The Great Fire Short Guide

The Great Fire by Jim Murphy

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

On October 8, 1871, on a lazy Sunday, a fire broke out in a barn near the edge of Chicago. According to Murphy, no one knows for certain how the fire started. He refutes the popular myth that it began when a cow being milked by Catherine O'Leary kicked over a gas lamp, saying that it was impossible for O'Leary to have been in the barn at the time.

At that time, Chicago was in the midst of a long drought, making its wooden buildings and wooden sidewalks very dry and thus vulnerable to fire. The city had already experienced a number of relatively small fires, including an especially troublesome one that the fire department had extinguished the previous day near the neighborhood of the O'Learys. Still, the fire department was well organized and well equipped, and it had been extinguishing fires with a high degree of success. Even so, failure to properly call in the fire in the O'Learys' barn, an insubordinate employee at the fire department's main tower, and high winds blowing flames to the city's center combined to turn a small fire into one of history's most notorious blazes. One hundred thousand people lost their homes; several tens of thousands of buildings were destroyed; and many people, including children, died.

Based on firsthand accounts, The Great Fire brings to life the panic, the confusion, and the desperation of the people who were caught in the fire's path. The book also details both the heroic and the foolish actions of some of the people involved in the fire. Many acted admirably, such as Chief Marshal Robert A. Williams, whose skillful leadership saved homes and lives. Others, however, behaved imprudently, like William J. Brown, who refused to relay his boss Mathias Schaffer's corrections to the firemen who had been sent to the wrong location in the city; Williams had only a small crew with which to fight a large fire because his reinforcements, and their vital, up-to-date equipment was lost several blocks away. All these people combine to form a great, chaotic humanity, brought back to life in The Great Fire.

About the Author

Jim Murphy was born in Newark, New Jersey, on September 25, 1947, to James K. Murphy and Helen (nee Grosso) Murphy. His father was a certified public accountant and his mother was an artist who worked as a bookkeeper. Murphy was not particularly interested in reading as a youngster, but he was athletic and adventurous. Murphy was a nationally ranked high school sprinter and participated on two national champion relay teams. He became interested in literature in high school only after he discovered that there were books adults did not want him to read; this motivated him to find and read those books.

Murphy attended Rutgers University, graduating with a bachelor of arts degree in 1970. He then enrolled briefly in graduate school at Radcliffe College in 1970, and he married Elaine A. Kelso, who is a successful business executive, that same year. He landed a job as a secretary in the juvenile department for Seabury Press (now Clarion Books), a publisher highly regarded for the quality of its publications for children, and he eventually became managing editor. It was while working for Seabury Press that he realized that his childhood adventures and the various jobs he held as a teen-ager provided him with experiences that he could draw on to create works for young readers. In 1977, he left Seabury Press and became a freelance writer and editor. The next year, his book Weird and Wacky Inventions appeared.

It received very good reviews. More recently, Murphy has devoted increasing amount of his work to historical subjects, of which The Great Fire is a fine example. The Great Fire was named a Newbery Honor Book in 1996.

Setting

Murphy does a fine job of setting the scene for the dramatic events that began October 8, 1871. The Chicago before the Great Fire was a bustling, prospering city— a center for freighters sailing the Great Lakes and an important link for commerce between eastern and western North America.

It was built on a marsh, and consequently the streets were often muddy; the city had built elevated, wooden sidewalks so that pedestrians could avoid the ooze. That year, a drought had dried the sidewalks until they were ready tinder for fires. Also, the many big, proud buildings of central Chicago that appeared to be stone or concrete were actually mainly wooden—wooden facades had been carved and painted to resemble stone.

These, too, were very flammable.

There were a few buildings that had been constructed to be fire resistant, but these contained a deadly flaw. Murphy describes the Tribune building: "In addition to a granite-block exterior, the interior ceilings were of corrugated iron, resting upon wrought-iron I beams, and every partition wall in the structure was of brick. It was, in all respects, one of the most absolutely fireproof buildings ever erected. That is, in every respect but one —the roof. The roof was a typical tar-over-wood affair . . ." Underlying much of Murphy's description of Chicago is a sense that its people were perhaps a little too overconfident about their abilities, which may have resulted in this huge oversight. In the case of the Tribune, firemen were stationed on the roof to hose it down, with "the men on it . . . constantly dancing around to stamp out burning cinders." In addition, the city's water pumps failed, like many of those in other areas of Chicago, and the supposedly fireproof building was destroyed.

