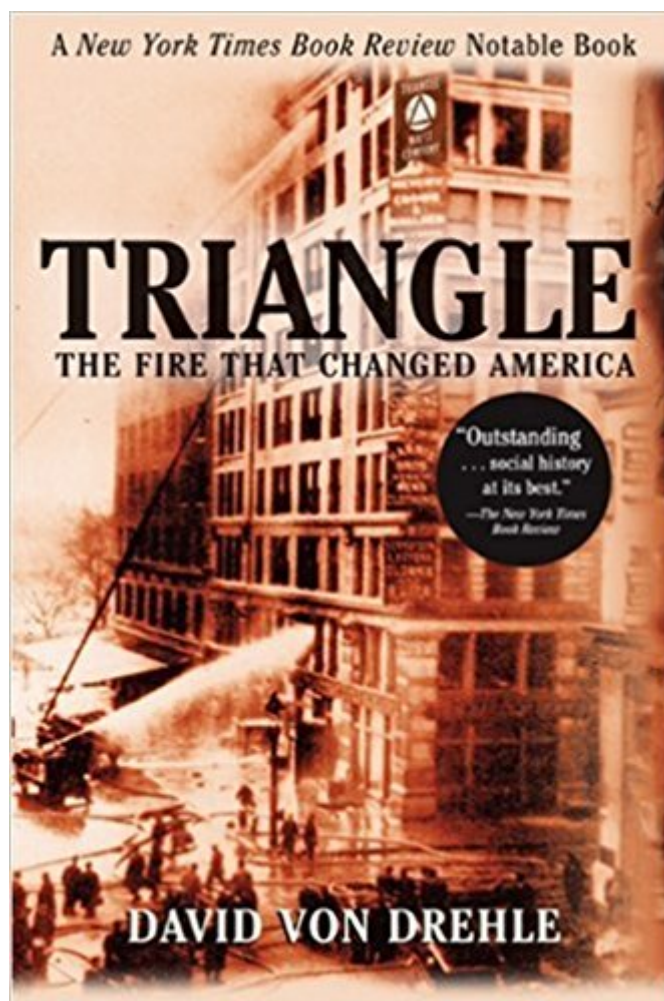


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# Triangle: The Fire That Changed America



## 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

It was a profitable business in a modern fireproof building heralded as a model of efficiency. Yet the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York City became the deadliest workplace in American history when fire broke out on the premises on March 25, 1911. Within about 15 minutes the blaze killed 146 workers—most of them immigrant Jewish and Italian women in their teens and early 20s. Though most workers on the eighth and 10th floors escaped, those on the ninth floor were trapped behind a

locked exit door. As the inferno spread, the trapped workers either burned to death inside the building or jumped to their deaths on the sidewalk below. Journalist Von Drehle (*Lowest of the Dead: Inside Death Row* and *Deadlock: The Inside Story of America's Closest Election*) recounts the disaster—the worst in New York City until September 11, 2001—in passionate detail. He explains the sociopolitical context in which the fire occurred and the subsequent successful push for industry reforms, but is at his best in his moment-by-moment account of the fire. He describes heaps of bodies on the sidewalk, rows of coffins at the makeshift morgue where relatives identified charred bodies by jewelry or other items, and the scandalous manslaughter trial at which the Triangle owners were acquitted of all charges stemming from the deaths. Von Drehle's engrossing account, which emphasizes the humanity of the victims and the theme of social justice, brings one of the pivotal and most shocking episodes of American labor history to life. Photos not seen by PW. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

Adult/High School-Von Drehle has embedded the intense, moving tale of the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in a fascinating, meticulously documented account of a crucial period in U.S. history. In addition to using an impressive list of secondary sources, the author has drawn heavily on newspaper articles, author Leon Stine's interviews with survivors, and trial transcripts. In a short prologue, he provides a poignant account of stunned, grieving relatives trying to identify burned bodies. To show why the tragedy occurred, he then goes back two years to the beginning of the 1909 general strike. The stifling, dingy tenements and the horrific conditions of the factories where immigrant workers toiled for 84-hour workweeks are described in evocative detail. Stories of the hardships they left behind in Italy and Eastern Europe contribute to the portraits of the victims and villains. Readers unfamiliar with Tammany Hall, the Progressive movement, or the rise of trade unions benefit from clear, concise background information. The account of the fire, the investigation, and the trial are both heartbreaking and enraging. The courtroom drama of defense attorney Max Steuer brazenly defending the factory owners overshadows any modern comparison. After concluding with the announcement of the trial verdict, the author provides an epilogue covering the final years of the key figures. An appendix gives the first complete list of victims. Eight black-and-white photos are included. Kathy Tewell, Chantilly Regional Library, VA Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

