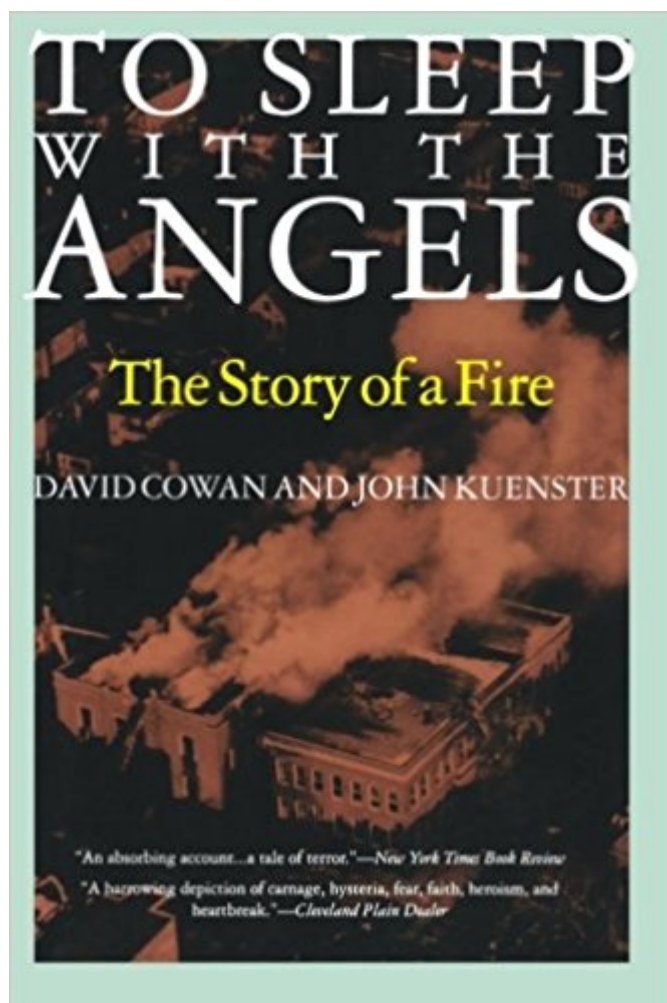


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# To Sleep With The Angels: The Story Of A Fire



## 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

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Ivan R. Dee; 1 edition (October 1, 1998)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 156663217X

ISBN-13: 978-1566632171

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.8 x 9.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars 234 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #111,322 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #29 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Regional U.S. > Midwest #873 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Criminology #1333 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > United States

## Customer Reviews

On December 1, 1958, a fire at Our Lady of the Angels School in Chicago killed 92 pupils, most between the ages of nine and 12, and three nuns. This deeply affecting account of that tragedy by

two Illinois journalists recreates the horror that destroyed a school and parish. The causes of the tragedy were manifold: outdated fire laws that permitted an edifice built before 1908 to escape a code passed in 1949 to insure safer schools; severe overcrowding; delay in reporting the fire; nuns ordering their pupils to pray rather than try to escape. Nor did municipal and archdiocesan officials help matters, their philosophy being that the fire was best forgotten; when a former student admitted to setting the blaze, they tried to conceal his confession. One positive result of the fire were the safety improvements made in 16,500 U.S. school buildings within a year. Photos not seen by PW. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Cowan, an independent journalist in the Chicago area, and Kuenster, a former reporter and columnist for the Chicago Daily News, fashion a gripping story from the events surrounding the tragic 1958 fire that swept through Chicago's Our Lady of the Angels elementary school. The fire, which left 92 elementary school children and three nuns dead, had profound effects on surviving students, parents, the surrounding neighborhood, and the city of Chicago. The tragedy spawned a nationwide school fire-safety program that is now often taken for granted. Cowan and Kuenster piece together a moving narrative based on the eyewitness accounts of surviving children, parents, firemen, doctors, nurses, and arson investigators. Although appropriate for any collection that serves general readers, this book is particularly recommended for Chicago-area libraries. Robert J. Favini, Bentley Coll. Lib., Waltham, Mass. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Good book, compelling read. Unfortunately many key witness stories are missing. The Pastor of OLA died before the book was written, the Judge as well. The main criticism I have for this book is that it leans a bit too much towards judging from a hindsight perspective. Lessons were not learned 50 years prior from the Collinwood School fire in Ohio. Studying that fire one will find that many of the schools in the US were firetraps. Cities did not want to tear down schools and build new ones. Fast forward to our age the Station night club fire in 2003 and the question remains if we have learned from history?

