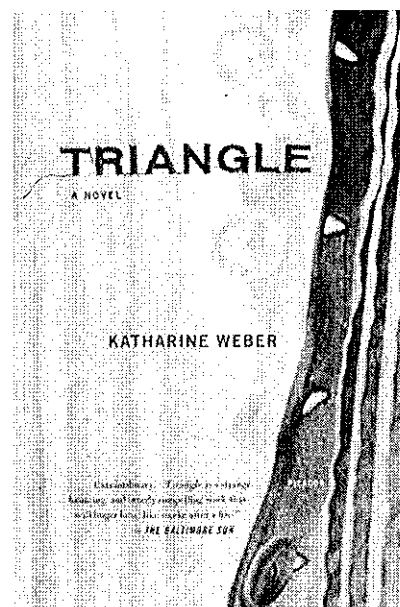


READING GROUP GUIDE

Triangle *A Novel*

by Katharine Weber

ISBN-10: 0-312-42614-3
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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Triangle* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Triangle*.

About the Book

By the time she dies at age 106, Esther Gottesfeld, the last survivor of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, has told the story of that day many times. But her own role remains mysterious: How did she survive when at least 146 workers, her sister and fiancé among them, burned or jumped to their deaths? Are the gaps in her story just common mistakes, or has she deliberately concealed a secret over the years? As her granddaughter seeks the real story in the present day, a zealous feminist historian bears down on her with her own set of conclusions, and Esther's own voice vies with theirs to reveal the full meaning of the tragedy.

A brilliant, haunting chronicle of the event that stood for ninety years as New York's most violent disaster, *Triangle* forces us to consider how we tell our stories, how we hear them, and how history is forged from unverifiable truths.

“An old-fashioned novel-with-a-secret, complete with a mysterious safe-deposit box and a case of mistaken identity.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

“Weber’s novel is indeed a thing of beauty. . . . A structurally dazzling novel whose formal acrobatics have a purpose beyond their own cleverness. That is, to make readers feel anew the tragedy of the Triangle fire.”

—Maureen Corrigan, NPR’s *Fresh Air*

“Katharine Weber’s crackerjack historical mystery, may be the most effective 9/11 novel yet written--and it isn’t even about 9/11.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Extraordinary . . . *Triangle* is a strange, haunting and utterly compelling work that will linger long, like smoke after a fire.”

—*The Baltimore Sun*

About the Author

Katharine Weber is the author of the novels *The Little Women*, *The Music Lesson*, and *Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear*. Her paternal grandmother finished buttonholes for the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in 1909. She lives in Connecticut.

Discussion Questions

1. Reread the poem by Robert Pinsky that opens the novel. What do you make of the way the poem blends past and present? In what way do various forms—poetry, journalism, scholarly books, musical compositions, fiction—complement one another in documenting history? What echoes did you notice between Pinsky’s poem and the *Triangle Oratorio* with which the novel concludes? What similar reverberations occur throughout the novel?
2. What assumptions did you make about Esther after reading the recollections that form the first chapter? How did your perception of her shift throughout the novel?
3. In your mind, what do George’s compositions sound like? What was the effect of reading about the medical aspects of his music? In what ways does this mesh with the legacy of loss in Rebecca’s ancestry?
4. What are the benefits and shortcomings of Rebecca’s DNA research? How does it affect her relationship with George?
5. What does George’s failure to have a cell phone indicate about his character and sensibility? In what way does George’s music weave science and technology into traditional and classical forms?

