



The Great Molasses Flood: Boston, 1919

Deborah Kops

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A strange and sticky piece of history. January 15, 1919, started off as a normal day in Boston's North End. Workers took a break for lunch, children played in the park, trains made trips between North and South Stations. Then all of a sudden a large tank of molasses exploded, sending shards of metal hundreds of feet away, collapsing buildings, and coating the harborfront community with a thick layer of sticky-sweet sludge. Deborah Kops takes the reader through this bizarre and relatively unknown disaster, including the cleanup and court proceedings that followed. What happened? Why did the tank explode? Many people died or were injured in the accident—who was to blame? Kops focuses on several individuals involved in the events of that day, creating a more personal look at this terrible tragedy.

The Great Molasses Flood: Boston, 1919 Details

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From Reader Review The Great Molasses Flood: Boston, 1919 for online ebook

Sheila Garry says

An interesting true story of a molasses holding tank that burst in Boston, in 1919.

Brenda says

1919 Boston Babe Ruth had just helped the Red Sox on the world series. World War I had ended the previous November with the signing of the Armistice. The battle against the Spanish Influenza that had taken thousands of lives had just ended. The schools had reopened. Soda fountains had reopened and it seemed as though life might just be returning to normal.

In the North End in between the elevated railroad tracks and the Paving Yard stood in huge steel tank. It dominated the skyline. In mid-January it had received another shipment and was now full. It held 2,319,525 gallons of molasses. That weighed as much as 13,000 Ford cars - a sizable weight. During the war the molasses had been made into alcohol that was used for making ammunition, much needed in the war. Now it was being distilled into rum by the company that owned the tank, the U.S. Industrial Alcohol Company (USIA).

January 1919 was a time of change. The troops would be coming home and efforts were being made to make that as soon as possible. Only one more state was needed to ratify a constitution amendment for Prohibition to begin. Business was was bustling in and out of the North End. Passengers made their way between North and South Station. Commercial Street was a busy place. Firemen worked in the firehouse. The fireboat was there. It was laundry day, and being surprisingly warm on the 15th many lines were full. The North End Park was nearby. People were out. Children snuck in and around the tracks collecting what wood they could find to use at home to keep warm and to cook. When they passed by the tank they'd scrape off some of the sticky goo that oozed from between the seams. It wasn't like candy, but it was sweet enough.

It seemed the start of a good day until around noon. Folks heard a devastating roaring blast. The tank split open and a wave of thick brown glue swept through the North End sweeping up and wiping out everything in its path. The force of the molasses swept buildings off their foundations, slammed people against trestles and curbs or trapped them for long hours under debris and sludge. No one was so lucky. They did not escape the tide as it chased them down. The whole area was awash with the sticky, brown goo - the devastation great.

How had it happened? Was it a bomb? Had Anarchists, unhappy with the outcome of the war, planned this attack? Boston had been bombed a couple years before. Was it an accident? Who would pay for the clean-up? How could the loss of businesses, livelihoods, homes and lives be repaid?

From this time of devastation and disaster nearly 100 years ago there are many lessons to be learning and many parallels to be drawn to similar happenings today. I knew nothing of the molasses flood until I read of this book. Once I knew I began noticing references to it in books and other stories of the time. You'll be interested to read of the people affected by this blast - their lives were never the same and were never better. It's an interesting point in history - a pivotal moment. How can we use this information to ensure the same

does not happen to people caught in disasters in the present. I don't think we have yet. Read *The Great Molasses Flood* and see what you think. UCLA basketball coach, John Wooden, is credited with a quote: "If you don't have the time to do it right the first time, when are you going to have the time to do it right again?" I know I can't stop a deluge of molasses, but thoughtfulness always matters, big or small.

