

OUR LADY OF THE ANGELS SCHOOL FIRE  
THE PROCESS OF A LITERATURE REVIEW

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## Abstract

On Monday, December first, 1958, in Chicago, Illinois, a fire started in the basement of the Our Lady of the Angels Catholic Elementary School shortly before class was dismissed for the day. The high death toll led officials to enact sweeping safety regulations across the country, Although the fire's cause remains inconclusive, the vast majority of authors agree that several discrepancies in fire and safety regulations in the school accounted for the death of ninety-five children. As of today, the Our Lady of the Angels School Fire's literature is limited, but, through subject encyclopedias, subject headings, and databases, three monographic sources were established as essential in the material. To comprehend the full literature and what it holds, every aspect of each individual publication, such as individual authors, what they argue, and what sources they use, need to be analyzed to make sense of the pattern of changes in approaches and debates within the literature. The literature review demonstrates understanding about the historiography of the literature of the Our Lady of the Angels School Fire through the development of a scholarly framework of research by using encyclopedias, subject headings, and databases used to locate the literature.

In a review, one arranges their research with regards to the previous explorations on the event and addresses how one's study occupies a space in that debate, either in contributing to a previous debate or calling to attention a gap in the literature. The fire's historiography remains in the preliminary stages of its development, focusing on individual autobiographies and remembrances of the fire by its victims. Few scholarly monographs exist on the topic, so the researcher identifies a central focus on the topic to direct the search for sources. This focus needs to be answerable using secondary sources, and stems from fundamental research on the event. By limiting the scope of the topic to secondary monographs and the historiographical context of the fire, one begins to examine the basics of the literature and sources available on the topic. This step significantly reduces the amount of relevant sources for the review, allowing for a more focused analysis of the literature. To find the focus of a field of study, historians utilize subject encyclopedias, which are reference works that contain concise descriptions on specific fields.

The Simpson Library website contains a research guide for history that delves into obtaining background information, grouping the encyclopedias on a given subject together and providing a list of plausible encyclopedias that would have information on the subject. For the Our Lady of the Angels School Fire, the sections of encyclopedias that proved valuable led to encyclopedias as follows: the history of the United States; world history; general histories and directories; material, pop culture and decades; and religion. By narrowing down to those that cover the specific time period, 1958, the remaining encyclopedias can then be scanned for general information regarding the fire and its historiography. When looking through

encyclopedias that cover a broad range of topics, disaster encyclopedias produced the most information of the school fire. The encyclopedias that proved most useful, given these parameters, were as follows: *Darkest Hours*,<sup>1</sup> *American Decade: 1950-1959*,<sup>2</sup> *Great Events: 1900-2001*,<sup>3</sup> *Disasters and Tragic Events: An Encyclopedia of Catastrophes in American History*,<sup>4</sup> and *Disasters, Accidents, and Crises in American History: A Reference Guide to the Nation's Most Catastrophic Events*.<sup>5</sup> From these encyclopedias, three main monographic secondary sources were found on the Our Lady of the Angels School Fire. The remaining sources cited within the encyclopedias were primary sources, which are not relevant to a review of secondary sources on the fire, even though they persist as part of the literature. Subject encyclopedias such as those listed orient the reader to basic information on specific fields of study, in this case the fire. The encyclopedias propose scholarly sources for further reading related to the topic and introduce specific vocabulary used in the study of the subject. By using this resource, researchers look for relevant terms, names, and places to then turn into subject headings for those to expand the search.

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<sup>1</sup>Nash, Jay Robert, "Our Lady of the Angels School Fire" in *The Darkest Hours: A Narrative Encyclopedia of Worldwide Disasters from Ancient Times to the Present* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1976), 196.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Layman, "Our Lady of the Angels Schools Fire," in *American Decades: Volume 5, 1950-1959*, ed. Vincent Tompkins, Judith Baughman, Victor Bondi, Richard Layman, Eric Barger, James Tidd, and Tandy McConnell (Gale Research Inc., 1994), 288-289.

<sup>3</sup>*Great Events: 1900-2001*, rev. ed. Stewart Ross (Pasadena: Salem, 2002) 356.

