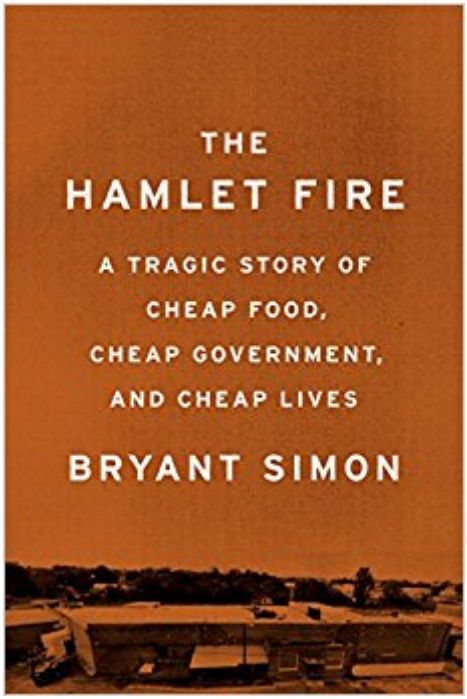
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The Hamlet Fire: A Tragic Story Of Cheap Food, Cheap Government, And Cheap Lives



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Synopsis

For decades, the small, quiet town of Hamlet, North Carolina, thrived thanks to the railroad. But by the 1970s, it had become a postindustrial backwater, a magnet for businesses searching for cheap labor with little or almost no official oversight. One of these businesses was Imperial Food Products. The company paid its workers a dollar above the minimum wage to stand in pools of freezing water for hours on end, scraping gobs of fat off frozen chicken breasts before they got dipped in battered and fried into golden brown nuggets and tenders. If a worker complained about the heat or the cold or missed a shift to take care of their children or went to the bathroom too often they were fired. But they kept coming back to work because Hamlet was a place where jobs were scarce. Then, on the morning of September 3, 1991, the day after Labor Day, this factory that had never been inspected burst into flame. Twenty-five peopleÃ¢â ¬â •many of whom were black women with children, living on their ownÃ¢â ¬â •perished that day behind the plantÃ¢â ¬â„¢s locked and bolted doors. Eighty years after the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, industrial disasters were supposed to have been a thing of the past. After spending several years talking to local residents, state officials, and survivors of the fire, award-winning historian Bryant Simon has written a vivid, potent, and disturbing social autopsy of this town, this factory, and this time that shows how cheap labor, cheap government, and cheap food came together in a way that was bound for tragedy.

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Customer Reviews

Praise for Hamlet Fire:"A multidimensional volume about a fatal 1991 fire at a chicken processing

plant in North Carolina [that] connects the disaster in Hamlet to increasing consumer demand for cheap goods and cites disasters in other industries also driven by low prices. The Hamlet tragedy was not an isolated incident, Simon reminds readers, but part of a wider system of profit-driven labor exploitation."—Publishers Weekly (starred)"Engaging and humanizing . . . [Simon] uses the horrific event of a devastating accident at a chicken-processing plant in rural North Carolina to examine the consequences of the modern American convenience diet, where everything is expendable."—Booklist"A vivid, highly disturbing narrative with relevance to current discussions of economic inequality and workplace safety."—Kirkus Reviews"In haunting and powerful prose, historian Bryant Simon lays bare just how costly it really is, just how ugly it truly is, when Americans insist on cheap. As his meticulously researched examination of the 1991 Hamlet fire makes so painfully clear, real peopleÃ¢â ¬â •overwhelmingly poor and disproportionately black peopleÃ¢â ¬â •pay a high price indeed for this nationÃ¢â ¬â„¢s insatiable desire for cheap food and cheap government. But thanks to SimonÃ¢â ¬â„¢s careful reconstruction of the forces and circumstances that led so many to suffer in this one tiny North Carolina town, as well as his searing analysis of why those who lived and worked there mattered so little, readers are left with only one conclusion: America finally must commit itself to decent wages, safe workplaces, sufficient health care, and everything else that human beings need. And, if that costs us all a bit more, so be it."—Heather Ann Thompson, author of Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and Its Legacy, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the Bancroft Prize for History "Bryant Simon plunges into the horror of an industrial fire and emerges with a gripping tale of capitalism gone wrong. Sifting through the wreckage, he unearths story after story of the unsustainable cost of cheap: a reckless economy, a cut-rate government, factory food, and disposable lives. SimonÃ¢â ¬â„¢s forensics are written with force, clarity, and gripping detail. The Hamlet Fire is a heartbreaking history of the hollowing out of the American dream."—Jefferson Cowie, author of StayinÃ¢â ¬â„¢ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class "What appears cheap comes at an expensive costÃ¢â ¬â •often life itself if life itself is worth valuing. But lives in the United StatesÃ¢â ¬â •especially poor Black livesÃ¢â ¬â •are as cheap as the food and the government that is not sustaining those lives, Bryant Simon reveals in absorbing prose and striking analysis. The Hamlet Fire presents the smoldering death day of those twenty-five small town North Carolinians not as an industrial accident. Simon heroically presents this tragedy as a regularity in the unknown life of present-day industrial America where Ã¢â ¬Ëœcheapâ ¬â„¢ lives lavishly and valued life is dead. The Hamlet Fire is an oracle."—Ibram X. Kendi, author of Stamped from the Beginning, winner of the 2016 National Book Award for nonfiction"Bryant SimonÃ¢â ¬â„¢s

The Hamlet Fire is a hard-hitting piece of investigative journalism that is steeped in economic history and cultural theory. ItÃ¢â ¬â„¢s also the story of a community thatÃ¢â ¬â„¢s fallen through the cracks of the prelapsarian American Dream, a community of people who read like tragic characters from a literary novel. This is a study of what happens when generational poverty meets capitalist greed, but itÃ¢â ¬â„¢s also a testament to the strength of the American fabric that binds us all."—Wiley Cash, author of A Land More Kind Than Home and This Dark Road to Mercy

Bryant Simon is a professor of history at Temple University. He is the author of Boardwalk of Dreams: Atlantic City and the Fate of Urban America, and Everything but the Coffee: Learning About America from Starbucks. His work and commentary have been featured in the New Yorker, the Washington Post, the New Republic, and numerous other outlets. He lives in Philadelphia.

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