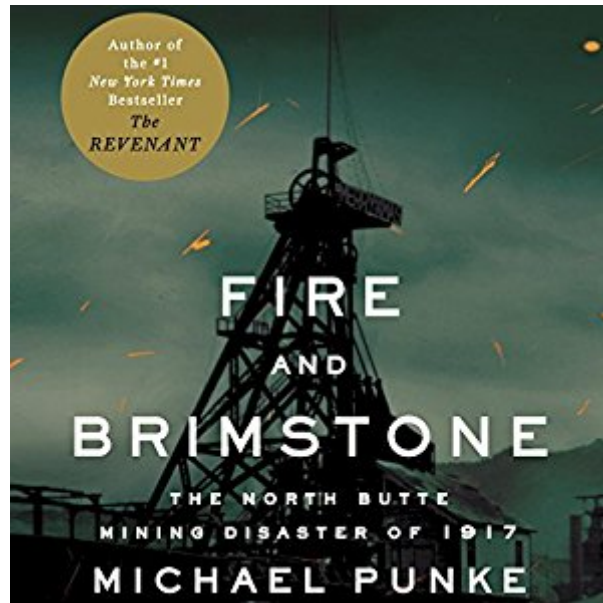


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# Fire And Brimstone: The North Butte Mining Disaster Of 1917



## Synopsis

The author of the number-one New York Times best seller *The Revenant* - the basis for the award-winning motion picture starring Leonardo DiCaprio - tells the remarkable story of the worst hard-rock mining disaster in American history. The worst hard-rock mining disaster in American history began a half hour before midnight on June 8, 1917, when fire broke out in the North Butte Mining Company's Granite Mountain shaft. Sparked more than 2,000 feet below ground, the fire spewed flames, smoke, and poisonous gas through a labyrinth of underground tunnels. Within an hour more than 400 men would be locked in a battle to survive. Within three days 164 of them would be dead. *Fire and Brimstone* recounts the remarkable stories of both the men below ground and their families above, focusing on two groups of miners who made the incredible decision to entomb themselves to escape the gas. While the disaster is compelling in its own right, *Fire and Brimstone* also tells a far broader story striking in its contemporary relevance. Butte, Montana, on the eve of the North Butte disaster, was a volatile jumble of antiwar protest, an abusive corporate master, seething labor unrest, divisive ethnic tension, and radicalism both left and right. It was a powder keg lacking only a spark, and the mine fire would ignite strikes, murder, ethnic and political witch hunts, occupation by federal troops, and ultimately a battle over presidential power.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

On 8 June 1917 an enormous 1,200 foot cable of wire, insulation, and lead sheathing, weighing five pounds per foot, was being lowered into the Granite Mountain copper mine in Butte, Montana. It

