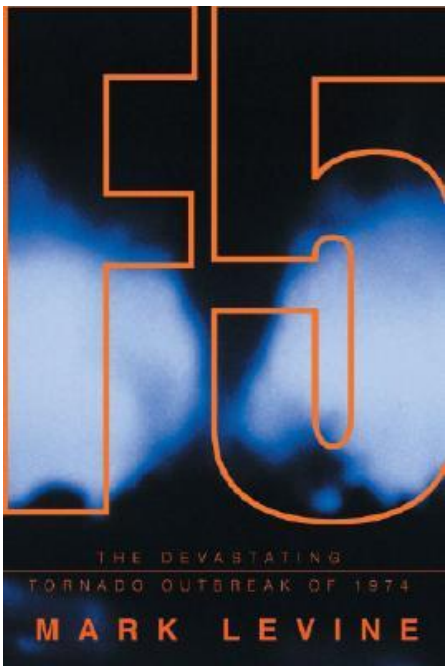

F5: The Devastating Tornado Outbreak of 1974

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On April 3, 1974, all hell broke loose in the central United States and southern Ontario. In the next 40 hours of the "Super Outbreak," 148 record-breaking tornadoes tore through 13 states, from Michigan to Alabama. The twisters killed more than 300 people and left over 5,000 others injured. *F5* recounts the nearly unbelievable destruction wrought by a "perfect storm" system that experts calculate could occur only once every 500 years. A truly riveting read.

F5: The Devastating Tornado Outbreak of 1974 Details

Date	:	Published June 6th 2007 by Miramax (first published 2007)
ISBN	:	9781401352202
Author	:	Mark Levine
Format	:	Hardcover 336 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, History, Science, Environment, Nature

From Reader Review F5: The Devastating Tornado Outbreak of 1974 for online ebook

Shay Caroline says

F5 is the story of the April 3-4, 1974 "super outbreak" of tornadoes which spanned from Alabama to Ontario and from Illinois to Virginia. In 17 hours time, a staggering 148 tornadoes appeared, including two killer twisters which hit Limestone County, Alabama, the focal point of Levine's book.

The title derives from the Fujita scale (now the Enhanced Fujita Scale) which categorizes tornadoes into any of six groups, from the F-0, which might topple your patio furniture, to the terrifying might of an F-5, whose winds can exceed 318 miles per hour, and can disintegrate a sturdy home in under thirty seconds.

While Levine does touch on such things as how twisters form, he doesn't let his story become bogged down with too much dry science. He focuses most of the book on a handful of residents of Limestone County who lived through the storm, some of them forever altered physically, all of them changed in some way by what they experienced. Woven throughout, are snapshots of the United States in 1974, a country freshly withdrawn from the war in Viet Nam, and led by a president who would soon resign in disgrace. In Limestone County, schools had only been integrated a few years before, and wheelchair-bound George Wallace had been re-elected by a large margin.

In F5, you'll meet a black pastor who sat with his wife and three sons on the living room sofa as the storm intensified. Soon enough, the roof flew away and all of them found themselves airborne inside the fury of an F5 tornado. Then there is the teenage couple who are sucked out of their car and hurled into different parts of a nearby field. Later that night, as she is being wheeled down a hospital hallway with one of her feet hanging on only by a few tendons, she sees her boyfriend being wheeled toward her. She calls out to him. The dazed young man's reply: "Who are you?"

Levine does spend a fair amount of time talking about Ted Fujita, or "Mr. Tornado" as he came to be known. During a research trip into the areas hit by the twisters, the single-minded Fujita and his young assistant stop to eat in a local restaurant. Fujita cannot contain his excitement at the opportunity to collect and analyze so much data. He raises his glass and proposes a toast. "To tornadoes!" The assistant looks around nervously at the people around them, some who had buried loved ones. "Perhaps you shouldn't do that," he advises his famous mentor.

F5 is entertaining, but does take nearly half the book in setting the scene. Once the twisters arrive, however, it is hard to put down. I do recommend it.