Scott says

I saw this one promoted by NYPL. It turned out to be a children's book, but that was OK. Although there are annoyingly "children's booky" moments (an explanation of what "appalling" means in quotations, the use of "Ouch!" as a sentence within the narration when Antonio DiStasio hits his head) and it sometimes feels written down, but the photographs are amazing (and toned in sepia--the incident would be all the more shocking if color photographs existed--it doesn't seem strange enough in black and white) and Kops has a throughline for drama that carries all the way through the text, although I wish some of the sidebars had been better incorporated. It's a very nice introduction to the story of the disaster. The incident made me laugh when I first heard it from my father (born in Springfield, Massachusetts a little over twenty years after the incident), which resulted in immediate chastisement, especially when he brought up that horses had to be shot when they got stuck in it. The deaths of horses and people are described here, but not that grisly bit. I would recommend this book to older elementary and younger middle school kids and their parents and teachers. I have a feeling I may prefer Stephen Puleo's *Dark Tide*, which she describes as one of her sources along with the entire 2,500 page court record, *Dorr vs. U.S. Industrial Alcohol*, which she read in the same courthouse where the trial took place.

Betsy says

I was hosting a party the other night and amongst my guests was a former editor of children's literature. In the course of the evening she happened to notice that I had a copy of *The Great Molasses Flood* by Deborah Kops sitting on my shelf. She saw it and instantly gave a groan. Apparently there was a time there when it felt like every other children's chapter book manuscript she received took place during that Boston tragedy. I admit I was surprised since before this book I hadn't seen ANY that covered this event thoroughly, fictional or nonfictional. Indeed, until I read Kops's book I wasn't even sure about the logistics. How exactly does molasses go about flooding anyway? Maybe if I'd lived in Boston I'd have had an idea, but I've never set so much as a toe in that town. So it is that once again I rely on the good authors of informational books for kids to fill in my spotty knowledge with their wise words. *The Great Molasses Flood* answers every question a person might have about that infamous moment in history, and does so with compassion and accuracy (two qualities all authors, adult, children, teen, what have you, should strive to achieve).

January 15, 1919 was an unseasonably warm day. Forty-three degrees if you can believe it. And folks were just going about their workday as usual. Then, at 12:40 in the afternoon, the strangest thing occurred. The molasses tank, located next to Boston Harbor and the train yard, burst wide open. Instantly 2,319,525 gallons of molasses spilled onto the streets, lifting homes, destroying elevated train tracks, and ultimately killing 21 people and wounding countless others. A 40-foot wave of molasses makes a mark, and when all was said and done folks had to figure out who was to blame. Was it an act of terrorism (anarchists were in full swing so this wasn't a crazy theory) or the fault of the tank? Whatever it was, it was an event that lasted long in the memories of those involved, even after the sticky sweet smell had faded.

Because I am a children's librarian and I had a somewhat spotty education when it came to American history I tend to get most of my historical information from works intended for kids. Actually, I'm not alone in this. We used to have an old man in my children's room that would come regularly to sit and read our history books because he liked how they laid out the facts. The same goes for me. So if I'm going to be honest with you, the first time I heard about The Great Molasses Flood was in Jennifer Armstrong's *The American Story: 100 True Tales from American History*. That book's a great collection of well-known and somewhat obscure tales from this nation's past. All the stories are true but I had a hard time swallowing (forgive the pun) this molasses blarney. I mean, really? A big old WAVE of molasses came down the street? People died?!? Of molasses? I mean . . . what? It all makes slightly more sense when you hear that molasses was useful for making weapons and in a WWI era American that was why you'd have a tank of the stuff. Still . . .

One of the difficulties in making a book like this is in the telling. The Great Molasses Flood sounds, when you say it aloud, like a bad Monty Python sketch. As an author Ms. Kops has a duty to tell this tale in such a way where the audience is sympathetic to the folks involved. Yes, they were maimed, or killed, or hurt by the equivalent of a tidal wave of melted sugar. So how do you manage to keep the important fact (molasses wave) prominent while at the same time restraining the text from devolving into some kind of bad joke? The solution appears to be a kind of you-are-there approach. Kops opens the book on the day of the accident and leads up to it by leaping from person to person. We see a bar owner worried about the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment, children outside picking leaking molasses from the outside of the tank as candy, train car inspectors on the job, firemen settling down to a siesta, and more. That way when the event occurs there are people you know directly involved. Now the problem with this is that Kops includes so many people that it's hard to tell one from another sometimes. There's a Cast of Characters listed in the front of the book but it requires a bit of backing and forthing to keep everyone straight (and only if you're dedicated to doing so).

