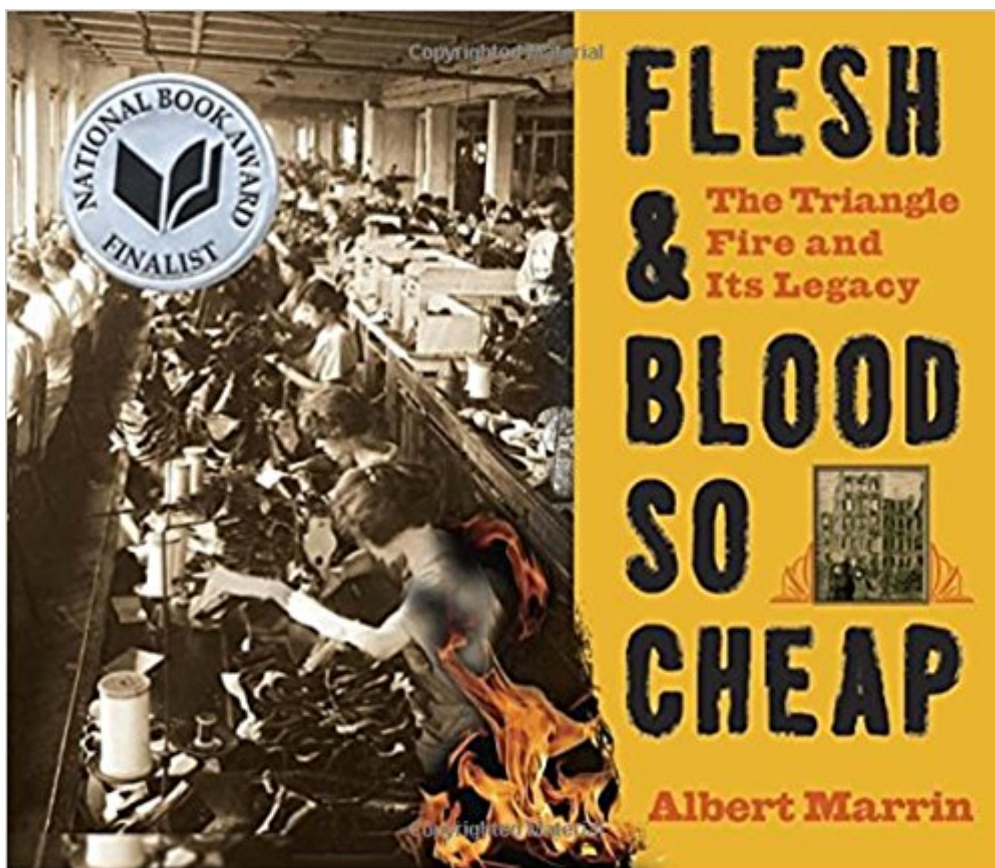


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# Flesh And Blood So Cheap: The Triangle Fire And Its Legacy



## Synopsis

On March 25, 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City burst into flames. The factory was crowded. The doors were locked to ensure workers stay inside. One hundred forty-six people—mostly women—perished; it was one of the most lethal workplace fires in American history until September 11, 2001. But the story of the fire is not the story of one accidental moment in time. It is a story of immigration and hard work to make it in a new country, as Italians and Jews and others traveled to America to find a better life. It is the story of poor working conditions and greedy bosses, as garment workers discovered the endless sacrifices required to make ends meet. It is the story of unimaginable, but avoidable, disaster. And it is the story of the unquenchable pride and activism of fearless immigrants and women who stood up to business, got America on their side, and finally changed working conditions for our entire nation, initiating radical new laws we take for granted today. With *Flesh and Blood So Cheap*, Albert Marrin has crafted a gripping, nuanced, and poignant account of one of America's defining tragedies.

## Book Information

Lexile Measure: 1000L (What's this?)

