

Report from Engine Co. 82 Study Guide

**Report from Engine Co. 82 by Dennis Smith
(firefighter)**

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Plot Summary

In his book, *REPORT FROM ENGINE CO. 82* Dennis Smith relates the day-to-day life of a fireman in the volatile South Bronx community of New York City. Company 82 receives thousands of calls for help each year. Each call presents the potential of injury or death to the firemen who respond. The story highlights the camaraderie the men share at the engine house. Much of the sarcastic humor is just a way to cope with the inherent risk of their jobs and the sad, tragic lives of those they serve. A printed sign, kept all but hidden, epitomizes the true nature of their lot. It reads, "This could be the night."

Although the firemen of Engine Company 82 are dedicated and are not paid well for risking life and limb, the community they serve does not generally respect them. The ruffians in the neighborhood seem to categorize them with the police—another authority figure to scorn. They are called pigs by groups of young kids chanting and tossing other invectives toward them as well. Kids throw stones and bricks at the vulnerable firemen standing on their fleet vehicles on the way to perhaps save a neighbor or a friend of the perpetrator.

The book was written in 1972, and therefore the statistics cited in the book relate to that time period. Engine Company 82 alone received 2,000 malicious false alarms (MFA's) in the prior year. New York City as a whole, received over 72,000 MFA's. To sound a false alarm is a felony, but rarely is anyone caught. If someone is turned in, it is usually a kid who doesn't understand why he's in trouble—all the kids pull false alarms. It's exciting to see the big red trucks speed in the neighborhood with the uniformed firemen ready to fight a fire. These calls are dangerous for the firemen and leave other areas vulnerable from lack of protection.

The real villain of the story of *REPORT FROM ENGINE CO. 82* are the wicked, dangerous fires that the brave firemen have to fight. An average of eight firemen lose their lives each year with many more sustaining serious injuries. The injuries range from minor burns from live embers dropping on the firemen's exposed skin to smoke inhalation, broken bones and serious burns. If a fireman dies in the line of duty, his widow receives only half pay while a career-ending injury provides the family with three-quarters pay.

Dennis Smith, his wife and three sons live 60 miles north of the city in a town that provides a better way of life than the crowded big city. However, Dennis Smith's heart belongs to the South Bronx of New York City. Although scorned by much of the community, he and his fellow fireman are dedicated to serving the people of the community, often saving their lives and helping them through tragedy.

Introduction

Introduction Summary and Analysis

Dennis Smith got his break in writing after a letter he had published in the New York Times was spotted by the editor of TRUE magazine who asked him to write an article about the modern-day firefighter. Smith considered his time with the Fire Department, from 1966 to 1973, similar to a wartime experience. Even though working full days, he religiously took daily notes ultimately turning them into his book.

A third of the calls to the department were for crimes and injured people; a third were false alarms; and the remaining one-third for fires. The work in the South Bronx was dangerous and difficult. Just as Katherine Anne Porter once suggested, Smith feels the story found the author. The account of the brave and extraordinary men of the South Bronx needed to be told. Smith felt it was up to him to tell it.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

The South Bronx Division receives an alarm for a large fire in an apartment on Kelly Street. The firemen all quickly begin to pull on their boots and gloves. They rush to their truck and are on their way. Just as the firemen reach their destination, a young man runs out on fire, screaming in agony. Fire Chief Solwin and Fire Captain Frimes enter the fiery building along with their men. Black smoke is covering the upper floors, forcing the firemen to lie on their stomachs on the floor where the last visage of oxygen remains. As soon as the water begins to spray away the smoke, more oxygen will be available.

The Chief senses that someone is in a locked apartment. Two firemen work on the door, but because of a special lock, they have trouble getting into the door. The Chief and some of his men begin to hack at an adjoining wall, using a halligan tool. Finally, they break through and Captain Frimes enters. He locates a large, unconscious body on the floor and finally gets him towards the hole in the wall. Several firemen pull the body out through the hole. Captain Frimes is overcome by smoke and is pulled out as well. The body is of a strapping, black youth. The firemen bring him down in the open air where Fireman McCarty administers mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

The firemen discover another unconscious body who does not respond to manual resuscitation efforts. The firemen get word that the young man running from the apartment was taken to the hospital and pronounced DOA. The other two young men are dispatched to the hospital. The firemen discovered three gas cans inside the apartment obviously pointing to arson. Two fire marshals arrive taking statements from the firemen and collecting the gas cans as evidence.

Later the fire marshals determine that the landlord of the building, knowing there were no renters in the building, had hired the three youths to torch it. Apparently, after the youths had spread gasoline around, the landlord threw a match in and locked the young men in. Two of the young men died and the landlord was wanted for double-murder.

The firemen reflect on the incident. Many times innocent victims die in arson fires; this time the arsonists did. Firemen are often hurt in fire. Arsonists leave booby traps to hurt the firemen; they might leave a piece of linoleum across a hole in the second floor, causing the firemen to fall to injury or death.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

The story of Engine Co. 82 was written in 1972. Dennis Smith introduces himself as a New York City fireman. Firemen are different from other New York City workers—ad men, bankers, truck drivers, sellers and buyers. When a fireman leaves his wife in the morning, she doesn't know if she'll see him again. She dreads all day the doorbell ringing, perhaps opening it to see a Fire Chief or Chaplain standing there prepared to tell her that her husband was a brave man and a hero.

Smith is part of Engine Co. 82 in the rough South Bronx. The year before, Engine Co. 82 responded to 9,111 alarms and its accompanying team, Engine Co. 85 responded to 8,386 calls. A new plan was developed that prohibited the two companies from responding to the same fires. That didn't work out as their ladder company, Ladder Co. 31's calls increased dramatically. A new plan was developed then that created Tactical Control Unit 712 that took over calls in the high incidence hours between 3pm and 1am. An average of eight firemen die each year in New York City fires and thousands of others are injured.

