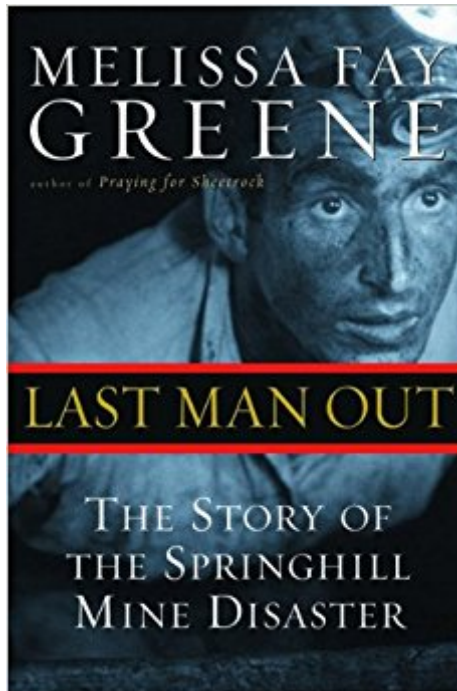




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Last Man Out: The Story Of The Springhill Mine Disaster



Synopsis

The deepest coal mine in North America was notoriously unpredictable. One late October evening in 1958, it "bumped" - its rock floors heaving up and smashing into rock ceilings. A few miners staggered out, most of the 174 on shift did not. Nineteen men were trapped, plunged into darkness, hunger, thirst, and hallucination. As days and nights passed, the survivors began to hope for death by gas rather than from thirst. Above ground, journalists and families stood in despairing vigil, as rescuers brought out scores of the dead. The hope of finding life underground faded and families made funeral preparations. Then, a miracle: Rescuers stumbled across a broken pipe leading to a cave of survivors, then a second group was discovered. A media circus followed. Ed Sullivan, then the state of Georgia, invited survivors to visit. Publicity, politics, and segregation sorted the men differently than they had ordered themselves. Underground, the one black survivor nursed a dying man; in Atlanta, Governor Marvin Griffin said: "I will not shake hands with a Negro." If every great writer has one tale of peril, heroism, and survival, *Last Man Out* is Melissa Fay Greene's. Using long-lost stories and interviews with survivors, Greene has reconstructed the drama of their struggle to stay alive

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Customer Reviews

On October 23, 1958, gases from deep within the earth shot skyward, causing entire floors of rock to rise instantly in a coal mine in Springhill, Nova Scotia, trapping 174 men underground.

Seventy-five miners never made it out alive. Miraculously, two small groups of miners survived the

initial "bump" but were sealed in small caverns deep within the coal. Surrounded by foul air and total darkness, and with precious little food and water, the men vacillated between optimism and hopelessness as they tried to maintain sanity amidst horrific conditions. Above them, fellow miners and rescue workers dug desperately to get them out, clinging to the unwritten Miner's Code that no man shall be left behind. After a week of digging and with hope all but exhausted, they found one group of a dozen miners; a day later seven more men were discovered. Melissa Fay Greene describes this harrowing ordeal in sharp detail, effectively capturing the drama of the event for both the miners trapped below and their distraught families waiting above. Placing the event into a larger context, Greene describes how it became the first nationally televised disaster, as journalists from all over Canada and the U.S. converged on the small town and camped at the entrance of the mine. After their rescue, the men were the center of media attention, and some of them became instant celebrities (one was chosen as Canada's "Citizen of the Year

