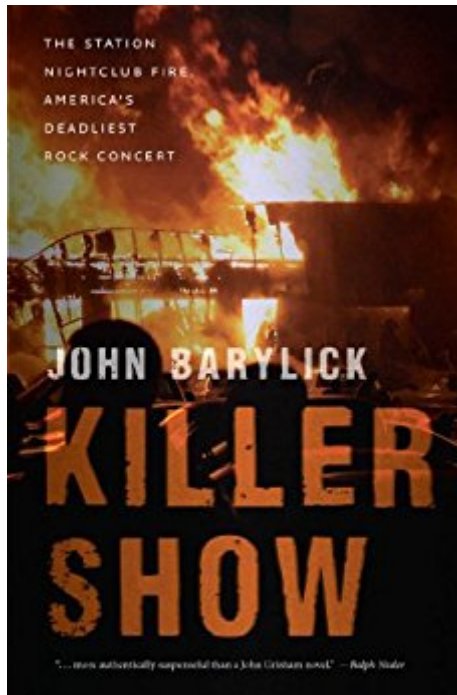


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Killer Show



Synopsis

On February 20, 2003, the deadliest rock concert in U.S. history took place at a roadhouse called The Station in West Warwick, Rhode Island. That night, in the few minutes it takes to play a hard-rock standard, the fate of many of the unsuspecting nightclub patrons was determined with awful certainty. The blaze was ignited when pyrotechnics set off by Great White, a 1980s heavy-metal band, lit flammable polyurethane egg crate foam sound insulation on the club's walls. In less than 10 minutes, 96 people were dead and 200 more were injured, many catastrophically. The final death toll topped out, three months later, at the eerily unlikely round number of 100. The story of the fire, its causes, and its legal and human aftermath is one of lives put at risk by petty economic decisions by a band, club owners, promoters, building inspectors, and product manufacturers. Any one of those decisions, made differently, might have averted the tragedy. Together, however, they reached a fatal critical mass. Killer Show is the first comprehensive exploration of the chain of events leading up to the fire, the conflagration itself, and the painstaking search for evidence to hold the guilty to account and obtain justice for the victims. Anyone who has entered an entertainment venue and wondered, "Could I get out of here in a hurry?" will identify with concertgoers at The Station. Fans of disaster nonfiction and forensic thrillers will find ample elements of both genres in Killer Show.

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Customer Reviews

Yes - I expected details about the events surrounding The Station fire, but the book is so much more than that. Details? You bet. I learned about how the average nightclub business works, how the minor bands who play there function, how the people who work there perform their duties, how the people who frequent them gather, how the science of fire works, how greed complicates, how lucky and unlucky chance intercedes, how fire science functions, the many ways fire kills, how some people step in and place themselves before others, how the court system tries to sort it all out and make the final outcome just. Whew! What was this book not about? One of the most fascinating, informative reads I've ever chanced upon. Bravo to this writer!

A personal confession: in my 20s and early 30s, I was unmarried and living in a large metropolitan area. My taste in music was not the sort of groups that played in stadiums. So I spent a lot of time clambering in and out of rickety clubs to see upcoming bands. Some achieved stardom. Most did not. I had some self-imposed rules for these excursions (no more than 3 beers and being aware of exits in case a hasty departure was necessary) and convinced myself I had been sufficiently proactive about my safety. Of course I was deluding myself. When the Rhode Island disaster occurred, I recognized the venue as a carbon copy of the sort of place I used to go to. With the clarity of hindsight, I can now easily envision myself trapped in the scrum of people struggling to get out the front entrance, piled seven deep and wedged so tightly that movement, let alone survival is impossible. Imagine yourself in a small place surrounded by almost 500 other people, your alertness pleasantly altered by the beers you've been encouraged to drink. The headliners blast into their first song and dazzling pyrotechnics temporarily blind you. When your vision clears, you see fingers of flame creeping up the back wall. Is that part of the show or is something wrong? They reach the ceiling and begin to spread, slowly at first but then more rapidly. As smoke fills the room, you (and 500 other people) surge towards the one narrow exit you are aware of. The alarms start to blare, the lights suddenly go off and you are now blindly groping in choking toxic smoke as the air heats up around you. From the time the squib pot is ignited until the entire building is raging, full on is less than 3 minutes. If you weren't out in the first 90 seconds, your chances were slim and none. The

