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There were few experienced swimmers among over 1,300 Lower East Side residents who boarded the *General Slocum* on June 15, 1904. It shouldn't have mattered, since the steamship was chartered only for a languid excursion from Manhattan to Long Island Sound. But a fire erupted minutes into the trip, forcing hundreds of terrified passengers into the water. By the time the captain found a safe shore for landing, 1,021 had perished. *Ship Ablaze* draws on firsthand accounts to examine why the death toll was so high and how the city responded. Masterfully capturing both the horror of the event and the heroism of men, women, and children who faced crumbling life jackets and inaccessible lifeboats as the inferno quickly spread, historian Edward T. O'Donnell brings to life a bygone community while honoring the victims of that forgotten day.

## Ship Ablaze: The Tragedy of the Steamboat General Slocum Details

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## From Reader Review Ship Ablaze: The Tragedy of the Steamboat General Slocum for online ebook

### Jan says

Chances are that you've never heard of the General Slocum disaster, NYC's deadliest disaster for nearly 100 years (until 9/11/01). If you don't want to read a book about a steamboat fire that killed over 1,000 people, most of them women and children, all of them on their way to a Sunday School picnic, I wouldn't blame you.

But if you're anything like me, and you find disasters fascinating, then you should check this book out. It's very well-researched, and the writing is incredibly engaging. The thing I like the most about it is how well O'Donnell set the stage. By the time the book finally got to the disaster, I felt like I understood very well a lot of things I didn't understand before: 1904 NYC politics, the dangers of steamboats, the now-extinct Little Germany neighborhood of NYC (I never even knew it existed), and the mindset of people in the early 20th century, i.e. how they had a much more fatalistic view of life than we do in our modern times. What I'm saying is, within the context of the book, the disaster doesn't occur in a vacuum, and I appreciated that.

The interesting thing about disasters is that they're rarely the result of one thing that's gone wrong. Usually a series of things have to go wrong, leading to a chain reaction that sets off a major problem. The General Slocum was no exception. If only one thing had happened differently, the disaster might not have been so bad, or it might not have happened at all. It's fascinating to read about it all unfolding. It's fairly appalling, too. I would say that this book is not for the faint of heart.

Once it got to the post-disaster section, I thought it dragged a little bit (I can only read so much about desperate family members trying to identify unidentifiable bodies), but otherwise I thought it was excellent. June 2015 was a good month for me - I read a lot of great books!

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### R.Friend says

I discovered this by accident at my favorite used book store a few years ago, and was surprised at how much I enjoyed it. I also had no idea that this relatively obscure disaster had been New York City's largest until 9/11--virtually wiping out an entire population of German immigrants. A horrific account, and very well-documented.

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### Marti says

A number of things conspired to make me intrigued with this story. Both the disaster, and the monument to the over 1,000 victims in Tompkins Square Park, are mentioned in *NYPD: A City and its Police*. Then, my in-laws told me that my husband's great uncle was born on June 15, 1904. I am thinking it must have been at Harlem Hospital as his mother was literally giving birth while watching the ship burn in the East River.

The author makes the inevitable comparisons to 9/11 and there are many similarities: The photo wall, the outpouring of charitable donations and concerts, the investigation etc. However, what makes the latter unlikely to be forgotten soon is the fact that it changed an entire country, not just one 40 block neighborhood (almost all those aboard the Slocum were parishoners of one church in "Little Germany"). And unlike the

illustrious passengers on the Titanic, those killed on the Slocum were mostly poor nobodies.

Though it is still a very depressing story, there is a lot of "Old New York" detail included that makes it more than just an account of death and disaster. And one thing certainly hasn't changed: when it came to assigning blame, the steamship operator who did not upgrade any of the safety equipment (life preservers made of cork so old it was utterly useless) got off scot free. Only the hapless Captain did jail time.

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### **Elizabeth Higginbotham says**

Ship Ablaze: The Tragedy of the Steamboat General Slocum by Edward T. O'Donnell is eye opening. I saw a documentary about the ship that caught fire in the east river of NYC and burned and killed most of the passengers. In other reading, I learned that the neighborhood where I lived as a child was Little Germany, but people were starting to leave for Yorkville and Brooklyn. The fire that was an annual Lutheran celebration connected to St. Marks church did bring people back to the community for this boat ride and day of celebration outside the city, but this does not happen.

O'Donnell brings together all the elements in describing the Germany community, diverse in social class, with the strivers moving to new neighborhoods. The church and the commitment of the pastors. Fires and other urban tragedies were part of the landscape for people in 1904. We also have the press, that is working diligently to inform people with EXTRA sold by newsboys. The tragedy reflects the lack of enforcement of the few laws about public transport and the ways that big company leaders can avoid responsibilities.

