

“Born in Oklahoma November 12, 1931, I lived through the decade known as the ‘Dirty Thirties.’ A time when farmers in the Wheat Belt broke up far too much prairie sod and planted wheat to cash in on the government’s price support program. This led to soil erosion and the most difficult times captured in the compelling novel *A Cup of Dust*. The author does a great job of giving the reader a feel for those dark days in our nation’s history. Very intriguing reading!”

—Virgil Dwain McNeil, a Dust Bowl survivor

“I have just finished reading Susie Finkbeiner’s *A Cup of Dust*. The story is excellent and an accurate story of the dust storms. I lived thru it in southeastern Nebraska and it would get so dark, the chickens would go to roost at 3 pm. My Dad had to go to Iowa to get hay to feed our cows. There was none available to buy in Nebraska.”

—Phyllis M. Wagner, Lincoln, Nebraska

“Riveting. An achingly beautiful tale told with a singularly fresh and original voice. This sepia-toned story swept me into the Dust Bowl and brought me face-to-face with both haunting trials and the resilient people who overcame them. Absolutely mesmerizing. Susie Finkbeiner is an author to watch!”

—Jocelyn Green, award-winning author of the
Heroines Behind the Lines Civil War series

“Without a doubt Finkbeiner’s best work to date, *A Cup of Dust* is simultaneously intimate and epic. The compelling voice of young Pearl describes a world of biblical-proportion plagues unleashed on the Oklahoma Panhandle in a way that is both grounding and disturbing—with the plague of frogs replaced by jackrabbits, boils by pneumonia, locusts by unyielding walls of sky-blackening dust, and the growing sense that there may not be a God who hears their cries for deliverance very much unaltered.

“At every turn gritty and historically accurate, *A Cup of Dust* allows us to weather the dust storm of a few months in the hope-and-rain-deprived Great Plains of the 1930s. As I tore through the often sobering text, I found the back of the storm to bring insight, deep empathy, and an enduring sense of redemptive hope.”

—Zachary Bartels, author of *The Last Con* and *Playing Saint*

A
CUP
of
DUST

A Novel of the Dust Bowl

SUSIE FINKBEINER

A Cup of Dust: A Novel of the Dust Bowl

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*For Jeff.
I love you.
Thank you for loving me.*



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I could never live the life of a reclusive author. I'm far too flighty and neurotic. In order to be the best writer I can be, I need people. I just so happen to have some pretty amazing people who prop me up, challenge me, and encourage me. I'd like to tell you about a few of these folks.

Ann Byle is the best agent a girl like me could hope for. She believes in me when I don't know if I've got what it takes. She doesn't let me whine too much and she tells it like it is. I'd trust her with my life. More than that, I'd trust her with my kids. That's saying a lot.

Jocelyn Green, Tracy Groot, and Julie Cantrell are authors who have influenced my writing of *A Cup of Dust*. I learned how to write historical fiction by reading their novels and learned about life by being around them. They are good mentors and even better friends.

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The team at Kregel has made me feel welcome from the very moment

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A good portion of this book was written at a table at my local Starbucks. That place has become my own personal *Cheers* because of how great the baristas are. They kept me caffeinated and smiling during the rougher days of writing. Marcia, Catrina, Hananiah, Jaimee, Jeff, Kasey, Lydia, Melissa, Sam, Shawn, Stephanie, and Travis aren't just great at making a cup of coffee, they've become sweet friends and I'm thankful for them.

I wouldn't be who I am without the love of my Father, the Author of all life. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and in that sameness is His unfailing love for His children. He sees us in our weakness, in our vulnerability, in our failings. He doesn't reject us. Instead, He scoops us up and brings us into His family. I can think of nothing more powerful, more beautiful. Pearl's story is mine. Yours. Ours. It is the story of God's great love for His people. He is the one who saves.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Part of the writer's task is to find and utilize the exactly right word. For the writer of historical fiction, the job is to match word choice to the commonly used vocabulary of the era. In all honesty, some words that were often used in the 1930s are now considered hurtful, abrasive, and racist.