6. In the interview transcript featured in chapter four, what new details emerged that you had not noticed before in Esther's initial retelling of the Triangle fire? What defines her immigration story?
7. The profile of George, comprising chapter five, includes his own take on the cadences that inspire his music. What does this interview, alongside the one between Ruth and Esther, tell us about the various ways we view our own lives? If a reporter were to interview you about a significant incident in your life, what facts would have to be conveyed in your own words? What experiences would a reporter likely misinterpret?
8. What was it like to finally "hear" Ruth's voice in chapter eight? What conclusions had you drawn about her before she was given a voice in the novel? What is Ruth right about? What are her shortcomings? Why are Esther and Rebecca so resistant to viewing the fire through the lens of feminism?
9. Chapter eight opens with the inaccurate news story that reports Esther's death. What is the effect of her death date and its proximity to 9/11? What parallels exist between the Triangle tragedy and 9/11?
10. In chapter nine, Rebecca tells her therapist about the few memories she has of her father, realizing "she believed that her father wouldn't have died in the car accident along with her mother, that they would both be alive today if it were not for the Triangle fire. But Esther herself would have died years ago had she not been so busy surviving the fire so effectively." What universal qualities exist in this line of thinking? What is it like to be a survivor? What patterns does the mind discover in the randomness of tragedy? Was the death of Rebecca's parents "random"? Or the death of Morris Jacobs, in a fire no less?
11. How did you interpret Esther's habit of wearing eyeglasses that didn't perfectly correct her vision? What did you make of her comment, paraphrased by Rebecca in chapter thirteen, that "it was so she could see the world a little blurry on purpose"?
12. Why didn't Esther spend any of the money she received secretly after the fire? How would she have responded to the *Triangle Oratorio*?
13. What causes the shift in Rebecca and George's relationship, leading to marriage and a child?
14. How much knowledge of the Triangle Waist Company fire did you have before reading *Triangle*? What details about the fire surprised you? What is the effect of reading a book that blends historical fact with fiction?
15. Had you pieced together the truth by the time you reached the novel's closing scenes, when the realities of Esther's and Pauline's experiences at the factory are revealed? What choices would you have made in Pauline's situation?
16. What are the key events in your family history? What discrepancies exist in the various accounts of it? To what do you attribute those discrepancies? Are there artifacts such as

letters, legal documents, or family photos like the ones in the novel that could reveal family secrets or hidden truths if examined more closely?

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• Questions for Discussion

- 1) Much has been written about the *Triangle Shirtwaist Fire*, most recently a non-fiction work called *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*, by David von Drehle. What does Katharine Weber's *Triangle* do that historical accounts do not? What issues arise from making fiction out of history?
- 2) Interspersed with the story of the fire are other themes, most notably Rebecca's work in genetics and George's musical compositions. In a book that is fascinated by patterns and connections, how can you connect these themes to the Triangle fire?
- 3) Triangles play a role in the novel, in a variety of places, from the obvious to the more subtle. Identify the various triangles Weber creates here.
- 4) Consider the character of Ruth Zion. What do you make of her various academic theories about the fire? Do her theories help clarify or obscure the quest to determine what happened?
- 5) When did you begin to suspect the truth of Esther's story? What clues does Weber leave along the way? Are there any threads left hanging?
- 6) What accounts for the change in Rebecca and George's relationship and their decision to adopt a child?
- 7) Do you agree with George that "anything we do or make or create in the aftermath of September 11 has that inevitable context"? Compare this book to other recent novels that deal directly with the events of September 11. Some examples include *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer, *The Emperor's Children* by Claire Messud, and *The Good Life* by Jay McInerney. Consider the words of Israeli author Amos Oz, who said, in a different context, that "What is happening here in Israel has to wait 50 years or more to become literature. We are now in the journalistic phase, not the literary phase, it cannot become literature, so in the meantime I am still writing about my childhood in Europe." Do you agree with this? How might this be applied to *Triangle*?

Tova Mirvis is the author of two novels, *The Ladies Auxiliary* (1995) and *The Outside World* (2004).

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[About This Book](#)
[Discussion Questions](#)
[Critical Praise](#)
[Author Biography](#)

Triangle

by Katharine Weber

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About This Book

Much has been written about the notorious 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist fire that took the lives of at least 146 garment workers, most of them women. But *Triangle*, Katharine Weber's mesmerizing novel, brings a unique vision to the history and recollections surrounding that event. At the center of the story is Esther Gottesfeld, who at age 106 is the last living survivor of the gruesome tragedy. Her testimony was a crucial element in the criminal trial that ensued. When Esther dies, her few belongings raise new questions about her story, and two women find themselves at odds while trying to reconstruct the truth.

Esther's granddaughter, Rebecca Gottesfeld, a scientist, has been raised to believe that chance enabled Esther to escape while her sister and fiancé perished in the sweatshop blaze. After Rebecca receives a call from the feminist historian Ruth Zion, she is both resentful and curious to learn that her grandmother had granted Ruth a series of interviews. Ruth's research on other Triangle workers proposes disturbing alternative possibilities about the nature of Esther's suffering and survival. With her partner, George Botkin, an ingenious composer, Rebecca begins to sift through new artifacts, wondering whether the discrepancies in her grandmother's stories were caused by ordinary human fallacy, or are the consequence of secret histories having been concealed in the remnants of an industrial inferno. The historian, the scientist granddaughter, and the musician each give voice to an essential, though sometimes conflicting, aspect of the fire and its repercussions.