When a series of four 5 bells intone—5-5-5-5—everyone pays attention. It's an indication that a fireman has died in the line of duty. The house watchman hurries outside, turns the radio volume up and readies the flag to place it at half staff in honor of the fallen comrade. A popular and well-respected friend had died sometime ago—Mike Carr. No one talks about it still. It is too difficult to deal with. Mike had responded with his company to a fire. As the fire truck turned a corner, Mike fell off and died from his injuries. The call was a false alarm—termed a malicious false alarm (MFA).

In the year past, Engine Co. 82 had responded to 2,000 false alarms. In the City of New York in the last year, there were 72,060 false alarms, averaging 147 per day. They are all dangerous for the firemen and remove a measure of safety for the segment of the community who may actually need firemen's help. Most MFA's are perpetrated by kids who are never caught. In the case of Mike Carr, the perpetrator of the MFA, a nine-year-old kid, was turned in. Most of the kids in the South Bronx are neglected by their families and are on their own. The other kids teach them the joy of making a false alarm—they get to see the big trucks scream on the scene with all the firemen who are ready for action.

The firemen begin to serve their evening meal when an alarm sounds. Dinner will have to wait. The firemen rush to the scene where a young Hispanic boy is lying in the street. Obviously he has sustained a broken leg after being hit by a car. An ambulance is called while an angry crowd gathers. The firemen soon see another injured person—the hot-rodder who hit the kid. Several men in the crowd have beaten him. The firemen call in the police who separate the angry crowd from the driver. They cart him away while an ambulance finally arrives to take the young boy to the hospital.



Just when the firemen are finally ready to eat, the alarm sounds again—back to the intersection from which they just came. They find a fire this time. The hot-rod that hit the kid is in flames. A few neighborhood on-lookers wave at the firemen with knowing smiles. The firemen try to eat again but have more calls. One is for another serious accident. Another is for an unconscious young man lying on his car, an obvious overdose. They get ice from a neighbor and shove it down the OD victim's pants. He comes back to life as they help him to the ambulance. He'll be fine until his next OD.

After the OD, Engine Co. 82 responds to 11 more calls between 11pm and 8am, nine of which are MFA's. Finally, it is time for Dennis Smith to go home. He'll stay at his mother's nearby apartment. That way he might get six hours of uninterrupted sleep before he's due back at the station.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Dennis' mother calls him from his deep sleep. He has to get going, as he needs to be at the station by 5pm. His mother forces a little tea and toast on him. She scolds him for staying in such a dangerous area as the South Bronx. She advises him to get a safe office job downtown. Dennis tries to explain that he likes serving people. The people in the South Bronx needs services as much as anyone else. He takes the subway into the station and arrives a little after five. The firehouse is at first empty. Everyone was out on a "all hands" call—meaning everyone available at the engine house participated. One fireman, Don Butts, saved a little boy's life and will be written up for an award.

As soon as Dennis starts to drink a cup of coffee, the bells start chiming—2 7 4 3. It's box 2743 at Charlotte Street and 170th. Probably a false alarm but there's no crying wolf in this business. The call turns out to be a false alarm but before they can head back, they are sent on another call. This one is on Freeman Street. As soon as they turn on Freeman, they see a car in the middle of the street on fire. They douse the flames, careful to cool off the gas tank first so it doesn't blow up. The car was probably stolen as its wheels and tires have been removed. Engine Co. 82 responds to four or five such calls every day.

Soon the company is on its way to another fire. An apartment in a large building is on fire. The firemen see the flames coming from the window. They connect the large hose to the water reservoir and several men, including Dennis, walk the large hose up the stairs. They encounter scared residents on the way up, including the woman and two children who live in the burning apartment. They are soon able to put out the flames which have not extended to another apartment. The woman who lives there comes in to see that everything she owns has been destroyed.

Back at the station, Dennis learns that Fireman Nick Riso had been taken to the hospital. Some one threw a brick and hit him on the chest as he stood on his truck on the way to a fire. It reminds Dennis of the time when a kid threw a rock at him and hit him in the eye. The bells have no mercy and start chiming again—Box 2402. Dennis, using the fireman's sixth sense, feels the call they're heading to on Prospect Avenue is going to be a "worker." The fire turns out to be a tough one, but the firemen of Engine 82 along with several other companies finally get it under control.

One of the firemen saves a woman and her children from an upper apartment. Unfortunately, as the fireman is carrying one of the children down the steps, he slips and breaks his ankle. He'll be okay but will be out for a while. Dennis sustains smoke damage to his throat and is unable to swallow. He, along with four other firemen, are sent to the hospital. Some of the men have ember burns—flying embers landed in one man's glove and down another's back. Everyone will be okay. Dennis is to take a syrup

prescribed by the doctor and is not to talk much nor smoke for a few weeks. The Fire Department medical officer instructs the men to report to him in a week.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Dennis Smith lives in Washingtonville, a town that is 60 miles north of New York City. Dennis lived in the city all his life. He wanted a better place to live with his wife and their three sons. Washingtonville is a bastion of Goldwater Republicans, a mind-your-own-business kind of community. Dennis' Democratic soul was heartened however when the John Birch Society failed to get a teacher fired who allowed a student's artwork of the American Flag surrounded by question marks. The town is historic as it had been a stopping place for the underground railroad, which provided freedom for many blacks just prior to the Civil War. As a result, Washingtonville has a generous share of blacks in the community.

