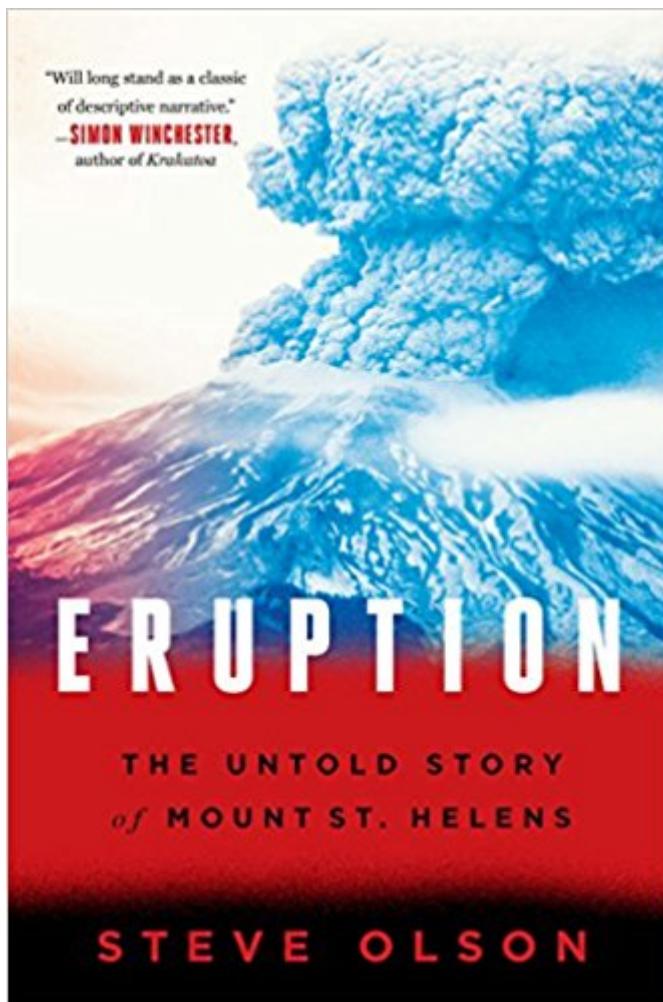


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# Eruption: The Untold Story Of Mount St. Helens



## **Synopsis**

Survival narrative meets scientific, natural, and social history in the riveting story of a volcanic disaster. For months in early 1980, scientists, journalists, sightseers, and nearby residents listened anxiously to rumblings in Mount St. Helens, part of the chain of western volcanoes fueled by the 700-mile-long Cascadia fault. Still, no one was prepared when an immense eruption took the top off of the mountain and laid waste to hundreds of square miles of verdant forests in southwestern Washington State. The eruption was one of the largest in human history, deposited ash in eleven U.S. states and five Canadian provinces, and caused more than one billion dollars in damage. It killed fifty-seven people, some as far as thirteen miles away from the volcano's summit. Shedding new light on the cataclysm, author Steve Olson interweaves the history and science behind this event with page-turning accounts of what happened to those who lived and those who died. Powerful economic and historical forces influenced the fates of those around the volcano that sunny Sunday morning, including the construction of the nation's railroads, the harvest of a continent's vast forests, and the protection of America's treasured public lands. The eruption of Mount St. Helens revealed how the past is constantly present in the lives of us all. At the same time, it transformed volcanic science, the study of environmental resilience, and, ultimately, our perceptions of what it will take to survive on an increasingly dangerous planet. Rich with vivid personal stories of lumber tycoons, loggers, volcanologists, and conservationists, *Eruption* delivers a spellbinding narrative built from the testimonies of those closest to the disaster, and an epic tale of our fraught relationship with the natural world.

## **Book Information**

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## Customer Reviews

I had a lot of thoughts/emotions throughout this generally awesome book:~Excitement to read it. I visited the remains of Mt. St. Helens when I was 9. I periodically love volcanoes.~Frustration. Over 50 of the first 139 pages are backstory on the Weyerhaeuser family/company for the past 100 years, and the very in-depth history of the forest service. Both could have been done in 5 or 10 imo)~Incredulity. The mountain developed a rapidly (and constantly) growing bulge on its side for weeks leading up to the explosion but very few seemed to recognize the severity or significance of this... Olson put it best in regards to lessons learned at Mt. St. Helens: "No one will ever again blithely and knowingly watch the side of a volcano bulge out like a balloon ready to pop and expect to outrun the ensuing catastrophe." -p232~Suspense. Olson took the timeline back and forth, both within the almost 2 months of activity leading up to the eruption and the personal stories of some of those affected by the blast.~Impatience. Olson took the timeline back and forth A LOT in the first half of the book.~Suspense (again) and mounting dread. He started referring to certain people in the past tense, and as I had not memorized the list of those who died before reading this the deaths and survivals were genuinely surprising to me.\*giggle\*\*\*"It was like going to the land of Mordor,' said one logger." -p203~Validation. Take that, loggers! Clearly leaving the downed trees where they lay would result in faster recovery/renewal of the scorched surroundings! I kind of wanted to shout at the corporate interests in their haste to "not waste" the trees to rot. Not-at-all-shockingly, "The habitats that have recovered fastest are those that were left in disarray." -237About halfway through I was also kind of overwhelmed with just pure interest in the story and enjoyment of Olson's writing. I felt that wonderful compulsion to keep reading and ignore everything else to see how it all turns out (spoiler alert, the volcano explodes).Olson does a great job of creating a compelling narrative around this recent historical event and I really liked the book, learned a lot about volcanoes (now I want to be a volcanologist), and came to care for some of the real people highlighted in the personal stories. He blends political maneuvering, history and a natural disaster, personal stories,

