



The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History

Susan Scott Parrish

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The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, which covered nearly thirty thousand square miles across seven states, was the most destructive river flood in U.S. history. Due to the speed of new media and the slow progress of the flood, this was the first environmental disaster to be experienced on a mass scale. As it moved from north to south down an environmentally and technologically altered valley, inundating plantations and displacing more than half a million people, the flood provoked an intense and lasting cultural response. *The Flood Year 1927* draws from newspapers, radio broadcasts, political cartoons, vaudeville, blues songs, poetry, and fiction to show how this event took on public meanings.

Americans at first seemed united in what Herbert Hoover called a "great relief machine," but deep rifts soon arose. Southerners, pointing to faulty federal levee design, decried the attack of Yankee water. The condition of African American evacuees in "concentration camps" prompted pundits like W.E.B. Du Bois and Ida B. Wells to warn of the return of slavery to Dixie. And environmentalists like Gifford Pinchot called the flood "the most colossal blunder in civilized history." Susan Scott Parrish examines how these and other key figures--from entertainers Will Rogers, Miller & Lyles, and Bessie Smith to authors Sterling Brown, William Faulkner, and Richard Wright--shaped public awareness and collective memory of the event.

The crises of this period that usually dominate historical accounts are war and financial collapse, but *The Flood Year 1927* enables us to assess how mediated environmental disasters became central to modern consciousness.

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