Although Dennis was anxious to move away from the city, he earns his living there. He cares what happens to it and its people. The people in the South Bronx need his services. He works for them. He fears the city is dying, sending all its tax money to Albany and getting very little in return. Although they lost, he loved it when Norman Mailer ran for Mayor and Jimmy Breslin for City Council President. He loves where he lives but hates that he can no longer vote for those who will run the big city.

Pat is getting breakfast together for Dennis who must leave for the station. He's been off two weeks with his parched throat. Dennis is more than ready to get back into the action. He can tell something is bothering her. She finally admits that she's been talking to his mother. She presses him to transfer out of the Bronx. She's worried about his safety. Dennis assures her that as a fireman he could be hurt in any community. He's young and can take the pace in the South Bronx. She would prefer that he take a teaching job at a nearby school.

Dennis and another injured fireman return after their short medical leaves, both anxious to get back to work. They don't have to wait long. The bells sound for box 2597 at Union and 165th. The fire's source is burned food on the stove. A group of young black kids across the street start to chant and yell invectives at the firemen. They are innocents—just have been taught to say the words, but it still hurts. After this fire, the company has eleven more calls before there is a break and Dennis is able to get some sleep. But sleep is an elusive thing in Engine Co. 82. After a brief nap, the bells begin chiming again. Dennis is soon sliding down the brass pole.

Dennis' truck is following two other trucks heading to another call. The two trucks in front collide, badly injuring one of the fireman hanging on the back of the first vehicle. Everyone is worried but the fireman survives, surprisingly without any broken bones.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

It's 2:30 am and Engine Co. 82 is hard at working spraying down a stubborn fire in a building on Charlotte Street. Part of the roof has caved in and the part that remains is a danger to the firemen. They are spraying water from the cold street. If they could enter, they could put the fire out sooner. But it's just too dangerous. Dennis' fire hat has icicles hanging from it. Other firemen are jumping up and down trying to get warm. One man took his icy rubber jacket off and it stood up by itself. The men take turns holding the hose, giving their fellow firemen a break from the miserable weather.

At an earlier fire, the men had to walk up five stairs winding the fire hose behind them. If only the designers of these buildings had been firemen, they would have constructed the staircase differently. But at least they were able to fight the fire from the inside. Dennis recalls an earlier fire fought from inside. They were spraying the fire ahead of them, when a fire broke out behind them. They were unable to backtrack and had the option of hoping another team was on its way or jumping out the window. Luckily, the fire chief was on the ball and hoisted a ladder up to save his men.

The real culprit on Charlotte Street, however, is the cold. When Dennis and several other men are given a break and try to find warmth in abandoned apartments but they are just as cold as the outside. They finally are able to access the furnace room which will provide plenty of warmth. The problem in that room are the thousands of cockroaches, large and small, that cover the floor, walls and ceiling. Dennis had a bad childhood memory with a cockroach. He had taken a swig from an opened bottle and as the liquid came in his mouth, something moved. Dennis never forgot the long brown cockroach as he spit it out on the floor. Dennis doesn't last long in the cockroach filled furnace room.

The rest of the roof of the Charlotte Street building finally caves in. The fire will be easily controlled now. The cold was defeating the men, but they are beating the fire. They men take a small diameter hose followed by a larger hose up the stairs to finish the job. As they climb the stairs, firemen from other companies are doing their part in dousing out the glowing embers. Part of their job is to check for any victims that may be inside. This time, everyone got out. The lead fireman gets a hot ember down his boot and is given a break, although he doesn't want one. They have to be careful, some of the floor is missing.

With the help up a ladder company fireman who pulls down the smoldering ceiling, the fire is under control. The fire chief gives a quick inspection and dismisses Engine Co. 82 back to the station. Dennis can't wait to get some dry clothes on, drink some coffee and get warm. Later during their watch that evening, Engine Co. 82 responds to three false alarms.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Dennis watches a group of young boys riding their bikes near the station. It reminds him of his childhood. Dennis Smith lived with his mother and brother in a fourth floor apartment in a tenement in New York City. He had always wanted a Schwinn bike as a kid but his mother couldn't afford it. His uncle gave his mother a TV. She was worried how she would hide it from the welfare inspector. Welfare recipients were not allowed to have TV's or phones. She hid the TV under a bedspread. When a new inspector came—a black man—Dennis was upset. His friends might see the man and give him a hard time. But after he left, his mother was happy. The new welfare inspector was going to recommend that they get more money so they could buy winter coats.

It was the day after St. Patrick's Day. Dennis had marched in a long parade playing the bagpipes and wearing a kilt. He and some of his friends had a wild night on the town celebrating the Irish holiday. He stayed at his mother's that night—too tired and drunk to drive home. He hoped for an easy day in the morning. The fire captain requires the men to go through daily drills. Everyone will be going through evaluations in the next few weeks and the captain wants to make sure they are prepared. The subjects vary widely on the evaluations from fire tactics or rescue procedures to the size of hoses and how much hoses weigh with and without water.

The men are saved from the boring drill sessions by the sound of bells—box 2544. The call is from a frightened Hispanic family. The tub from the abandoned apartment above them is flooding their apartment. Dennis notices the decrepit state of the department and feels sorry for the woman and her young children. After they return, they are quickly dispatched on another call. A naked man is writhing in the middle of the street, holding a whip. The man swings the whip dangerously as the crowd grows and impatient motorists honk in waiting cars. The Chief tells his men to restrain the man. Someone grabs a large blanket and the men are able to wrap the man up. Eventually, the man is taken away and will be observed at Bellevue for a few days.