conservation hot-topics, and individual family histories and creates a genuinely enjoyable read. I have been talking about this book with my friends and family far more than I expected. Because I can't just be happy, if I had to give one more very minor complaint (which doesn't really count as a complaint, but more a back-handed compliment) it is that it did not contain more stories about the people who were near the mountain, both the survivors and those who died. Olson does such a fantastic job with most of those he does include that I found myself wanting to know more. Along those same lines, I would have loved to have the end of the book provide more information about those who survived and their lives since. I know not everyone will want to share any of that (I can't begin to imagine how traumatic that was), but as a reader I am sorry Eruption did not include at least footnotes on more of the people it focused on in the earlier parts of the books. Most impressively, he somehow created a text about a volcano that is both informative and accessible --something that I have recently (today) discovered to be VERY rare. I received an advance copy of this book as part of the Goodreads Giveaways program.

I love books about events where I (think) I know the outcome and I am still engrossed from the moment I pick up the book until I sadly reach the last page, and this book fits that description perfectly. Like a well-paced movie or novel, this book recounts the devastating and tragic Mount St. Helens eruption in 1980 while providing all of the backstory that I doubt most anyone knows about. For me, it was fascinating to read about the paths, some spanning generations, that various people took that shaped the events of that day and led too many people being in the path of an erupting volcano. The author done a superb job filling in historic and scientific details that bring this story to life, and he has done so with beautiful writing on par with the best nonfiction writers of our time.

A well researched and beautifully-written book. While the eruption is obviously the centerpiece, what makes the book special is the context - the story before and after the eruption, and the geographic context of the area. I especially liked the short biographies of the people whose lives intersected - and sometimes ended - with the volcano.

This is a very good book. The research is exhaustive, and the author appears to have gone to considerable lengths to talk to survivors, witnesses, scientists, policy makers and others who lived through the event and helped to shape the response. It's been 35 years since the blast, so Mr. Olson seized the opportunity to make sure the story was told. The book, aside from its dramatic re-telling of the events leading up the blast, and its aftermath, is very relevant for today. It provides

insight and perspective on land use and the economic issues surrounding the blast. If you read the Wikipedia entry on Mount St. Helens, it makes it seem as if government did a lot to protect lives. But this book provides an entirely different accounting and is very critical of the state government's response. It illustrates the tensions between big business and government over access restrictions. He explains -- in a very compelling way -- how the death toll could have been substantially higher had it not been for the timing of the volcano blast. Fundamentally, this is a story about hubris. You can apply to response to the volcano's threat to response the leadership makes today to all kinds of threats. Climate change, in particular, came to mind. The land use history and the Washington politics around it foreshadows the strident arguments being made out West today. The history of Weyerhaeuser at the start of the book runs, perhaps, a bit long but it's easy enough to read quickly through it to get the heart of the story. And the heart of the story is a very, very good read.

As far as disaster stories go, it's hard to get much more awe-inspiring than volcanic eruptions, yet I found myself skimming whole sections of "Eruption" despite the subject matter. Instead of delving deeper into the human tragedy, or the science of volcanic eruptions, nearly a third of the book is given to dry, vaguely interesting histories of the forest service and the Weyerhaeuser logging corporation. Having just finished "A Wall of White" (the account of a contemporaneous avalanche disaster in the Sierras, and an absolute page-turner) I expected such a slim volume about an even more dramatic cataclysm to hold me fast from start to finish. It did not, despite the cinematic heights of hubris, ignorance, and bravery its cast of characters display. A missed opportunity.

I didn't realize when I picked this book up how much the story would be about the social factors at work in the US at the time. It was well written and the research was thorough, but it just wasn't what I was looking for. I wanted to know more about the actual volcano and the geological forces at work. Sure some background about the people there at the time of the eruption would have been nice, but having that be the main focus of the book didn't really peak my interest.

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