Kops also could have limited her focus of this tale and, as a result, limited the use of the book. I'm sure there would be a huge temptation to just talk about the flood itself and leave the story at that. Instead, she examines the accusations that flew after the accident and shows how applicable they are to our 21st century world. If a molasses tank were to explode in one of our cities today, you can bet that accusations of terrorism would be out there, absolutely. A significant portion of this book is then dedicated to the lawsuit brought against the tank's owner, USIA (the U.S. Industrial Alcohol Company) which is interesting insofar as it shows who ultimately paid for the damage, but will probably be of interest only to those kids with a judicial bend to their brains.

The design of the book is, as far as I can tell, meant to do two things at once. On the one hand the sepia brown throws you instantly back into the year of 1919. You don't need a time machine if you make all the photographs brown. Additionally the brown is useful because that happens to be the color of molasses itself. And boy, I sure hope you like brown because the book's just loaded with it. Brown titles, brown photographs, brown sidebars, brown endpapers, brown brown brown brown brown. The problem? Well, in my time as a children's librarian I can tell you that getting a kid to pick up a book with a brown cover is akin to getting them to swallow red-hot pokers. Nothing doing. Kids today, for whatever reason, instantly associate the color brown with boredom. That means this book's going to be a shelf sitter in bookstores and libraries alike unless you find a way to talk it up. Fortunately, the story kind of sells itself. It just needs someone to do the selling.

Let me state for the record that I am very happy with the number of photographs Ms. Kops was able to include. Since we're talking about 1919 here it's not like there were citizens on the streets with cell phone cameras snapping pics as the massive wave destroyed their homes. Instead, most of the photos are taken before the accident and after it occurred. These turn out to be hugely useful. In one two-page spread we see

an elevated track next to a gigantic tank sitting peaceably. Later come multiple candid shots of folks wearing rubber boots walking through streets thick and sticky with the substance. Good crazy stuff.

You won't find a Bibliography in the back of this book, which probably has to do with the fact that aside from *The American Story* there really aren't any nonfiction books for kids out there that talk about this event. There's an adult book called *Dark Tide* by Stephen Puleo (who provided a blurb for this book) but that's about as close as you get. Really, as bizarre moments in American history go, this one's tough to beat. It sounds on paper like a cut scene from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* but was instead a massive horrific event that no one would ever want to live through. Definitely a book worth consulting from time to time, and kids will enjoy the pictures and the individual stories. Maybe some of the more technical details will appeal to only a few, but overall this is a title worth talking up, worth discovering. History was never quite this weird.

For ages 9-12.

Jim Erekson says

This slice of Boston history was a great read. Kops made it into a page-turner for me. While I was far less interested in the information after the flood, Kops kept the thread of characters weaving through that portion of the book to keep me thinking about how things turned out for Martin, or Teresa. This helped make the protracted legal battle interesting to hear about. Again, I really enjoy these small cuts through overlooked historical events and everyday characters. It reminds me of *Heroes of the Surf* that way.

About a dozen old photographs of twisted metal and knee deep molasses were the bits I browsed to repeatedly--these were engaging artifacts. Otherwise, this book is all text all the time (reading, who knew?)

Anyway, in February 1990, this very same thing happened -right here- in Loveland, Colorado. No fatalities, but a flood of molasses swamped buildings and property in one of the oldest parts of town! Coincidentally, it was the *Boston Globe* that broke the story. 'SWEETHEART CITY' HIT BY MOLASSES: Associated Press. *Boston Globe* [Boston, Mass] 17 Feb 1990: 53.

Terri says

I love discovering bits of history that are new or forgotten by me. I had never heard of this disaster and was fascinated by Kops' well-researched narrative. During World War I molasses was processed into ammunition. Millions of gallons were in huge vats at the Boston docks, awaiting transport to processing centers. Suddenly, the rivets on a new vat began to pop, the seam ripped open, and a brown tide burst into the dockyard destroying everything in its path. It was an incredible event that took many lives and caused catastrophic damage. Kops' details it in fascinating detail, with diagrams and period photographs in appropriate sepia tones enhancing the text.