The guys get set to eat a big steak just as the bells start to chime again—box 2743, at Charlotte and 179th Street. In one call from that box, another fireman, Tom Leary, got caught above a fire, one of the riskiest of scenarios. He was badly burned and spent months in the hospital. But he came back and recovered quite well. The Charlotte Street call is a false alarm. As they start to depart, they are sent on another call to Stebbins Avenue—another false alarm. On the way back, they spot some trash can fires and douse them out. It will save a trip by another company.

Right before their last call—another false alarm—a cop is chasing a youth down the street in front of the station. The cop discharges five shots and the the firemen take cover as the shots are near. The cops catch the perpetrator. Later the fireman see that

an errant bulletin entered their new bulletin board, right near where Dennis was standing. Close call.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

The next day is Easter when Dennis is off and will gather with his family. He arrives at the station to see one of the garage doors that hasn't functioned for weeks still open and broken. Even though it's April, it is freezing and will be another cold day inside the station. He'd like to stage a strike over the conditions but is afraid he'd be transferred to a station even further from home. He and the others clean up the station. A notice is posted that one of the firemen contracted hepatitis. Another fireman suggests that they take up a collection for a new dishwasher so their eating conditions are more sterile. Dennis doesn't think the guys will want to pitch in.

Charlotte and 170th is their first call of the day. It's an OD case. The men bring the unconscious young Puerto Rican around. The ambulance carts him off as his wife and friends look on in anguish. Before they can eat lunch back at the station, Engine Co. 82 is off on another call—it's a fire on the upper floor of a Puerto Rican tenement. The fire is confined to one room. The firemen carry the hose up the winding stairs to the floor where the room is on fire. They encounter many residents rushing out. Two teen aged boys are carrying down a TV and phonograph. The firemen crawl on the floor below the smoke. The fire is soon out with only minimum fire and water damage. As they begin to leave, a woman is screaming that someone stole her TV and phonograph. The firemen will report it to the police. Maybe the kids carrying the loot out started the fire so they could steal.

The next fire involves an apartment that a young black man claims is his. A large black woman comes after him with a machete, claiming he set the fire after her daughter threw him out. The firemen douse the fire—the problem with the young man and woman is one for the police to figure out. At the next fire, Dennis and his company encounter a crazy man swinging a knife. He slices one of the firemen in the face. The police subdue him. He wanted to die in the fire, he screamed. But the firemen didn't allow that—they put the fire out.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

Dennis reflects on his hatred of cockroaches. He feared them as a child. As much as his mother sprayed and cleaned, they were still there. Now the areas where the Irish community lived when he was a child are taken up by Puerto Ricans. But the cockroaches are still there. He has to fight them as he crawls through smoke towards a fire. He used to fear them; now he resents them as to him they represent poverty. After a devastating fire, Dennis sees the cockroaches return to every wall but the burned ones. Survivor instincts.

Dennis thinks of young Tina deVega who lives in the neighborhood. She is a prostitute who works for \$4 or \$5 a trick. She seems oblivious to the murder rate in South Bronx as well as the VD and infant mortality rates. She is unaware that the homicide squad in the South Bronx is the busiest in NYC. Dennis met her when she was fourteen. She brought her younger brother in to the firehouse to see the trucks up close. Now she is an 18-year-old drug addict and prostitute. She is living in a roach-infested tenement that she shares with another girl and her four kids. Dennis laments about the life the young woman felt forced to live. Did anyone—a teacher counselor—ever reach out to her?

Dennis quit high school and got a job delivering flowers for \$50 per week. Quitting school brought down the wrath of his Catholic school's principal and broke his mother's heart. They didn't understand—he was going to make \$50 a week! He could buy good shoes and clothes, take girls on dates, buy his own smokes and help his mother. Like Tina deVega, Dennis found his own way of survival as a teen. He developed some bad habits—drinking too much among them.

On the sticky July day, Engine Co. 82 is dispatched to an abandoned building on Southern and Fox. The men have been there before—it needs to be torn down. The smoke swirling in the sky telling the firemen that they have a fight ahead of them. The firemen attack the fire from the street, inside the building, and the roof of the next building. The firemen douse the flames successfully and wait for the ladder company to pull the ceilings down and open the walls to check for fires. Vinny, one of the firemen waiting on the sidewalk, barely misses being hit by a full trash can that was maliciously dropped from the roof. Some of the firemen and cops run up there, but the perpetrators are already gone. Vinny could have been killed.

That night two other companies have "all hands" while Engine Co. 82 is once again working another arson at the abandoned building on Fox. Dennis observes the two large fires in the distance and the one in front of them. The Bronx is burning.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

One hot September day, young Dennis Smith decides to apply to become a firefighter. He envisions the life of a hero with the Mayor pinning medals on his chest and mothers tearfully thankful for saving their children. It was idealistic but compelling. He wanted to become one of New York's Bravest. After becoming a fireman, Dennis quickly learns that there is no glamor. He saw too much hurt and death. He had carried death in his own hands.

Pat looks at a recent scar on her husband's neck. It's from the burn of an ember. It's a vivid reminder of his job, a job with which she is growing increasingly disenchanted. Dennis tries to assuage her fears but is not successful. Pat acknowledges what he does is important and that their she and her sons are proud of him.

A young Hispanic girl approaches the firehouse. She is shy and can barely look at Dennis who is standing nearby. She has a notebook and sharpened pencil. She shyly tells him she has to write a report on firemen. He will help her as soon as he gets back from a call. The call involves a young Hispanic man who lies dead with a knife in his heart. It is a brutal scene. The firemen check his vitals and wait with the family until the ambulance arrives. Cynthia the little girl is waiting for Dennis. She is very bright and articulate. Her final question is what can children do to help the firemen. He tells her three things: Don't play with matches; never pull a false alarm, and tell adults to never smoke in bed.