kinked as it was going down the mine shaft, and in attempting to untangle it, the cable came loose, tearing down the shaft, ruining equipment, but harming no one. In the operation to recover the hopelessly damaged cable, however, part of the insulation caught fire. The resulting smoke and conflagration killed 164 miners, which is significant enough as the worst hard-rock mining disaster in American history. It also sparked labor violence and affected national politics even to the attempt of Franklin Delano Roosevelt to pack the Supreme Court with justices who saw things his way. Everything from the small flame that started the fire to the national repercussions is examined in *Fire and Brimstone: The North Butte Mining Disaster of 1917* (Hyperion) by Michael Punke. Readers will be reminded of the coal mining disasters from earlier this year and the continuing danger of working underground, but will also get short course in the history of American copper mining and the associated labor movements of the first half of the twentieth century. After the cable had been lost, the problem started with the crew that descended 3,740 feet to retrieve it. A carbide lantern (battery lamps were available, but were dim and heavy) caught the oil-soaked insulation on fire, and the crew could not stop it. There were over 400 men working in the mine, and as word spread about the fire, they scrambled through the labyrinthine tunnels attempting to find a way out or somehow to keep clear of the poisonous gases (mostly carbon monoxide). Many of the men attempting to leave the mine by their customary means were overcome. Others who knew that side tunnels connected to distant mine shafts found that solid walls blocked their escape; the walls, ironically made to keep smoke from getting from one mine to another, were illegal because they had no doors. In two cases, miners walled themselves up in mine tunnels to barricade out the deadly fumes. The company assured everyone that it would be getting a generous \$750,000 to the families of the dead, but it didn't even come close. After the accident, there was an understandable push to restart unionism, but Anaconda portrayed strikes by the union as a plot by German forces, and especially by the leftist International Workers of the World, which the public feared. Anaconda did whatever it could to divide the prospective unions by ethnic lines or by job specialty. It also took hold of the Montana government, helping to found "Councils of Defense" that had intimidating capacity to outlaw the German language or effectively ban First Amendment rights. Senator Burton K. Wheeler, who had made a name for himself as district attorney by refusing to crack down on labor organizers after the disaster, helped usher in the New Deal changes when he became a senator from Montana, but he also became a leading opponent of FDR's court-packing scheme. Readers will not only notice similarities to recent mining disasters, but also to the current political atmosphere. Fear of poorly-understood aggressors led to curtailment of citizens' rights and to the increase in executive power, with corrections to the abuses coming only eventually. Punke does not belabor the

similarities, but easily moves from the specific accident to the broader view of effects on Montana and national politics. It is a grim tale at all levels.

Michael Punke does an excellent job of weaving the history of the time with the story of the North Butte mining disaster. I don't read a lot of history, but found this one of the most interesting, hard-to-put-down books I've read of any non-fiction genre. You can smell the smoke, feel the panic and appreciate the courage of the men and women of Butte. To get a real sense of this history, visit Butte, Montana. It's one of the most fascinating and strong communities on the planet.

Since reading Punke's first novel, *The Revenant*, I have anxiously awaited his next effort. *Fire & Brimstone* certainly does not disappoint. Like *The Revenant*, *Fire & Brimstone* is a meticulously researched and colorful historical novel. However, *Fire & Brimstone* has significant relevance to today's world given the recent mining tragedies in West Virginia and elsewhere. Other modern day themes include all powerful energy companies, labor strife and environmental issues. Punke also brings to life a wide range of characters from that tragedy and era. I highly recommend *Fire & Brimstone*.

This is an excellent read. Michael Punke tells a compelling story of the worst hard-rock mining disaster in history and describes in detail the political unrest and ethnic tensions in our country at the dawn of the 20th century. Most interesting of all is the gripping adventures of the men who are trapped more than 2000 feet below ground trying to survive fire, poison gasses, and despair - hoping rescuers will soon arrive. Highly recommended . . . a book you will not want to put down.

*Fire and Brimstone* represents one of the best combinations of accurate historical documentation, with countless examples of word for word quotation, making the events which define Butte's landscape to this day seem as though they happened only last week. Heroes are remembered and chaos is represented in such a manner that puts the boring history classes of childhood to shame. This book is a required work for any truly involved study of the history of Butte, more so than that of 18th century mining America.

this book talks about the times during my great uncles' times when they worked in the copper and iron ore mines. I'm hoping to get a more complete picture of life they lead and rough times they had to go through.

FIRE AND BRIMSTONE: THE NORTH BUTTE MINING DISASTER OF 1917 provides a 'you are there' history of a disaster which began just before midnight on June 8, 1917, when a fire trapped over four hundred men underground. As they fought to survive below, politics and local changes intersected above in a book which covers not just the mining disaster's circumstances, but its lasting implications for labor relations. Diane C. Donovan California Bookwatch

I can not possibly grasp how much research went into this book. This is not the kind of story that makes you wish you were there. On the contrary I am glad I was not involved. I came from a family who at times were involved in coal mining and in fact my father started in the mine at 16. Luckily I never had to. I pray none of our offspring never have to work under the hazards or the labor conditions these people did. The story seemed drawn out but that is probably the only way to tell the hole story

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