Nick says

This is the story of one of the most unusual disasters in history, the explosion and collapse of a huge storage

tank in Boston in 1919. The reason why millions of gallons of molasses were being store there was made clear by this book, wonderfully illustrated by many photos taken after the flood of molasses moved through the streets, killing and injuring many humans and horses.

While visualizing a flood of molasses may seem humorous, the stick deaths caused by this bizarre event were very real, and the court case dragged on for years. The company which owned the storage tank helped confuse the issue by insisting that the tank had to have been bombed by anarchists, who apparently did plant a bomb in another molasses tank later, for reasons that have never been made clear.

This was a very interesting volume, and a quick read, at around 100 pages including photos.

Christine says

* I received this as a free eBook from Netgalley in exchange for an honest review. *

January 15th, 1919 was an unseasonably warm day in Boston's North End. Everyone was going about his or her day-to-day lives when the unthinkable happened. Amidst screeching steel and popping rivets a large tower "exploded" and a flood of molasses covered the area. In total 21 people lost their lives and many more were injured as the metal pieces soared through the air and whole buildings were moved off their foundations. One person was sent flying through the air and into the frigid waters surrounding Boston. A 6-year long court case ensued between the citizens of Boston and U.S. Industrial Alcohol Company for restitution and the settlement of damages for the victims. Blame flew back and forth, fingers pointing at the USIA for negligence, the local Anarchist Society (suspected of placing a bomb in the tank) and even so far as accusing a 6-year-old girl killed while she was playing in the area of being the one to plant to the bomb for them. Settlement was finally reached out of court.

Ms. Kops does a respectable job of telling of the tragedy in an abridged yet very understandable manner. This by necessity as the book is written as a "children's book suitable for ages 9 through 12". I picked this book up because I had never heard of the "Molasses Disaster" until I took a walking tour of Boston several years ago. I always meant to look into it a little further but until this little book caught my attention I never got around to it. So why read a children's book?

1 – It was available.

2 – While reading it, I found it contained all the information I needed to know without making a huge time investment.

3 – It had some truly incredible pictures. (Yes – I like picture books sometimes – stop guffawing)

This book satisfied all my needs when it came to what I wanted to learn about the "Molasses Disaster".

With a title like "The Great Molasses Flood" it sounds like it may be an amusing bit of bedtime reading for a little tyke. It's hardly that. Ms. Kops is very factual about what happened including descriptions of people being trapped under debris, injuries people suffered and the deaths that were caused. She also goes into fairly extensive detail about the court case. The top end of the recommended 9 – 12 years old would probably be more suitable as the writing is very fact based, with few embellishments, so unless the youngster had a real desire to know about the incident, they may not find it overly captivating for a casual read. Information packed ... absolutely! I would even go so far as to say it would be an excellent resource for a 4th grade history paper. I do think this book should have a place on the shelf in every school library's history section,

especially because of the pictures and newspaper article reproductions included.

A small plaque was placed at entrance to Puopolo Park by the Boston Historical Society to mark site of the disaster.

Mary says

I borrowed this at the library for my kids, but ended up reading it myself. Living in Boston, we have passed the plaque in the North End commemorating this event, so it was interesting to read the full account, and see the many historical photos. What the book also provides is valuable context: 1919 was after World War I, and a period of political unrest, with some anarchist groups setting off bombs. This intriguing story covers not just the failure of the molasses tank and the resulting disaster, but the legal battle to assign blame for damages, which took years to resolve.

Worth a read, although I am subtracting one star because it did not grab my kids' attention and they abandoned reading it. They are 11 and 15, and both like history! So the narrative could have used a bit more oomph.