We see lives of people who begin a day with high expectations and it ends in horror and loss. This was no accident but reflected the vulnerability of people in the stage of urban life. In the face of this "crime," it was not clear who had jurisdiction and it meant the corporate wrong doers could avoid blame. The captain is scapegoated, but people also felt sorry for him.

O'Donnell does follow the people, their ways of coping with the tragedy over time. Many leave the neighborhood. Some sort out ways to keep the story alive and have an annual memorial in Queens, where the unidentified were buried. To many families members, whose loved ones were never found, this monument has significance.

This fire predates the Triangle Fire of 1911, where fewer people died, but it was another era and these working women had been trying to organize. The investigation of that industrial fire was more rigorous and did lead the way for legislation in the workplace. The Slocum fire killed more people and shattered the life of the survivors, people who did make it off of the ship with burns and other injuries. It shattered families, as father lost their wives and children, or most of their member, but a few did survive. But there was little change in the law.

The book is a nice treatment of a disaster that does show us how many factors come together, the public, the government, the press and the companies that jeopardize people's lives for money.

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### **Heather Brush says**

I've always been horridly morbidly fascinated by North Brother Island, and must have blocked the memories

of my grandmother telling us about the wreck. My great great great aunt Maggie died in the tragedy along with her son, William. Her son George was rescued. O'Donnell's treatment of the story is excellent in combination of non-fiction and speculation of emotion in the players. Such great detail shows his dedication to research and fact, but his empathy shows through in relaying the horrible experiences of so many. 1904 NYC is brought to life, only to sink back into the past. A wonderful depiction, worthy of the victim's ancestors' praise. Thank you for telling our story.

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## **Diana says**

I have to admit one of the things I like to study is historical disasters. It can be very depressing but it's interesting to read about how they made medicine and safety better for us today. I picked this up prior to a trip to NYC and wanted to learn more about this little-remembered disaster. While I had known about things like the Triangle factory fire, the aircraft that crashed into the Empire State Building and of course 9/11, I had no clue about this disaster until a program on the History Channel a few years ago. I have no clue how this could have been forgotten, especially since most of those killed were women and children. A pleasure craft that was taking a church Sunday school to a picnic caught fire and due to multiple factors, including the crew saving themselves and not the passengers, caused over 1000 deaths. I plan on visiting the memorial to those lost on the ship during my trip.

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## **Emily says**

Last night, I read a book, Ship Ablaze, that was everything Krakatoa wasn't--a book about an event that has long inspired my curiosity, which exhaustively describes and explains what happened and why.

The fire on the steamboat General Slocum was New York City's most fatal disaster prior to September 11th, but strangely almost no one has heard of it. It devastated the Lower East Side neighborhood once called Kleindeutschland, but the only reminder of it is a small and somewhat mysterious memorial plaque in Tompkins Square Park.

On June 15th, 1904, St. Mark's Lutheran Church, a block down Sixth Street from my old apartment, held its 17th annual Sunday school picnic. They chartered a steamboat to take them to a Long Island beach. Because it was a weekday, nearly all of the 1,300 people on board were women and children.

Partway up the East River, the boat caught on fire. The crew reacted badly, spreading the flames. Meanwhile, the passengers panicked. The boat had not been provisioned properly (not to mention inspected), and fifteen-year-old cork lifejackets were filled with useless dust. (Those who jumped into the river wearing them sank like stones, as the dust absorbed water.) The lifeboats were painted and wired onto the deck and could not be detached. As the fire spread, crowding the passengers to the front of the three decks, people began to fall or be thrown overboard. Most did not know how to swim, which meant that would-be rescuers--watching in horror from the nearby shores--had very little time to reach the victims before they drowned.

Despite many heroic rescues, within an hour, more than a thousand people had died. Many men had lost a wife and four or five children; some extended families were not reported missing for days because no one was left alive to report them. Some survivors committed suicide. Within a few years, the traumatized neighborhood that had seen so many funerals had emptied out; the German inhabitants were replaced with Eastern European newcomers.

O'Donnell tells the story at a perfect pace, giving the reader just the right amount of information to envision and understand the scene, while making the chronology clear. The psychology of panic, what it causes people to do, and why, is fascinatingly invoked. O'Donnell has also captured some of surprising differences between 2003 and 1904. Some of the orphaned survivors were simply sent back downtown in the El alongside commuters that evening, because "Americans in 1904 thought no more of 'grief counseling' than they did computer programming." There is a cautionary tale to be found here, too, about how the survivors were driven apart by disagreements related to a speedily-collected relief fund.

Many aspects of the disaster--aside from the fact that it was the result of criminal negligence rather than terrorism--are immediately relevant to September 11th and its aftermath. Yet I appreciated the fact that O'Donnell does not discuss this overtly, leaving you to make the connections yourself. Before September 11th, this might have been a solid study of a little-known event. Afterwards, it is an invaluable--if disturbingly familiar--look at an urban disaster that history has had time to analyze.