When writing this novel I had to make difficult choices when it came to terms used as identifiers for people of various races. Writing words such as *Negro*, *Injun*, and *colored* made me uncomfortable. However, in keeping with the times, I felt they were consistent.

Since the founding of our nation, race has been a sensitive issue. We look back at the horrors of slavery, civil rights abuses, and the unjust way in which the American Indians were driven from the land. As we experience the racial tensions of our own time, we do well to remember the consequences of dehumanizing others based on the color of their skin. And as we hope for a peaceful future, we can grapple with our various backgrounds and appearances and find that we have a shared heritage that no title can fracture.

“He picked you out,
He picked you up,
He brought you home.”

—Jeff Manion



YOU'RE MY GIRL by John Blase

In that second I first held you
I sensed you as fragile.
Not like a demitasse that if
dropped would break
but like the peach that will
bruise if not carefully kept.
So that is what I've tried to do,
to permit only the irritants necessary
for you to shine.
You must know, my girl, that this
has been and is my happiness.
For you are the best thing that has
ever come into my life.

CHAPTER PAST

Red River, Oklahoma
September 1934

As soon as I was off the porch and out of Mama's sight, I pushed the scuffed-up, hole-in-the-soles Mary Janes off my feet. They hurt like the dickens, bending and cramping my toes and rubbing blisters on my heels. Half the dirt in Oklahoma sifted in when I wore those shoes, tickling my skin through thin socks before shaking back out. When I was nine they had fit just fine, those shoes. But once I turned ten they'd gotten tight all the sudden. I hadn't told Mama, though. She would have dipped into the pennies and nickels she kept in an old canning jar on the bottom of her china cabinet. She would have counted just enough to buy a new pair of shoes from Mr. Smalley's grocery store.

I didn't want her taking from that money. That was for a rainy day, and we hadn't had anything even close to a rainy day in about forever.

Red River was on the wrong side of No Man's Land in the Panhandle. The skinny part of Oklahoma, I liked to say. If I spit in just the right direction, I could hit New Mexico. If I turned just a little, I'd get Colorado. And if I spit to the south, I'd hit Texas. But ladies didn't spit. Not ever. That's what Mama always said.

I leaned my hip against the lattice on the bottom of our porch. Rolling off my socks, I kept one eye on the front door just in case Mama stepped out. She was never one for whupping like some mothers were, but she had a look that could turn my blood cold. And that look usually had a come-to-Jesus meeting that followed close behind it.

She didn't come out of the house, though, so I shoved the socks into my shoes and pushed them under the porch.

Bare feet slapping against hard-as-rock ground felt like freedom. Careless, rebellious freedom. The way I imagined an Indian girl would feel racing around tepees in the days before Red River got piled up with houses and ranches and wheat. The way things were before people with white faces and bright eyes moved on the land.

I was about as white faced and bright eyed as it got. My hair was the kind of blond that looked more white than yellow. Still, I pretended my pale braids were ink black and that my skin was dark as a berry, darkened by the sun.

Pretending to be an Indian princess, I ran, feeling the open country's welcome.

If Mama had been watching, she would have told me to slow down and put my shoes back on. She surely would have gasped and shook her head if she knew I was playing Indian. Sheriff's daughters were to be ladylike, not running wild as a savage.

Mama didn't understand make-believe, I reckoned. As far as I knew she thought imagination was only for girls smaller than me. "I would've thought you'd be grown out of it by now," she'd say.

I hadn't grown out of my daydreams, and I didn't reckon I would. So I just kept right on galloping, pretending I rode bareback on a painted pony like the one I'd seen in one of Daddy's books.

Meemaw asked me many-a-time why I didn't play like I was some girl from the Bible like Esther or Ruth. If they'd had a bundle of arrows and a strong bow I would have been more inclined to put on Mama's old robe and play Bible times.

I slowed my trot a bit when I got to the main street. A couple ladies stood on the sidewalk, talking about something or another and waving their hands around. I thought they looked like a couple birds, chirping at each other. The two of them noticed me and smiled, nodding their heads.

"How do, Pearl?" one of them asked.

"Hello, ma'am," I answered and moved right along.