Leading us to consider how we tell our stories, how we hear them, and how history is forged from unverifiable truths, *Triangle* is a brilliant ode to the memorial process itself, and to the lives lost on that terrible day.

[top of the page](#)

Discussion Questions

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[top of the page](#)

Critical Praise

"Katharine Weber has always been a brilliant and ingenious formalist; at last she has found a subject deep and durable enough to bear the jeweled precision of her gaze. Here one of our most irresistible writers meets one of the most immovable events of our history. *Triangle* is an incandescent novel."

—Madison Smartt Bell, author of *The Stone That the Builder Refused*

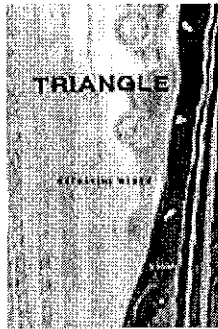
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Katharine Weber, Triangle



One of the first adult books I read as a teenager was a novel about the historic Triangle Shirtwaist fire. I've always been intrigued with this time in history, early New York City and the young girls who worked in the big city so long ago.

With **Triangle**, **Katharine Weber** takes us inside the life of a surviving Triangle factory worker, Esther Gottesfeld, who is 106 years old. Set in modern day, the novel looks at the fire through interviews with Esther and an overzealous historian with an agenda of her own, Ruth Zion. **Triangle** also delves into the lives of George, a composer who is inspired by genetic material and Rebecca, Esther's granddaughter. The themes and plots and characters are seamlessly braided together so well, as only a writer like Katharine Weber is able to do.

Why did you choose to write the book through George and Rebecca rather than from Esther's point of view?

I am not sure I made a decision about this exactly, so much as I just wrote it in a very organic way. I do think I wrote the book with Esther's voice as the organizing spine. I think her voice dominates the story. The story of Rebecca and George is really more of a counterpoint.

Tell me about your paternal Grandmother who worked at Triangle. What did you know about her and her work at the shirtwaist company, did she leave notes behind?

My grandmother rarely spoke of The Triangle to me, though she did work there for perhaps a year, finishing buttonholes, in 1909. She would mend my clothes when I visited her in her Brooklyn house, and she made some very nice little jackets for my dolls, complete with buttonholes. She would say from time to time that I was lucky to be in school, lucky I didn't have to earn a living the way girls my age who worked in sweatshops did, in her day. She died when I was 12.

My father talked more about his mother having worked at the Triangle than I ever heard about it from her. "She was a great lady," he would say, and then he would enumerate her accomplishments, arriving with her brother, sister, and nothing else in 1900, working first in sweatshops and later in the family grocery store (where my father was born, in the back room, in 1910) to support the family and to help put her sister Esther through law school.

Not a lot of books delve into the tragedy that was the Triangle fire, which was such an interesting time in history. What other periods in history intrigue you?

It's hard not to be intrigued by the Civil War, which has offered fertile material to countless novelists. I am also really interested in Irish history of the last few hundred years, and delved into it in a bit in **The Music Lesson**. I am especially interested in the first half of the twentieth century as well which seems so much richer than our present era.

I always think that serious books are written by scholarly, somber writers. How would you describe yourself and is 'serious' a word you would use ?

I certainly mean to be taken seriously. I feel only somewhat scholarly, however, which is to say the scholarship, crackpot as it is, is only ever there to serve the fiction. I am a novelist above, not anything else. My kind of scholarship is much more like a magpie swooping down on a glittering gum wrapper on the sidewalk than it is like the kind of scholarship necessary, for, say, a thesis.

Does your writing routine revolve around a cat, a pot of Earl Gray and a bit of classical music? That's how I imagine you.

Not quite. Our beloved cat has died, and I am a coffee drinker. I don't listen to music while I write. I write in my study out in the studio in our backyard in Connecticut, and also at certain times in Paris, and in our little house in Ireland.

What is your writing schedule? Are you a disciplined writer?

I am a wildly undisciplined writer most of the time, and I am mostly unproductive (in the sense of words on the page) for long stretches, but then I write in bursts of very intense long days, and some of that feels more like writing down what I have allowed to form fully. It is a little bit of a manic process. In a way it is like spending a certain amount of time just floating around, becalmed, and then catching a wind in your sails. I have learned to be patient with myself, and to accept that this is how I work, this is my process — the not writing is an important step in the writing.

