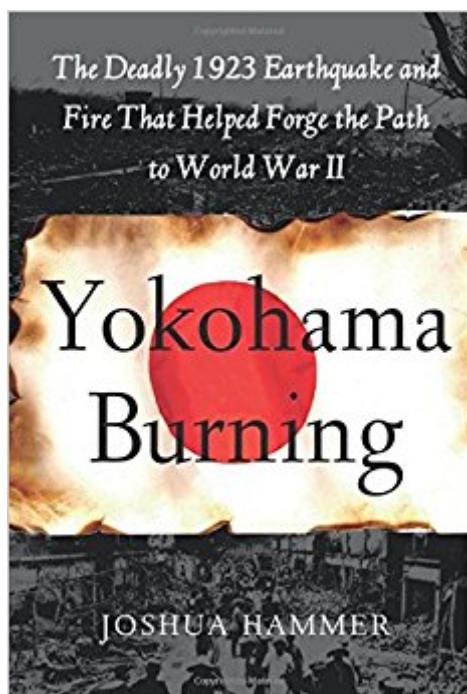


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# **Yokohama Burning: The Deadly 1923 Earthquake And Fire That Helped Forge The Path To World War II**



## Synopsis

Yokohama Burning is the story of the worst natural disaster of the twentieth century: the earthquakes, fires, and tsunamis of September 1923 that destroyed Yokohama and most of Tokyo and killed 140,000 people during two days of horror. With cinematic vividness and from multiple perspectives, acclaimed Newsweek correspondent Joshua Hammer re-creates harrowing scenes of death, escape, and rescue. He also places the tumultuous events in the context of history and demonstrates how they set Japan on a path to even greater tragedy. At two minutes to noon on Saturday, September 1, 1923, life in the two cities was humming along at its usual pace. An international merchant fleet, an early harbinger of globalization, floated in Yokohama harbor and loaded tea and silk on the docks. More than three thousand rickshaws worked the streets of the port. Diplomats, sailors, spies, traders, and other expatriates lunched at the Grand Hotel on Yokohama's Bund and prowled the dockside quarter known as Bloodtown. Eighteen miles north, in Tokyo, the young Prince Regent, Hirohito, was meeting in his palace with his advisers, and the noted American anthropologist Frederick Starr was hard at work in his hotel room on a book about Mount Fuji. Then, in a mighty shake of the earth, the world as they knew it ended. When the temblor struck, poorly constructed buildings fell instantly, crushing to death thousands of people or pinning them in the wreckage. Minutes later, a great wall of water washed over coastal resort towns, inundating people without warning. Chemicals exploded, charcoal braziers overturned, neighborhoods of flimsy wooden houses went up in flames. With water mains broken, fire brigades could only look on helplessly as the inferno spread. Joshua Hammer searched diaries, letters, and newspaper accounts and conducted interviews with nonagenarian survivors to piece together a minute-by-minute account of the catastrophe. But the

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## Customer Reviews

Shortly before noon on September 1, 1923, a massive earthquake and devastating fire destroyed Yokohama and parts of Tokyo, and killed over 140,000 people. Using vigorous prose, Newsweek journalist Hammer (A Season in Bethlehem) skillfully sets the sociopolitical stage for the catastrophe, drawing a picture of Japan's rapid economic growth, Westernization and integration into the world community. However, underneath this veneer of progress lurked a growing militaristic, xenophobic impulse. While the mass death that followed the quake is bad enough, Hammer describes in grisly detail the wanton killing of Korean immigrants by roving bands of sword-wielding Japanese. Following the chaos of the disaster, in Hammer's telling, the forces of imperialism took increasing control of the nation's agenda, and Japan began its march to war with the West. Too much of Hammer's recounting comes from the observations of outsiders: American and British diplomats, scientists and world travelers. One wishes there were a more nuanced treatment of the average Japanese who were crushed, burned or hacked to death as a result of this cataclysm. Instead they are swallowed up in Hammer's big-picture rendition. 8 pages of b&w photos. (Sept. 14) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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The devastation of Yokohama and Tokyo in Japan in 1923 is one of the worst natural disasters in recorded history. The eyewitness accounts quoted by Hammer, a Newsweek -foreign--affairs journalist, stagger the imagination. The earthquake obliterated Japan's expatriate community, and its absence in ensuing years was one less restraint on Japan's expansionist tendencies prior to World War II. The foreign presence in Yokohama provides Hammer's prelude to chronicling the earthquake of September 1, 1923. Through the eyes of numerous survivors, such as the American naval attache, a missionary, then-famed anthropologist Frederick Starr, a captain of an ocean liner, and several Japanese and Koreans, Hammer portrays the frightful sight of a wave visibly rippling across the cityscape, collapsing buildings and igniting a firestorm. A xenophobic massacre of Koreans, a portent of future atrocities, also occurred. Buried beneath the modern cities and their second destruction in WWII, the memory of this tragedy is capably restored by Hammer. Gilbert TaylorCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is a good book on the subject of the Great Kanto earthquake. I actually liked the fact that this is primarily focused on the foreign community as most of what I've read is the Japanese experience and the foreign community was in the thick of things before, during and after the earthquake. What keeps it from being a great book is that the author is obsessed with making parallels with Hurricane Katrina which hit New Orleans in 2005. The book was written in 2006 so it might have been fresh in his mind but in terms of magnitude there are many other disasters, at least 10 off the top of my head, that would be a more apt comparison to the Great Kanto Earthquake. I almost quit reading about 2/3 of the way through because it was driving me crazy but I stuck with it, had to read only one more Katrina reference and ended with a good read. It was like he had this grand story to tell but he had to keep cheapening it by bringing in some kind of contemporary example to explain what was happening to his readers who lacked the imagination to understand what was going on. If that were the case then at least pick an example with death and destruction on a similar scale, like the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. I thought he must be from New Orleans but he is from South Africa so his obsession really puzzles me and it was jarring. Tension is high, fire is raging and then we get to hear about Michael Brown and FEMA. It's like slamming on the brakes at 100 miles per hour. We start to accelerate again, things are moving along and slam on the brakes again. If I could go through with a black out marker and delete all the references to Katrina I think this would be a much better book.

