



When the Dancing Stopped: The Real Story of the Morro Castle Disaster and Its Deadly Wake

Brian Hicks

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During the dark days of the Great Depression, thousands of weary souls escaped their bleak lives for a week of paradise aboard the Ward Line's glamorous cruise ship, the "Morro Castle." It was the most famous passenger liner of its day, lightning fast, elegantly appointed. It was also a ticking time bomb. It was the summer of 1934. Two sailors joined the "Morro Castle" crew, one a teenager on his first job away from home, the other a dangerous psychopath. Within two months, they would witness the end of the party in a single night of death, killer storms, and catastrophic fire. And that was only the beginning of a twenty-year-long story.

In "When the Dancing Stopped," we too walk up the gangplank to that art-deco liner and, at first, enjoy the glamour and the sultry Havana nights. With mounting suspense, we also witness the launch of a mystery that mesmerized the nation and then, in the midst of troubled times, faded away. Award-winning author Brian Hicks, using newly declassified FBI files, thousands of pages of investigation notes, testimony, and new interviews, takes the reader on a mid-century cruise through history, revealing a cold-case file that had been, until now, left unsolved for history. And, as he relates in this work of masterful storytelling, it all began with the last cruise of the "Morro Castle."

One of those two men, Thomas Torresson Jr., first sailed on the cruise ship as a high school senior recovering from serious illness and soon found a love that would endure his entire life. Within months, he would join the crew. For George Rogers, a gifted radio operator with a secret past, the ship was merely the latest in a long line of jobs. Their paths would cross several times on the way to their destiny, and the disaster would affect the two in very different ways: one would become famous, the other scarred forever.

In the grand tradition of "The Devil in the White City," Hicks details a desperate investigation and the search for what may be the modern era's first serial killer through the tragic backdrop of a country suffering through depression and a buildup to war. With cameos by J. Edgar Hoover, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Ernest Hemingway, "When the Dancing Stopped" is the captivating true story of two men irrevocably bound by history -- a true American hero and a dangerous killer masquerading as one. More than that, there is the larger cast of characters: crew members and passengers, investigators, scoundrels, and, yes, additional victims. For the story that began on that storm-tossed night off the coast of New Jersey continued, as we now learn, for decades to come.

When the Dancing Stopped: The Real Story of the Morro Castle Disaster and Its Deadly Wake Details

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From Reader Review When the Dancing Stopped: The Real Story of the Morro Castle Disaster and Its Deadly Wake for online ebook

GoldGato says

There are usually three types of crime layouts for books:

1. The author decides he/she knows what was in a criminal's head and spends the entire book spinning the spin.
2. The author writes a thesis but neglects to keep the reader involved due to the fact that it's really just a thesis.
3. The author throws everything at the reader from the beginning, so the rest of the book is a letdown.

Thankfully, this book is none of the above. Brian Hicks crafts a tale that leads the reader into a just-one-more-page-even-though-it's-2AM spellbinding journey to discover the cause behind one of the greatest maritime disasters of the 20th century. Hicks has done his research homework, to the point where he even throws off newspaper facts from the 19th century, all to support his findings on the psychopath who is really the center of the story.

We don't know this, of course, because we think we're going to read a book about a ship, but it's so much more than that. I love authors who do their homework and don't just guess, and that's why this book merits the highest marks. Engrossing and gruesome.

Book Season = Autumn (because that's when the nuts thrive)

BAM The Bibliomaniac says

Maybe closer to 3.5

Cruising on the Morro Castle during the early 1930s was an escape from the drudgery of life during the depression. Sailing from New York to Havana, the trip took middle class families and young single females on a whirlwind break from reality.

But in September, 1934, one of the worst maritime disasters in American history occurred leaving more than half of its passengers dead or lost at sea.

This book begins with the exploration of this final cruise and its possible catalyst. However, the investigation evolves to include crimes committed by the man believed to be the arsonist. This leading storytelling makes this an original true crime narrative. The author does an excellent job of research and interviewing without blatantly presenting the information as such. At the time of drafting the book, there was one remaining surviving crew member and a handful of scattered voyagers. No one escaped unscathed from this tragic incident, but was it an accident?

Donna says

I loved this! For me it was especially interesting since I'm familiar with a few of the towns.