When did you decide to become a writer, was it a long road or smooth sailing to get to the point of being an esteemed novelist?

I was always writing and a child, and there is no clear single moment of decision. But I did get a bit of a late start. My first fiction in print appeared in 1993, a short story in *The New Yorker*, taken off the slush pile, which was part of my first novel, then only half-written. I turned 40 the same year my first novel was published. I had done a lot of other writing along the way, I have never studied writing, and taught myself to write by being a reader, pretty much. It has certainly been a very crooked path.

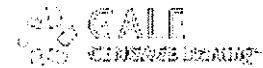
Who are some of the writers of today that you admire?

I have tremendous admiration for Philip Roth, Stephen Milhauser, Richard Powers. Colson Whitehead, Emily Barton, and Jonathan Lethem are fabulously inventive, and I esteem Allegra Goodman, Binnie Kirshenbaum and Margot Livesey a great deal as well. My admiration is boundless for Vladimir Nabokov, Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch, Somerset Maugham. And always, always -- Henry James and Edith Wharton. I am sure that on another day I would name a dozen different writers, but some of these are my core mentors on the page.

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Document 1 of 1

Katharine Weber

1955-

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Birth: November 12, 1955 in New York, New York
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Entry updated: 05/19/2004

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Awards](#)[Career](#)[Further Readings](#)[Personal Information](#)[Sidelights](#)[Source Citation](#)[Writings](#)

"Sidelights"

Katharine Weber's first novel, *Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear*, has been greeted enthusiastically by critics. "Tender and funny and sometimes remarkably jolting, this is a first novel of remarkable accomplishment," said a contributor to *Publishers Weekly*. Set in Geneva, Switzerland, the story traces the experiences and thoughts of Harriet Rose, a young American photographer, through a combination journal/letter she sends to her boyfriend, Benedict.

In the novel, events from both the past and present serve to expose the darkness underlying each character's life. Harriet observes Anne Gordon--the friend she is visiting--embark on a self-destructive affair with Victor, her father's friend and fellow

Auschwitz survivor, and the relationship causes much concern for Harriet. While wandering the streets of Geneva so that Anne and Victor can continue their daily lunch-time trysts in privacy, Harriet ponders her friend's happiness and gradually succumbs to memories of her own past.

Written in a style that critics found both witty and humorous, as well as dramatic, *Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear* reminds the reader that the past has a constant influence over the present. Truth can be interpreted on many levels, according to Weber. Harriet's letters and journals may record the events experienced inside a day and interpret her feelings; however, she can never precisely capture the day as it happened--written words can only be impressions and fragments of the complete truth, which is acted on by outside forces and events from the distant past. "Life is nothing but images transformed by reflection, and we rarely understand what we think we see," summarized Sally Eckhoff in the *Voice Literary Supplement*. Harriet's experiences reflect these limits of perception and fragmentation of memory. Elizabeth Benedict wrote in the *New York Times Book Review*, "As her title suggests, Katharine Weber is wise to these issues of artifice, distance and what seems like candor." Despite such weighty thoughts woven through the novel's plot, Weber's novel is never heavy-handed. As Eckhoff observed, Harriet's buoyant character keeps the darkness and danger from oppressing the reader. "Her jokey patter and enthusiastic innocence--that's the book's brightest idea."

Weber once told CA: "I have rarely done things in the usual order. I have no high school diploma, having left after eleventh grade to attend the New School when I was sixteen, and I have no college degree, though several years of part-time college at the New School and Yale. One way of thinking about this as an asset rather than a liability is to consider my education as being an ongoing activity rather than something that has been completed.

"Though I worked as a journalist and critic for several years, my fiction was never published anywhere until a story of mine was selected off the slush pile for publication in the *New Yorker* in January of 1993. That story was to form part of my first novel. I tell this story to encourage all unpublished fiction writers. It can happen."