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### **Beth says**

This book seemed a little slow to start, to be reaching to build empathy, but that clears up quickly as the facts are laid out. It seems inconceivable that a tragedy of this scale could be lost in American memory so quickly - official death toll of 1,021, mostly women and children, victims of fire and drowning on a steamship with rotten lifepreservers and lifeboats fastened permanently to the ship. The story just gets worse and worse as more details pile up. For instance, it's not just that the life preservers were old and rotten but that the dust into which the buoyant cork had dissolved turned into the equivalent of mud dragging down those who wore them instead of offering any kind of help. It's also amazing to read the complaints in 1904 about the negligence of corporations and how their structure effectively shields all individuals from blame for wrongdoing.

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### **Bob Schnell says**

Imagine if your Circle Line cruise around Manhattan caught fire and over 1,000 people died because the life preservers were useless, the lifeboats were locked down and, instead of heading towards the nearest pier, the captain decided instead to go upwind (fanning the flames) to an East River Island minutes away. That is pretty much what happened to the unfortunate picnickers from St. Marks Lutheran church whose annual day of fellowship and fun in 1904 turned into a flaming nightmare.

The Circle Line had not yet been founded but there were plenty of steamships for hire around NYC at the turn of the 20th century. They were regulated, but corruption was rampant and some bribes to inspectors cost less than properly outfitting a tourist boat with safety equipment. Fire drills? Yes, we have them regularly (wink, wink). The General Slocum was no exception. Even though the captain had an excellent record of no fatalities, he was just as complicit with the other boat operators in ignoring the regulators in favor of his corporate masters.

Edward O'Donnell's well-researched history of the General Slocum tragedy and its aftermath shows how little things have changed in the century since then. It is a gripping tale, simply told and effective. The reason this particular disaster isn't better remembered today is that 7 years later the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire occurred. Even though far fewer people died in that inferno, there were photographs and lots of eyewitnesses watching people jump from the building. The owners of the General Slocum had already been lawyered out of any consequences by then, so the wrath of NYC was turned to the factory owners who locked the doors

and made escape impossible. Still, "Ship Ablaze" shows how the city came together for the German immigrant neighborhood decimated by the Slocum fire in ways not seen again until 9-11. Over 100 years later there are still annual memorials for the victims of the Slocum. This book makes me want to attend the next one.

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### **Ceh131973 says**

This was a good book about a little known tragedy. The General Slocum was a steamer that traveled on the rivers that surrounded New York City. Often these ships were used by groups for excursions to the shore or picnic areas up river. On June 15, 1904 a German church group had booked passage. It was mainly women and children.

As the book title suggests the worst thing that could happen on a ship did when it caught on fire. The early 1900's were still a time of corruption and profit over safety. This helped lead to the deaths of over 1,000 people.

The story in this book is a timely warning to us as safety laws are rolled back for profits. It was a well written and researched tale. We need to heed the warnings of our past so as not to repeat them with larger tragedies.

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### **James says**

#### **The Definitive Book on the Subject – Reads like a Novel But Is Meticulously Researched Work Of Non-fiction**

I cannot recommend this book highly enough. I've had a lifetime of interest in all things maritime and that includes maritime disasters. Sadly, in the category of maritime disasters, we are inundated with countless retellings of the Titanic tragedy, or if you're a Midwesterner like I am, countless retellings of the sinking of the Edmund Fitzgerald—the Great Lakes ore-carrier. It is refreshing therefore to come across a book that covers a lesser, relatively little known maritime calamity—which is surprising since it is the second most deadly ship disaster in United States history. In terms of loss of life, only the Civil War era loss of the paddle-wheeler Sultana out ranks it. To appreciate the importance of this cataclysm, it was the worst loss of life in New York City until the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

This book does a marvelous job of telling the story while remaining completely accurate to first-hand sources contemporary to the time of the General Slocum sinking in 1904. The book gives equal treatment to all the important details: the stories of the doomed and helpless passengers who perished—mostly women and children, the many narratives of the cowardly and heroic and callous and self-serving actions of the ships owners and the incompetence of the U.S. Steamboat Inspection Service involved in the event.

Other details of interest are not neglected. The author covers every aspect in detail: thorough information about the ship itself, details of the aftermath of human suffering, investigations into the accidental and deliberate causes responsible for this catastrophe—and even offers reasonable suppositions as to why this event is not forever imprinted on our minds like other similar fiery tragedies from the same era, such as the Iroquois Theater Chicago fire and the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire—even though these two events are much better known but had far fewer casualties. This seems rather odd when one considers that the fiery destruction of the Slocum was an event which played out directly within the view of millions of New

Yorkers.