Joshua Hammer has pulled out all the stops with this new and timely book about the 1923 earthquake that struck Yokohama. It is an extensive review of events prior to the quake, with details about Akitsune Imamura, later Chairman of the Seismology Department, Tokyo Imperial University, who correctly predicted the coming horror. I like this book, because it gives the reader a before and after look at all the key players involved, including the embassy and Naval personnel, U.S. professors, and other well-known travelers of that day, whose involvement is important to the story. Architect Frank Lloyd Wright's hotel, which was built to withstand an earthquake, plays a prominent part of the story. Hammer has done significant research that is written in a style which can be understood by academic and layman alike. When detail is needed about how the science of Seismology was developed, it is not so technical, that one cannot understand it. Foreshadowing the Japanese militaristic movement and the massacre of Koreans that followed in the wake of the earthquake by the Japanese, is important to the story. I also liked the link drawn between what happened then, in the diplomatic aftermath, and our current world situation via the current U.S.

involvement in humanitarian missions. This is an indispensable resource for the student of pre-Pearl Harbor intelligence: it includes the sidebar stories of spy intrigue that was going on prior to the quake. The author's footnotes are extensive and his sources are well-mined for all the included rich detail. My highest recommendation.

Extremely accurate account of a very sad time in Japan. I always prefer reading historic events.

This book is amazing. Well-written and exciting.

Tying together the declining hopes for democracy in Japan after the hub of foreigners in Yokohama was wiped out by the earthquake amid the eruption of social violence against Koreans by government sanctioned vigilantes, Hammer makes an intriguing historical argument. A lack of follow through on evidence of related change combined with a flawed narrative that focuses entirely too much on the foreigners, especially relatively obscure ones, rather than the Japanese themselves, sinks the book at times. Hammer spends ample time on the amazing relief effort mounted by America (primarily) to respond to the disaster, including the mobilizing of the Asiatic Fleet to sail into Japanese waters with abundant relief supplies and an open hand of friendship to the Japanese people, yet only in passing explains the hostility among many Americans towards Japan from before the quake and certainly after the false media reports claiming Japanese arrogance in the face of the unprecedented relief effort. Nevertheless, it's a richly detailed and fascinating read about a disaster that may be a forerunner for the caliber of devastation to be seen in seismic risk sectors like Caracas, Venezuela and Tehran, Iran, to say nothing of dozens of other supercities horizontally spread far and wide with slums packed with millions of teeming masses.

YOKOHAMA BURNING is a fine disaster yarn in the same tradition of ISAAC'S STORM or THE GREAT DELUGE. However, as a work of history, especially Japanese history, the book's promotional materials are deceptive. YOKOHAMA BURNING deals primarily with the experiences of foreigners during the Yokohama earthquake...an interesting topic, certainly, but the book almost entirely ignores the Japanese, who clearly made up the majority of the victims. As a reader, I questioned whether the author spoke Japanese or had done any research into Japanese sources. Moreover, the book's claim that this event leads to Japan's militarism is both facetious and unproven. Again, perhaps if the author had done more work with the experience of the Japanese citizenry he might have been able to construct this point. So, what are we left with? If you like

disaster tales then this book is fine (thus the two star rating instead of one). However, anyone looking for a serious and engaging work of history will be sorely disappointed. If you are interested in this topic I suggest Edward Sidensticker's TOKYO RISING, an entertaining, informative and comprehensive examination of the earthquake and the times which followed it (In fact, this book quotes Sidensticker...and made me wonder why, if the author read TOKYO RISING, he still wrote this work). In short, a great disappointment.

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