A young Hispanic woman runs into the station, half naked and bleeding from wounds on her neck and shoulders. Glass is packed in her wounds. Her grandmother and mother rush in after her. They explain that the girl's stepfather tried to sexually assault her, and when she resisted he hit her with a beer bottle. Dennis thinks of Cynthia, all the Cynthias of the neighborhood and prays for them.

Many firefighters become disgruntled when the Fire Department PR Department holds free parties for neighborhood kids. Their own kids should get the parties. The kids in the South Bronx are the ones who pull false alarms and throw rocks at the firemen and taunt them. But the Department is trying to build a bridge in the community, hoping that the community will come to understand how important the firemen are and that they are a positive force in their lives.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

Winter is coming on as Dennis arrives at the station. The guys are eating and sitting around talking. One fireman just had his new auto stolen, which was parked out on the street. The men gripe about general conditions. Their cars are parked out on the street, vulnerable to auto theft and vandalism. The men want the City to provide them with a secure lot in which to park their cars. There are other concerns. Cops are provided TV's for their training films. Since firemen watch TV in between calls, the City lets them buy their own sets. They also have to purchase a lot of other items they need at the firehouse. They purchase their most important piece of equipment themselves—the halligan tool. They usually have to scrounge for bandages from the nurses at the hospitals. The serious discussion turns lighthearted—the firemen have no faith that their lot will soon be improved.

Bells start chiming that would have ended their discussion anyway. Engine Co. 82 is not called in. The guys begin to do their firehouse chores—cleaning and polishing. Their talks return to some mindless banter and more discussion about their conditions. Dennis emphasizes that no changes can be brought about without collective bargaining. The bells chime again and this time it's for Company 82—a rubbish fire at Charlotte and 170th that is quickly put out. Dennis notices painted graffiti on one of the rundown buildings saying, "\$10 for the superintendent." The firemen have some issues, but these people can't even locate the guy that's supposed to clean their halls and tow their trash away. Another fire in a vacant building, obviously arson, is their next assignment. Abandoned buildings typically have fires set in them several times a week until the city finally tears them down.

Before they can get back to the station, Engine co. 82 is called in to help in a big fire where residents are crowded on fire escapes pleading for help. The ladder company hasn't arrived yet so Dennis and the other firefighters climb the rickety steps and carry babies and children to safety. One fireman, Benny, re-enters the building and finds five adults and two children piled up waiting for death on the landing that leads to the roof. The door had been chained from the outside to keep drug addicts out; therefore, the people couldn't get out and the fire below stopped them from retreating. Benny and other firemen who hacked their way in drag all seven people to safety. It was uncertain whether all would live; some were badly burned and others overcome from smoke. Ultimately, one of them—a pregnant woman dies from injuries. Fortunately, Benny was able to breathe life back into a toddler who seemed on the verge of death. Several firemen wind up in the hospital with injuries, including Benny who finally collapsed from fire inhalation and exhaustion.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

When Dennis Smith takes the evaluation test to become a fireman, that same day across vast New York City, some 8,000 young men competed for the same jobs. The most difficult service examination to pass in New York City is that for fireman—it has the most difficult and technical questions. Out of the 8,000 who took the evaluation, only 2,000 qualified for current or future positions in the NYFD. Dennis Smith was one of those 2,000. Dennis passed the background investigation that included an in-depth criminal check as well as a strenuous physical exam. All elements were considered in the selection of the final, qualifying candidates.

The medical exam weeds out more candidates—a candidate had to be at least 5'7", have 20/20 vision, perfect hearing and be in perfect physical health. Two years later, Dennis Smith is engaged, in his first year of college and a had become a new member of the New York City Fire Department. He was badge # 11389, NYFD and was given the three-inch chrome Maltese cross. The cross, the fireman's badge, got the men into the movies, got them free meals, discounts at stores, and free subway rides among other perks.

Eight weeks of training consisted of calisthenics and classroom work in the morning with three hours of field training where the recruits begin to handle equipment and learn how to use it. They use abandoned buildings in learning how to tear down ceilings and chop through doors. They learn how to search for survivors by moving in on their stomachs. Using dummies, they learn how to administer first aid and splint legs. Dennis' first assignment is in Queens where he stays for three years. But the pace was slow and he decided he needed more action. He transferred to the busiest firehouse in the city—Engine Co. 82 in South Bronx.

After five years in the South Bronx, Dennis has begun to question why he is still there. The excitement of the company has grown into a kind of sameness of its own. That evening, as Dennis contemplates his life and career, he and his company are sent out on false alarms, rubbish fires, and incidents in which children and firemen alike are injured and scared. In the last fire of the watch, a baby is found already overcome by flames, too badly burned to even try mouth-to-mouth. The firemen carry her lifeless body to the ambulance—she never got much of a chance to live. The humanity that Dennis sees in the eyes of his fellow firemen in the wake of this tragedy remind him why he is a fireman.



Characters

Dennis Smith

Dennis Smith is the author of the book, *REPORT FROM ENGINE CO. 82* and was a fireman when he wrote the book. Dennis grew up in a poor area of New York City in a 4th floor tenement with his mother and brother. The family was on welfare and had to hide their TV from the welfare investigator. Dennis always wanted a Schwinn bike as a kid, but they could never afford it.

