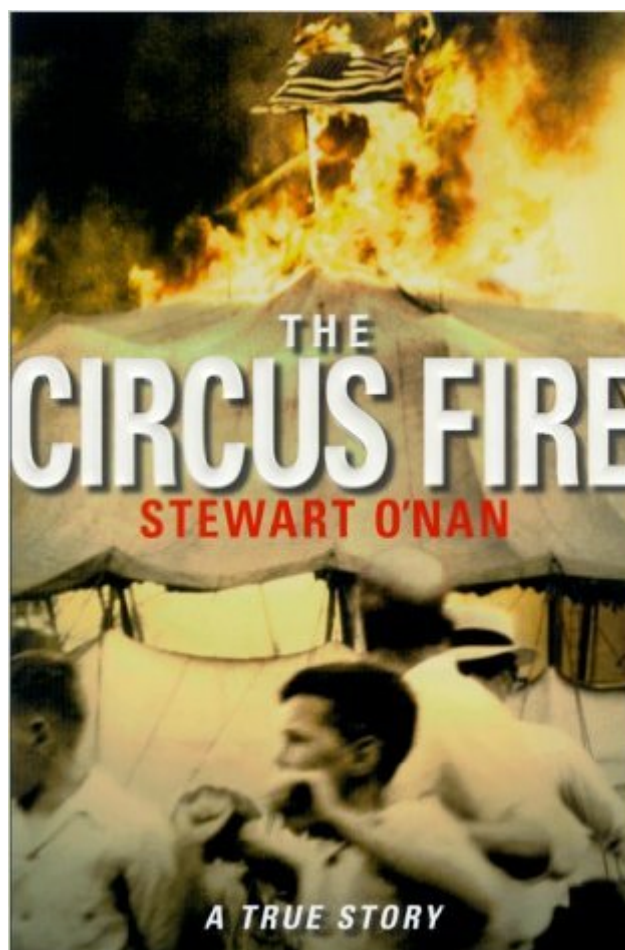


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The Circus Fire: A True Story



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. Halfway through a midsummer afternoon performance, Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus's big top caught fire. The tent had been waterproofed with a mixture of paraffin and gasoline; in seconds it was burning out of control, and more than 8,000 people were trapped inside. 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 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. From the Trade Paperback edition.

Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (132 customer reviews)

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[Photography > Performing Arts > Theater > Circus](#) #22356 in [Books > History > Americas >](#)

[United States > State & Local](#) #90172 in [Books > Humor & Entertainment](#)

Customer Reviews

I am sure that any decent writer who was willing to dig through the archives and old newspaper stories could have written a good book about the Hartford circus fire. For Stewart O'Nan however, that was not enough. He not only did the research that any author would do when writing about a historical event; he tracked down the survivors. That is what makes this book so good. The stories told by the survivors make the whole story much more personal and much more tragic. On top of all this, O'Nan's writing style is superb. As a novelist who usually deals in fiction he writes in a very engrossing manner that keeps the reader's interest from cover to cover. The chapters are divided by dates and O'Nan takes each of the several families he follows in detail from their preparations for the circus to the very end. Whether that end is death or recovery we get the whole story. In this way

the reader is able to connect in a personal way with the victims. If they escaped we find out how they got out. If they required hospitalization we get the story of their recovery. If they are killed we are taken through the identification process and some of the funerals. O’Nan even follows two of the survivors into their careers as firemen. The reader is also treated to the inner politics of the Ringling family and the power struggle after the fire. Along the way we meet circus people who were indeed negligent, politicians who struggled to cover their own negligence, nurses, doctors, and lots of policemen. We also meet many heroes; many of them policemen and firemen just like on 9/11. O’Nan spares no detail but he never gets boring. The reader will also get a good feel for 1944. The circus was short on workers because of the war. Hartford’s residents were prospering because of the war industries.

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