<sup>4</sup>Mitchell Newton-Matza, "Our Lady of the Angels," in *Disasters and Tragic Events: An Encyclopedia of Catastrophes in American History* (ABC-CLIO, 2014), 512.

<sup>5</sup>Ballard Campbell, "Our Lady of the Angels School Fire," in *Disasters, Accidents, and Crises in American History: A Reference Guide to the Nation's Most Catastrophic Events* (New York: Facts On File Library of American History, 2008), 367-368.

Subject encyclopedias help generate a list of key words and phrases to assist in research during this process, as well as a collection of secondary sources. Scholarly sources often list subject headings in the front of the book to make them easily locatable in a library. Subject headings, as defined by the Library of Congress, consist of “a type of controlled vocabulary. . . used to take the guesswork out of searching by using a single term to describe a subject.”<sup>6</sup> By finding these phrases while looking through the reference section, the number of known books and encyclopedias that could enclose valuable information on the fire expands to encompass all aspects of the fire. Subject headings narrow the search parameters online and lead the researcher to databases. Historians use this method before searching for specific works on the topic because it provides a way of classifying sources and sifting through the literature to locate relevant material.

By using one of the secondary sources cited in the subject encyclopedias and looking at the subject headings used for that book, the researcher now has a starting point to locate the literature. Once additional subject headings that relate to the fire are found, the search for material becomes easier to sort through the hundreds of works containing the key words and phrases. One subject heading leads to another, creating a chain of subject headings that potentially lead back to the topic. In this particular case, the subject heading “Our Lady of the Angels School Fire” resulted in no sources on the library’s website, but the heading “United States -- History -- 1953-1961” produced several helpful subject headings, such as “Chicago,

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<sup>6</sup>“Subject Headings,” in *Subject Cataloging Manual: Subject Headings*, ed. Library of Congress (Library of Congress, 2008), 6.

Illinois,” “Chicago Fires,” “Fire Safety Codes,” “Schools -- Fires and Fire Prevention,” and “Catholic Schools,” among others. Broadening your search depends on finding a large array of subject headings that relate to the fire. From this step, more tertiary sources can be found, creating a cycle of subject headings and encyclopedias that lead to a growing number of secondary sources.

Using the subject headings that contributed monographs on fire, historians utilize a database called WorldCat, which is a website designed to search the catalogs of libraries across the world. WorldCat looks both for other works on a subject, as well as presents the location of physical copies of the books. Although the site detects more subject headings such as “Chicago (Ill.) -- Social Conditions -- 20th Century” and “Fire Safety--Law and Legislation,” WorldCat does not broaden the number of monographs of the fire. However, now that the number subject headings increases, the researcher begins at the beginning and searches through the library website and reference section yet again. Using this process of locating monographs found in encyclopedias, subject headings, and databases, historians constantly update the literature on a subject. Due to this, the next step is to find all the sources that exist on the subject by utilizing these resources, uncovering books, biographies, articles, and everything in between. By doing this, the researcher compiles the Our Lady of the Angels School Fire’s comprehensive historiography and literature. The fire’s literature refers to all written material on a subject, from its inception to modern day. Although the literature review focuses on secondary monographic sources, texts not included in that definition encompass a large amount of written matter that

refers to the fire. Therefore, to understand the scholarly historiography of the fire and how a monographic book fits into the literature, the researcher must examine all of the literature.

While analyzing scholarly books on the Our Lady of the Angels, the literature review requires the author of the paper to know who the authors are and factor that fact into the book as a whole. The author's personal and academic history dictates how they approach researching and writing the book, and establishes possible biases that the author may have. Cited in *Darkest Hours*, Michele McBride published the first work on the Our Lady of the Angels School Fire in 1958 titled *The Fire That Will Not Die*.<sup>7</sup> The book details a step by step account of her experience in the fire and the subsequent psychological trauma and recovery that the author endured.<sup>8</sup> An excellent first place to look for the author's history is the *The Biography and Genealogy Master Index*, a database of authors. From there, if the author does not appear, it becomes necessary to employ other databases. In McBride's case, WorldCat establishes that her book is a biography on the fire. To understand how the study of the fire changes, it becomes important to acknowledge that she is not a professionally trained historian. However, her book remains a part of the literature due to her involvement in the event and the subsequent importance of her opinion in the literature. However, the book demonstrates the thinking of the time period she wrote it, interpreting the event personally because of the recent nature of the disaster. Her interpretation and thinking of the time period factor into the book itself, and beyond

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<sup>7</sup>Nash, Jay Robert, "Our Lady of the Angels School Fire" in *The Darkest Hours: A Narrative Encyclopedia of Worldwide Disasters from Ancient Times to the Present* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1976), 196.