Dennis Smith writes the book in 1972. He is around thirty years old and is married with three young sons. Although he works in a fire station in the tough South Bronx part of New York City, he and his wife are able to purchase a four-bedroom house in Washingtonville, New York, about 60 miles north of the City. He loves the city and loves providing service to the poor people of the South Bronx but decided he wanted his kids to have a better childhood than he did. They have a large house and yard in Washingtonville, much different than the crowded apartment he lived in as a child.

Dennis often stays at his mother's apartment in Manhattan, avoiding the 60-mile drive that is difficult to make after a long shift at the fire station. The South Bronx has several engine companies and a ladder company. It is the busiest fire station in the entire New York City. The year before Smith wrote the book, his station had over 9,000 calls, some 2,000 were false alarms. Dennis was once hit in the eye with a stone while hanging on the back of a firetruck on the way to a fire. They passed a group of young kids who thought it was funny to hit a fireman.

Dennis is realistic about the community and the people he serves. Most of them look at firemen as authority figures and lump them in with the cops. Despite the danger and thanklessness inherent in the job, Dennis is always ready for the next call, the next fire.

Tina deVega

Tina deVega is an eighteen-year-old Puerto Rican woman who lives in a vermin and cockroach infested tenement apartment that she shares with another woman and her four children. The lobby of the apartment has a large pile of garbage. Dennis Smith first met Tina deVega when she is a fourteen-year-old who came into the fire station with her little brother who wanted to see the firetrucks up close. Tina was a beautiful, vibrant teenager with beautiful black hair and sparkling eyes. She would stop by the fire station periodically through the years. Dennis was always happy to see her. She lived in a cramped apartment with her mother and siblings and from time to time with other friends and relatives. As she matured, Tina became weary of life with her family. She wanted to move on, buy nice things for herself and make life better.

Unfortunately, Tina took a path that led her in a direction that turned out to be at great odds with her dreams. At sixteen with the promise of easy money and a better life, she



became a prostitute. Dennis saw her life begin to tumble. At one point in the story, Tina passes by the station and stops to chat with her old friend, Dennis. Dennis does not recognize her at first. Her walk was wobbly and her eyes had taken on a lifeless, vacant look—like most drug addicts. She is wearing provocative attire, her way of advertising her skills. She is making between \$4 and \$5 a trick and living with another girl who has four children. She looks wistfully at Dennis and tells him she is trying to get off the drugs. Looking at the many marks on her arms, Dennis sadly knows that she probably will not.

Pat Smith

Pat Smith is the wife of Dennis Smith who is a fireman at Engine Co. 82 in the South Bronx community of New York City. Dennis, Pat and their three sons live in a small town 60 miles away from New York City.

Dennis Smith's Mom

Dennis often sleeps at his mother's Manhattan apartment to avoid the long ride home. She pressures him to give up the dangerous assignment in the South Bronx and transfer to a safer job.

Chief Solwin

Chief Solwin is Fire Chief of the Fire Department, South Bronx Division. Chief Solwin doesn't stand idle as his men fight fires; he goes in with them.

Mike Carr

Fireman Mike Carr was also a union rep for the firehouse. He died as he fell from his firetruck on the way to a false alarm.

Artie Merritt

Artie Merritt is a fellow fireman. He is different than most other fireman—he has a beard and a master's degree in sociology. He lives near Dennis Smith on the outskirts of New York City.

Lieutenant Tom Welch

Tom Welch is a hip-looking fire lieutenant who has worked in the South Bronx over 15 years. He puts out fires no matter what the condition. Off-duty he dresses in western clothes and plays the guitar.



Benny Carroll

A friend and fireman, Benny is a good-looking young man who is easy-going and answers most things with "Say no more."

Cynthia

Cynthia is a bright eleven-year-old who visits Dennis at the firehouse. She shyly asks him for help. She has an assignment to write a report about firemen. He gladly helps her and finds her a bright and articulate young girl. He hopes she gets out of the South Bronx one day.



Objects/Places

New York City

Dennis Smith and his Engine Co. 82 serve the citizens of the rough New York City community of the South Bronx.

South Bronx

Dennis Smith and his Engine Co. 82 serve the citizens of the rough New York City community of the South Bronx.

Engine Co. 82

Dennis Smith is assigned to Engine Co. 82, one of the fire engine companies of the South Bronx Division of the NYFD.

Washingtonville

Washingtonville is 60 miles north of New York City. Dennis Smith and his wife and three sons live in a large house there. Smith wants to raise his kids in this small town environment.

Manhattan

Dennis Smith's mother has an apartment in Manhattan. He often sleeps there to avoid the 60-mile drive home.

Charlotte and 170

Charlotte and 170th is a hot-spot in the South Bronx. Calls come in every day from the firebox located there.

Southern Boulevard and 172nd Street

There is a vacant blacktop lot at the corner of Southern Boulevard and 172nd Street in the South Bronx. The Fire Department holds free ice cream parties there for the neighborhood kids in outreach to the poverty-stricken community.



The Tenements of the South Bronx

Most of the fires that Engine Co. 82 is sent on take place in apartments in the high-rise tenements of the poverty-stricken South Bronx. They are old and decrepit and crawling with vermin. Many arson fires are set in these buildings.

Pete's Bodega

Pete's Bodega is a Spanish grocery store located across the street from the firehouse. Pete, a hard-working Puerto Rican, came to the United States for a better life.

Queen's, New York

Dennis Smith's first assignment as a firefighter is in a firehouse in Queens, New York. He remains there three years.



Themes

Dangers and Risks in Firefighting

In the early 70's, Engine Co. 82 typically responded to over 9,000 alarms and its partner engine company in the South Bronx to another 8,000 calls. An average of eight fireman die each year in New York City fires and thousands are injured. These injuries range from minor (though painful) burns from live embers and smoke inhalation to broken bones, serious gashes and life-threatening second and third degree burns.

