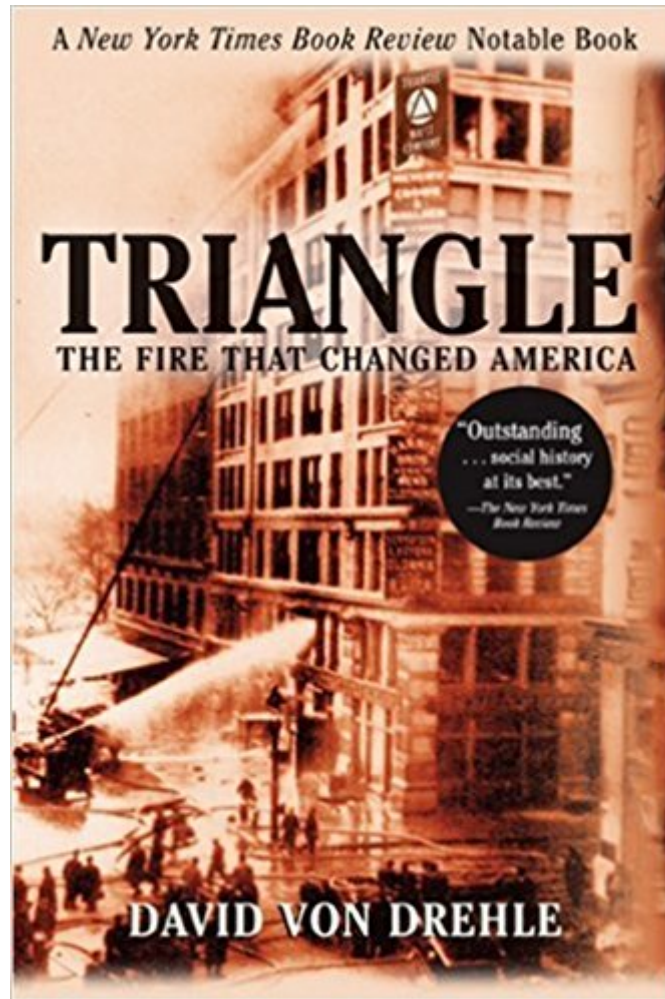


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Triangle: The Fire That Changed America



Synopsis

• Sure to become the definitive account of the fire. . . . Triangle is social history at its best, a magnificent portrayal not only of the catastrophe but also of the time and the turbulent city in which it took place. • The New York Times Book Review Triangle is a poignantly detailed account of the 1911 disaster that horrified the country and changed the course of twentieth-century politics and labor relations. On March 25, 1911, as workers were getting ready to leave for the day, a fire broke out in the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York's Greenwich Village. Within minutes it spread to consume the building's upper three stories. Firemen who arrived at the scene were unable to rescue those trapped inside: their ladders simply weren't tall enough. People on the street watched in horror as desperate workers jumped to their deaths. The final toll was 146 people; 123 of them women. It was the worst disaster in New York City history. Triangle is a vibrant and immensely moving account that Bob Woodward calls, "A riveting history written with flare and precision. •

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Before 11 September 2001, the worst workplace disaster in New York City was the fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in Greenwich Village on 25 March 1911. As recounted in a riveting history, *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America* (Atlantic Monthly Press) by David Von Drehle, the fire was caused not just by a careless cigarette, but by social, industrial, and labor forces summed to that point, and true to the subtitle, it changed those forces ever afterward. Anyone

studying the economics and history of twentieth century America needs to know the prominence of the sweatshops, but as Von Drehle points out, we are now once again concerned about the sweatshops from where our clothes issue (they just don't happen to predominate in New York anymore). And though after Triangle there were important safety laws imposed in New York, there are still factory disasters happening in the equivalent of sweatshops in other parts of the world. Ironically, the Triangle factory made shirtwaists, which were the women's blouses of the time, and they were something of a sartorial liberation for women. It was a practical garment, with no hoops or corsets, and yet it was fashionable enough for the Gibson Girl. The book covers the lengthy strike at Triangle of 1909, but the strike was not about safety, just hours and pay. Von Drehle shows that there had already been factory buildings successfully protected from fire. Automatic sprinklers, firewalls, and fireproof doors and stairways were, from the 1880s, standard in some factories. The Triangle owners paid lots for insurance, and little for safety. The building itself was promoted as fireproof, and it proved essentially to be, but the contents were certainly not. There were about 250 workers in the building, and as they attempted to escape, each fire hazard took its toll. A door to the rear stairway was locked, for instance, because the owners insisted that workers use only one stairway. This ensured that before leaving the building, everyone could be checked for goods smuggled out. Crowds mobbed shut other doors which opened inwards. The account of the fire is vivid and scary. 140 people died in the fire, 123 of them women. About a hundred of the deaths were those who fell or jumped. The owners were tried for manslaughter. Van Drehle has uncovered a lost transcript of the trial, which focused on the locked doors. On the stand, one of the owners stressed the importance of having the door locked to prevent theft, but when pressed to state how much loss there had been to theft, he admitted that it was less than \$25 a year. The owners were deemed not guilty, and gained \$60,000 in insurance payments. The resulting public outcry provided a new impetus for workplace safety, creating rules that are in force even today, like the ones requiring outward swinging doors. Van Drehle shows that even more importantly, it began to be taken for granted that a progressive government ought to be regulating such matters. Tammany Hall came around to protecting the workers, and from this change grew such philosophies as the New Deal. *Triangle* compellingly tells the story of the building's fire, but even better, it covers the stories of the women workers involved in the disaster, and the changes the fire brought. The fire lasted a horrific ten minutes in 1911, but it has not finished burning yet.

I normally avoid books that focus on horrific events in history because they mostly exploit and sensationalize the disaster for their authors' obvious motive: profit. David Von Drehle has no interest

in exploiting this exceptionally terrible moment in New York's--and even America's--history. His compassion for the victims, his admiration for the reformers, and his loathing for those who caused and profited from the fire is obvious on every page, and in every word. Framed by the scorn and indifference toward laborers before the fire, and the realization of guilt that led to the rush to reform after it, the events of March 25, 1911 are heartbreakingly described by Mr. Von Drehle's vivid prose. But the description of the actual fire is only part of the book. He doesn't linger over the gruesome details to satisfy some cruel, voyeuristic hunger that some readers might have expected. There's just enough narrative to convey the chaos, terror and sadness of the event. To prevent the story from getting too morbid, the author diligently included the many individual acts of heroism by police, firemen, passersby and neighboring NYU students. The main purpose of the book, as the subtitle explains, is to demonstrate how the Triangle catastrophe profoundly affected Tammany Hall, New York City and State government, the federal government, the labor union movement, socialists, and Democrats. The dedication of the reformers and labor leaders like Al Smith, Frances Perkins, Robert Wagner, Sr., Clara Lemlich, and so on, is also highlighted. The owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, receive the vilification they deserve. And somewhere in the moral gray area are the two most enigmatic figures: Tammany leader Charles Murphy and the attorney for Blanck and Harris, Max Steuer. One last note: the book is a fascinating history of the history of the disaster. By that I mean that Mr. Von Drehle reports how others before him--the newspapers, Attorney Steuer, Clara Lemlich, and Leon Stein--recounted the events of that dark day, and how frighteningly close we came to losing these records (especially Steuer's). It represents the debt we owe to Mr. Von Drehle's dogged research, as well as the debt he owes his predecessors. Amazing. Rocco Dormarunno, author of The Five Points

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