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Fisher, David E. THE SCARIEST PLACE ON EARTH : EYE TO EYE WITH HURRICANES. New York, NY: Random House, 1994. 250 pp. US$23.00 hardback ISBN: 0-679-42775-9.

THE SCARIEST PLACE ON EARTH is an account of the influence of the hurricane (and to a lesser extent, the typhoon) on various cultures since the earliest recorded occurrences. The author, David Fisher, draws extensively from ancient accounts to present an inside view of how and where hurricanes have taken place, and (to some extent) what earlier cultures learned from their experiences.

As an introduction to this historical view, we read of the author's own experience with a dangerous storm, his insight and analysis of the potential danger to himself and his family, and the preparations he made as the danger approached. What emerges is a testimony of a learned man's arrogance as we watch him take his family into a life-threatening situation with only minimal protection. Fortunately, his family survives the experience, but Fisher criticizes the rescue and recovery services, which were ill-prepared and ill-trained to handle a disaster of the magnitude encountered. THE SCARIEST PLACE ON EARTH succeeds in its presentation of historical encounters with hurricanes and typhoons, but it also underscores the danger of an educated person presuming himself capable of assessing something outside his area of expertise. The author's dismissal of the experts placed his entire family in peril.

Fisher's belief in his own superior capability is evident on page 69. He writes, "But I had learned a lot about hurricanes in the past ten years, and had a better understanding of how and where they moved than the pretty boys on television had." What the author knew was merely historical track evidence; he did not know the specifics of the developing situation, and the difference was to place him in extreme jeopardy. Furthermore, the "pretty boys on television" were not making the forecasts; they were presenting information prepared by professional meteorologists at the National Hurricane Center.

From a historical standpoint, this is a very informative book. It draws from a number of references and condenses the information into an easily readable form. The manner of presentation is the traditional "flashback" approach, which is a bit overdone (nearly every chapter is presented this way). Also, there are a few inaccuracies. For example, there is an incorrect direction of flow on one of the global circulation cells on Figure 2-5, page 39. Perpetuation of the error, resulting in totally impossible general flow patterns, on Figure 2-6, page 40, indicates the error was not detected by technical editors. Another instance of similar inaccuracy (though perhaps done for the sake of simplicity) is found in the discussion of radar principles, pages 209-212. Here the author contends that the radar beam is "absorbed and remitted by an object." Radar operates from a reflective principle and does not involve remission of energies at the frequencies (wavelengths) involved in the radar process. Finally, some of the diagrams used too much gray shading and became difficult to really see clearly, especially to a non-meteorologist. Examples of these include Figure 5-1, page 125; Figures 6-1 and 6-2, pages 153 and 154.

Overall, this is a good historical presentation, but I would recommend its use in the classroom for this role only; it should never be taken by anyone as an authoritative treatise on hurricane forecasting. To do so would probably place others in situations such as the one faced by the author when he refused to heed the experts, and consequently placed his family directly in the scariest place on earth.