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born November 12, 1955, in New York, NY;
daughter of Sidney (a film producer) and Andrea (a
photographer and bird watcher; maiden name,

Contributor of numerous articles, short stories, and reviews to periodicals, including *New York Times Book Review*, *New Yorker*, *Boston Sunday Globe*, *New Haven Register*, *Connecticut*, *Story*, *Redbook*, *Journal- Courier*, and *Architectural Digest*.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- *Library Journal*, June 15, 2003, Eleanor J. Bader, review of *The Little Women*, p. 103.
- *New York Times Book Review*, April 30, 1995, Elizabeth Benedict, review of *Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear*, p. 20.
- *Publishers Weekly*, February 13, 1995, review of *Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear*, pp. 62-63.
- *Voice Literary Supplement*, May, 1995, Sally Eckhoff, review of *Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear*, p.10.*

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October 21, 2007

BOOKS

A Fire, a Curiosity, a Heritage, a Novel and, Now, a Prize

By FRAN SILVERMAN

GROWING up in New York City, Katharine Weber used to walk by the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, aware that her grandmother had worked there finishing buttonholes for the shirts. Although her grandmother left that job two years before the 1911 fire that killed 146 workers, Ms. Weber often thought of the women caught there and of their decision either to jump to their death or to die in the blaze.

That curiosity became the inspiration for her book "Triangle" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006), for which she won the Connecticut Book Award for fiction last month.

Ms. Weber, 51, who moved to Connecticut in 1976 and settled in Bethany a year later, said she was prompted to start writing about the fire in February 2001 when she read that the last survivor, Rose Freedman, had died at the age of 107.

"I always had it in mind to write a story of the fire but didn't know how," she said. Then she wondered what would have happened if the last survivor of a tragedy was not telling the whole truth.

How her main character, Esther Gottesfeld, survived the fire is at the center of the book. The character, while inspired by Ms. Freedman, is completely fictitious, Ms. Weber said. But some of the characters are loosely based on what she imagined her grandmother's life was like while working in the factory, she said. The book is dedicated to her grandmothers — Pauline Gottesfeld, who worked in the factory until 1909, and Kay Swift, who was a Broadway composer. The book is Ms. Weber's fourth novel, but her first based on an actual event, one she says that has relevance today. She was in the middle of writing it on Sept. 11, 2001, and was struck that many workers in the World Trade Center faced the same decision as the Triangle workers.

"It's a parallel theme," Ms. Weber said. "It's a workplace, and there's something different about a workplace, where you are sitting at your desk doing your work or sitting at your sewing machine doing your work, and suddenly you are engulfed in flames."

In winning the book award for fiction, Ms. Weber beat Philip Roth's "Everyman" (Houghton Mifflin) and Chris Knopf's "Two Time" (Permanent Press), which were runners-up.

Ms. Weber, who teaches writing at Columbia University, is at work on a novel about a chocolate business run by a New Haven family. This book, she said, also carries the theme of workers at risk — the children who harvest cocoa beans in slavlike conditions.

Ms. Weber, a former board member of the National Book Critics Circle, twice judged the Connecticut Book Awards, in 2002 and 2003, before winning this year. She has two daughters, Lucy, 26, and Charlotte, 24, and

her husband is the cultural historian and author Nicholas Fox Weber, who is also the executive director of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the visual arts in Bethany.

At least 10 other states have book awards. For Connecticut's, the requirements are that nominees must live or have been born in the state, or their book must be set there or deal with events that took place there. The panel of judges is made up of writers, journalists and literature professors from Connecticut. There is no monetary compensation with the awards.

Kat Lyons, coordinator of the Connecticut Center for the Book, which gives out the awards, said there were 90 submissions in several categories this year.

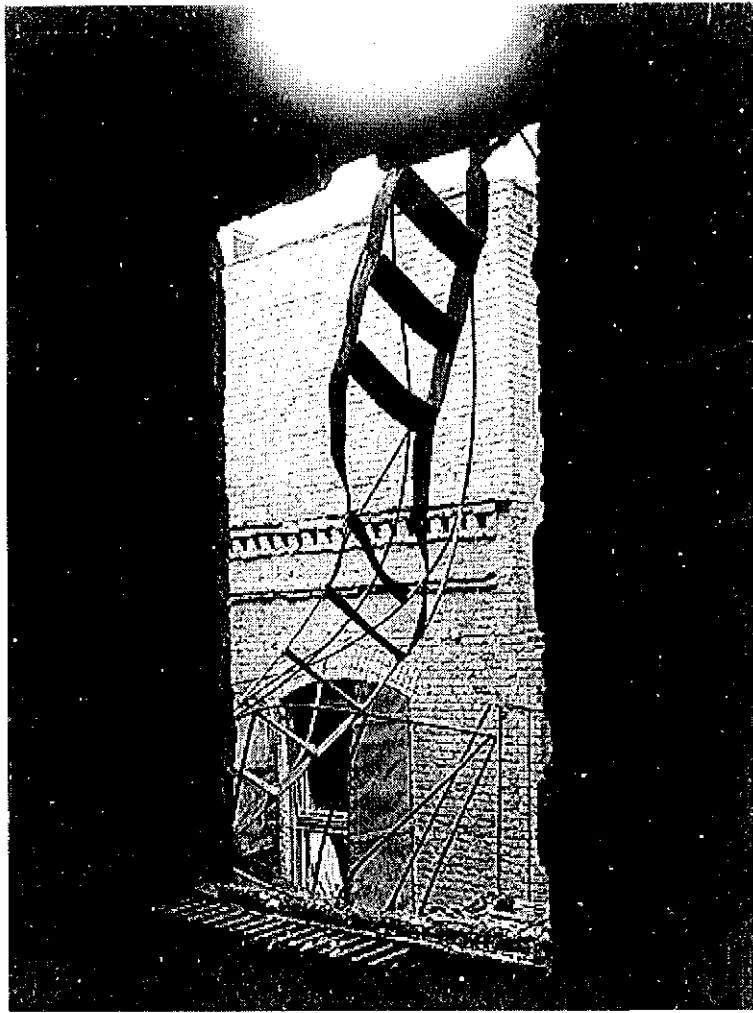
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Leap for Life, Leap of Death

