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# Big Top Burning: The True Story Of An Arsonist, A Missing Girl, And The Greatest Show On Earth



## Synopsis

On July 6, 1944, thousands of fans made their way to Barbour Street in Hartford, Connecticut, to see the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus performance. Not long after the show's start, a fire broke out and spread rapidly as panicked circus-goers pushed and scrambled to escape. Within 10 minutes the entire big top had burned to the ground, and 167 people never went home. *Big Top Burning* recounts the true story of one of the worst fire disasters in US history. It follows the tragic stories of the Cook family—including children Donald, Eleanor, and Edward, who were in the audience that day—and 15-year-old Robert Segee, a circus employee with an incendiary past. Drawing on primary sources and interviews with survivors, author Laura Woollett guides readers through several decades of investigations and asks, Was the unidentified body of a little girl nicknamed "Little Miss 1565" Eleanor Cook? Was the fire itself an act of arson—and did Robert Segee set it? Young readers are invited to evaluate the evidence and draw their own conclusions. Combining a gripping disaster story, an ongoing detective and forensics saga, and vivid details about life in World War II-era America, *Big Top Burning* is sure to intrigue any history or real-life mystery fan.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 176 pages

Publisher: Chicago Review Press (June 1, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1613731140

ISBN-13: 978-1613731147

Product Dimensions: 5.8 x 0.6 x 8.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 20 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #607,004 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #67 in Books > Children's Books > Education & Reference > Law & Crime #449 in Books > Children's Books > Education & Reference > History > United States > 1900s

Age Range: 10 - 13 years

Grade Level: 5 and up

## Customer Reviews

Gr 5—The Hartford, CT, circus fire of 1944 is still infamous locally for killing 167 people and injuring more in only 10 minutes. Woollett's retelling of the event is interspersed with

thought-provoking questions designed to encourage readers to ponder the gaps in our knowledge about the event ("So what about the city of Hartford? Did it have a role in not preventing the disaster?"). The story of the actual fire is gripping, but the narrative is occasionally on the dry side, and the pace slows as the book goes into more detail covering the arson investigation and the identification of the victims. The inclusion of photos and documents adds appeal, though, and students learning about forensics may be interested in the investigation processes. VERDICT A suitable addition to history collections. — Dorcas Hand, Annunciation Orthodox School, Houston, TX

— "While walking readers ages 11 and older through the disaster and its long investigative aftermath, Ms. Woollett takes pains to point out how the world 70 years ago differed from our own. — The Wall Street Journal" This chronological account vividly describes the circus, the fire, the rescue, and the medical care that followed. History buffs and fans of forensic television shows will especially appreciate this exploration of one of the worst fires in American history. — Kirkus Reviews "Fascinating, devastating, and impeccably researched." — Booklist "This meticulously researched book will draw readers in to a terrifying disaster story — and an unsolved mystery. — Steve Sheinkin, award-winning author of *The Port Chicago 50* and *Bomb! The Race to Build and Steal the World's Most Dangerous Weapon* "Big Top Burning is a gripping narrative of one of our country's most horrific yet largely unknown disasters. — The Republican-American "Wollett brings the incident alive by combining the historical accounts with the mystery surrounding the disaster. The author does a stellar job describing the gripping story in an age-appropriate way. For example, she focuses on the mystery of an unidentified little girl. Youth will enjoy evaluating the evidence and drawing their own conclusions. This short book would be a good choice for reluctant readers looking for an interesting history project topic. — Annette Lamb, Teacher Librarian "This piece of engaging nonfiction would lend itself to analysis, prediction, and as a catalyst for future research. The inclusion of notes, bibliography, and image credits make this a great mentor text. — School Library Connection "This is nonfiction at its very best. — Tulsa Book Review

This book has all the excitement you would associate with an event like this, yet manages to avoid the tone that could be somewhat offputting to many young (and older) readers. Woollett has carefully researched this event and traces the story and the investigation in great detail; she also

does a great job of placing it in its historical context. Some of the facts just blew me away. The fact that flammable liquids were used to waterproof a tent, the lack of inspection, etc. Wow! The well-chosen (and never grisly) photographs really help young readers to imagine what this world looked like in times past. I would recommend this to any young reader who likes history, is interested in circuses, or in investigation.

My 8 year old son is enjoying every bit of this as we read it together nightly. As many of you know, getting little boys to read isn't always so easy, but my son is begging to find out what happens next in this captivating story. Well written and exciting tale of a real life mystery.

Another book for our mother-daughter book club. (6th graders) It was a good true story. I liked that it wasn't too graphic, but did convey the essence of the tragedy. I really liked that it hit on different aspects of the case, especially on the judgement and how it was paid back. It is definitely written for a middle or even elementary school reading level, and I had to keep reminding myself of that.

This is a rich account of one of the country's most horrific disasters. Woollett focuses not only on the facts of the Hartford Circus Fire but also details the rescue efforts, community volunteers, and other positive aspects that arose from the tragedy. This is a great read for all ages!

Great book and love all the historical research.

Wonderfully written! The story flows seamlessly and walks through the history of the circus fire and the following decades. An easy and enjoyable (but educational) read!

A good account of the circus fire, but not the best.

I had never heard of the big fire that destroyed a Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus tent in 1944 in Hartford, Connecticut before reading *BIG TOP BURNING* by Laura A. Woollett. The fire, which destroyed the tent in less than 10 minutes, killed 167 people and injured dozens more. It made headlines across the country. Woollett sifted through police reports, newspaper articles, interviews and eye witness accounts searching for information about this tragic fire. The official report says the cause of the fire was undetermined. After following all the events in the book, the reader is left to decide for himself if the fire was arson or accidental. There is a secondary storyline/mystery in the

text --- was the unidentified remains of a little girl found after the fire actually Eleanor Cook? Cook disappeared after the circus and was never found. In 1991, the town of Hartford put up a memorial in honor of Eleanor, believing the remains to be hers, but not everyone is convinced. No matter your opinions or conclusions about the fire and the mystery of the missing girl, you will have to agree that the author did a thorough job of researching these historical events. She includes quotes from eye witnesses, and the back matter includes extensive Notes and a Bibliography. There are also plenty of photos scattered throughout the pages. If history is your thing, then this is a good book for you to read. If mysteries and who-dun-its are your thing, then you'll enjoy this book for that reason, too. If you just like a good story, then you'll also enjoy this book. Reviewed by Christine Irvin

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