I have reproduction postcards of this ship and other local historical images of Southern Jersey, but didn't know the history behind the image. This was a real eye-opener. The writing, the story, the characters and familiar towns involved kept me on the edge of my seat. As the drama intensified, I could not put this book down. I'm still amazed and keep googling images of the ship.

How Rogers got away with all he did for so long is a testament to his genius. Too bad his super powers went astray. I wonder how his wife stayed with him or what she thought was going on. An interview with her would have been a plus.

All in all...it reminds me there's always more going on behind the scenes than what folks tell you.

Sal4gal says

I listened to the Audible version.

"Not at all what I expected!"

This is not an adventure book. It is detailed true history that follows the lives of a few characters. The construction details, the employees, the accident, the politics, J. Edgar Hoover, and trials. As I review the book in my mind, it indeed covers a lot from start to finish and the main characters are well developed making it more interesting as a documentary.

Stacey says

I found this book looking for "Dead Wake" by Erik Larson, and it sounded intriguing, so I borrowed it from my library and I'm glad I did! (I seem to be obsessed with maritime disasters at the moment).

Well written account of a disaster that I had never heard of, but which changed the shipping industry in many ways. A ship that offered trips to Cuba during the Depression. Hicks relies on first person accounts, including an interview with one of the surviving crewman who brings the ship and its time to life. Hicks doesn't reveal the "villain" until the middle of the book, but the reader can sense who it might be and it is a little fun to try and guess. The person is truly evil. I learned more about the beginning of the cruise ship, the history of Cuba, and a disaster that dominated headlines at the time, but I had never heard of... it's a good read.

Jill says

I thought the book was incredibly researched but I didn't find it as gripping as I thought I would. I had never heard of the Morro Castle disaster so I was intrigued. I did though find myself gasping here and there reading what all Rogers had done and gotten away with for so long. Too bad there was never any conclusive evidence against him for justice sake.

Diana says

I had wanted to read this book for quite a while. I hadn't read much about the Morro Castle disaster before this. I was enjoying the book for a bit, but the author started going on about various conspiracy theories, and how this person was poisoned, this person left passengers to die on purpose, etc. It got old about halfway through, and I gave up at 90%. Hopefully, I can find another book about this disaster to read.

Holly Ristau says

I enjoyed this historical true crime story. It was well-researched and talked about an historical event that I hadn't heard about before. My two favorite things: history and mystery! It was also well-indexed, which I appreciated. I wish there had been a list of characters and their jobs because so many people are referenced, I ended up making my own list as I read along.

CJ says

The Morro Castle was a luxury liner which sailed from New York City to Havana, Cuba during the early thirties. Although its primary function was to transport mail between the two cities, the ship also had a decent passenger business--despite the ever-worsening depression--taking tourists to "Gay Havana" which at the time was still a wild party town. On the Labor Day cruise in 1934, the ship mysteriously caught fire and sunk, killing more than half the passengers and crew aboard. This book tells that story, but also tells the story of George Rogers, a radio operator who was convicted of murdering two elderly neighbors as well as attempting to kill a friend with a bomb. The connection between those two stories is that George Rogers was the radio operator on the Morro Castle, and many believe he was responsible for setting the fire, and possibly also for murdering the ship's captain before the fire began.

The author of the book, Brian Hicks, has obviously done painstaking research, and although the book tends to be a novelization, it is comfortable with inserting facts (as well as their sources) into the story. The main voice we hear from during the parts of the story which take place on the Morro Castle is Tom, a young man who was working on the ship that summer. Hicks had a chance to interview Tom (who was roughly 84 at the time Hicks met him) and get a lot of details not just about the fire itself, but also about the way the ship ran and about the tensions and problems among the crew leading up to the disaster.

Hicks follows an extensive description of the disaster itself with coverage of the various trials held to attempt to get to the truth about the matter with regards to fault and blame. The egregious errors made by the replacement captain and the crew are brought to light by the combined efforts of the U.S. District Attorney's office, the department which would soon become the FBI, and the board that dealt with issues of the sea. After that, Hicks continues on to follow George Rogers, and the case quietly being built against him as far as the Morro Castle was concerned.

This book is well-written and includes a lot of interesting, gripping details. It has a certain feeling of being a detective story without getting totally side-tracked, never forgetting what the story is REALLY about. The author ties his strings together well, and in general I found the book to be a fascinating read.