<sup>8</sup>Michele McBride. *The Fire That Will Not Die*. (Etc. Publications: California, 1979).

that, the literature in the view of the event in 1971. McBride utilized the primary sources that she had access to, family and friends who shared her first-hand experience and shared her trauma. Her book is crucial in the study of the literature because it exists as the first monograph on the Our Lady of the Angels School Fire. The first book on a subject drives further exploration of the topic, shaping the approaches and debates within the literature and interpretations of the event.

*The Fire That Will Not Die* remained the only monographic book on the Our Lady of Angels school fire for fifteen years until the publication of *To Sleep with Angels: The Story of a Fire* in 1996. The encyclopedia *Disasters and Tragic Events: An Encyclopedia of Catastrophes in American History* cites the book as further reading on the fire.<sup>9</sup> The encyclopedia states that the monograph's importance lies in the evidence that one of the students intentionally set the fire and later confessed to the crime.<sup>10</sup> The encyclopedia outlines the author's thesis and the context within which they wrote the book in the 1990s, painting a picture of the fire and revealing new information. This supplies the primary importance of the book and its argument, clearly placing the book in the historiography. From there, a historian evaluates the work's sources to examine the overarching literature and the role that the book plays in the debate.

The writer of the literature review analyzes the conclusions that the author comes to and the reasons behind it in order to determine how important the literature's timing, authors, methodology, and interpretations are to the literature. Ten years after the publication of his first

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<sup>9</sup>“Our Lady of the Angels,” in *Disasters and Tragic Events: An Encyclopedia of Catastrophes in American History* ed. Mitchell Newton-Matza (ABC-CLIO, 2014), 512.

<sup>10</sup>David Cowan and John Kuenster, *To Sleep With Angels: Story of a Fire*. Ivan. R. Dee Inc., 1996.

book and fifty years following the tragic fire, John Kuenster released *Remembrances of the Angels: 50th Anniversary Reminiscences of the Fire No One Can Forget*.<sup>11</sup> Historians, before the fifty year anniversary, could predict the surge in literature on the anniversary of the fire, a large portion of the literature published after the fiftieth commemoration of the event. Through this, the changes in approaches and debates within the literature have the potential to shift, and the writer of a literature review on the topic requires analysis of the timing of the publications and the subtle shifts in methodology and interpretations as studies are farther removed from the event. Historians thus far have not written monographs on the Our Lady of the Angels school fire beyond the life accounts of the survivors. However, as the fire grows farther in the past, the methodology and approach to the fire will evolve, and possibly result in more scholarly monographs and secondary sources on varying aspects of the fire and its consequences.

Starting with the simultaneous examination of subject headings and encyclopedias, the journey from research to a completed literature review continues to be a long and arduous process. Finding all sources related to the fire and digging into the individual works, the writer of the literature review deeply reads into the author's intent and methods of research to examine the literature as a whole. To fully understand the book, a series of questions and views need to be asked before beginning to form a thesis. After completing this procedure for each piece of research, the paper calls for the organization and separation of the material into one unified picture, creating the historiography of the Our Lady of the Angels School Fire. The review aims

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<sup>11</sup>John Kuenster. *Remembrances of the Angels: 50th Anniversary Reminiscences of the Fire No One Can Forget*. (Ivan R. Dee Inc., 2008).

to provide the reader with an exploration of the sources necessary for the reader to understand the changes in methodology and perspective within the literature. For the Our Lady of the Angels School Fire, the material on the fire consists mainly of autobiographies and biographies that utilize primary sources and interviews to discuss the tragedy and its effects. would read the review and recognize that the material on the fire consists of mainly autobiographical and biographical accounts of the fire, applying primary sources and interviews to relay the events of the tragedy. In the future, as historians complete studies on the Our Lady of the Angels school fire, the fire will firmly place itself among the famous historic disasters and fires, leading to a larger collection of sources and studies that completely alters the path of the literature and creates a new chapter in the fire's historiography.

