

Ashes of Roses by Mary Jane Auch

Subjects: Triangle Shirtwaist Company—Fire, 1911—Fiction; Immigrants—New York (State)—New York—Fiction; Irish Americans—Fiction

Awards: Best Books for Young Adults, Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People

Book Lists: America, Gifted, Grade 6, Middle School, North America, Reluctant Readers

Props: Pictures of real Shirtwaist Factory fire, shawl



Near closing time on Saturday afternoon, March 25, 1911, a fire broke out on the top floors of the Triangle Waist Company. This factory for clothing quickly erupted into madness, a terrifying moment in time, disrupting forever the lives of young workers; many were women as young as 15 years of age. They were, for the most part, recent European immigrants who had come to the United States with their families to seek a better life. When the fire broke out, factory workers were trapped on the top floors of the building because the doors were routinely locked by the factory owners and the fire escapes were not maintained. The young immigrants waited at the windows for rescue only to discover that the firefighters' ladders were several stories too short and the water from the hoses could not reach the top floors. Many chose to jump to their deaths rather than be burned alive. By the time the fire was over, 146 employees had died and hundreds more were seriously burned.

Ashes of Roses is a fictional story based on the real events of the devastating fire that claimed those 146 lives. The story begins with a sixteen-year-old girl named Rose Nolan. She has just completed a long sea voyage from Ireland to America.

(Put shawl around shoulders and speak with an Irish accent)

As I came up the ladder from the lower decks I could see all of the passengers crowded together on the low side of the deck. There was no doubt that the deck was tilted. But why? Then I realized what the problem was. We were just passin' the Statue of Liberty, and everyone had rushed to that side of the boat to see her. I grabbed Bridget's little hand and pushed through the crowd. There stood Lady Liberty, more beautiful than ever she'd appeared in the black-and-white pictures I'd seen. She was a lovely soft green in color, and the rosy sun gave a blush to her cheeks. I couldn't believe how big she was. She towered over the harbor like a giantess who had waded in from the ocean. The ship grew strangely silent. I saw tears in the eyes of the men next to me. My heart swelled with hope and fear at the same time.

Once we had passed the Statue of Liberty, I found Da and Ma, Maureen, and little baby Joseph. Da told us that we were to go to Ellis Island, the place where immigration officials decided whether or not ye were fit to enter America's gates. Stern, thin-lipped women doctors poked and prodded me. When it was over, I emerged half stunned into the huge registry room and looked for my family. I found them distraught and angry. Baby Joseph had an eye disease and the law said he could not come into America. Da had decided that he would return to Ireland with the baby, earn more money, give the baby time to heal, and come back to us in America.

The examiner came into the room, "We'll have to separate you now. Who is going back with the child?"

Da said he would. He kissed us each in turn. "Be strong," he whispered to me. "Yer ma needs ye now."

Da tried to pull the squallin' Joseph from Ma's arms, but Joseph wouldn't let go. I stepped behind Ma and pried Joseph's little fists away from the collar of her coat. As Da wrenched Joseph away, Ma followed him, but I caught her around her waist and held tight. "Don't take my baby!" Ma wailed. Her piercin' scream echoed at me from all corners of the huge room, like arrows goin' through my body. The last thing I saw was Joseph reachin' his little arms over Da's shoulder, his eyes wide with the shock of betrayal.

(Take off shawl and stop using Irish accent)

Rose must find her way in a new world with her family torn apart. This is not the beginning she had hoped for. But the question is: How will it end? For Rose will eventually find her way to the Triangle Waist Company. She will be there on March 25th when so many lives are lost. The name Rose was the most common name among those that died. On that day, when the fire eventually cooled, it left behind the ashes of the burned, it left *(Hold up book)* *Ashes of Roses* by Mary Jane Auch. Learn what happens to Rose for yourself.