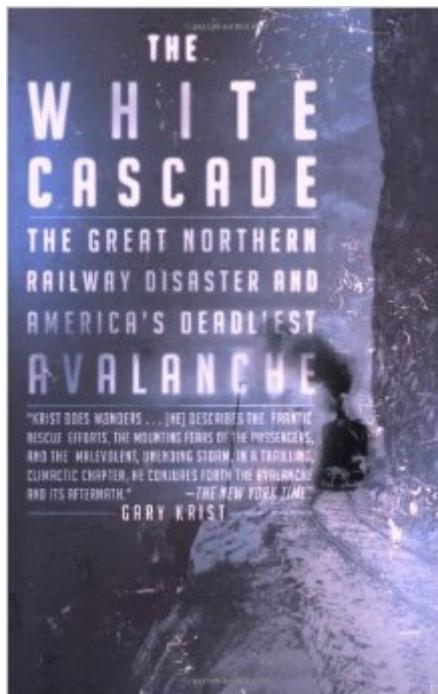


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# The White Cascade: The Great Northern Railway Disaster And America's Deadliest Avalanche



## Synopsis

"Krist does wonders . . . [He] describes the frantic rescue efforts . . . and the malevolent, unending storm. In a thrilling, climactic chapter, he conjures forth the avalanche." •The New York Times

In February 1910, a monstrous, record-breaking blizzard hit the Northwest. Nowhere was the danger more terrifying than near a tiny town called Wellington, perched high in the Cascade Mountains, where a desperate situation evolved: two trainloads of cold, hungry passengers and their crews found themselves marooned. For days, an army of the Great Northern Railroad's most dedicated men worked to rescue the trains, but just when escape seemed possible, the unthinkable occurred •a colossal avalanche tumbled down, sweeping the trains over the steep slope and down the mountainside. Centered on the astonishing spectacle of our nation's deadliest avalanche, *The White Cascade* is the masterfully told story of a never-before-documented tragedy.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

We hear of avalanches now and then, taking to their deaths skiers or climbers, but as disasters they are these days relatively small scale. That was not the case on the night of 1 March 1910, when bizarre weather in the Cascade Mountains of Washington State brought down an avalanche that was half a mile wide. In its path were two trains pinned in by the snowstorms, and the cars were hurled down a mountain. The official death count was 96, although the number is an estimate, and the toll on the wounded and on the rescuers cannot be tallied. Gary Krist, whose previous books have been fiction, has become a historian of this disaster, telling it with a novelist's skill in *The*

*White Cascade: The Great Northern Railway Disaster and America's Deadliest Avalanche* (Henry Holt). The disaster was not, as Krist modestly admits, the "Avalanche That Changed America", because it was in many ways just one aspect of changes that were happening in railroading at the time anyway. It remains, however, a gripping tale of human endeavor against natural forces; it is all historical fact, but Krist has produced a page-turner. Krist dutifully sets up the scenes in the mountains with historical context. In 1910, railroads made the American economy, and they had changed the American Northwest forever. The representative of the Great Northern Railway, the Superintendent of the Cascade Division was James H. O'Neill, in many ways the flawed hero of the book. He was a lifetime railroad man, "a precociously shrewd manager with seemingly inexhaustible reserves of drive and will." His were the responsibilities of the tracks, stations, buildings, and the movements of the trains through his region, a major mountain crossing that got an average of fifty feet of snow a year.

Don't know why I was prompted to pick this book up...my husband is in a search and rescue group, so that was partly the reason. I read the info given on the back of the book, and having grown up in Northern CA and being a voracious reader, I thought I should have heard about this one transportation disaster. My father was born up in Washington, but somehow this one has faded from national consciousness. What really struck me about this book is the straightforward writing of the author, Krist. He doesn't sensationalize, as some other books on disasters tend to do. He is honest and reflective, gives the reader all the information on both sides, and lets them draw their own conclusion. I especially enjoyed the information about the court trials and the aftermaths. We can dislike the typical corporate image that continues to run big companies (only now they are the pharmaceuticals who could care less...), but we also recognize that the men who dealt at the closest part of the railway with this disaster most probably did as good a job that could have been done. Unlike the Titanic, where there were some very dismaying behavior by many who were at the helm of the boat and the company, most of the rail workers, especially the superintendent who oversaw the whole week of work around this avalanche were hardworking and gallant, who did make a few mistakes but nothing overt. By showing us how the courts handled this particular case, plus the information that came from the newspapers that did sensationalize this happening, Krist lets us see why we have come full circle to another place that if this case were tried today, it would have ended very differently for the company.

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