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### Honor Pledge

I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work. Note that I consulted with Maddie Shiflitt at the UMW Writing Center on April 23, 2020.

Signed: Elizabeth Anne Debes (April 24, 2020)

# CHECKLIST

- secondary source analysis
- book review
- literature review

## General Rules:

1. Do not use a title page unless specifically instructed to do so.
2. 12 pt. Times Roman, DOUBLED SPACED with one-inch MARGINS. Adjust computers automatically set for 1 1/4" margins.
3. PROOFREAD – or be penalized for typos.
4. Submit (in hard copy and electronically) all REQUIRED MATERIALS in proper form or be penalized.
5. Do not ignore this CHECKLIST or repeat EASY-TO-CORRECT ERRORS noted on papers -- or be penalized.
6. Take advantage of the WRITING CENTER; acknowledge you did so within your HONOR PLEDGE.
7. Ask a classmate or friend to read your paper and to provide general FEEDBACK; acknowledge his/her contribution within your honor pledge.
8. Secondary source analysis and book review: Document only quotations—and do so using PARENTHETICAL NOTES. (Literature review: Use footnotes.)
9. Keep a computer COPY of your work.
10. Number pages.

spacing with text

Technically, as paper is not pledged, it is not acceptable. Future un-pledged assignments = zero

## Some Rules for Clear Writing:

10. Use VERB TENSE logically and consistently.  

Past tense is the most widely used and logical tense for historians, but present tense is standard in some situations (e.g., "in his book, historian John Doe argues that"). Be especially careful when using different tenses for different aspects of your paper (e.g., "Doe asserts that the Puritans were").
11. Use PASSIVE VOICE carefully (e.g., "the decision was made." By whom?).  

Passive voice is NOT past tense, and it is not by its nature wrong; however, passive constructions are usually vague, lifeless, and uninformative.
12. Always provide FULL NAME AND IDENTIFICATION when referring to a person for the first time.
13. Always IDENTIFY THE AUTHOR OF A QUOTATION AND PROVIDE A BRIEF IDENTIFICATION (e.g., "as presidential candidate Mary Smith explained").
14. Write in THIRD PERSON. Avoid "I," "our," "we," "us," "you," etc. in most history papers.
15. Avoid "THIS" without a reference word. ("This was a problem." What was?) Do not assume that what is clear to you is clear to your "ignorant" reader.

16. **Avoid:**

- SLANG, COLLOQUIALISMS, and "CUTE" EXPRESSIONS.
- JARGON AND TECHNICAL LANGUAGE that does not fit a general reader.
- STUFFY, WORDY, LECTURING PHRASES, e.g., "it is important to note that."
- "A LOT" or "LOTS" in formal writing.
- CONTRACTIONS or ABBREVIATIONS in formal writing.

**Some Rules on Mechanics and Punctuation:**

17. Do not confuse HYPHENS with DASHES.

Both are created through use of the hyphen key, and neither has spacing around it.

The DASH (two strokes of the hyphen key) is used to add words/phrases to a sentence, much as parentheses are used.

The HYPHEN (one stroke) is used to break words, etc.

18. Do not use SINGLE QUOTATION MARKS unless you are indicating a quotation within a quotation.

19. PERIODS and COMMAS: go inside quotation marks.

COLONS and SEMICOLONS: go outside.

20. Do not confuse the following:

it's = it is; its = possessive

NOTE: There is no such thing as its'.

affect = verb; effect = noun (except when used to mean caused)

accept = verb; except = preposition

lead = present tense; led = past tense

number of people vs. amount of fuel or money

21. Do not use COMMA SPLICES, RUN-ON SENTENCES, or SENTENCE FRAGMENTS.

The pitcher threw the ball. The batter hit it. (two sentences)  
The pitcher threw the ball, and the batter hit it. (one sentence)  
The pitcher threw the ball; the batter hit it. (one sentence)

**The pitcher threw the ball, the batter hit it. (comma splice)**

**The pitcher threw the ball the batter hit it. (run-on sentence)**

**When the pitcher threw the ball. (fragment)**