The book is a stellar example of how to retell, with all its nuances, an event so horrible that it should not be lost to the dusty archives of history.

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### **Lisa Rathbun says**

On the History Channel, I watched a gripping show about the General Slocum disaster. I truly feel sorrowful that this tragedy has been overlooked and ignored; I know I'd never heard of it and I love history. So I had to read this book almost in tribute to those who lost their lives, that someone still remembered and cared. So sad.

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### **Charles Clark says**

The five stars for this book is all about the wealth of historical detail reported and research that went into it. The book was written using primary source material and is as comprehensive as possible and without speculating on the unknowable or undocumentable.

As far as a story-telling narrative, the book starts out strong. It weaves the stories of the Slocum's captain, the pastor of the church whose members were the passengers, and the Mayor of New York City. Their stories are woven together and along with the story of the most recent safety inspection of the ship and a number of members of the congregation of the church who would be on the ship, and the story of the Germantown neighborhood. Then the events of the fire are told in great detail, and told very well. However, the stories of the Mayor, the pastor, and the captain are not followed and paid-off in the days and months following the tragedy with the same sort of focus as in the beginning of the book.

In particular, the story of the Mayor is told in much detail prior to the fire. His expectations of using the Mayoral job as a springboard to a run for the US Presidency are detailed. How did his actions in the wake of the fire affect his possible run? What sort of leadership did he provide after the fire? Who knows; the build up of that story is never paid off in any way.

The stories of what happened to the captain and the pastor are told, but not with the same level of detail and focus as they were given in the pre-fire part of the book. Their lives are not followed in detail in the following days and months, but instead picked back up after a year (pastor) or almost two (captain), and not with the same feel or style as the pre-fire stories are told. As far the narrative story aspects are done, it is more of a 3 star effort.

The story and history of the victims, both the dead and the survivors, and story of how it happened are just superb and so well researched and documented. That is the part of a book of history such as this that really matters. The story is interesting, and is told in a way that evokes much emotion and empathy, and as deep an understanding of how it affected the people and the community as possible. Just so well done, and a wonderful read. For that, it is a 5 star book. Highly recommended.

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### **Chris says**

Titanic might be the most famous, but this comes close to being the most unbelievable.

This is an engrossing read about a tragedy overshadowed. While not in total scope and drama, it nears the loss of life of the most famous of all sinkings — The Titanic. In fact, given the drastically different setting, it is even more of a tragedy.

This recounting of the doomed ship General Slocum flies by like an action adventure disaster of the most epic proportions. Everything is in place, innocent victims, mustache-twirling villains, and the main character herself, the steamboat Slocum. One particular section prior to the sinking highlights certain individuals headed out for a day of fun. I winced the entire time, knowing some of these very real people wouldn't survive.

Ship Ablaze is informative, fascinating, enraging, and totally heartbreaking.

Highly recommended.

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### **Michael Clark says**

I thought this was an absolutely fantastic book!

It's a history book but it reads more like a novel. It's an amazing story about a terrible tragedy. The General Slocum was a passenger steamer out of New York City. On June 15, 1904 the ship was carrying German immigrants to a church picnic on Long Island. The ship caught fire on the East River and tragedy ensued. The book gives the reader a look into life in turn of the century New York City. I had never heard of the Slocum disaster before. Usually when people think of historic New York City fires, they think of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire mainly because it happened at a time when garment factory workers had been fighting to achieve organized labor. But the shirtwaist factory fire only took 55 lives. The General Slocum disaster claimed 1,021 lives. Only one of those was a crew member. The majority of the victims were women and children. Most people in New York in 1904 didn't know how to swim so the victims were caught in a horrible paradox; burn to death or drown. The fire started forward and was out of control on the wooden steamer in minutes. The captain kept the ship full speed into the wind trying to make it to land but the result was to feed and drive the fire aft where all of the passengers were trying to escape. The life jackets were useless because they were so old that the fabric was rotted and the cork inside them had literally turned to dust, making them as buoyant as dirt. The fire hoses were rotted and burst as soon as the crew tried to use them. People that couldn't swim who put on these life jackets and jumped into the water sank immediately. There are amazing stories of ordinary people committing selfless acts of heroism. There was rampant government and steamboat company corruption. The German immigrant community called "Little Germany" was decimated. Whole families were wiped out, and children left orphaned. There were days where there were so many funerals that horse drawn glass hearses were sometimes three abreast on the same street. And it's interesting to note so many of the differences between people's attitudes then and now. For example the people of New York were very generous establishing a relief fund for the victims but many people sold everything they had to pay for funerals rather than accept charity. It really is an amazing story. I'm going to read it again just to catch anything I might have missed

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