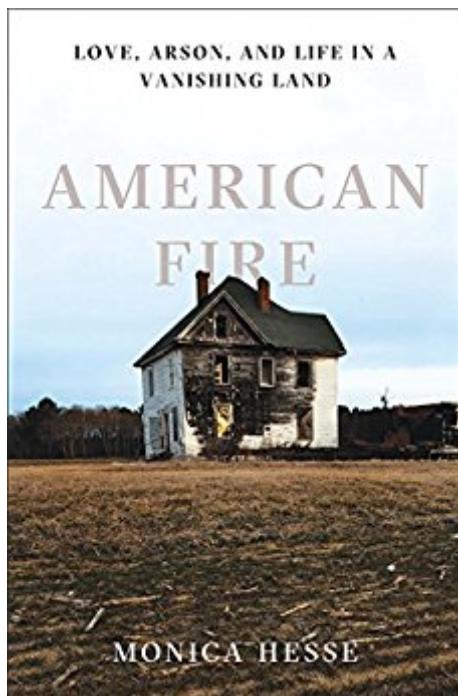


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American Fire: Love, Arson, And Life In A Vanishing Land



Synopsis

Recommended Summer reading by TIME, Entertainment Weekly, Real Simple, and Elle. A breathtaking feat of reportage, American Fire combines procedural with love story, redefining American tragedy for our time. The arsons started on a cold November midnight and didn't stop for months. Night after night, the people of Accomack County waited to see which building would burn down next, regarding each other at first with compassion, and later suspicion. Vigilante groups sprang up, patrolling the rural Virginia coast with cameras and camouflage. Volunteer firefighters slept at their stations. The arsonist seemed to target abandoned buildings, but local police were stretched too thin to surveil them all. Accomack was desolate—there were hundreds of abandoned buildings. And by the dozen they were burning. The culprit, and the path that led to these crimes, is a story of twenty-first century America. Washington Post reporter Monica Hesse first drove down to the reeling county to cover a hearing for Charlie Smith, a struggling mechanic who upon his capture had promptly pleaded guilty to sixty-seven counts of arson. But as Charlie's confession unspooled, it got deeper and weirder. He wasn't lighting fires alone; his crimes were galvanized by a surprising love story. Over a year of investigating, Hesse uncovered the motives of Charlie and his accomplice, girlfriend Tonya Bundick, a woman of steel-like strength and an inscrutable past. Theirs was a love built on impossibly tight budgets and simple pleasures. They were each other's inspiration and escape—until they weren't. Though it's hard to believe today, one hundred years ago Accomack was the richest rural county in the nation. Slowly it's been drained of its industry—agriculture as well as its wealth and population. In an already remote region, limited employment options offer little in the way of opportunity. A mesmerizing and crucial panorama with nationwide implications, American Fire asks what happens when a community gets left behind. Hesse brings to life the Eastern Shore and its inhabitants, battling a punishing economy and increasingly terrified by a string of fires they could not explain. The result evokes the soul of rural America—a land half gutted before the fires even began.

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Customer Reviews

This is a stunning book. I read it (rather, I swallowed it) in three marathon sittings. The story is captivating, unfolding a troubling and urgent mystery in a once-proud region now become a backwater. It's a page-turner. But the keen insights about this county and its people, coupled with an engaging style, are what push this book into the territory of the extraordinary. I especially appreciated Hesse's ability to balance clear affection for the county's residents with honest critique. Both beauty marks and blemishes. Read it first for a compelling story. Read it a second time to appreciate this fine portrait of a lost America.

Excellent story telling, kept me in suspense. I also enjoyed the descriptions of the real life characters in the book. If I had a large block of time I could have binge read this. I have never been to this part of the country where the book takes place, so for me I was fascinated by it's history and current state of condition. The best book I've read this year!

All I can say is what a well researched story ! I remembered watching this on the news all the way in the Midwest when the fires were blazing away . I found the story a fantastic read that held a underlining warmth for the rural areas of the fire's county.

Well written book and am enjoying it. But why is there no map of the area described in the book? We also could have used a diagram with the fires noted near each town. A little hard to follow sometimes. I found myself going to my road atlas to understand the geography of the area described in the book.

Interesting info on a bizarre topic. Enjoyed reading about the situation in that area. I'm still puzzled about how this all transpired in spite of the authors speculation.

Interesting story to a point in the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Ran on a bit too long due to all the legal and investigative reporting. Good writer with a blazing tale!

This story was close to home. I have spent many years on the Eastern Shore. Monica Hesse captured the essence of life here. For many, there is a hidden desperation and sadness that words cannot express. To live a successful life here, one must be motivated to rise out of the culture and create a way to self expression that is motivated and meaningful.

fascinating story about an arson escapade showing points of view of nearly all sides involved.

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