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Worlds Afire



Synopsis

"Riveting. . . . A memorable historical fiction selection, similar in intensity to Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust* and *Witness*." -- SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL (starred review) One summer afternoon in 1944, hundreds of circus lovers crowded under the big top in Hartford, waiting for the show to begin. Minutes later, a fire broke out and spread through the tent, claiming the lives of 167 souls and injuring some 500 more. Paul B. Janeczko recalls that tragic event by bringing to life some unforgettable voices -- from circus performers to seasoned fans, from firefighters to ushers. Using the lyrical power of language to render tragedy with a human face, this spare, startling book in verse leaves an emotional impact young readers will not soon forget.

Book Information

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Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

Customer Reviews

Grade 6 Up-A riveting account of a horrific event that killed 167 people, mostly women and children, and injured 500. In a collection of narrative poems, Janeczko describes a circus fire that took place on July 6, 1944 in Hartford, CT, from the viewpoints of those who were there. The event's horror leaps vividly from each poem. The brief book is divided into three parts-a sort of introduction, the fire itself, and the aftermath as people tried to understand what went wrong. Readers hear from police officers, and many circus people, as well as the 13-year-old girl whose friends were lucky enough to go to the circus while she had to stay home. The voices lend immediacy to the story and enhance

the sense of tragedy. This is a memorable historical fiction selection, similar in intensity to Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust* (1997) and *Witness* (2001, both Scholastic).-Renee Steinberg, formerly at Fieldstone Middle School, Montvale, NJ Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

Gr. 4-8. Based on a real circus fire in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1944 that killed 167 in a few minutes and injured more than 500, Janeczko's spare poetic novel describes the events in the voices of 29 eyewitnesses: children and adults in the audience, circus folk, and townspeople. First, there's the excitement before the show, then the horror of the sudden wild flames and screaming panic, and finally the "shuffling and sobbing" of families in grief. Many voices sound too much the same; but the words are plain, with short lines that are very easy to read, and the stories they tell are unforgettable. A child escapes, but watches her mother and brother "swept away by the rush." A young trainer saves the elephants ("the herd lined up / tail-to trunk / just like they'd been taught"). A firefighter explains that the canvas tent was waterproofed with paraffin and gasoline ("one huge candle / just waiting for a light"). Janeczko never sensationalizes the horror, but the combination of a thrilling circus and true catastrophe will grab middle-schoolers, especially for readers' theater. Hazel Rochman Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

Mr. Janeczko visited my classroom, and read a few poems from this book. My students were quite taken with it, and were pleased when I purchased it for our classroom. The subject matter is a bit heavy, but not inappropriate for my 5th graders.

a glaring example of 'vanity press,' this 'author' has compiled thoroughly un-extraordinary prose and passes it off as something of importance and value. This thing was on a 99 cent table at books-a-million. I LOST 99 cents. Just wretched...

This collection of poems horrified and startled me with its moving images of a big top fire that killed hundreds of people and injured half a thousand more. I was amazed at how fast this collection read, I devoured the whole thing in forty-five minutes. Janeczko grabs you from the first word and pulls you through the story of the circus fire by telling it from the point of view of various people who were at the event. Some of the speakers will live, some will die, some spit out their last words at the end of their poems. Janeczko really gets you to feel the terror of the people fleeing the burning tent and

feel for the victims, mainly women and children who were at the circus while their men were away fighting world war II. There are poems by animal trainers trying to get their charges to safety and poems by the police detectives trying to determine who lit the fire. These are sorrowful poems of a disaster one hopes will never happen again. I was amazed that the circus people waterproofed the big top with a combination of paraffin and gasoline, seems like anyone could see that was a nightmare waiting to happen. They never did catch the person who lit the fire, though a mentally ill man claimed credit. His account wasn't believed, though, and in the end the authorities were obliged to let it go, the truth just another sad casualty of that miserable day.

I had never heard of the 1944 Ringling Bros. and Barnum disaster. This book is written in blank verse and from different people's points of view. Each poem gives the perspective of someone who was at the disaster. It starts with their point of view before, during, and after the fire. It was interesting to see the various point of views and how they may have seen the situation and how the event may have been seen from their point of view. This was a very well done book and one of my favorite books written in verse.

The book *Worlds Afire* is the best drama book I have ever read but since I'm only 13 I'm sure that there is a lot more better drama books out there I just haven't heard of yet. This book is about "a circus gone bad" as I would say. It is also a true story that is going to haunt my dreams for the rest of my life. That's how good of a picture the book draws for you as you read. As your reading you can just see all the people dying in the torturous flames of the Hartford fire. The book takes place during the circus act of the tigers. The worst thing about the fire is that there is only one escape for all those people to get out of and barely half of them did. I would definitely recommend this book to anyone shape, color or size.

Paul Janeczko's collection of poems tells the story of the infamous Hartford Circus fire of 1944. From the gradual points of view of performers, parents and anxious children, Janeczko leads his readers through the excitement of the Big Top event, to the horror and tragedy of the fire. From parents, freaks and photographers, the reader is lead through the terror and confusion of the fire and the anguish of the hospital afterward. The best poem in my opinion was not saved for last. The touching point of view of Sally Weissman, the nurse attending the emergency room to which so many victims were rushed is this book's most powerful moment.

I am very excited about the new format of books written in poetry, some of my favorites being "Love That Dog" and "Shakespeare Bats Cleanup." However, both of these are fictional stories and the format really DOES NOT work for non-fiction. The poems feel uninspired and would have been much better expressed in, say, a historical fiction novel. Also, the book offers us no real information about the fire or the circus. If you would like to get books written in poetry, please check out "Love That Dog" by Sharon Creech or "Shakespeare Bats Cleanup" by Ron Koertge. Don't even bother with this one.

Each chapter here involves a character from the fire and the poems tell the story from that point of view. Characters include performers, policeman, children, an usher and even, the alleged arsonist himself. Every poem adds detail to the events of that hot July day. I am not fond of mixing poetry with disasters, and the author is no Whitman, but the book is far from hopeless. If you are interested, and can get a cheap copy, it will probably be worth your while.

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