275 girls started to collect their belongings as they were leaving work at 4:45 PM on Saturday. Within twenty minutes some of girls' charred bodies were lined up along the East Side of Greene Street. Those girls who flung themselves from the ninth floor were merely covered with tarpaulins where they hit the concrete. The Bellevue morgue was overrun with bodies and a makeshift morgue was set up on the adjoining pier on the East River. Hundred's of parents and family members came to identify their lost loved ones. 146 employees of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company were dead the night of March 25, 1911. The horror of their deaths led to numerous changes in occupational safety standards that currently ensure the safety of workers today.

At the time of the fire the only safety measures available for the workers were 27 buckets of water and a fire escape that would collapse when people tried to use them. Most of the doors were locked and those that were not locked only opened inwards and were effectively held shut by the onrush of workers escaping the fire. As the clothing materials feed the fire workers tried to escape anyway they could. 25 passengers flung themselves down the elevator shaft trying to escape the fire. Their bodies rained blood and coins down onto the employees who made it into the elevator cars. Engine Company 72 and 33 were the first on the scene. To add to the already bleak situation the water streams from their hoses could only reach the 7th floor. Their ladders could only reach between the 6th and 7th floor. 19 bodies were found charred against the locked doors. 25 bodies were found huddled in a cloakroom. These deaths, although horrible, was not what changed the feelings toward government regulation. Upon finding that they could not use the doors to escape and the fire burning at their clothes and hair, the girls of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, aged mostly between 13 and 23 years of age, jumped 9 stories to their death. One after another the girls jumped to their deaths on the concrete over one hundred of feet below. Sometimes the girls jumped three and four at a time. On lookers watched in horror as body after body fell to the earth. "Thud -- dead; thud -- dead; thud -- dead; thud -- dead. Sixty-two thud -- deads. I call them that, because the sound and the thought of death came to me each time, at the same instant," said United Press reporter William Shephard. The bodies of teenage girls lined the street below. Blankets that would-be rescuers used ripped at the weight and the speed the bodies were falling. Fire Department blankets were ripped when multiple girls tried to jump into the same blanket. Some girls tried to jump to the ladders that could not reach the ninth floor. None reached the ladders. The fire escape in the rear of the building collapsed and trapped the employees even more.



Many people were outraged at the tragedy. The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire helped to solidify support for workers' unions like the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. The owners, Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, were tried for manslaughter but were acquitted in 1914. Though most people were disgusted with what had happened, there were no regulations in effect that would have saved lives.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911 still remains one of the most vivid and horrid tragedies that changed American Labor Unions and labor laws. The fire had come only five years after Upton Sinclair published his book *The Jungle*, which detailed the plight of the workers at a meat packer's plant. But instead of reforming the working conditions most people wanted to reform the health and safety regulations on food. The tragic death of 146 girls, whose average age was 19, was needed before the politicians and the people saw for the need to regulate safety in the workplace.