When the firemen hear the ominous tone of four 5 bells—5-5-5-5—they all pay attention. It's an indication that a fireman has died in the line of duty. The house watchman hurries outside, turns the radio volume loud and gets ready to place the flag at half staff in honor of the fallen comrade.

There are many obvious and inherent dangers for the firemen in the dispatch of their duties. One of the most dangerous situations for a firefighter to be under a fire. That is, fighting a fire in front of himself while a fire is ranging dangerously above him. The firemen also have to take great precautions to not only avoid the flames but also the smoke. Smoke is the culprit that can sneak up on the firemen and literally take their breath away. The firemen must approach a fire in a crawl position to avoid the worst of the smoke. Even if it's not clearly visible the smoke is there—where there's fire there's smoke.

Poverty and Firemen

The South Bronx where Engine Co. 82 operates consists of some of the poorest people and residences in the entirety of New York City. Most of the tenements that Dennis Smith and his engine company co-workers are sent to are roach and vermin infested residences. Even the fires don't get rid of these pests. The children in the neighborhood are taught by older kids to pull false alarms and throw rocks and bricks at the firemen. The poor children consider the fireman as an authority figure who belongs in the same group as cops. They often taunt the firemen, calling them "pigs" and directing other invectives at them. Dennis Smith attributes their attitude to poverty. The kids have no direction and often times no one who really cares. They don't have much to do and no one makes them do chores or their homework. They have time on their hands—time that allows them to throw rocks and pull false alarms.

The firemen see the kids play in filthy ponds of backed-up sewage water in the hot summer. They see the children playing in large piles of trash. The kids make pretend forts out of the garbage heaps and use garbage-strewn backyards and vacant lots filled with debris as their playgrounds. They have very few other options. Oftentimes, the kids set garbage or debris on fire—something else they learn from the older kids who have been there, done that. The fires bring the excitement of the lights and siren of the large



red trucks and apparatus to the blighted neighborhood. They enjoy the firemen jumping off their trucks and looking for the fires. The kids aren't shy about jumping and swinging on the large firetrucks and making them temporary monkey bars—the only ones they have.

The poorest, most subsidized people in the city that the firefighters serve are black or Puerto Rican and they are the groups that have the most vitriol for the firefighters. While the firefighters work for a relatively small wage, they serve the people who largely resent them and who are supported by their blood, sweat and tears and their own tax dollars. But people don't make the fireman's job tough—it's the conditions. The people in these communities only reflect the terrible conditions in which they live.

Dedication

Although the firemen of Engine Company 82—and all the other fire companies—are not appreciated in large measure by the community and people it serves, there is an overarching dedication that emanates from the firemen. Although they are literally stoned by kids in the community as they race by on their red firetrucks, ironically they are on their way to save the lives and property of people these ruffians probably know. Dennis was hit in the eye with a stone and another fireman was hit in the chest with a large brick. Nevertheless, these men do not put in for transfer to a more sedate neighborhood. They are in the South Bronx to serve the community and whether that community knows it, or admits it or not, they need these men.

There is a great camaraderie among the men of Engine Company 82. They tease one another and exchange sarcastic banter, but they watch out for each other. The men have no choice but to be brave in their job—it's a prerequisite. They bet with each other how many stitches an injured fireman is going to get—but wish he didn't have to have any. When the man returns and tells them he has twelve "sutures," they laugh and tell him he calls stitches "sutures" because he reads the New York Times. The men relieve each other in the most dangerous position of first man in; in fact, they fight each other for that position.

Style

Perspective

Dennis Smith is a firefighter in the rough South Bronx section of New York City. He has written his book, *REPORT FROM FIRE ENGINE CO. 82* in the first person and with the authority of an actual firefighter. When the story was written, Dennis Smith was a veteran firefighter of almost ten years. He was an active, 30-year-old who was dedicated and committed to serving the typically unappreciative people of the South Bronx.

Smith writes the story from his viewpoint. He is a strong, tough experienced firefighter who serves a community that is poverty stricken and populated with minorities. Perhaps it is his youth that keeps some cynicism at bay. Although he has been hit with stones thrown by kids as he rushes to save lives and property, he has empathy for the poor people of the South Bronx. Much of his understanding of these people no doubt stems from Dennis Smith's own experiences as a kid who lived in a fourth floor apartment of a New York City tenement. He understands the kids who run the streets with no supervision and limited attention from parents.

Smith is a fireman who reaches out to children in the South Bronx community. In his writing, he demonstrates the understanding that building bridges with the youngsters of the neighborhood could help to stem the vitriol that these kids are taught by their parents and older kids in the community to have. The groups of little kids who throw stones and bricks at them and who assault them with invectives don't understand that these firemen are on their side—trying to save their lives and property. Smith's perspective as both a fireman and a person who is raised in poverty illustrates his keen understanding of both sides.

Tone

The tone of *REPORT FROM FIRE ENGINE CO. 82* is straightforward in its depiction of the dangerous job of a New York City firefighter. But at times the account takes a surprisingly tender and nostalgic turn. Although many of the members of the community he serves, the rough South Bronx section of New York City, do not appreciate the work of Dennis and his colleagues, he feels an almost poignant dedication to them.

The present day story of Smith and his firefighting peers is intermingled with splashes of his past. As a young boy he lived in a roach-infested tenement with his mother and brother when the community consisted largely of Irish immigrants. Now those same roach-infested tenements are inhabited by Puerto Ricans and blacks. Dennis Smith, having lived in poverty, shows a strong empathy for the poor people and awful conditions in which they are forced to live.



