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# The Circus Fire: A True Story Of An American Tragedy



## Synopsis

The acclaimed author of *A Prayer for the Dying* brings all his narrative gifts to bear on this gripping account of tragedy and heroism—the great Hartford circus fire of 1944. It was a midsummer afternoon, halfway through a Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus performance, when the big top caught fire. The tent had been waterproofed with a mixture of paraffin and gasoline; in seconds it was burning out of control. More than 8,000 people were trapped inside, and the ensuing disaster would eventually take 167 lives. Steward O’Nan brings all his narrative gifts to bear on this gripping account of the great Hartford circus fire of 1944. Drawing on interviews with hundreds of survivors, O’Nan skillfully re-creates the horrific events and illuminates the psychological oddities of human behavior under stress: the mad scramble for the exits; the perilous effort to maneuver animals out of danger; the hero who tossed dozens of children to safety before being trampled to death. Brilliantly constructed and exceptionally moving, *The Circus Fire* is history at its most compelling.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Meticulously researched and very detailed account of a horrific event. You need to know: some of the details are horrifying, and this book is not for the squeamish. Trust me, some of the people died horrendously awful deaths, and O'Nan does not shy away from the facts. What led to the disaster was no single one error, and there really was no case of outrageous criminal negligence, Instead, it was a long series of small careless errors that snowballed into something beyond the sum of its parts. True, the big top had been painted with a mixture of melted paraffin and white gasoline for waterproofing, but other circuses at the time did the same thing. Two other circuses had started using flame resistant materials, but at that time, it was out of the ordinary. I was also impressed at how quickly the city mobilized to handle the disaster. Probably because WWII was still underway, there were procedures that were adapted that had to have saved some lives. The only caveat I had about the book was that most of the photos were taken by amateurs who attended the circus as regular customers. This means that many of the photos are a little grainy and not centered for maximum effect. You really have to study some of them to make out the details. But they were taken on the spot, so that is the outcome.

I found this book after conducting a Google search looking for information about the Cocoanut Grove fire. I had no idea the circus fire even occurred nor had I heard about it. I purchased the book and couldn't put it down. The way O'Nan writes, you actually get a genuine feel for 1944; the way he describes the events taking place, I almost felt like I was there! Even though the book is 370 pages, he talks about the fire early in the book (he makes reference to the Cocoanut Grove fire, the book I was originally looking for). I was wondering how he was going to fill in the remaining pages, but he will take you through not only the fire; but the victims recoveries (some would take years to recover from their burns); identification of the bodies; the political machine at the time and of course Little Miss 1565. The photographs in the book are haunting. There are a lot of characters in the book and I was having trouble keeping track of all of them, but was enthralled nonetheless. It will drive you to tears reading about this deadly fire, the acts of heroism and of course the deaths of many. This is a book I will unlikely never forget; well researched and written.

I've read a couple books about this fire, and this is by far the best written of them. It's a wonderful balance of facts and storytelling, fairly easy to follow the names of people and what happened to them. I have read it twice just to really follow the story along and it was much more clear the second time around. I rank this with "to sleep with the Angels" and "fire in the grove" both of those were very well written historical books about fires in the same vein of storytelling

This account of a ghastly event is extremely well researched and written. There is no hyperbole, no wringing of hands. The author simply lets the story tell itself through those who were there, for the most part. Here is but a single stunning example, from p.109: "Several survivors said the one thing they will never forget about the circus fire as long as they live is the sound of the animals as they burned alive. But there were no animals." How much more effective that is, as prose, than the alternative method of saying the same thing. Stories of individual selfishness and total selflessness abound, as they do in an accurate account of any great tragedy. The author does not omit either, so that the reader comes away with a feel for what it must have been like that hot July afternoon in Hartford, one month after D-Day. I had misgivings about how well this could be told, before I read the book. Not now. I'd recommend this to any circus fan, to anyone who wants to read something really well written and thoroughly researched. My only criticism is that the photos, many taken by amateurs, to be sure, are not well produced. I like the fact that they are on the pages where they fit, but in doing this on regular paper, details and drama are lost.

This is a fascinating account of an incident that I knew the basic facts about, but never had the chance to read about in such depth. The personal stories really made the book. My only suggestion is that if this book is ever revised, that some of the circus jargon used be better defined, whether in the text or in a glossary. I come to this book as a firefighter and a student of American history, though I don't know much about circus life and history. Terms like "Bally girl" sent me to the dictionary, but beyond that, a great book.

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