A powerful read that captures the feel of a desperate era of American history, while at the same time making the tale unique with the inclusion of some supernatural elements. Even if kids think historical fiction is boring, they should enjoy this graphic novel, which is a nice blend of history and fantasy that should appeal to many readers.

Good for ages 8 and up.

If you're looking for a page-turning graphic novel that is both educational and kid-friendly, look no further than *The Storm in the Barn* by Matt Phelan. This riveting story of one family's struggle during The Dust Bowl is not to be missed. Kansas circa 1937 is shown through the eyes of an eleven year old boy named Jack Clark. While a bunch of bullies swings at him with their fists and their harsh words, a dust storm blows through town, and Jack runs off. Soon, we meet his family: Pa is gruff, Ma is sad, his sister Dorothy is sick, and his littlest sister, Mabel, has never seen rain. Jack overhears the doctor telling his father that Dorothy's condition is called "dust pneumonia," and that a new trend, "dust dementia," has started to spread. After seeing an odd face in the abandoned Talbot farm, Jack begins to worry that he too has been made ill by the storm. Using pencil, ink, and watercolor, Phelan has created stark, dusty images of distinct, proud characters that will certainly stay with the reader. As Jack's level of courage goes up and down, so does his posture: sometimes he is slouched, and he often hides his eyes under the brim of his hat, but when push comes to shove, he stares, he shouts, and he stands straight up. There are wordless panels which express a great deal, such as the two panels on one of my favorite pages (199, which comes towards the very end, so don't you dare skip ahead!) With her songs and and her smile, little sister Mabel steals every single scene - rather, panel - that she's in. Whenever she was shown skipping around with her

umbrella, I thought of the Morton Salt Girl. Her natural curiosity and happiness nicely countered the sadness expressed by other, older characters. Phelan also weaves in the power of storytelling: While bed-ridden Dorothy reads Ozma of Oz by L. Frank Baum, Ernie down at the General Supply tells young Jack tall tales which always star a courageous boy named Jack. Highly recommended for young readers and their families.

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