

Windblown dust

Connie Nugent MLS

In 525 BCE, according to Herodotus, the Persian king Cambyses II assembled an army of 50,000 men to march across the Egyptian desert to subjugate the priests of Amun. In her futuristic time travel novel *And the Rest is History*, Jodi Taylor places her protagonist Max and a companion perched among boulders in the western desert to witness the army's march toward the Siwa Oasis. Max spies a "dark yellow murky cloud" where the horizon had been and hopes that it is dust "kicked up by a marching army rather than the beginnings of a sandstorm."¹ No such luck.

Dust swirled madly, first kicked up by hooves, wheels, and marching feet and then being blown around by the wind. I could feel it everywhere, in my hair, in my mouth, everywhere, but I could still see ... [The soldiers] marched fast. Every now and then, one would look back over his shoulder. They knew what was coming. What was behind them ... They were pushing along at a brisk trot. Were they hoping to outrun it?

The dust-covered soldiers pass by the boulders, and Max relaxes, "As sandstorms go that wasn't too bad." And yet...

The entire horizon—the shimmering heat haze—everything had gone. Completely vanished. Disappeared. In its place, a huge, vast billowing cloud of brown was storming toward us. Not the horizon-blurring dust kicked up by a passing army. This cloud had to be hundreds and hundreds of feet high and it was solid dust and sand. Soon, it would swallow the sun ... The world grew cold and dark ... the wind came roaring across the desert, changing its note to a shriek ... Lightning flashed somewhere ... Around

Corresponding author: Connie Nugent
Contact Information: Connie.Nugent1@ttuhsc.edu
DOI: 10.12746/swrccc.v12i53.1393

us the desert thundered...Sand was beginning to build up around us. Even through my clothes I could feel a thousand-thousand tiny pinpricks as wind-driven sand hit us from all directions. Wind, sand, and sound tore at us. Without the shelter of our rock, I no longer doubted that Cambyses's army had been lost in this sandstorm.

Many Egyptologists consider the Lost Army of Cambyses to be the stuff of legend, and modern expeditions to unearth the remains of these soldiers have proved fruitless. Nevertheless, catastrophic sandstorms do occur and devastate lives and property. In this issue of the *Southwest Respiratory and Critical Care Chronicles*, Dr. Thomas E. Gill and colleagues describe wind patterns that transport huge amounts of West African dust into Europe and across the ocean to the Caribbean and the continental United States with an emphasis on its effect on health in Texas.²

Perhaps the most devastating series of dust storms in the United States occurred during the 1930s across



The lost army of Cambyses II according to a XIX century engraving.
 from: Jacob Abbott. *Makers of History: Darius the Great*. Wikimedia Commons.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cambyses_II-lost-army.jpg

the Midwest. Of course, it cannot be proven that African dust contributed to the Dust Bowl; nevertheless, overly aggressive farming practices in the U.S. during bouts of drought provided a “perfect storm” of events that smothered farms and threatened health. A series of previous articles in this journal described the conditions that led to the Dust Bowl and featured contemporary art and literature. One of these articles included excerpts from Sanora Babb’s novel *Whose Names are Unknown*, in which she “presents a first-hand experience of hard-scrabble farmers and their families as they struggle with ‘wind, wind, wind and the mistake [that] resulted in dust which covered fields and buildings, killed people and animals, and drove farmers out with nothing.’”³

Sanora Babb wrote her novel in 1939, but it was not published until 2004. A recent biography examines possible reasons for this delay. In his review in *The Atlantic* of Jamahl Dunkle’s biography *Riding Like the Wind: the Life of Sanora Babb*, Mark Athitakis points out that Babb and John Steinbeck separately canvassed the Dust Bowl migrant camps in California, documenting the conditions faced by those escaping from the dire situations in the Midwest. While Steinbeck and Babb both wrote novels depicting these circumstances, only Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* was published. Dunkle’s biography attempts to explain what happened to Babb’s work, and why it was rejected, even when its first two chapters were enthusiastically received. She posits that Steinbeck used Babb’s notes and interviews describing life in the camps as a foundation for his novel, and that Random House’s Bennett Cerf refused to consider releasing two books on the same topic at the same time, “Obviously, another book at this time about exactly the same subject would be a sad anticlimax!”⁴ Steinbeck was allegedly given these notes by a friend at the Farm Security Administration, who had requested them from Babb.