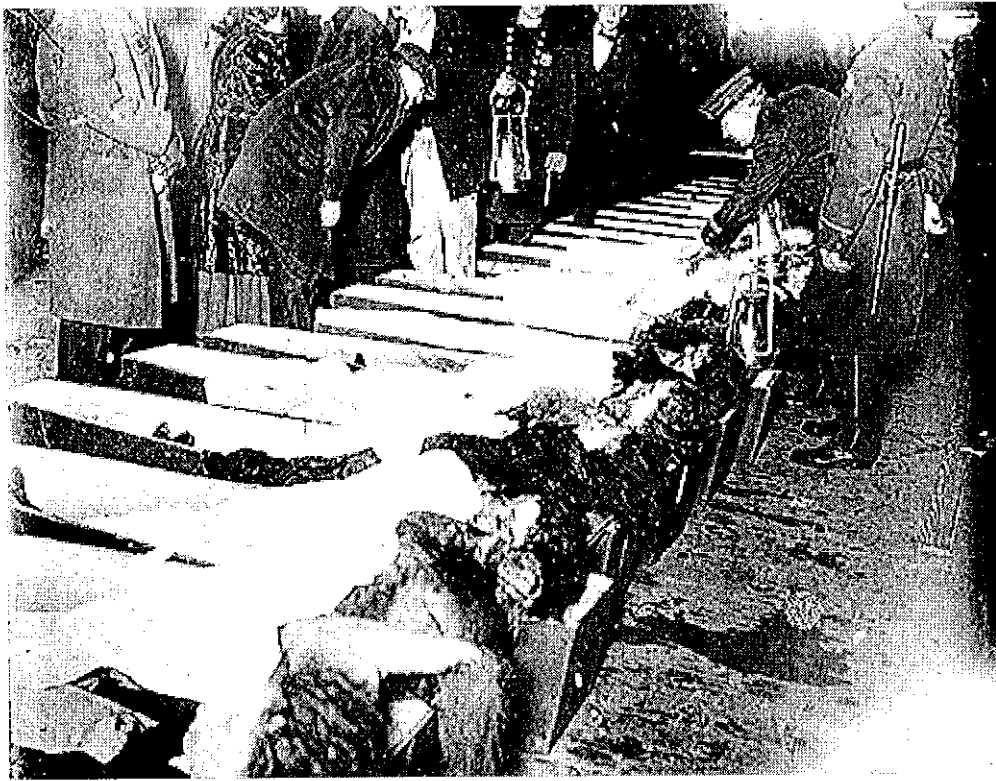
Pauline Cuoio Pepe was a nineteen-year-old sewing machine operator and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. "It was all nice young Jewish girls who were engaged to be married. You should see the diamonds and everything. Those were the ones who threw themselves from the window," Pepe told a Manhattan historian. "What the hell did they close the door for? What did they think we were going out with? What are we gonna do, steal a shirtwaist? Who the heck wanted a shirtwaist?" asked Pepe. The New York legislature created a commission called The Factory Commission of 1911. Senator Robert F. Wagner, Alfred E. Smith and Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, headed the commission. One of the most significant results of this commission was the creation of the Fire Prevention division as part of the Fire Department. Restrictions were made to prevent fires from happening and to prevent the blockage of escape routes.



Pauline Cuoio Pepe recounted that the workers didn't even use the regular doors to leave the factory. "...we never went out the front door. We always went one by one out the back. There was a man there searching, because the people were afraid we would take something, so that door was always locked." Even the doors that were not locked were of no use to the workers. The doors in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory only opened inward. When the girls tried to escape through the doors, the girls in front could not open the doors because of all of the girls pushing from behind. If the door opened outward, the onrush of girls would have opened the door. The factories would be required to make all doors open outward in factories. At the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, some of the doors were locked. Usually the doors were locked so that clothing could not be stolen through unwatched doors. When the girls tried to escape through the locked doors, the fire consumed them. All doors were to remain unlocked during business hours in accordance with new regulations. Sprinkler systems must be installed if a company employs more than 25 people above ground level. The girls of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company only had 27 buckets of water to save themselves from the fire. Today there are many laws that govern the condition of workplaces. Among those regulations are implemented to let people out during a fire. Multiple fire exits, unblocked fire doors, and clear pathways to exits are all required. Firefighting equipment must be maintained in the building. Fire sprinklers for higher floors and portable fire extinguishers. Education for employees is a must. All employees are to be trained on the proper use of a fire extinguisher as well as escape routes and fire drills. Emergency evacuation plans are also required in writing and posted. Written fire prevention plans must also be available. All areas that are fire hazards or that contain equipment of chemicals that could start fires must be maintained and controlled and all times. The United States Department of Labor classified this set of standards as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911 would change the regulation by government of business. Before the fire government had mostly stayed away from business feeling it had no power to legislate it. After the fire government could not avoid instituting laws to protect the workers. Once the New York legislature enacted safety laws, other states in the US followed suit. Workers also began to look toward

