

2008 Floods Book Report

I don't read books anymore. That's because ever since I graduated from the University of Iowa there is nobody forcing me to. Consequently, I'm not sure why I volunteered to review "A Watershed Year: Anatomy of the Iowa Floods of 2008," a compendium of essays about the 2008 Iowa floods edited by local ecologist Connie Mutel.

I have a keener interest than most in this topic. My business was flooded in '08 and operated from an alternate site for almost two months. I'm a former Johnson County Soil and Water Conservation District commissioner, and currently a member of the Clear Creek Watershed Enhancement Board and the Iowa Valley Resource Conservation and Development board.

Ever since the 2008 floods, I have been searching for someone who could tell me in twenty-five words or fewer why the floods occurred and what variables contributed to what extent. In other words, who's to blame and can they be sued? Although the book's stated purpose is to "help spark flood-related explorations, not summarize endpoints," I found some answers.

Cliff's Notes hasn't gotten around to Mutel's book yet, so I couldn't avoid reading the whole thing. At first, the idea of reliving the flood in excruciating detail seemed as compelling as, say, watching video highlights of my dating experiences in high school. Fortunately, it is much less painful than that.

I haven't written a book report in over 35 years, so I may be a little rusty. One thing I do remember about a 650-word book report is to kill the first 250 words talking about peripheral topics to minimize the actual work involved. That accomplished, here we go.

"A Watershed Year" is probably not a book to be read on vacation at the beach. It's somewhat technical in places and was designed to be a standard of reference for the 2008 floods, which it no doubt is. Even so, it's a

surprisingly easy read; compared to your average technical journal it's a real bodice-ripper.

Every facet that may have contributed to the floods of 1993 and 2008 is explored in depth, as well as the aftereffects. For me, the most fascinating chapters deal with the design and operation of the Coralville Dam, which I've always assumed was managed by bureaucrats and idiots (is that redundant?). As it turns out, that's not the case and I need to find someone else to blame.

Surprisingly, Iowa City has recorded four floods as big as or bigger than 2008, the most recent one occurred in pre-dam 1947. In contrast, Cedar Rapids' 2008 flood was its worst on record. When the Cedar River crested there, its flow rate was twice as large as anything previously measured, and about 53 times normal. Every minute, it was transporting enough sediment to fill three 12-ton dump trucks, enough nitrate to treat 20 acres of farmland and enough atrazine to treat an acre of corn.

A few more fun facts: A building just above the 100-year floodplain has a 25% chance of being flooded in a 30-year period. 2008 contained the flood trifecta of a snowy winter, cool, moist spring and heavy early summer rainstorms. 85 of Iowa's 99 counties were declared federal disaster areas by FEMA. For the eastern third of Iowa, 2008 ranked as the wettest winter on record. The 1993 flood was originally estimated to be a 100 to 500 year event but is now estimated to have been a 50 to 100 year event.

The best part about reading a book like this (if I can remember it all) is that I'm unlikely to lose a flood-related argument because I don't know what I'm talking about. Which is what I'm used to.

Back to my original quest for a grossly oversimplified 25-word summary of the 2008 floods, I was able to craft my own after reading this book: "Despite our best efforts, a river will eventually do what all rivers do, and it's best not to be in the way when that happens."