Evan says

To give a you an idea of the subtle difference between an F4-rated and F5-rated tornado (today the ratings are calculated slightly differently under the enhanced Fujita, or EF scale, btw), the first will completely level the most well-built home and leave some traces of its material on the foundation. The F5 adds that extra kicker of sweeping away every shred of the building from the foundation. Not much consolation in those differences for the homeowner, if, indeed, said homeowner managed to live through either of them.

The worst F5 of all time, at least in terms of complete devastation, was likely one that hit the Double Creek Estates neighborhood of Jarrell, Texas, in 1997. Entire families were lost and in some cases their bodies, if found at all, were rendered into something outside the realm of human recognition. Material was pulverized into dust. Some cars were never found. The tornado left a scoured mud field and utterly bare foundation slabs. For anyone above ground it was an absolutely unsurvivable storm.

But that is by way of tangent. In citing that example, I might to some degree be replicating the major problem in Mark Levine's book, F5, but on that I will later elaborate.

For an F5/EF5 tornado to be classified as such, it must hit a home and sweep it away. To date, the Fujita scale does not count *measured* wind speed as justification for rating a tornado. If that were the case, a lot of tornadoes are probably EF5s but aren't classed as such because they hit no buildings: necessary for the rating. It's an imperfect system, but it makes sense, for what it is.

The epicenter of Levine's tale is sleepy Athens, the county seat of Limestone County in northern Alabama, one of the most notoriously active tornado regions on earth. His date is April 3, 1974, the day of the infamous Super Outbreak, the worst tornado outbreak of the 20th century. The Athens area was hit by multiple twisters that day, including an F5 and an F4 that wiped out the community of Tanner. People who somehow managed to avoid the F5 were clobbered by the F4 that came less than an hour later. Some were hit by both.

To strain or twist (no pun intended) the metaphor, this book is like an F5 that fails to hit any buildings, or only sideswipes them. Levine's book has the power, the stuff, and all the makings of an F5 of nonfiction. His reportage is exceptional, topnotch. His writing masterly and descriptive, full of flavorful observation and detail. Overmuch, alas.

And then comes the vast cast of characters, their narratives sliced and diced and rejoined in a rather scattershot way. There are books that do this and can pull it off, like John Hersey's classic, *Hiroshima*. This one, not so much. I've read many nonfiction books that juggle ample *dramatis personae* with varying degrees of success. Doing it successfully is a real art form, and it requires the best editors in the business. Good editors can reign in such authorial excesses and keep things on track. Alas, this is an example of a book that knocks itself off the rails time and time again.

Then comes the Baby Boomer parade of historical markers; the references to streaking and Vietnam and Watergate and many other cultural contextual tangents that are excessive and probably more fascinating to Levine than to the reader. I did appreciate the sections on Dr. Ted Fujita, the great tornado scientist who invented the Fujita scale. Fujita surveyed the damage in Limestone County, and to Levine's credit he does pick up that narrative later in the book. I appreciated Levine's inclusion of a fact that I had never known: that a nearby nuclear plant nearly suffered a meltdown as the result of damage from the tornadoes. Shades of Fukushima.

I will admit, though, that my interest in reading tornado books is really to get down to brass tacks: to talk about the history of the tornado, where it went and what it did, and, yes, to capture some semblance of the lives of those disrupted or devastated by it. Unfortunately, Levine's approach seems more aimed to carefully delineate in great detail the lives and family trees of his cast, and it's just too much. For fans of, say, Southern Gothic fiction,or those who appreciate a well-drawn portrait of a Southern town and a good cross-section of some its citizenry, Levine delivers. You hear the gospel and taste the chitterlings.

I rooted for this book; really wanted to like it, and even contemplated a four-star rating about halfway in. It is

what it says it is ("one town's survival..."), so there is no falsity in advertising. Its organization and excess of detail, however, did not persuade me and I have to concede that it wore me down. At no point did I feel the power of momentum, of the gravitas of the event. There are nonfiction books that are page turners. For me, this was not one of those. Your mileage may vary.