Paperback: 192 pages

Publisher: Yearling; Reissue edition (February 10, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0553499351

ISBN-13: 978-0553499353

Product Dimensions: 9.2 x 0.5 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 30 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #145,155 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #26 in Books > Children's Books > Geography & Cultures > Emigrants & Immigrants #52 in Books > Children's Books > Education & Reference > History > United States > State & Local #140 in Books > Children's Books > Education & Reference > History > United States > 1900s

Age Range: 10 and up

Grade Level: 5 and up

## Customer Reviews

Starred Review, Publishers Weekly, January 17, 2011: "Published to coincide with the centennial

anniversary of the 1911 fire that erupted in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, this powerful chronicle examines the circumstances surrounding the disaster...Marrin's message that protecting human dignity is our shared responsibility is vitally resonant."Starred Review, Booklist, April 1, 2011:"Sure to spark discussion, this standout title concludes with source notes and suggested-reading lists that will lead students to further resources for research and debate."Starred Review, School Library Journal, May 2011:"The writing is compelling and detailed, and the author effectively manages to bridge the gap between detached expository writing and emotionally charged content...this is a useful and thoughtful addition to any American history collection."

ALBERT MARRIN is the author of numerous highly regarded nonfiction books for young readers, including *Years of Dust*; *The Great Adventure: Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of Modern America*; and *Sitting Bull and His World*. His many honors include the Washington Children's Book Guild and Washington Post Non-Fiction Award for an "outstanding lifetime contribution that has enriched the field of children's literature," the James Madison Book Award for lifetime achievement, and the National Endowment for Humanities Medal.

This book is ostensibly about the March 25, 1911 fire at the Triangle Waist Factory which killed 146 workers because of inadequate fire protection and locked doors. In reality, though, it is the story of poor, mostly immigrant workers and their families struggling to make it in the "New World". It's the story of the struggle for rights - labor rights, women's rights, etc. - that has recurred on a cyclical basis as each new generation has had to relearn the importance of and fight for the rights which previous generations also struggled for. Although the story of the Triangle Waist Fire is all but forgotten today (a tragedy in itself, hopefully remedied in large part by Albert Marrin's powerful book), its legacy continues to this day. Marrin opens with a bare bones account of the fire and a brief glimpse of life in New York City around the early twentieth century. But to understand the fire and its context, one must first understand the people and the social conditions involved. So Marrin backs up his story to explore the lives of immigrants - mostly Italians and Russian Jews, particularly women and girls - who made up the bulk of the menial labor force in the garment industry around the turn of the century. Due to economic and political pressures in their own countries, these immigrants were pressed to venture to America with little more than the clothes on their backs and the money for their fare. They endured harsh conditions only to find a new life of hardship packed tightly into the tenements of New York City. But this new life, as hard as it was, offered relative safety and opportunity for advancement not to be had in the Old World, so they worked hard and

made the most of it. Those who had come before, meanwhile, had already achieved their success, and the rich among them lived in lavish mansions along "Millionaire's Row" dining on lobster and smoking cigarettes rolled in hundred dollar bills. The contrast in material life was stark, but the real inequality came in the non-material aspects: basic rights, education, working conditions and quality of life. There was none of the social "safety net" which we today take for granted (and which therefore is gradually being eroded), so every man and woman (and many children) had to rely on him or herself, the family, and perhaps the neighborhood. Marrin next documents the change in working conditions that led to the creation of the Triangle Waist Factory. Originally all clothes were hand-sewn and tailor-made for the individual wearer (the poor would wear ill-fitting cast-offs from those better off). But the invention of things like the sewing machine, paper patterns, and cloth cutters gave birth to manufactured clothes. These clothes brought a feeling of democracy because even most of the poor could afford decent clothes, but it also brought the rise of the sweatshop, where individual parts of the clothing production process were done assembly-line style in various tenements with "schleppers" hauling materials between locations. The Triangle Waist Factory as one of the first modern "New-Model" factories in which all parts of the production process were brought under one roof. This saved a great deal of money for the manufacturers and even had some benefits for the workers - cleaner air and better light, for instance. But it also took workers out of smaller, local family-controlled work environments and made them "wage slaves" under the watchful eyes of supervisors who made them work long hours, cheated them of break time, docked their pay for supplies and accidents, and locked them into the factory. The factory did give workers one other significant benefit, however - the opportunity to meet and organize, albeit often surreptitiously. Although factory owners worked hard to prevent it, often using violent means, workers eventually formed unions and began demanding their rights through protests and strikes. Marrin gives a nice overview of the often rather sordid history of unions and labor relations, including the use of mob violence by both sides. Women were initially shut out of unions, but the garment workers (who were mostly women) formed their own. These unions were supported (to a point, anyway), by some wealthy women of the "Mink Coat Brigade". Through their perseverance, the unions eventually won some rights, including reduced hours and protections from cheating and wage docking. None of those new benefits, however, were enough to save many of the workers of the Triangle Waist Factory. This chapter is particularly gut-wrenching and heart-breaking. No one knows for sure how the fire started (although illicit smoking by male cutters is the most likely culprit), but once it started, it engulfed everything in the "fireproof" building within minutes. No sprinklers were available to douse the fire and frightened, unprepared workers ran madly to escape the smoke and flames.