This is a terrific book about not only the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, but also the political and

labor situation at the time. Frances Perkins - Secretary of Labor under FDR - has as starring role here, as do some of the union leaders and politicians of the time. The influence of Tammany Hall was about to wane and the labor union movement was about to explode - greatly helped along by the horrific fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. The reader gets to know the history of some of the girls who were trapped in the fire - some escaped and some died in the flames. I found it so frustrating that there weren't regulations in place before the fire to prevent the carnage from ever happening. Even after the fire, things seemed to move slowly. Everyone was horrified and wanted to make sure nothing like that ever happened again. But no one went to jail and change did not come fast. Why does it so often take a tragedy to inspire people to do the right thing? I suspect there will be other readers as disheartened as I was at how this played out for the factory owners. I also suspect that others will see parallels between the events of the early 1900s and today - no one is ever to blame!

I liked reading about life at the turn of the century and the changes that occurred in the factory workplace. The attempt to document lives of some of the individuals lost in the fire was difficult to follow on the Kindle version. The author too easily moved between time periods and locations to keep track of the detail individual histories, but as an overview it was interesting. The Kindle version had few pictures. An engineer reading the book would have liked to see a sketch of the factory floor, exits, pictures of the fire escape. We visited the site on a recent trip to NYC, and the size and layout of the building and adjacent buildings became much more clear.

In 1911 a shirt-waist factory catches on fire, leading to an unprecedented change in work safety standards. This book is beautifully researched. It provides vivid detail to round out the characters so that the reader truly understands the time period that this story is taking place in. I was particularly interested in the insights provided about the local government, Tammany Hall. I know others didn't understand why there was so much about Tammany Hall in the book, but I found that understanding the local politics really helped me to understand the different forces at play in NYC during the time.

The book was not really what I had expected. I had looked for a more personal account of the people who died and those who survived. My husband's grandmother was an Eastern European immigrant to New York shortly after the time period of the Triangle Fire. She came alone to this country, lived with relatives already here, and worked in one of the garment factories. With the great exception that she escaped the Fire, her early life in this country was the life that had been lived by

the Triangle victims, and I think I had expected to learn more about this life. Mr. von Drehle makes clear that the book I had expected is just not possible because of the great scarcity of source material. He does what he can in general terms: he tells where the majority of these women came from and the circumstances most of them escaped. He details the incredibly long hours they worked, the incredibly small wages they received, and the fact that many still managed to help support families in this country or The Old Country. He explains that, because of the horrific over-crowding of the tenements in which they lived, their lives away from work were spent on the streets. Here they found community with people of their own background, language, and age; intellectual stimulation in the many near-by free courses offered by NYU and various associations; and exposure to the social and political thought of the day. But these generalities are pretty much as far as he is able to go. The real subject matter of this book is political change; in particular, the liberalization of New York. In this context, the Triangle Fire was no more than a tremendous spur to this change. His enduring characters are less the women of Triangle and more the reporters, business people, public officials, and primarily the politicians who, willingly or not, took part in this change. He chronicles the fall of Tammany Hall and the rise of the Democrats. Once I got past the realization that the book was other than what I had expected, I grew to appreciate it for what it is. It is a well-documented and compelling account of a time of change and the people (certainly including the victims of the Fire) who combined to bring it about.

This is the definitive historical book that explores the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. Author von Drehle gives a human face to the tragedy by writing about the people, mostly girls and women, who died and also those who escaped. It is interesting to learn how buildings were designed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and how buildings such as the one that housed Triangle were not designed for the safety of the occupants and how lax inspections precipitated the horrific fire that occurred. I also found out where the term "sweatshop" originated. Besides this documentation, the author also includes a look at the trial where the owners of the building were charged with knowingly locking exit doors and disallowing workers to escape the blaze. It looks like a no-brainer, but there were some twists in the testimony that made the outcome of the trial a surprise. This book kept my interest and kept me turning pages until late at night. I would recommend this book to anyone who like history and in particular New York in the early 20th century.

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