Donna says

The shipwrecks I read about are usually age-of-sail affairs that follow the survivors' struggle against their environment (and occasionally each other). But the wreck of the Morro Castle involves more than just the fire, the crew's response, and the rescue efforts. The author presents historical context, personal accounts, and a heaping pile of evidence against one arson suspect, all delivered in an organized, cohesive way.

The story itself is unnerving. There was unrest among the crew, and the captain died shortly before the ship burned. The fire started in one of the few areas that didn't have an automatic fire detection system. Orders to abandon ship or call for help were delayed by poor communication. Many of the lifeboats either burned or launched with only a few people aboard, leading those who couldn't reach them to jump into the ocean and hope they'd get picked up. One of the ship's design features helped to spread the fire, and rough weather made rescue difficult. But the author makes a credible case that the 135 deaths were ultimately the responsibility of radio operator George White Rodgers.

Right after the wreck, Rodgers was called a hero for getting the SOS out before the ship's equipment failed. The last third of the book explores his history of erratic behavior and later crimes, including an attempt to kill a coworker with a homemade bomb. Rodgers went to prison after being convicted of two murders, where he teased reporters about new information on the Morro Castle.

The book is primarily about the ship and the crew member who may have burned it, but it also brings to life a time when ship owners feared communist infiltration and New York tourists cruised to Havana. It was compelling and written well, but the author doesn't address any other theories about the cause of the fire, even to argue against them.

It was also more difficult to get through than it should have been, because somebody decided to get creative and set it in a tall, narrow typeface. I was interested in the story and am not even that prone to eyestrain, but I had to keep putting it down.

Meadow says

I love my disaster books and this one did not disappoint. As a matter of fact, it was full of disaster and then went beyond that into the life of a scary psychopath. I appreciated the author's goal of not fictionalizing the story by adding thoughts or dialog that he could not account for from personal conversations, transcripts, or interviews. After reading this I find it odd and a bit sad that the name Morro Castle is not a known name anymore (no one I asked knew the name at least) since it is one of the worst maritime disasters in America's history.

K says

In the summer of 1934, off the coast of New Jersey, the Morro Castle, a well-known luxury liner returning from a Labor Day cruise to Havana, caught fire during a tropical storm just hours after its captain was found dead in his cabin. The ship was incinerated, some 134 passengers died, and the rest forced to jump into the sea to survive. Based on recently declassified FBI files, thousands of pages of investigation notes, testimony, and new interviews, Hicks provides a fast-paced account exploring the mystery of what exactly happened on the Morro Castle seven decades ago.

Jennifer W says

Fascinating story of a disaster I had never heard of. It started off a little slow, but after the 2nd death (the first being more of an anecdote), it took off and I couldn't stop reading. Like most large catastrophes, lots of small acts lead up to a big freaking disaster. An inexperienced leader, 2 huge storms in the Atlantic, a crew and passengers not properly trained in evacuating a ship, a floating pile of fuel and excellerants, and maybe, just maybe, a madman capable of setting it all ablaze. It doesn't end the night the ship ran aground, because someone that diabolical, that evil, doesn't just stop. He relished the attention and decimated anyone who got in his way. It's all circumstantial, mind you, but there's a hell of a lot of circumstances.

Sheila says

I enjoyed this book. I had never heard about the Morro Castle nor about the disaster. The book read like a novel. Occasionally the voice of the narrator was heard but for the most part the story and what people involved were living through was the focus. I liked the you were there feeling as the author described what was going on in the different parts of the ship and how people just wanted to get away from home during the Great Depression. As the story builds you find out about the engineering of the ship and the crew and their jobs and actions during the crisis. I liked the glimpse we had of Havana when Americans still could travel there. Little personal anecdotes were throughout the book which made the book alive for me. An amazing story. Amazing research. Good read.

Trappercat says

This was a horrible book that I kept reading because of all the high marks. It is by no means a 4 or 5 * book.

It was redundant through the book, rehashing the telling of the story, using the exact same words ad-nausea. The lying and discontent by the officers, the crew and passengers were marked mostly by a few "trials" to find out what happened. No grand discovery by the author. The only learned behavior was that from that forward cruise lines held regular lifeboat drills.

The erratic behavior of the radio man speaks to a clueless, untrained person, not to a person who had any care for life and limb. Having to hear about him during the rest of the book bored me to pieces.

I will never read anything by Brian Hicks again, especially a "quasi-fact" book.