Across the street, I spied Millard Young sitting on the courthouse steps, his pipe hanging out of his mouth. He'd been the mayor of Red River since before Daddy was born. I didn't know his age, exactly, but he must have been real old, as many wrinkles as he had all over his face and the white hair on his head. He waved me over and smiled, that pipe still between his lips. I galloped to him, knowing that if I said hello he'd give me a candy.

Even Indian princesses could enjoy a little something sweet every now and again.

With times as hard as they were for folks, Millard always made sure he had something to give the kids in town. Mama had told me he didn't have any grandchildren of his own, which I thought was sad. He would have made a real good grandpa. I would have asked him to be mine but didn't know if that would make him feel put upon. Mama was always getting after me for putting upon folks.

"Out for a trot?" he asked as soon as I got closer to the bottom of the stairs.

"Yes, sir." I climbed up a couple of the steps to get the candy he offered. It was one of those small pink ones that tasted a little like mint-flavored medicine. I popped it in my mouth and let it sit there, melting little by little. "Thank you."

He winked and took the pipe back out of his lips. It wasn't lit. I wondered why he had it if he wasn't puffing tobacco in and out of it.

"Looking for your sister?" His lips hardly moved when he talked. It made me wonder what his teeth looked like. I'd known him my whole life and couldn't think of one time that I'd seen his teeth. "Seen her about half hour ago, headed that-a-way." He nodded out toward the sharecroppers' cabins.

"Thank you," I said with a smile.

"Hope you catch her soon," he said, wrinkling his forehead even more. "Her wandering off like that makes me real nervous."

"I'll find her. I always do," I called over my shoulder, picking up my gallop. "Thanks for the candy."

“That’s all right.” He nodded at me. “Watch where you’re going.”

I turned and headed toward the cabins, hoping to find my sister there but figuring she’d wandered farther out than that.

My sister was born Violet Jean Spence, but nobody called her that. We all just called her Beanie and nobody could remember why exactly. Daddy had told me that Beanie was born blue and not able to catch a breath. He’d said he had never prayed so hard for a baby to start crying. Finally, when she did cry and catch a breath, she turned from blue to bright pink. Violet Jean. The baby born blue as her name. Just thinking on it gave me the heebie-jeebies.

When I needed to find Beanie, I knew to check the old ranch not too far outside town. My sister loved going out there, being under the wide-open sky. I was sure that if a duster hit, God would know to look for her at that ranch, too. Meemaw had told me that God could see us no matter where we went, even through all the dust. I really hoped that was true for Beanie’s sake.

Meemaw had told me more than once that God saved us from the dust. So I figured He was sure to see me even if Pastor said the dust was God being mad at us all.

In the flat pasture, cattle lowed, pushing their noses into the dust, searching out the green they weren’t like to find. I expected I’d find Beanie standing at the fence-line, hands behind her back so as to remember not to touch the wire. Usually she’d be there looking off over the field, eyes glazed over, not putting her focus on anything in particular.

Daddy said she acted so odd because of the way she was born. She could see and hear everything around her. But when it came to understanding, that was a different thing altogether.

I found Beanie at the ranch, all right. But instead of looking out at the pasture, she was sitting in the dirt, her dress pulled all the way up to her waist, showing off her underthings in a way Mama would never have approved of. Mama would have rushed over and told Beanie to put her knees together, keep her skirt down, and sit like a lady. I didn’t think my sister knew what any of that meant.

Being a lady was just one item on the laundry list of things my sister couldn't figure out. I wondered how much that grieved Mama.

Mama had told me Beanie was slow. Daddy called her simple. Folks around town said she was an idiot. I'd gotten in more than one fight over a kid calling my sister a name like that. Meemaw had said those folks didn't understand and that people sometimes got mean over what they didn't understand.

"It ain't no use fighting them," she had told me. "One of these days they'll figure out that we've got a miracle walking around among us."

Our own miracle, sitting on the ground grunting and groaning and playing in dirt.

"Beanie." I bent at the waist once I got up next to her. My braids swung over my shoulders. "We gotta go home."