unions to voice their concerns over safety and pay. Samuel Gompers of the AFL had won a lot of trust and admiration by sitting in on The Factory Commission of 1911. The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union also won support and led a march of 100,000 to tell the New York legislature to move into action. Unfortunately not everyone had learned their history. March 25, 1990, on the 79th anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, the Happy Land Social Club fire in the Bronx, New York killed 87 people. Most of the people killed were not workers but customers. There was no sprinkler system, fire alarms, nor exits. The windows had iron bars on them leaving only one door to escape the inferno. On September 3, 1991 in Hamlet North Carolina 25 workers died at a poultry factory. The exits were ill marked, blocked or padlocked. The doors were padlocked to prevent theft. The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire remains as a turning point in US history. Countless state and federal laws were enacted because of this incident. Unions gained numerous new workers who wanted someone to fight for their safety. Now employers in the US have a clear set of guidelines that they need to follow to ensure the safety of their employees.



Works Cited

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The Triangle Fire, March 25, 1911



Detail, *History of the Needlecraft Industry* (1938), by Ernest Fiene, High School of Fashion and Industry. A mural commissioned by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGW).

- [After Identifying a Body](#)
- [After the Fire](#)
- [Pavement Broken by Falling Bodies](#)
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- [Triangle Fire](#)
- [Triangle Fire](#)
- [Triangle Fire](#)
- [Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Building](#)
- [Twisted Fire Escape](#)
- [View of Ruins](#)
- [Viewing Victims at the Morgue](#)

These photographs, taken at the scene of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, are from the archives of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library. It might seem surprising that a collection of photographs depicting an event that occurred over twenty years prior to the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt should be found on a website devoted to the New Deal era, but for many New Dealers, March 25, 1911 was, as Secretary of Labor Francis Perkins recalled, "the day the New Deal began." Throughout the 1930s, artists, labor leaders, and reformers continued to look to the tragedy as a touchstone for the continuing need to agitate for legislation concerning work conditions and to press for the rights of all workers.

The best educational resource on the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire is the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives at Cornell University's [Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire Website](#) created in cooperation with the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE!). The website contains speeches, photographs, political cartoons, oral histories, lesson ideas and much more.

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<u>Chronology</u>	<p><i>Famous Trials</i></p> <p><i>The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire Trial</i></p> <p><i>1911</i></p>
<u>Maps</u>	
<u>NY Building Code & Safety Laws</u>	
<u>Newspaper Accounts</u>	
<u>Fire Report</u>	
<u>Fire Comm'n Testimony</u>	
<u>The Victims</u>	
<u>Trial Excerpts</u>	
<u>Trial Summations</u>	
<u>Selected Images</u>	<p>The bodies of seamstresses, who jumped from the factory floors of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company to avoid being burned alive, lie outside the building.</p>
<u>Cornell Site</u>	<p><u>The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire Trial</u> <i>by Douglas Linder (c) 2002</i></p> <p>It was a warm spring Saturday in New York City, March 25, 1911. On the top three floors of the ten-story Asch Building just off of Washington Square, employees of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory began putting away their work as the 4:45 p.m. quitting time approached. Most of the several hundred Triangle Shirtwaist employees were teenage girls. Most were recent immigrants. Many spoke only a little English.</p> <p>Just then somebody on the eighth floor shouted, "Fire!" Flames leapt from discarded rags between the first and second rows of cutting tables in the hundred- foot-by-hundred-foot floor. Triangle employee William Bernstein grabbed pails of water and vainly attempted to put the fire out. As a line of hanging patterns began to burn, cries of "fire" erupted from all over the floor. In the thickening smoke, as several men</p>

the Triangle Factory Fire

Near closing time on
Saturday afternoon,
March 25, 1911,
a fire broke out...

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The Story of the Fire

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- Fire!
- Mourning and Protest
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- Investigation, Trial and Reform
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- Other Resources
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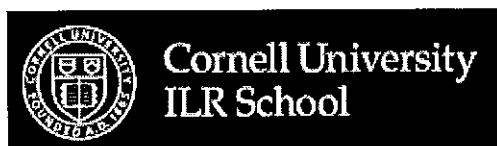




**Criminal Trial
Transcripts**

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