

BOOK REVIEW

Richard E. Tontarski, Jr.,¹ M.S.

A Review of *Investigating Arson*

REFERENCE: Bennett, W. W. and Hess, K. M., *Investigating Arson*, Charles C Thomas, 2600 South First, Springfield, IL 62717, 1984, 412 pp.

Investigating Arson covers old ground in an interesting fashion. Unfortunately, some information is dated, not well documented, and perpetuates several myths about fire cause which have plagued the fire investigation community for years. There are contradictions and inconsistencies across several chapters.

The book is structured as a self-teaching text with four distinct sections—statistical and legal background, origin and cause, investigative techniques, and future trends in prevention and investigation. Points in each chapter are highlighted in the text. Chapters are summarized using a question and answer format.

The first section does a good job presenting and interpreting arson statistics. References for the arsonist profile data are missing or incomplete. Investigation and prosecution responsibilities are well outlined.

The second section begins by outlining the phases of an “arson investigation” (more properly termed fire investigation) and covers the material adequately. The authors’ discussion of point of origin contains many factual errors. “The heaviest burning or charring . . . will be toward the point of origin” (p. 118) is not always true. Drafts, composition of materials, and fire suppression efforts are just some of the contributing factors. Spalling is indicative of intense heat, *not* the “point of origin” (p. 128). Throughout this section the authors report temperatures attained by common household items (for example, cigarettes, fluorescent ballasts, light bulbs, and so forth) and other data without any reference source. Listed as a source of spontaneous combustion fires is “oil mixed with rags” (p. 147). This self-heating of oils occurs only in vegetable oils which contain unsaturated bonds (that is, linseed).

Under explosives, the authors remind investigators that “explosives contain taggants . . . that may be detected” (p. 149). The use of taggants was only a pilot program which ended in 1979. They were never used in full production in the United States.

A good overview of basic investigative skills, such as proper documenting of the fire scene, interviewing, and court preparation is presented in Chapters 12 through 18. The discussion of laboratory techniques is sketchy and outdated.

Comments in the text suggest writing of the book was completed between 1979 and 1980. The four-year delay in publishing explains why much of the material is dated. It is unfortu-

¹Chief, Arson and Explosives Section, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, National Laboratory Center, Rockville, MD.

nate that those sections were not revised before printing. The dated material, coupled with inadequate references, detracts significantly from an otherwise useful text. The material it covers well is the investigative skills/documentation, however, it is not new. The book does, however, put this useful information together in one location. As such, it can serve as a basic reference for investigators getting started in arson investigation.