



Island in a Storm: A Rising Sea, a Vanishing Coast, and a Nineteenth-Century Disaster that Warns of a Warmer World

Abby Sallenger

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Abby Sallenger's *ISLAND IN A STORM* has been chosen by *Choice* magazine of the American Library Association as an outstanding 2010 academic title.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Isle Derniere was emerging as an exclusive summer resort on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. About one hundred miles from New Orleans, it attracted the most prominent members of antebellum Louisiana society. Hundreds of affluent planters and merchants retreated to the island, not just for its pleasures, but also to escape the scourge of yellow fever epidemics that ravaged cities like New Orleans each summer. Then, without warning, on August 10, 1856, a ferocious hurricane swept across the island, killing half of its four hundred inhabitants. The Isle Derniere was left barren, except for a strange forest standing in the surf.

Drawing from a rich trove of newspaper articles, letters, diaries, and interviews, Abby Sallenger re-creates the chain of events that led a group of people to seek refuge on an exposed strip of land in the sea. He chronicles the dramatic course of the hurricane itself, as seen through the eyes of a diverse cast of real-life characters, including eighteen-year-old Emma Mille, her French father, a steamboat captain, a pastor, and a slave. *Island in a Storm* is the story of their bravery and cowardice, luck and misfortune, life and death.

At the heart of this narrative lies another, equally compelling, story. Sallenger, an oceanographer, traces the insidious link between the environmental deaths across the Mississippi delta and the human deaths that occurred when the storm swept ashore. The result is a fascinating portrait of a coast in perpetual motion and a rising sea that made the Isle Derniere particularly vulnerable to a great hurricane.

Ultimately, *Island in a Storm* is a cautionary environmental tale. Global warming is spreading the unique hazards of river deltas to coasts around the world, and the signs of what happened to Isle Derniere may soon be appearing on other islands. The account of this nineteenth-century disaster and its aftermath offers a vital historical lesson as we continue to develop precarious coastal locations whose vulnerability will only grow as sea levels rise across the globe.

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