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



## Synopsis

Big Top Burning investigates the 1944 Hartford circus fire and invites readers to take part in a critical evaluation of the evidence. The fire broke out at 2:40 p.m. Thousands of men, women, and children were crowded under Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey's big top watching the Flying Wallendas begin their death-defying high-wire act. Suddenly someone screamed "Fire!" and the panic began. By 2:50 the tent had burned to the ground. Not everyone had made it out alive. With primary source documents and survivor interviews, Big Top Burning recounts the true story of the 1944 Hartford circus fire—one of the worst fire disasters in U.S. history. Its remarkable characters include: Robert Segee, the 15-year-old circus roustabout and known pyromaniac; and the Cook children, Donald, Eleanor, and Edward, who were in the audience when the circus tent caught fire. Guiding readers through the investigations of the mysteries that make this moment in history so fascinating, this book 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? Big Top Burning combines a gripping disaster story, an ongoing detective and forensics saga, and World War II-era American history, inviting middle-grades readers to take part in a critical evaluation of the evidence and draw their own conclusions.

## Book Information

File Size: 6521 KB

Print Length: 176 pages

Publisher: Chicago Review Press (June 1, 2015)

Publication Date: June 1, 2015

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B00XGX2I3U

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #639,779 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #28

in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Children's eBooks > Education & Reference > Law & Crime

#113 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Children's eBooks > History > United States > 1900s

## Customer Reviews

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

This masterwork of narrative nonfiction will seize you from the opening line and not let you go. Gruesome but never gratuitous, Woollett's portrait of the Hartford Circus Fire puts you in the middle of the action, fleeing for safety with the patrons, performers, and animals. But this is more than mere disaster story: Two captivating unsolved mysteries unfold. Who started the fire? And who was the little girl, whose body no one ever claimed? Woollett presents the facts and theories, and readers are encouraged to draw their own conclusions. The book's content is well researched and sensitively handled; give this to any middle grade reader who enjoys history, mystery, or simply a darn good story!

Woollett struck a gold mine with this little-known event in American entertainment history. Presented as both a tragedy and a decades-old mystery, the Hartford circus fire is a topic certain to pique any reader's curiosity, as well as evoke crucial conclusions to these questions: who or what caused the fire? Was unidentified "Little Miss 1565" actually the body of young girl Eleanor Cook who went

missing in the fire? Woollett's impressively thorough research lays out the definitive details in a suspenseful narrative that is both intriguing and informative.

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.

This is quite a book. It covers such a hard event in the history of Hartford, CT and it is for teens. It is really an excellent presentation of what happened, why it happened, and who was affected. As an adult, I was fascinated to read the story; as a former resident of Hartford, it hit home even more. The research done by the author was quite thorough and it shines throughout. What is most impressive is how the author explains things at a level teens can understand while still holding an adult's attention. It is an eye-opening story for all readers and sends a clear message how corners cannot be cut because of greed or sloppiness when trying to do something good for the public.

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.

Big Top Burning by Laura A. Woollett is a nonfictional recounting of a horrific event in American history: the 1944 Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus fire. On the afternoon of July 6, 1944, thousands of citizens crowded into a circus tent in Hartford, Connecticut, excited to witness the wonders that the Ringling Brothers promised. However, only minutes after the circus began, the big top caught fire, leading to the deaths of 167 people and the injuries of hundreds more. Big Top Burning provides a fairly short, very simple account of a runaway arsonist, a missing eight-year-old, and many other details surrounding the catastrophic fire that stopped even the greatest show on Earth in its tracks. Big Top Burning is an informational yet enjoyable book. Author Woollett includes numerous details that allow for a riveting, educational read. Also, despite the many unclear events

revolving around the fire of July 1944, Woollett is unfailingly objective and unbiased, always including both sides of the story. Besides the great text of Big Top Burning, multiple photographs are also featured in the book, helping readers to understand and appreciate the tragedy that occurred. In fact, the only disappointment of the book is that the questions raised throughout its pages, such as how the fire started and whether the missing child was ever found, are never answered; the mystery has yet to be solved. Big Top Burning is a wonderful choice for children around the fifth grade level who take interest in historical mysteries. I encourage young readers to venture into its pages and try to solve the mystery of the fire that nearly destroyed the greatest show on Earth. review by Isabella T., age 14, Memphis Mensa

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