If you are really interested in tornadoes I would recommend a website called extremeplanet.me.

Schmacko says

As an adult, I have come to realize that I have a love for real-life disaster documentaries, especially ones that pit humans against Mother Nature. Humanity always has a reputation for extreme hubris, a quality that Nature tends to destroy in single, dramatic swoops.

F5 is about a set of vicious tornadoes and the Fujita scale, a scale recently adopted in the early 70s. Just as it was being considered, one of the most ugly super-cells hit mid-America, spawning own 100 tornadoes in less than 2 days. In a single county in Alabama – where our story is set – eight tornadoes set down, including an F5 (310+ MPH winds) and another F4 or F5, they cannot tell. People still remember April 3, 19734 for this unexpected devastation.

Mark Levine does almost everything so well. He introduces the science, he talks about the people and their lives, he brings in the storms, and then he measures the aftermath both in physical and emotional costs. Levine has a talent for setting up dread merely by talking about the layout of a local trailer park. He finds the families already in stress, and he throws them into the whirlwind.

Here are my small complaints:

- He explains, as best he can, how tornados are formed. However, it’s still pretty dense description. A drawing or two would’ve helped. As it was, I had to go online – especially targeting several Youtube videos – to understand better. In fact, after rereading Levine, his description was thick, lacking in metaphor and imagery to help us understand.
- As a reader, I sometimes was confused in the characters (real people), forgetting if Frank worked for the electric company, or if Walter had the fancy house. A couple things would’ve helped. More description in reintroducing the characters would’ve helped, and a subtle approach at this wouldn’t have seemed clunky.
- Also, a map of the county and the houses – who lives where – would’ve helped. I had trouble visualizing the roads, etc., and again had to revert to the Internet and Google Maps, where the roads have changed significantly.

Still, Levine’s emotional work is amazing. Here is a first-hand account of a 16-year-old girl, after she was caught in the storm with her boyfriend and his Mustang.

"In a moment your life changes. It’s that sudden. The moment is over. It was so quick it might as well not have happened. You ought to be able to forget it, or to pretend it gone. You don’t know why it happened to you and not someone else. And since it happened to you, why did you survive it? Others didn’t.

It’s as thought something was revealed to you inside the tornado, something you need to know in order to go

on, in order to get out the other side of it. But for the moment you can’t recall what it is. So you go back there, back inside it, you feel the wind trying to pull you apart, you go back and tell yourself: This time pay attention to every detail.

You wake in pain. You can’t move your leg. You see it at the other end of the bed, under the hump of the sheet, and it doesn’t seem to have anything to do with the rest of you. In any case, the leg might not be yours for long. You hear the doctor whispering to someone in the shadows of the room. “I can’t promise she’ll keep it,” he says. You close your eyes.

Sometime later, you wake in pain again. Your father is sitting beside you. He takes your hand. You turn your head and catch your reflection in the basin near the bed. It is not you, really, but some ugly, beaten, sorrowful new version of you.

You are afraid to ask about the boy who was driving. Afraid to even say his name if that means he must be answered for. You would rather not know.

Your father tells you that he and your mother went out looking for you during the storm. When they passed the compacted Mustang, your mother went hysterical, fainted, and had to be taken home. Your father lied to her and told her it wasn’t the same car, all the while praying to himself that if you and the boy were in bad shape, the Lord would take you quickly and not make you suffer.

Well, here you are anyway."

If one believes in a Divine Force that created the universe, the message of severe storms doesn’t seem to be one of mercy, grace, and blessings. Instead, this god is either vengeful or, more likely, so uncaring that only Probability rules. Perhaps the great lesson of nature is to teach us that we small humans do not have dominion, and that we do not control. We merely must figure out how to survive. As the saying goes, “We cannot control the waves, but we can learn to surf.”