Athitakis suggests myriad reasons for Babb’s rejection—appropriation, theft, bad timing, and/or sexism—but concludes that “without evidence, a definitive link can’t be proved; both authors were, after all, in the same place at the same time.”⁴ However, he also reasons that “It’s unreasonable that the marketplace didn’t have room for them both.”⁴ He cites Van Coutren of the Steinbeck Center who said, “So I imagine there was

some other push for [Cerf] to come up with a reason to dismiss her, and I see that dismissal . . . as, most likely, because she was a young woman writer who was just getting started.”⁴

Helen Lewis would agree to a charge of sexism. In her article “The Hazards of Writing While Female,” Lewis quotes successful novelist Elif Shafak, “A male novelist is primarily a novelist. Nobody talks about his gender. But a woman novelist is primarily a woman.”⁵ Babb’s youth may also have hindered her with Random House; Shafak maintains that “In a patriarchy, a woman writer will be respected only when she is ‘old’ in the eyes of the society, only when she is defeminized, desexualized.”⁵ Athitakis says that Babb “had a gift for weaving together individual desperation and systemic failure. Its portrait of an Oklahoma-panhandle community undone by dust storms, depicting miscarriage and suicide along with economic devastation, is visceral and honed.”⁴ Lewis would argue that Babb’s focus on the personal crises of the Dust Bowl migrants also worked against her, “Women also face a strange dynamic: They’re encouraged to write in a personal tone, and then dismissed for it.”⁵

The Dust Bowl in the United States was a cataclysmic event that resulted from destructive farming practices. Agricultural strategies have been put into place over time that mitigate the chances of dust storms reaching the levels present in the 1930s. Dr. Gill’s article about African dust and its settling over Texas broadens the scope of dust distribution and analyzes the perils of dust inhalation. This scientific information is essential to understand the consequences of environmental events, but Gilbert Berdine, M.D., reminds us that art and literature are lenses that provide

*a more humanly complete picture than we would have by a table of the size and velocity of every particle within a dust storm even though the table would be scientifically comprehensive. Art [and literature] distill the scientific information so that it can be absorbed by human minds using sensory perception, emotions, and cognition.*⁶

Sanora Babb did live long enough to see her novel *Whose Names are Unknown* published in 2004 (she died in 2005 at the age of 98). How fitting that the last

line of that novel is “They would rise and fall and, in their falling, rise again.”

Keywords: Sahara dust storms, Lost Army of Cambyses, Dust Bowl, Sanora Babb, John Steinbeck

Article citation: Nugent C. Windblown dust. *The Southwest Respiratory and Critical Care Chronicles* 2024;12(53):80–82

From: Department of Internal Medicine, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, Lubbock, Texas

Submitted: 10/12/2024

Accepted: 10/13/2024

Conflicts of interest: none

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

REFERENCES

1. Taylor, Jodi. *And the Rest is History*. (Chronicles of St. Mary’s, book 8) London: Accent Press Ltd., 2016.
2. Gill TE, Mims FM, and Chellam S. African dust: Occurrence, health consequences, and impacts on Texas. *Southwest Respiratory and Critical Care Chronicles*. 2024;13(53): 39-47.
3. Alexander RA, Nugent C. Cultural responses to the Dust Bowl. *Southwest Respiratory and Critical Care Chronicles* 2018;6(22):53–6.
4. Athitakis M. The woman who would be Steinbeck: a review of *Riding Like the Wind: the Life of Sanora Babb*. *The Atlantic*. Oct. 10, 2024. <https://www.theatlantic.com/books/archive/2024/10/john-steinbeck-sanora-babb-biography-riding-like-the-wind/680204/>
5. Lewis H. The hazards of writing while female. *The Atlantic*. Aug. 15, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/08/sally-rooney-and-hazards-writing-while-female/596218/>
6. Berdine G. The Dust Bowl: combining art, literature, and science. *Southwest Respiratory and Critical Care Chronicles* 2018;6(22):8–9.