Murphy spends much of his narrative explaining the social structure of Chicago, noting that economic classes were laid out by neighborhood. The neighborhood where the fire started was populated by hardworking men and women; for instance, both Catherine and Patrick O'Leary had paying jobs, and their combined incomes enabled them to own their own home and a barn. Newspapers and people of the wealthier areas of Chicago, however, characterized them as lazy, stupid, and criminal merely because they were of a lower economic class. The homes of the wealthy were often large and stoutly built, as Murphy's photographs show; they maintained their property well. When these houses were leveled by the fire, the poorer people were, in effect, blamed for the disaster. Murphy's maps of the progress of the fire, when combined with his descriptions, reveal a city laid out in class divisions that encouraged lack of cooperation, and in the case of the Great Fire, encouraged a fatal lack of interest in a disdained part of Chicago.

Social Sensitivity

Murphy injects social commentary into his narrative throughout The Great Fire. He is clearly sympathetic to the O'Learys and their neighbors, all hard workers who were climbing the social ladder through long hours and mutual help. The O'Learys are presented as exemplars of the hard work that made Chicago a hive of activity. Both Catherine and Patrick O'Leary worked; their prosperity came from laboring side-by-side with one another. They were productive people whose labors added to the general wealth and welfare of the city. When they and many others of their economic level lost their homes, the blow to the city's economy must have been significant, but they tended to be vilified in the press. The O'Learys in particular were slandered, portrayed as drunkards and feeble-minded fools. Part of what Murphy attempts in The Great Fire is to set the record straight about the working people who suffered most from the fire, and who had much to do with the city's rebuilding after.

Literary Qualities

The structure of The Great Fire is Murphy's trademark blend of text and illustrations, including numerous photographs, drawings, and engravings from the era. In The Great Fire, the illustrations help to illuminate his subject. For example, photographs that show the O'Learys' home are invaluable to his descriptions—in the case of the O'Learys' house, the photographs support his declaration that it was a large, sturdy structure.

The text is a combination of written accounts of the Great Fire and Murphy's narration and explanation of the events. The excerpts from diaries are especially typical of Murphy's historical writings and of American-style histories in general; they provide a firsthand realism that shows that the events, however great they may be, have their greatest importance in their effect on individual people. The use of diaries and other firsthand accounts also creates an immersive text—that is, events are seen from street level, not from high above. This device helps Murphy to place his audience in the middle of events and it makes for fine drama.

Themes and Characters

The Great Fire is populated by a multitude of figures, most of them representative of the experiences of their parts of the city, and each offers a fresh view of a tragedy that engulfed a hundred thousand people.

Although many dignitaries were involved in the story of the Great Fire, the O'Learys are probably now the most familiar of the historical figures, due to the story of their cow's accidental ignition of the blaze. Murphy rejects this explanation, citing eyewitness testimony that Catherine O'Leary could not have been in the barn at the time it ignited.

The fire began as a small one, involving less than a block of the city. A series of blunders and bad luck turned the fire into an uncontrollable blaze. Murphy interestingly mirrors the spread of the fire in his prose. When the fire first is only a small blaze, he confines the points of view to the O'Leary's and their neighbors. Murphy widens his focus to include more people in his narrative as the fire spreads. For instance, when one of the witnesses rushes to trigger the fire alarm at a nearby drugstore, the circle of characters widens to include obstructive figures such as Bruno Goll, owner of the drugstore, who refused access to the alarm. After at least three different tries, someone managed to set off the alarm. As a result of the delay, the fire grew.

The man on whom Murphy lays most of the blame for the small fire growing into a large one is William J. Brown, a man characterized as arrogant. Brown was positive that he was right and everybody else wrong, even after his behavior resulted in massive destruction and loss of life. It was his job, as assistant to Mathias Schaffer, to relay Schaffer's instructions by striking boxes that would signal the location of a fire. At first, Schaffer called through a speaking tube to Brown to strike Box 342. This resulted in sending fire fighters to a location several blocks from the actual fire; Schaffer had trouble seeing exactly where the blaze was, but he soon corrected his mistake and signaled Brown to strike Box 319, which would indicate the O'Learys' neighborhood. Brown ignored the order, figuring that it would confuse the situation. Thus, the necessary manpower and equipment were lost. The firemen were unaware of the site of the fire until its glow could be seen. By then it was far too late.

