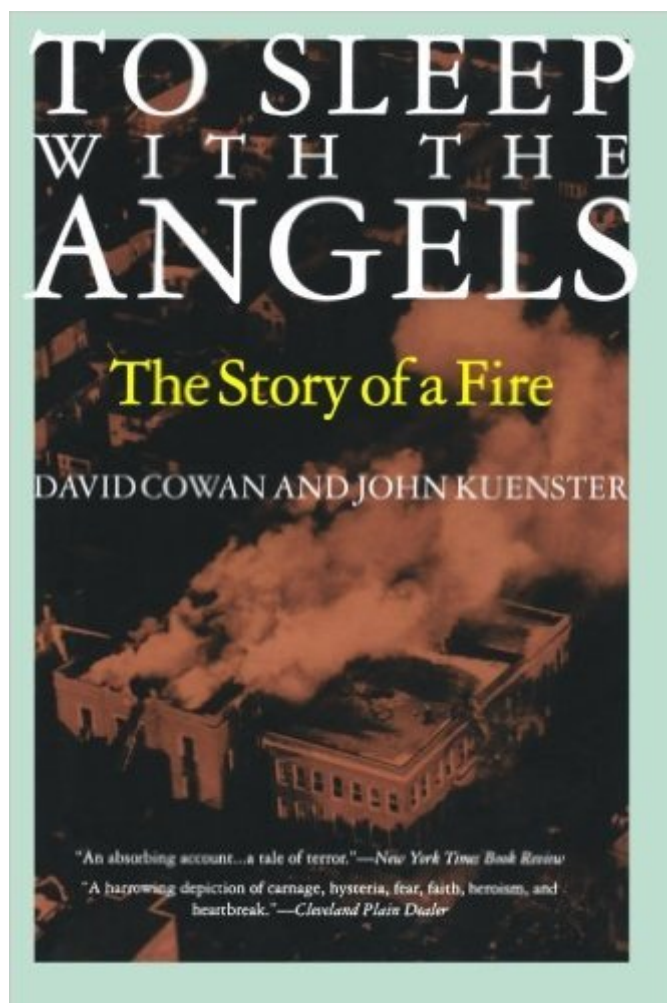


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To Sleep With The Angels: The Story Of A Fire



Synopsis

If burying a child has a special poignancy, the tragedy at a Catholic elementary school in Chicago almost forty years ago was an extraordinary moment of grief. One of the deadliest fires in American history, it took the lives of ninety-two children and three nuns at Our Lady of the Angels School, left many families physically and psychologically scarred for life, and destroyed a close-knit working-class neighborhood. This is the moving story of that fire and its consequences written by two journalists who have been obsessed with the events of that terrible day in December 1958. It is a story of ordinary people caught up in a disaster that shocked the nation. In gripping detail, those who were there—children, teachers, firefighters—describe the fear, desperation, and panic that prevailed in and around the stricken school building on that cold Monday afternoon. But beyond the flames, the story of the fire at Our Lady of the Angels became an enigma whose mystery has deepened with time: its cause was never officially explained despite evidence that it had been intentionally set by a troubled student at the school. The fire led to a complete overhaul of fire safety standards for American schools, but it left a community torn apart by grief and anger, and accusations that the Catholic church and city fathers had shielded the truth. Messrs. Cowan and Kuenster have recreated this tragedy in a powerful narrative with all the elements of a first-rate detective story.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Many books have been written about real-life tragedies, and in this sense, Cowan and Kuenster's book is no different. However, there is a thin line in these type of books between boring the reader