The tip of Beanie's nose stayed pointed at the space between her spread out legs. Somehow she'd gotten herself a tin cup. Its white-and-blue enamel was chipped all the way around, and I figured it was old. She found things like that in the empty houses around town. Goodness knew there were plenty of abandoned places for her to explore around Red River. Half the houses in Oklahoma stood empty. Everybody had took up and moved west, leaving busted-up treasures for Beanie to find.

She'd hide them from Mama under our bed or in our closet. Old, tattered scraps of cloth, a busted up hat, a bent spoon. Everything she found was a treasure to her. To the rest of us, it was nothing but more junk she'd hide away.

"You hear me?" I asked, tapping her shoulder. "We gotta go."

She kept on digging in the dirt with that old cup like it was a shovel. Once she got it to overflowing, she held it in front of her face and tipped it, pouring it out. The grains of sand caught in the air, blowing into her face. I stood upright, pulling the collar of my dress over my face to block out the dust. She just didn't care—she let it get in her mouth and nose and eyes.

"That's not good for you," I said. "Don't do that anymore."

Little noises came out her mouth from deep inside her. Nothing

anybody would have understood, though. Mostly it was nothing more than short grunts and groans. Meemaw liked to think the angels in heaven spoke that same, hard tongue just for Beanie. Far as I knew it was nothing but nonsense. Beanie was sixteen years old and making noises like a two-year-old. She could talk as well as anybody else, she just didn't want to most of the time.

"Get up. Mama's waiting on us." I grabbed hold of her arm and pulled. "Put that old cup down, and let's go."

Scooping a cup of dust, she finally looked at me. Not in my eyes, though, she wouldn't have done that. Instead, she looked at my chin and smiled before dumping the whole cupful on my foot.

Some days I just hated my sister so hard.

"I seen a horny toad," Beanie said, pushing against the ground to stand herself up. She stopped and leaned over, her behind in the air, to refill the cup. "It had blood coming out its eyes, that horny toad did."

"So what." I took her hand. Scratchy palmed, she left her hand limp in mine, not making the effort to hold me back. "Mama's gonna be sore if we don't get home."

"Must've been scared of me. That toad squirted blood outta its eye right at me. Didn't get none on me though." She looked down at her dress to make sure as she shuffled her feet, kicking up dust. Her shoes were still on, tied up tight on her feet so she wouldn't lose them.

Mama moaned many-a-day about how neither of her girls liked to keep shoes on.

"That toad wasn't scared of you," I said. "Those critters just do that."

We took a few steps, only making it a couple yards before Beanie stopped.

"Duster's coming." Dark-as-night hair frizzed out of control on her head, falling to her shoulders as she looked straight up. Her big old beak of a nose pointed at the sky. "You feel it?"

"Nah. I don't feel anything."

Her long tongue pushed between thin lips making her look like a lizard. Her stink stung my nose when she raised both of her arms straight

up over her head. She would have stayed like that the rest of the day if I hadn't pulled her hand back down and tugged her to follow behind me.

After a minute or two she stopped again. "You feel that poke?" she asked.

"Just come on." Hard as I yanked on her arm, I couldn't get her to budge.

Goose pimples bumped up on her arms. Then I felt them rise on mine. A buzzing, fuzzing, sharp feeling on my skin caught the breath in my lungs.

The same feeling we always got before a dust storm rolled through.

"We gotta get home." Finally, my pulling got her to move, to run, even.

Flapping of wings and twittering of voice, a flock of birds flew over us, going the opposite way. They always knew when a roller was coming, all the birds and critters did. Beanie did, too. I wondered if she was part animal for the way she knew things like that.

We stopped and watched the birds. Beanie's coal black eyes and my clear blue, watching the frantic flying. Beanie squeezed my hand, like we really were sisters and not just one girl watching over the other. For a quick minute, I felt kin to her.

Most of the time I just felt the yoke of her pushing me low, weighing about as much as all the dust in Oklahoma.



The winds whipped around us, and a mountain of black dirt rolled along, chasing behind us. Making our way in a straight path was near impossible, so we followed the lines of wire fence, watching the electric air pop blue sparks above the barbs. We got home and up the porch steps just in time. Mama was watching for us, waving for us to get up the steps. Reaching out, she pulled me in by the hand, our skin catching static, jolting all the way through me and into Beanie.

