



# Firefight: The Century-Long Battle to Integrate New York's Bravest

*Ginger Adams Otis*

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In 1919, when Wesley Williams became a New York City firefighter, he stepped into a world that was 100% white and predominantly Irish. As far as this city knew, black men in the Fire Department of New York (FDNY) tended horses.

Nearly a century later, many things in the FDNY had changed—but not the scarcity of blacks. New York had about 300 black firefighters—roughly 3 percent of the 11,000 New York firefighters in a city of two million African Americans. That made the FDNY a true aberration compared to all the other uniformed departments, like the NYPD. Decades earlier, women and blacks had sued over its hiring practices and won. But the FDNY never took permanent steps to eradicate the inequities, which led to a courtroom show-down between New York City's billionaire Mayor, Mike Bloomberg, and a determined group of black activist firefighters. It was not until 2014 that the city settled the \$98 million lawsuit.

At the center of this book are stories of courage—about firefighters risking their lives in the line of duty but also risking their livelihood by battling an unjust system. Among them: FDNY Captain Paul Washington, a second generation black firefighter, who spent his multi-decade career fighting to get minorities on the job. He faced an insular culture made up of relatives who never saw their own inclusion as favoritism.

Based on author Ginger Adams Otis' years of on the ground reporting, *Firefight* is an exciting blend of the high-octane energy of firefighting and critical Civil Rights history.

## **Firefight: The Century-Long Battle to Integrate New York's Bravest Details**

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## **From Reader Review Firefight: The Century-Long Battle to Integrate New York's Bravest for online ebook**

### **B. says**

A fresh and revealing account of the practical struggles to address discrimination at the FDNY - issues that go back to the founding of the organization and run clear through to the Bloomberg administration. The story is interesting because it recounts a history I didn't know but wasn't surprised to learn about. It is ultimately heartening because of the many people who made the cause their own and stepped up to make "the bravest" better and fairer. Bloomberg comes off bad. The CCR contribution was great to discover.

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### **Candice says**

I really enjoyed what i felt was a fair look at trying to Integrate the firefighters of New York. This definetly isnt the kind of book that i would normally read but i still loved it. It really felt like the author wanted you to experience and understand what had happened. This book really pulled no punches in making you feel the depth of these firefighters courage.I won this book in a Goodreads giveaway in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Lee Sandberg says**

I recommend this book to anyone interested in learning more about the history of the FDNY. Such a history would be incomplete without recognizing the heroic efforts of the city's first African American firefighters and those who continue to battle against the lasting effects of discrimination. Yet, this is more than just an historical account; the author's in-depth research transports the reader to the segregated bunk rooms of the early 20th century and recent court battles seeking to address under representation of minorities in New York City's fire service. As a volunteer firefighter, I found the level of detail in this book to be fascinating. It also reminds me that in serving the community, the role of firefighters extends far beyond just fighting fires.

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### **Teri Rainey says**

Great story! Super interesting piece of history that if not for this book would have gone untold .

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### **Mara says**

Interesting read, if not quite what I expected--I thought it would be more of a straight-forward chronological march through the "century" in the title, but the book's primary focus is definitely on the last 20 years or so. There are some chapters set in 1919, but they don't fit into the overall flow of the book very well (though they are fascinating!). The story of the Vulcans' battle for fairer hiring standards in the late 20th and early 21st centuries is definitely interesting in and of itself, though, and I don't regret having picked this up.

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## **Nicholas says**

Goodreads win. Will read and review once received.

This is really a normal book that I usually read. But I will say I really enjoyed myself. It was a well written book. It was paced nicely to where I never found myself getting too bored or wanting it to be over with. The author did a great job of writing this book. I felt the author made the book interesting and easy to understand what was going on. This is a book i would recommend to just about anyone. A nice changed of pace from what I usually read.

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## **Susan says**

I read a good review of this book, so I took it out of the library when I saw it on the new books shelf. I must admit, I thought of the book as something I probably SHOULD read, but that it would probably be dry and boring. It is not that at all.

The author shifts between the stories of one of the first black firefighters in NYC in the early 20th century, and the story of a modern day firefighter. Most of the modern day story is contemporary, as in right now - the 21st century. That was what was most eye-opening about this book. Extreme and overt discrimination is/was occurring in left-leaning, diverse, 21st century New York City. Really boosts the argument that affirmative action may be needed after all.

The other thing that was interesting, and frustrating for tax payers, is that the federal discrimination lawsuit against NYFD didn't come out of the blue. The department, the mayor and more had been warned for years that things were not good, and they needed to straighten things out. The administration just blew off the lawyers and the federal government and did whatever they wanted. They had plenty of chances to not only improve things following guidance and suggestions from various people, but to save the city money if they had addressed this sooner.

I also liked the big picture approach of this book, even while the author focused on two men's stories. Different practices of the department, which may look innocuous on their own, such as the way they reached recruits on the waiting list, ended up discriminating against people without relatives in the department, which naturally discriminated against people of color. The policies may not have been set up to discriminate, but that was the unintended result. It reminds all of us who run organizations to look at how our policies and procedures may inadvertently discriminate.

There was obviously another side to Washington's, the modern day firefighter, story. The book hinted that he was volatile and had made a number of enemies. I would have liked a little more explanation of this and wondered when his approach helped and when it hurt his cause.

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## **Harriet Brown says**

**Firefight by Ginger Adams Otis**

Firefight The Century Long Battle to integrate the FDNY is a really fascinating book about the history of New York City and the civil rights struggle in the entire country.

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