Apparently the fire department's Chief Marshal, Robert A. Williams, was initially blamed for the disastrous spread of the Great Fire, but an official inquiry into his conduct and into the other possible causes of the Great Fire absolved him. According to Murphy, Williams brilliantly orchestrated a defensive perimeter around the fire, using a small group of local firefighters, some outmoded equipment, and the aid of the local people. Firefighters fainted where they stood and others saw their clothing ignite, not from the flames, but from the intense heat alone. According to Murphy, they prevented the spread of the fire in three directions, but lacked the resources to extinguish it in the direction the wind was blowing.

For much of the night, people in the line of the fire's progress were unaware of the danger they faced. Murphy cites diaries and other accounts that indicate that people,

just out of church, strolled pleasantly along their streets, little interested in the glow from the fire as there had been several small and relatively harmless fires of late.

People watching near the fire, however, were experiencing terror or fascination. The Great Fire drew an audience, but soon amusement became panic. People threw their possessions and their children out windows before leaping out themselves to escape the flames. The streets nearest the fire became choked with both the rich and the poor, and families were torn apart in the crush of bodies. Murphy notes that the newspapers of the time characterized the behavior of Chicago's citizens as by-andlarge calm and civilized, people helping one another; Murphy's account tells a different story.

Perhaps the most interesting figure in The Great Fire is Claire Innes, a twelve-yearold girl who recorded an account of her experiences during the fire. She and the rest of her family packed their belongings quietly, and the people on her street seemed calm. This quickly changed as she carried her load and struggled to stay with her family. She was soon separated in the pushing crowd and a man tried to steal her load.

She was saved by another man, but she lost her family. Her account is as gripping as an adventure novel, as she fights to keep her possessions and to find safety. The general panic of everyone around her threatened her life. With fire and dying people all around her, she became trapped in an alley by fire and collapsing brick walls. The tale of her survival is spellbinding.

Murphy takes pains to show the events of the Great Fire from the point of view of people like Claire Innes—ordinary citizens experiencing a terrifying event. He also includes the wealthy and the powerful, and he is by-and-large critical of their behavior and attitudes. Complacency, ignorance, and prejudice seem to mark them. For instance, the editor-in-chief of the Tribune, Horace White, is solely concerned with the great headlines that will come out of the fire and gives little thought to the very real danger.

He strolls from the Tribune's building, secure in the belief that the structure will be unharmed. As we learn, the fireproof building is destroyed. His determination to publish the newspaper amidst difficult and dangerous circumstances is admirable, but the Tribune and other newspapers exhibit a condescending tone in their accounts of the fire's impact on the poor and the working classes, the people most devastated by the blaze.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Claire Innes avoid looking at the dead?

2. Why was Chicago, in 1871, built mostly of wood?

3. Why would William Brown have thought that correcting the location of the fire would have "confused the situation," as Murphy puts it?

4. Murphy says that the Great Fire became more than an average fire partly because of people's blunders. What were these blunders and how did each make the fire worse?

5. Why would the Great Fire become international news?

6. Why does Murphy tell about the experiences of ordinary people like Claire Innes rather than focusing just on the officials and leaders who contributed to fighting the fire?

7. How did newspapers in 1871 portray the fire? What faults does Murphy find in the newspaper accounts?

8. Are the many characters in The Great Fire confusing because of their number? What does Murphy do to make them less confusing than they could be?

9. Murphy describes different social classes in The Great Fire. How does he characterize each class? Is he fair to each?

10. What is Murphy's explanation for why Chicago became divided into sections based on class? Does it make sense?

What could be done to prevent such divisions from occurring?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Murphy says that early books about the Great Fire are inaccurate and biased. In his bibliography, he lists some nineteenth-century accounts of the fire. Select one and identify the inaccuracies Murphy mentions. Is the account as prejudiced against poor and lower-middle-class people as Murphy suggests?

2. Late in The Great Fire, Claire Innes is trapped in an alley with fire burning all around her. What do safety experts recommend someone do to survive when trapped like that? Does Claire Innes make the best choices for survival?

3. According to Murphy, the Chicago fire department of 1871 was almost stateof-the-art. What equipment did the department have? How were its stations organized?

4. Describe in detail one of the pieces of fire equipment that would have been used to fight the Great Fire. Who built it? What was its purpose? How well did it work? Is there a modern equivalent?

5. The Great Fire touches on the ships that caught fire at Chicago. Go into more detail about these ships. What ships were destroyed? How did people try to save them?

6. Who founded Chicago? Why did its location make it ideal for shipping?

How did cross-country commerce contribute to the city's growth until 1871?