Smith exhibits a tone and understanding that reaches far beyond his training as an engine company fireman. While many of his peers feel understandable resentment for the community residents who pelt them with rocks and sling invectives toward them, Smith understands their actions are a reflection of the conditions in which they find themselves. Smith's great empathy is illustrated in his enduring dedication and commitment to serve these people.

Structure

Dennis Smith's story originally written in 1972 and based on true life incidents, is segmented into eleven chapters. An updated introduction was added in 1998. The introduction shows his surprise that a book written from his notes over the course of his South Bronx assignment would become a much-heralded book, translated into dozens of languages, reprinted five times and selling over two million copies.

A dedication appears first in the book that honors all firefighters, noting that since he took the oath of office, 3,500 firefighters have given their lives in the course of their commitment to protect and to serve. He also notes that though the book is written about a specific firehouse—that located in the South Bronx of New York City—the book is meant to tell the story of the difficult and dangerous jobs of all firefighters throughout the country and even the world.

The account of the day-to-day job of the firefighters of Engine Company 82 is told mainly in a straightforward, chronological order. The timespan of this account covers roughly one year in the lives of the firefighters of Engine Co. 82. There are flashbacks to Dennis Smith's childhood. Smith grew up in the poverty-ridden tenements of New York City himself. He deftly intersperses these splashes of his youth, intermingling them with the struggles the kids face current day in the South Bronx. His personal connection to the poor kids in the community he serves is obvious and is reflected in the great compassion and understanding he possesses for them.



Quotes

". . .it wasn't ironic justice at all. It's what always happens in the South Bronx. The real devil gets away without a burn, and the children of the South Bronx are the victims." (9)

"He tried to console Nick Riso, who was punishing himself because he was driving the apparatus from which Mike fell. He said, 'God Almighty, Nick, how many times did you turn that corner before when nothing ever happened? The Big Guy upstairs called the shots, that's all. You gotta look at it that way.' But Nick just sobbed, with his face in his hands."

(16)

"If you pick up a telephone receiver in this town you may, or may not, get a dial tone. If you get on a subway you may, or may not, get stuck in a tunnel for an hour. The wall socket in your apartment may, or may not, contain electricity. The city's air may, or may not, be killing you. The only real sure thing in this town is that the firemen come when you pull the handle on that red box." (27)

"What can be done with people who throw bricks at the very men who are most committed to protecting the lives of the brick throwers? I feel empty and helpless, because I know that nothing can be done. And I feel violent, because I know that this insanity will continue until the brick throwers are educated, until they find decent jobs, and until they have better places to live in." (43)

"New York City is simply too big. I have lived in it too long to hate it, but I know it too well to love it. I am still a part of it, yet I feel removed, like a broken jockey who grooms horses. I earn my living caring for it, but I feel helpless because I know that I can't train it, or ride it, or make it win." (53)

"The walls are covered with cockroaches and water bugs scurrying in every direction. Some are as long as three inches, and as they scamper, the smaller ones drop from the walls. The light has surprised and confused them. I look up at the ceiling, and it, too, is a moving black mass. Roaches are falling all around us, and as they hit the floor they shoot in the direction of the coal pile as if propelled by a twisted rubber band." (76)

"There is a loud cracking noise, and the sky before us is again filled with fire. The rest of the roof has come down, and the fire is let loose from its confinement, but it won't last long. All the lines around the building are directed at the roof. The fire darkens quickly, and we know it will soon be over soon. The cold has beaten us, but we won't have to outlast it." (80)

"Yes, time, if studied, is cyclical. Only at death does it become linear." (103)

"I can remember Sister May Jean telling us that it was a much more serious sin to steal from our neighbors than it was to steal from a place like Macy's. I was in the fifth grade the, and I believed it. I still believe it." (119)



"I used to believe that people who threw rocks at firemen were motivated by conditions—the lower depths of American society. I used to believe that the fundamental problems were housing and education, and that people would stop throwing rocks if they had a decent place to live and were given equal educational opportunities. But I don't believe that anymore. That, to me, is prescribing for symptoms. The disease is more seriously latent, more pernicious than uncaring landlords, or bureaucratic, apathetic school officials. The malignancy lies in the guts of human kind at all levels. We have unlearned the value of a human life." (147)

"There is no doubt that the firefighters' job is more difficult, and more dangerous, in black and Puerto Rican areas than in other parts of New York City. What most firefighters do not know, however, is that a good case for economic determinism can be made to explain this prejudice, that those one rung up from the bottom of the status ladder traditionally resent those below them. Nor do most firefighters know that conditions make their job tough, not people. People only reflect the conditions. Poverty is manifested in fire statistics—that's a safe generalization." (169)

"The corneas are red from heat and smoke, and light reflects from the watered surfaces, and they sparkle. I wish my wife, my mother, everyone who has ever asked me why I do what I do, could see the humanity, the sympathy, the sadness of these eyes, because in them is the reason I continue to be a firefighter." (215)



Topics for Discussion

Why do firemen crawl on the floor while trying to put out fires?

Why does Dennis Smith and his wife and sons live in Washingtonville, a town that is 60 miles from where Smith works as a fireman?

What is it about Dennis Smith's childhood that makes him empathetic for the children of the South Bronx?

Dennis Smith has known a young neighborhood Hispanic girl named Tina deVega for several years. What path did Tina's life take as she matured?

What experience in Dennis Smith's childhood makes him fearful and resentful of cockroaches?

A young Hispanic girl, Cynthia, seeks Dennis' help in writing a school report about firemen. She asks him how children can help firemen. What three things does Dennis enumerate in response?

Why are pulling false alarms dangerous to firemen and to the surrounding communities?