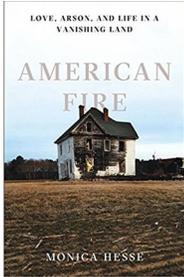


Books by the Stack



American Fire: Love, Arson, and Life in a Vanishing Land by Monica Hesse

Documents the trials of a man who was charged with dozens of counts of arson in rural Virginia, sharing insight into the perpetrator's struggles with addiction, his relationships with his accomplice girlfriend and the impact of the fires on their community.

Why you'll like it: *True crime. Compelling. Journalistic.*

About the Author: Monica Hesse is a feature writer for the Washington Post. Winner of the Edgar Award and a finalist for a Livingston and James Beard Award, she is also the author of *Girl in the Blue Coat*. She lives in Washington, DC.

Questions for Discussion

1. Talk about the setting of *American Fire*, the isolated county on the far side of the Chesapeake Bay. How would you describe its economy, its residents, and history? In what way are rural areas like Accomack County tailor-made for arsonists?
2. At one point, the author tells us that the arson aroused suspicions throughout the community, that "people turned on friends and neighbors." Yet the arson also seems to have brought people together. How would you say the arson affected the community?
3. Consider, also, the human effort involved in fighting and investigating the fires: Hesse tells us that over 41,000 manpower hours were involved. What impressed you most about the authorities' responses?
4. It took the police months to solve the crime? How did they finally catch the culprits?
5. A group of profilers descended on Accomack County. Talk about their insights and whether or not they were helpful in solving the crime?
6. Hesse takes a chapter to compare Charlie Smith and Tonya Bundick to Bonnie and Clyde Barrow. What are the similarities? Aside from the Barrows, how would you describe Charlie and Tonya?
7. What motivated the couple to turn to arson, especially on such a grand scale? What do you think of the two? Hesse spends a good deal of time detailing the specifics of their lives: does she build a sympathetic portrait? Do they spur *your* sympathy?
8. Hesse calls arson "a weird crime." What makes it so strange?
9. Fire itself interests the author – the way it's set, the way it moves, the way it's fought. Why do humans find fire so fascinating? What is the power it holds over us?
10. Even though we know the outcome in catching the arsonists, *American Fire* still thrums with suspense. How does Monica Hesse do that?
11. What is the significance of the book's title, *American Fire*? Why "American"?
12. How does the history of the area impact the story?

13. Has technology robbed people of a sense of community? Why or why not?
14. What are the differences between Tonya's interrogation and Charlie's interrogation?
15. Why did Charlie think by lighting the fires he was protecting Tonya? Why not just stop?

(Questions provided by LitLovers and Tracy Harrington Atkinson)



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