Karen says

Because I live in Boston I have heard about the Great Molasses Flood and visited the plaque at Puopolo Park to mark the event. It is a cherished and unusual piece of Boston history and Deborah Kops has done a fine job of making it feel vivid and fresh. I like the sepia photographs and the lively prose. The sidebars about women's rights, Prohibition and other historical facts were fun and informative. I would have liked the author to have more fully focused on fewer of the men, women and children impacted by the flood (I think if it could have been the children it would have made the book more compelling for kids to read) but this is minor. This is a good time to publish this book since a reanalysis was done in 2014 that more fully describes the structural defects of the tank. the article in the Boston Globe noted that it was the same type of steel used on the Titanic which was "susceptible to fracture." Overall, a wonderful book.

Thank you to Netgalley for allowing me to review this book for an honest opinion.

Sharon Lawler says

Unusual and deadly event caused by corporate greed, and initially exasperated by a judge who proclaimed that the citizens of Boston were responsible since they voted to keep taxes low, therefore causing a shortage of building inspectors. The book has two intertwined parts. One part deals with the experiences of the residents before, during, and after the disaster. The second story line deals with the judicial process. In the acknowledgements, the author identifies two primary sources that were crucial in the writing of this book-- the 40 volume transcript from the hearing, *Dorr vs. US Industrial Alcohol*, and Hugh Ogdon's *Auditor's report* to the Superior Court. The author also refers to Stephen Puleo's *Dark Tide*. Other than these three items, other resources are not noted. There is an index, as well as photos and maps.

Mandy says

Aimed at children, this is nevertheless perfectly suitable for adults too. Everything you ever wanted to know about the Great Molasses Flood in Boston in 1919. A fascinating story, and very well presented here, with lots of photos, a clear exposition and some personal stories to make it easier for children (and adults) to understand the human dimension. Excellent.

Melissa Guimont says

I have heard the stories of being able to smell molasses from the top of Cobb Hill from local historians. I've been on walking tours of the site of this destructive black tide. I decided I wanted to know a little more of the history of this accident and picked this book up for a brief lesson. The facts and pictures were all presented well enough in this book, but I found the jumping from character to character to be a little unnecessary. It is important to relate how many different people were affected and how each person's lives were moving in different directions on that January day, but I just found myself wondering if it was better to leave a chapter devoted to this aspect instead of jumping around from this to that throughout the book. I did like that the book emphasized the problems of whom was to claim responsibility for this flood and it did cover the potential causes and effects well enough. I wouldn't recommend this for children under 10, as it's a bit lengthy and involved.

Fredrick Danysh says

In January 1919 a storage tank containing over two million gallons of molasses ruptured in Boston flooding the harbor district and killing twenty-one people. This is the story of that disaster and the aftermath. Vintage photographs are included. This book is appropriate for middle schoolers and late primary as well as reluctant older readers.

Sarah Monsma says

In January of 1919 a disaster occurred in Boston that is almost hard to imagine today. A huge tank—filled with over two million gallons of molasses—burst, damaging the elevated train tracks, lifting buildings off their foundations, and carrying pedestrians and workers into Boston Harbor. Eleven people died and forty were injured. Buildings were destroyed. Clean up took weeks, but the investigation into what happened and who was responsible would drag on for years.

Deborah Kops has written an interesting account of this bizarre accident. She spends just enough time orienting readers to the neighborhood, the people, and the times of the incident. She details the effects of the tragedy, setting them squarely in facts that help readers understand the times. For example, the ambulance drivers were women, for though World War I was over, the troops had not yet returned from Europe.

The Great Molasses Flood follows some of the children and adults involved from the time before the incident

through to the years after the case was settled. Period photographs and a beautifully drawn map of the neighborhood help readers understand the details even better. Sidebars present additional information about the 18th Amendment, women's suffrage, the history of Boston's North End, and other important historical information that will help readers further understand the story.

One aspect of the book I appreciated most was the way the hearing was presented. During her research Kops waded through 25,000 pages of transcripts to bring the most interesting information about the people we'd been following. She also presented the testimony in a way that was informative about the justice system but also left readers wondering how it would all come out.

This was a truly enjoyable middle grade nonfiction read. I'd heard only a little about this incident before reading the book. I'm glad to know more about it now.

I read the electronic ARC of *The Great Flood* courtesy of Charlesbridge and NetGalley.