The mining disaster that killed 75 men in Nova Scotia in 1958 is rich terrain for a good yarn, but Greene's book about the miners who survived and those who didn't comes up short. Her research is adequate, but surprisingly, NBA finalist Greene fails to bring this tale to life. In re-creating the events leading up to and following the catastrophe, imagined dialogue rings inauthentic: that miners gathered around a colleague with a mile of rock pinning his arm down exclaim, Oh my God, oh my God, and Oh Jesus, oh Jesus, seems a tad polite, even for 1950s Canada. Similarly, the author's overreliance on exclamation points in dialogue forces tension and excitement. As well, the miner subculture isn't effectively captured, and the buildup to the explosion, known as the Bump, is bereft of suspense. The story gets interesting after the rescue of 19 men, who are subsequently exploited by various factions, including the media and the public relations aide to a segregationist U.S. governor, who arranges to fly the survivors and their families to a beach resort the governor's state is looking to promote. The presumed PR goes horribly awry when it's learned that one miner is black, as are his 12 children. Greene (*Praying for Sheetrock*; *Temple Bombing*) does prove successful in her fascinating narrative on this miner an amateur musician known as the Singing Miner and Canada's Citizen of the Year in 1958. But sadly, this is the only head that Greene succeeds in getting into. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

The basic facts of this book's content - the event surrounding the Spring Hill Mine rescue have been covered in other reviews and I will not waste time rehashing them yet again. Instead I would like to focus upon the less obvious gems within this book that in my opinion transcend the amazing story of

survival. Melissa Green takes the reader on a journey not just into a coal mine, but into life in this working class town in 1958. The families, the marriages and the race relations all form a familiar image for those who like myself lived in or near the same time frame (in my case as a child) except that this book provided me an understanding of my parent's world. While my father wasn't a miner or ever a manual laborer nevertheless the men of the mine matched up with faces and families of those I grew up with in a world long lost to history. Of solid men who took care of their families, saved, and yet know how to have fun. Beyond that personal appeal the medium of the story takes us with the trapped men and allows us to experience their emotions. Somehow in spite of the fact we know it is coming the disaster seems as fresh and unexpected as it was to the men who also knew that some day there would be the "big one" and prayed they wouldn't be inside when it happened. The aftermath leaves the reader choking on coal dust and shaken by the sight of crushed men whom they have just gotten to know. Unlike some writers the author doesn't pretty it up and the all the horror and mental trauma of the men is ours to share. We also share through the men's thoughts, thoughts of children and the future they now realize they will never see, thoughts of wives whom they will never hold and the constant and never ending question of what will it be like when death comes? Like so many of us who take life's little pleasures for granted, this disaster brings into focus for these trapped and dying men the value of those things and people they took for granted. Lie in the coal black mine on a bed of broken rock while thirst unlike anything you have ever known threatens to drive you out of your mind. Realize your pants can't stay up because you've lost so much weight and understand that you can't last, can't live much longer. Then return to thoughts of your parched throat that feels as if it is filled with a splintery wooden stake that keeps "being twisted and twisted." A harrowing and personal experience. Well done! Well done indeed!

Great story telling

Very good story and well written. How do you deal with being trapped in such a small dark space that deep underground. When I think they were trapped as far under the ground, as high as a plane flies above the ground, I get chills! I couldn't put it down.

Last Man Out is quite possibly the greatest work of nonfiction I have ever read. The writer wonderfully captures the terror of being trapped in pitch blackness for seven and a half days. The countless details of the survival attaches the reader to each of the trapped men. Because of this attachment, the reader is then appalled at the treatment received by the miners after their

rescue. This is a fantastic, awesome, excellent, outstanding, wonderful, terrific, splendid, fabulous, marvelous, magnificent, first-rate, brilliant, tremendous (and any other possible synonym of fantastic) book that should be purchased immediately.

first Melissa Faye Greene book I'd read - awesome writer

I heard the song written when I was 19-years-old. I wanted to know the real story and this book did it. It is was excellent.

The writer of this book does such a good job in painting the picture of lives of these in this book about life and the dangers of coal mining!

This book will last in my memory for years. I've read other books on mine disasters, notably one about the 1917 Butte disaster by Michael Punke, but they pale in comparison to this one. It was hard to put down, it was hard not to cry for the miners and hard to believe the blatant racism that existed in my parents' time. I've read a dozen books this year and it's been my favorite.

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