For the most part… Sometimes the wave is a tsunami, and then it is only anyone’s guess who survives and who doesn’t.

Jennifer Wardrip says

F5 is a really good non-fiction book that reads like the best type of fiction -- action, adventure, thriller, family drama. It's the true-life accounts of what many people lived through in April 1974, when the US suffered the deadliest outbreaks of tornadoes on record.

I read this book in a day, mostly because I didn't want to stop reading once I had started. Mark Levine has truly done his research, but he's written the story of these tornadoes in a way that never seems overbearing or gets so bogged down in pure science that you want to stop reading.

A great book and highly recommended.

Michael says

A very basic and to the point account of the "super outbreak" of April 3-4, 1974. The book concentrates primarily on Limestone county, Alabama. After a short history about the area and some of its residents the book is almost entirely about the tornados and damage. Then has a brief aftermath. Never going into intricate detail but giving enough to give you a good idea while keeping the names and places easy to follow. A good account of events. This was a story that could have gotten bogged down with to much info but the author kept it clean and to the point. A really good book about an amazing and catastrophic event.

Katherine says

This is a fascinating story about the devasting series of tornadoes that shattered the south during April, 1974. Focusing primarily on the devastion and damage that occured in the small town of Limestone, Alabama, and the surrounding area, this book brings the reality of severe storms and tornadoes to life. Levine begins by introducing main participants and survivors of the storms. You know their lives and personal stories before the storms arrive to change their homes, lives aand dreams forever. It is truly remarkable at the strength these people had as survivors. This series of storms included 148 tornadoes in a 17 hour period, including 6 F5 tornadoes. Their cumulative paths covered 2,584 miles. 335 people were killed and over 6,000 injured. The total cost of property losses was conservatively estimated at $600 million. Nothing, of course, could replace the value of the personal losses of so many people. This series of storms was closly studied by Dr. Ted Fujita. The knowledge gained of tornado behavior and destruction was at least a benefit of the disaster.
If you are interested in any stories of weather phenomenon, storms, or if you have ever experienced a tornado or live in an area frequented by these terrible storms, this book will be enlightening.

Jennifer says

Having grown up in Limestone county, it was fascinating to read this account of the tornado outbreak. Fortunately my immediate family did not move there until 1976, but I grew up in the shadow of this terrible storm as my great aunt and great uncle and cousins were seriously injured during the course of these events when their house in East Limestone was demolished with them in it.

Several people I know were featured in this book- including Brother Fred Lackey, who was my pastor for 16 years, Jason and Mark McBay, who were2 guys I went to school with and my bus driver- Donnie Powers. It was really interesting to be able to visualize faces, places and streets while reading the accounts. I lived less than 2 miles from Coffee Pot and frequented the convenience store there as a child.

Having a better understanding of this storm also explains why almost EVERY house has a storm shelter in this area of the country and why most residents of this area are hypervigilant when it comes to severe weather.

As a book I thought it was well written, but there were some points where I found some of the additional information to be a little out of place. However, it was a good read and would highly recommend it to anyone who was interested in severe weather or that area of the country.

Mark Jordan says

There's a great 150 page book here. Unfortunately, the full text is about 300 pages. Whether it was author Mark Levine's desire to flesh out the picture or the publisher's mandate to flesh out the size of the book, Levine's vivid narrative--based on interviews with survivors--of the insane multiple-tornado night of April 3, 1974 in Limestone County, Alabama, is bogged down by frequent asides discussing the history of weather forecasting, the structure of severe storms, the politics of the day, and so forth. Much of that could be jettisoned in favor of focusing on the narrative of events that evening. After all, those with a scientific or technical interest in tornadoes will already be familiar with the meteorology and the Fujita scale which gives the book its name, and those not interested won't care anyway. But I can't criticize Levine's narrative, because he puts you vividly at the scene, experiencing the uncanny dread of a tornado's approach and the chaos of its aftermath. For those who want to experience the story of the night that five tornadoes hit one county, I'd recommend skimming the padding and savoring the narrative.