Just as soon as we were inside, Mama closed and bolted the door. "It's a big one," she said, shoving a towel into the space between the door and the floor.

“Praise the Lord you girls didn’t get yourselves lost,” Meemaw said, stepping up close and examining our faces. “You got any blisters? Last week I seen one of the sharecropper kids with blisters all over his body from the dust, even where his clothes covered his skin. And we didn’t have nothing to soothe them, did we, Mary?”

“We did not.” Mama moved around the room, busying herself preparing for the storm.

The nearest doctor was in Boise City, a good two-hour drive from Red River, three if the dust was thick. When folks couldn’t get to the city or didn’t have money to pay, they’d come to Meemaw and Mama. I thought it was mostly because they had a cabinet full of medicines in our house. Meemaw’d said, though, that it was on account of Mama had taken a year of nurses’ training before she met Daddy.

“That poor boy. We had to clean out them sores with lye soap. I do believe it stung him something awful.” Meemaw shook her head. “Mary, did we put in a order for some of that cream?”

“I did.” Mama plunged a sheet into the sink and pulled it out, letting it drip on the floor. “Pearl, would you please help me? This is the last one to hang.”

We hung the sheet over the big window in the living room. Mama’s shoes clomped as she moved back from the window. My naked feet patted. I remembered my shoes, still under the porch. I crisscrossed my feet, one on top of the other, hoping she wouldn’t notice.

“You can dig them out in the morning,” Mama said, lifting an eyebrow at me.

Mama never did miss a blessed thing.

Rumbling wind pelted the house with specks of dirt and small stones. Mama pulled me close into her soft body.

“Don’t be scared,” she said, her voice gentle. “It’ll be over soon.”

Then the dust darkened the whole world.

Wind roared, shaking the windows and rattling doors. It pushed against the house from all sides like it wanted to blow us into the next county. I believed one day it would.

The dust got in no matter how hard we tried to keep it out. It worked its way into a crack here or a loose floorboard there. A hole in the roof or a gap in a windowsill. It always found a way in. Always won.

Dust and dark married, creating a pillow to smother hard on our faces.

Pastor had always said that God sent the dust to fall on the righteous and unrighteous alike because of His great goodness. I didn't know if there were any righteous folk anymore. Seemed everybody had given over to surviving the best they knew how. They had put all the holy church talk outside with the dust.

Still, I couldn't help but imagine that the dust was one big old whupping from the very hand of God.

I wondered how good we'd all have to be to get God to stop being so angry at us.

Pastor'd also said it was a bad thing to question God. If it was a sin, sure as lying or stealing busted-up cups or tarnished spoons, I didn't want any part of it. I didn't want to be the reason the dust storms kept on coming.

I decided to fold myself into my imagination instead of falling into sin. I pretended the wind was nothing more than the breath of the Big Bad Wolf, come to blow our brick house down. Problem was, no amount of hairs on our chiny chin chins could refuse to let it in. Prayers and hollering didn't do a whole lot either, as far as I could tell.

The daydream didn't work to push off my fear. Mama's arm around me tightened, and I turned my face toward her, pushing into the warmth of her body. She smelled like talcum powder and lye soap.

I stayed just like that, pressed safely against her, until the rolling drumbeat of the dust wall slowed and stopped and the witches' scream of wind quieted. The Lord had sent the dust, but He'd also sent my mama. I wondered what Pastor would have to say about that. I wasn't like to ask though. That man scared me more than a rattlesnake. And he was just as full of poison.

Mama loosened her arms and rubbed my back. "It's done now," she said. "We made it."

"Praise the Lord God Almighty," Meemaw sang out.

Sitting up, I felt the grit the storm left behind on my skin and in my hair and under my eyelids.

“You think Daddy’s okay?” I asked, blinking against the haze hanging in the air.

“I have faith he is.” Mama stood and shook the dirt from her skirt. “I would bet he’s worrying about us as much as we’re worrying about him.”

A flickering flame rose as Meemaw lit a lantern. It barely cut through the thick air. Still, the light eased my fear.