by burying the human aspect of the story with an overload of factual material and becoming nothing more than a non-fiction hankie weeper. Quite a few books have disappointed me in the past by straying to either one side or the other. Not so with this one. It is a solid piece of reporting that does not lose the human dimension of the tragedy. Nor does it obscure the investigation and the facts with too much emphasis on the human dimension. The fire at Our Lady of the Angels was one of the worst tragedies to strike America, made even more so in that the vast majority of its victims were innocent children. The authors follow the story from the day it occurred to the fire itself and the heroic efforts of the fire department to the later delegation of blame and recriminations from what was seen as a bureaucratic conspiracy. In doing so they manage to bring the reader into the story not merely as a spectator but almost as a fellow reporter, sharing not only facts, but also conjectures and whispers plus personal items about the victims, always careful always to straddle the line between objectivity and the trap of a "crusading" journalism. By letting the story speak for itself, they bring it home all the more forcefully, to where no one who reads it will remain unaffected. This book should also serve as a warning against the false sense of security that this sort of thing cannot happen again. There are still many schools, public and private, at risk, and this is a book that should be read by every parent with children still in school, and not only during Fire Prevention Week.

I was a fourth grade student at Our Lady of the Angels at the time of the fire. Room 210. When I saw this book in the store, it immediately took me back to 1958. I find it very difficult to express in words how well these men have put down on paper what happened that day. I commend them and their years of diligence putting this story in print. I have been in the fire service for 23 years (pure coincidence) and my heart and soul go out to those firemen that had to work that infamous day. The only closure this book was not able to provide is that I never was able to personally thank the fireman that pulled me to safety from room 210.

This book took me back to a painful time in otherwise happy years as a child. In December of 1958 I was a third grader at St. Peter Canisius School, just northwest of OLA. I can remember watching the news bulletins on television, my mother weeping and praying and the unbelievable sadness at the sight of the dozens of small coffins. The changes in school fire codes were swift. Before the end of the school year, we were on half-day shifts because our basement classroom (somewhat with block glass windows) did not meet fire code. The authors of this book have brought to light that the 93 OLA martyrs left a legacy of change and improved safety for school children across the country and even around the world. I, too, was compelled to go back to the old neighborhoods - down North Avenue,

past what used to be St. Anne's on Thomas Street where I was born, to Avers and Iowa. The authors remark how not even a plaque on the property remembers those who died. Even at this late date, I hope something will be done to remedy that injustice. I could not stop reading this book - even once past the horror of the actual fire, the investigative reporting was clear, concise, riveting and brings answers to so many questions. A must read, especially for Chicagoans.

I found TO SLEEP WITH THE ANGELS one of the most fascinating books I have read in decades. Now a college professor, I was a teenager in New York when the fire took place. I was struck by the senseless horror of it: it stayed in my mind for years and when I read TO SLEEP WITH THE ANGELS I finally could learn all that I had now known about the work. I actually went to Chicago, met some of those survivors of the fire, went to the old neighborhood, visited cemeteries and relived my own past and could learn about that horrendous fire. I have never done anything like this as a result of reading a book and I have, believe me, literally read thousands of books in my long teaching career. Hats off to the authors: they have that unique talent that all professionals strive for--to make History come alive both for those who were involved in it (in whatever way) and for those who never experienced the event. This is the BEST book on the subject of current History that I have ever read. I cannot speak too highly of this work and I recommend it to anyone who wants to become involved in one of the most heartbreaking events of our age. I have reread the book six times and plan to do it again. My students are fascinated by the work and many have begun independent research work on the fire, due only to the skill of the writers of TO SLEEP WITH THE ANGELS.

I am a teacher of English and history at a high school and a junior college. I have a son who is studying to be a professional fire fighter. In fact, I bought this book for him but read it first. This story is gripping and powerful. It is also beautifully written and it is clear the authors have a close affinity with the countless victims of this nightmare--the children, the nuns, the families, the fire fighters and all who suffered as a result of this catastrophe. To read this book is to go back in time to 1958. I was a student in a catholic elementary school at the time and this book captures the spirit of parochial schools of that era. Their tribute to the nuns who gave the last full measure for their children is overwhelming. In fact, it has been a long time since a history has made me gasp aloud and I have to admit that I felt the tears well up as I read the accounts of tragedy, loss and heroics. The book captures a moment in time and stands as a tribute to those who died so young.

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