7. After the Great Fire, how was the reconstruction organized? Was anyone in charge? How did the new buildings differ from the old? Who used them?

8. What happened to the approximately one hundred thousand people who lost their homes? Did they build new ones in Chicago? Were any of them permanently displaced? Where did they all go?

9. A disaster such as the Great Fire is often followed by a medical crisis. What were the medical needs of the people of Chicago after the fire? How were these needs met?

10. Claire Innes's account of her adventures is very vivid and among the highlights of The Great Fire. What would the typical life of a twelve-year-old in 1870s Chicago have been like? What would the child have done for fun? What would the child's chores have been? What kind of clothes would he or she have worn?

What would society have expected of the child?

11. Murphy mentions great water pumps that were shut down by the fire. Where were these pumps? Who manufactured them? What were their capabilities?

What safeguards did they have?

For Further Reference

Beavin, Kristi. Horn Book Magazine (November 1998): 768. This is a review of John McDonough's audiorecording of The Great Fire. Says Beavin, "New nonfiction from any of the handful of children's authors whose works give equal weight to research and literary value is always an event; when one such work appears in audio format, it's time for celebration. Jim Murphy is one of those authors, and this is one of those audiobooks."

Bradburn, Frances. Booklist 91, 19-20 Qune 1, 1995): 1757. An admiring review of The Great Fire.

Bush, Margaret A. Horn Book Magazine 71, 3 (May-June 1995): 343-344. Recommends The Great Fire as a well-written, informative book.

The Great Fire 133 Harris, Karen. Booklist 95,12 (February 15, 1999): 1084. This has several brief reviews of audiorecordings of books for young people, including John McDonough's audiotape recording of The Great Fire. Harris says, "The scholarly writing of The Great Fire is nicely matched by McDonough's reading; the work should appeal to serious students."

Hile, Kevin S., and Diane Telgen. "Murphy, Jim." In Something about the Author. Volume 77. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994.

Short summary of Murphy's career with some photographs. Reprints the interview in Contemporary Authors, Volume 111 with some new information.

Luzerne, Frank. The Lost City: Chicago as It Was and as It Is and Its Glorious Future.

New York: Harper and Sons, 1872. A firsthand account of Chicago in transition, notably appearing in The Great Fire with a description of the dead.

"Murphy, Jim." In Contemporary Authors.

Volume 111. Edited by Hal May, et al.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1984. This has a summary of Murphy's career to 1984 and a brief but informative interview of Murphy.

Pendleton, William E., and Richard T. Hart.

Recollections of a Bygone Era. New York: Cassell Petter and Galpin, 1896. This book contains Claire Innes's exciting account of her experiences during the Great Fire.

Price, Susannah. School Library Journal 41, 7 0uly 1995): 89-90. A review that highly recommends The Great Fire.

Publishers Weekly 242, 19 (May 8, 1995): 297.

A brief but positive review of The Great Fire.

Related Titles/Adaptations

In 1998, Recorded Books published an audiocassette reading of The Great Fire by John McDonough. McDonough is a good reader whose well-controlled voice brings the many different figures in the book to life, and in spite of the lack of illustration found in the original book, the scenes and action are still vivid.

Murphy's interest in history was evident early in his writing career in books such as Weird and Wacky Inventions (1978), Baseball's All-Time Stars (1984), and even The Custom Car Book (1985). It was in the 1990s that he began publishing the complex, heavily illustrated histories for which he is best known. The Boys' War:Confederate and Union Soldiers Talk about the Civil War (1990) features the careful interweaving of firsthand testimony from participants in historical events with Murphy's account of the context of the events. This is typical of not only The Great Fire, but The Long Road to Gettysburg (1992), Across America on an Emigrant Train (1993),A Young Patriot: The American Revolution as Experienced by One Boy (1996), and Gonea-Whaling: The Lure of the Sea and the Hunt for the Great Whale (1998).

Like The Great Fire, The Long Road to Gettysburg is focused on a single significant event, and it shares the quality of having many different perspectives from people who were there, creating the same "you are there" tone found in The Great Fire. Across America on an Emigrant Train and A Young Patriot are biographies that use the real-life experiences of historical figures to illustrate important aspects of America's history. In Across America on an Emigrant Train, the central character is a famous historical figure: Robert Louis Stevenson, who joined poor migrants from Europe on their journey to America's Far West. In A Young Patriot, the central character is a little-known teen-ager who wrote a book about his service in the American army during the Revolutionary War.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996