wonder isn't that 100 people died. The wonder is that the death toll wasn't higher. It is hard to imagine that John Barylick's version of events could be improved upon. Barylick has the vantage point of being an attorney for the survivors, so he has a front row seat to all the events and subsequent machinations. He painstakingly weaves all the elements of the story (governmental oversight (or lack thereof), architecture, fire science, forensics, biology, causation, rehabilitation and litigation) into a seamless, highly readable story. In between the technical information, Barylick is aware that this is first and foremost a human tragedy and he puts names and personal stories to humanize the numbers. I thought the litigation portion of the story would be anticlimactic, but Barylick makes it as interesting (and ultimately infuriating) as the events that preceded it. I followed the story closely after it occurred, but this book exposed a wealth of information I had no idea existed. The most amazing vignette was of concert-goer Mike Vargas, whose insane story of survival has to be read to be believed. What makes Barylick's book required reading for risk managers is how ably it demonstrates the chain of causation that led to the outcome. It wasn't one main thing that happened - it was an accretion of commissions and omissions that accumulated into a perfect storm of consequences. One despairs at the number of places where a single act could have prevented the tragedy. The villains in this book weren't purposely evil. No one is accusing them of trying to kill as many people as possible. But the neglect, greed and inattention of folks like Denis Larocque, the Derderian brothers and Jack Russell ultimately had the same effect. The Derderians and Russell seem to be the callow sort capable of brushing the ashes off their clothes and blithely continuing their lives (even if many others weren't able to). The only one who seems worthy of sympathy is Great White road manager Dan Biechiele. In igniting the fireworks that fateful February night, Biechiele only did what he (and many others) had previously done in the club. In doing so, he unwittingly set off the bomb that had been patiently waiting for the final spark. Unlike others, he accepted responsibility and made no attempt to equivocate or deflect blame. His remorse seemed genuine rather than calculated. This stands in sharp contrast to those who spent the immediate aftermath lawyering up and shuffling assets to places where they couldn't be seized. Disasters also cause some to rise to the occasion. We have the heroism of Shamus Horan, who pulled people through a broken window from the flames. There is the example of bouncer Tracey King, who pushed and threw patrons out of the building until the flames consumed him. And the event was a testimony to the quality of New England regional medical care. 96 succumbed at the site. Of those who made it to hospitals, only 4 more died. Given the severity of the injuries, this is nothing short of astonishing. You would have hoped that folks had learned after the Station fire. But since then, there has been the 2004 Republica Cromanon fire in Argentina (194 dead), the 2008

Wuwang China fire (43 dead), the 2009 Santika club fire in Thailand (66 dead), the 2009 Lame Horse club fire in Perm Russia (156 dead) and the 2013 Kiss nightclub fire in Brazil (242 dead). All can be traced to the same preventable cause - pyrotechnics used in an enclosed space in close proximity to flammable decorations. Future tragedies of this type appear to be sadly inevitable. But Barylick's highly readable, highly recommended cautionary fable is ample evidence that they shouldn't have to be.

As a matter of routine, I have to suit up each year with an air-pack and enter a smoke filled room to find a mannequin. I try to be aware of potential fire hazards at work, but this book really hit home how quickly the ordinary can become something out of Dante's Inferno. This is an excellent read for people who remember the event and for those who work in public safety or crowd control. It gives one pause as to becoming aware of evacuation and exits---the need for orderliness, control and proper egress. For, as this book lets the reader know, not everybody follows the rules. Shoddy builders and inspection caused the inside of this club to become deadly in only ninety seconds. The fumes were incapacitating and altered decision making skills. In "Killer Show," we meet the survivors and are introduced to those that didn't make it. It puts the pieces of a puzzle together, because it wasn't just one thing that went wrong. How it happened, the fire itself and the aftermath are all discussed. Some of the polysyllabic chemical terms are very long, but the writer does a good job in making their hazards understandable. This is also done with the legal proceedings that followed, both civil and criminal.

Well written and compelling, this book's gut-wrenching descriptions of all that happened that terrible night are sad and sobering without being sentimental or disrespectful. What most impressed me was the author's ability to explain technical things such as, for example, various legal processes, how foam is made, how fire works for the non-schooled in these topics in a clear way that wasn't insulting. I learned so much, and feel I'm walking away from this book with not only a solid understanding of that night and all the poor decisions as well as other environmental and social factors that led to it, but with a basic knowledge of things I wouldn't think to learn on my own. I also think it serves as a work of public service: know your exits and don't assume you are safe. There have been club tragedies following this one, such as in Brazil and Russia, that prove that we still haven't learned our lessons. If we don't, we aren't honoring the lives of those who passed. Everyone who goes to large venues and that's probably most of us should read this.

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