As with most disastrous fires, this one most certainly could have been prevented from taking so many little children. Please - no fire alarms, no fire escapes, fire extinguishers mounted 6 feet high!? And the building was within fire code... Check it out - Chicago itself is a death trap. The Great Fire,

Al Capone, the flipping of the Eastland, the dirigible crash, the Catholic school fire, the Iroquois theater fire, the most corrupt city government, etc. etc. This book is an excellent, gripping presentation of this tragedy. Recommended.

This was a tough book to read because of the subject matter, however, it was also one of the best books I've ever read. Having attended schools much like the school in the story, at the same time, I could easily identify with many of the facts regarding the general condition of the school as well as the attitudes of those times regarding child safety. Much of what we take for granted today to prevent such events didn't exist in the late '50s. The book is a tribute to the survivors and their families and to the memories of the children who perished. Just hearing them recount that day so many years later was very emotional. I now look forward to reading the follow up book written a few years later. We take so much for granted, but this story shows how quickly life can change forever. I highly recommend this book.

Heart wrenching but could not put book down....perfect storm of events (no fire alarm to FD, no fire doors, multiple layered roof, flammable steps and walls, FD being sent to WRONG address, iron gate blocking fire department, short ladders)-- anything that could go wrong, did go wrong in this tragedy-- book interviews several people that we're there years later--- one firefighter said they we're called too late and chronology recorded supports this-- if they had been able to get to windows of second floor 3 minutes earlier- many more would have been saved but they we're pulling children right up to the moment of flashover- complete eruption of fire everywhere in room-- if the descriptions of death and desperate rescue don't raise your pulse and bring tears to your eyes, you must not be human. Highly recommend.

Beautiful book..sad and emotional. Hope it will never be forgotten. To those that died, to their families, to the survivors, to their families, I send my prayers.

This superbly well-written book can be read in one long evening (and once past the necessary "introductory" material, it is impossible to put down) and left me, and likely many other readers, about equally afflicted with both heartbreak and rage. A sadistic genius could not have designed a better firetrap than OLA was on the day of that fire. Add a Murphy's Law domino effect (anything that could have made the situation worse \*did\* happen) and it becomes a tragic story of 95 lambs to the slaughter. After the funerals were over, though, the lack of counseling - up to and including an

official stance of "suck it up and move on", destroyed the happiness of many of the children who escaped unharmed, and it ultimately destroyed a very close and supportive middle class neighborhood. The book is never gruesome, though the descriptions of the firemen removing the bodies from the building teeter on the edge of it - the most tearful portion of the book. The national commission that investigated the fire after the fact said it all: "No new lessons were learned. Only old lessons that were ignored". They were learned after OLA: Today's schools are as safe as human minds and hands can make them. But it was too late for the 92 kids and three nuns of OLA. It most certainly does not classify as "light reading", but it is excellent. And one of the best tributes to those kids and their teachers is to read this book - so they will never be forgotten.

I was in a Catholic school in the Chicago suburbs at that time and 8 years old. My school was very much like OLA in size, structure and age (our school was built in 1901). The OLA fire was all over the tv and in the newspapers and even at age 8 it made a huge impression on me. I constantly thought about how the same thing could happen to me. The next two years, my school made all the changes recommended by NFPA as a result of the OLA fire. I've often thought about the fire and just heard about this book a few weeks ago. I immediately bought it to finally get the full story about what really happened that fateful Monday afternoon. This is a story of unspeakable tragedy and like so many tragedies, it did not have to happen. The lessons learned from the OLA fire have certainly saved many lives since then. At least that is of some consolation. I never knew of the impact on the families and the neighborhood until reading this book. It describes how it literally destroyed a close knit neighborhood and parish and helped to hasten the decline and eventual closing of the school and church. It is hard to believe that no monument or memorial to the victims was erected on site until 1999 after the rebuilt school finally closed. So many people just wanted to wipe that horrible fire out of their collective memories. Of course, that could not be done and it led to many people suffering needlessly due to internalizing their feelings. Much was learned from this tragic fire. This book lays that out clearly. It also provides a permanent record of what so many people for so many years were afraid to discuss. I highly recommend this book, but warn you that you will cry while reading it.

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