Whitaker says

A really great book shows us how everything is great and worth to die for

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Lindsay says

An excellent time capsule-like view of the Super Outbreak of '74. Levine weaves threads of individual's and family's lives together with the socio-political climate of the time in rural Alabama and the advances of Fujita to create a tapestry that fully illustrates the multi-faceted effects of this phenomenon.

Kelley E Bosley says

A good,quick read. Loved the personal stories. Made the tornadoes impact more real.

SouthWestZippy says

This book walks you through April 3,1974 when 148 tornadoes covering thirteen states killed hundreds and injured thousands of people. Six of them were a category F5.
I wanted to like this book. I am fascinated by storm stories of survival and destruction. This book is all over the place with information and does a horrible job of sticking to the subject. Goes off on a tangent about things that have nothing to do with the story he is telling. I would have like a better time line. It would have given a more accurate and a bigger picture of events.

Lisa says

I'd give this book 4.5 if I could. I reserve a 5 for a book that I think is an absolute must read. I must state that I am fascinated by tornados so that likely adds to my enjoyment of this tale. At the time of the events of this book I was 12 and living in Ohio. I remember the events in Xenia very well, my brother was dispatched there as part of the Ohio National Guard. I loved hearing the in depth stories of families that were impacted by these events, often with tragic results. In those days tornados and warnings were much more scary because we didn't have all the advance warning that we have these days. I did not mind the style with a bit of jumping around and was able to follow just fine. I have to admit holding the results of Donnie and Felicia to the end kept me in suspense as we resolved what happened to all others!

Mia Lucia Manifold says

At times this book is in total control of the reader. Gentle readers may feel overwhelmed , readers that are shock proof will be deeply engaged , and all readers will at some point feel the book nudge, or shove them into a new understanding of nature's power ability to change lives.. At times this book becomes so tangled in its many threads that the reader may not successfully shift their focus.Then it is like watching television when someone else has control of the remote and you find yourself struggling to make sense of a plot only later catching on that it is an entirely different plot.The writing is extraordinary in places and it is worth the mental fatigue one may develop keeping up with the multitude of transitions among sub-plots to find these jewels of word play. Levine is especially strong when writing philosophically about extreme weather , good at writing about technical aspects of meteorology ,(but assumes more prior knowledge then many readers have), and excellent if not perhaps too speculative about the inner workings of individual's mental processes.I would not read this book if not prepared for extreme and graphic descriptions of carnage related to physical trauma ,or if one lives in tornado alley , or is prone to phobias or has trouble sleeping. Do not read before bed. If you have a high tolerance for being reminded that life is unfair ,and random proceed into the book confident that you will most likely not get bored ,and feel free to skip portions if you do since this is a book that can be read in sections and while missing the larger plot will still provide insight and for many entertainment.

Melissa says

A historical look at the Super Outbreak of tornadoes that hit the south/mid-west on April 3, 1974 as seen through the eyes of those living in Limestone County, Alabama.

The story is choppy, with many different people profiled from just prior to the thunderstorms through to the recovery and clean up phases of the storm. It is really hard in the beginning 25% of this book to keep everyone straight in the reader's head. There is a great story here, but too much excess on politics, the end of Vietnam, and national news (such as the oil crisis) suffocates the tornadoes story. The long science lecture on how thunderstorms and tornadoes are made I could have done without; it slowed down the story considerably. Likewise, the chapter on the different disasters happening that same year was a snooze.

I did enjoy the side journey of Mr. Fujuita, the scientist whose life-long work gave us untold information about tornadoes - this side journey eventually crossed into the story of April 3, 1974, making the two stories cohesive. The story is at times gory, with descriptions of injuries; if you are sensitive to those things, please

take heed. There are descriptions of children dying and recovery of dead children.

I'm still glad I read this book, as it gave me an understanding to how natural disasters were handled before the 1990s introduction of disaster prevention and response and the birth of the Emergency Management career field.