Some found stairwell doors locked. Some simply flung themselves out the windows, perhaps hoping to grab onto rungs of the fire ladders which reached only to the sixth floor. The tragedy and outrage of the Triangle Fire could not be ignored, and it gave workers a platform and a voice they would not otherwise have had. In the wake of the fire it soon became politically expedient - even necessary - to initiate investigations against businesses who were formerly ignored. The owners of the Triangle Waist Factory were prosecuted (although acquitted), other factories were investigated, laws were changed, and decent labor and safety standards were decreed (and even enforced somewhat, although not uniformly). Although it was always an uphill struggle, workers eventually earned many of the "New Deal" rights we enjoy today. In the final chapter, Marrin explores the world of labor relations and "sweatshops" today, both in New York City where new waves of immigrants work in re-constituted sweatshops, and abroad where the majority of our clothes and many other items are made by Asian workers earning a few dollars a week. Marrin also explores the flip side of the issue, for if workers in poor areas don't have sweatshops, then they have nothing - no way to earn a living or feed their families. Of course, the hope would be that those workers too can organize and demand better wages, benefits and working conditions (admittedly easier said than done in today's globalized world). I highly recommend this book. It should be required reading in middle and high school history courses and every adult should read it too, especially those who believe that if only the government would stop interfering, "market forces" would work out for everyone's benefit. In the early twentieth century, businesses had few pesky regulations to dictate their actions and, among other things, 146 people lost their lives in an unsafe factory. We can have similar incidents again if we're not careful.

In this National Book Award Finalist, Marrin provides a thorough overview of the conditions and events that lead up to and contributed to the Triangle Waist Company fire. He also discusses what happened afterwards and how it might have been prevented. He goes on to highlight the fact that such sweatshops and factories are still with us today, both inside and outside the United States. He makes it clear that the labor movement is far from over. He also looks at both sides of the issue, those who support such shops and those who do not. This can leave the impression that sweatshops do have a place in society, but I don't think that is what he was trying to say. I believe he was just showing why people work in such factories and shops. I did find it a bit jarring to leap from the early 1900s all the way to present day. It would have been nice to have more information on what happened in between the two time periods. I appreciated the numerous quotes and stories of real people who were there. In fact the most powerful part of this book are the quotes from

eyewitnesses.

An excellent concise history of a tragic fire that followed shortly after the equally tragic Newark Factory Fire. Highly recommended for students who do not realize that the abuses of factory workers abroad also took place here. Well-illustrated.

Fascinating book. It covered the Triangle Fire but also the rise of the labor unions and how immigrants changed the face of America. Highly recommend it as a social history. It is written to be understood by high school aged students.

The school give this book as reading work for summer. My 11 year old and my self like a lot this book because bring part of history that happen in NY that we know very little. This book not only tell you about the Triangle Fire but give you a back ground of the people that was involve and living the conditions of the time.

Very well-researched, with excellent photos. Emphasis is on the social context of 1911 and the Labor Movement of that time, not just the horrors of the fire. This book puts a great deal into perspective regarding the garment industry and the persistence of sweatshops even today: 100 years after the tragedy. Written for younger readers; very easy to read and understand.

I was disappointed with the scant information on the actual event. I wanted more info on the working conditions, human cost and sympathy than the employers savings. The amount the employers got for each burned body, versus the amount given to the families of these victims is abhorrent. The title of this book shows that.

It's not as old as I thought, it's ok for my daughter. thank you

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