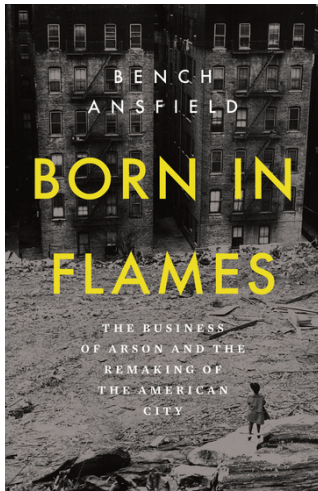


# Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards\*



## *Born In Flames*

*Bench Ansfield*

2026 AWBA Nonfiction Winner

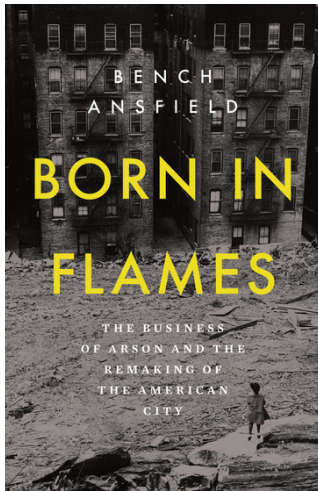
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### BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. *Born in Flames* documents the arson wave that blazed across the Bronx in the 1970s, exposing the FIRE industries—Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate—as driving forces behind the reshaping of American cities. During the 1970s, nearly 10,000 housing units were lost to arson in the Bronx. Ansfield makes the case that what happened in the Bronx was not an anomaly—that arson and the ‘brownlining’ practices of insurers fundamentally reshaped cities across the United States. How does reading *Born in Flames* and learning about ‘brownlining’ change your understanding of modern cities and our current housing crisis?
2. While *Born in Flames* is set in the Bronx, Ansfield charts a global ‘triangular trade in risk’ that reveals how flawed underwriting and reinsurance practices from Lloyd’s of London and the Sasse syndicate actually paved the way for the arson wave back in the Bronx. Ansfield documents how an emerging drive towards financial globalization had direct impacts on the built environment. How did Ansfield’s careful work to parallel the 1781 slave ship *Zong* with the corrupt practices of the Sasse syndicate reframe your perspective on financial globalization?
3. From the onset, Ansfield disputes the widely held notion that it was Black and Brown residents in the Bronx who burned down their own neighborhoods. *Born in Flames* showcases how 1970s pop culture including disco music, movies, and the underground press were infused with flames from “Disco Inferno” to *The Towering Inferno*. How does the inclusion of cultural documentation and narrative building add to your understanding of the arson wave?

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### BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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4. In Chapter Eight, entitled Corrective Capitalism, Ansfield documents the grassroots efforts of the tenant organizing movement that pushed back against ‘brownlining’ practices and the arson wave of the 1970s. Building on the principles of the Young Lords, The People’s Development Corporation used sweat equity to renovate a six-story abandoned tenement building at 1186 Washington Avenue. In the face of disinvestment, Black and Brown residents chose to redevelop. As you read, what lessons does this tenant organizing movement offer us in today’s housing crisis? How does Ansfield’s characterization of CDC’s parallel or diverge from your own experience with contemporary urban development initiatives?
5. *Born in Flames* ends with razor-sharp insight that climate change is having drastic impacts on insurance rates and availability in coastal regions, resulting in the resurgence of the very exact FAIR plans that skyrocketed in the 1970s Bronx. Ansfield asks: “Can we imagine protections against future harms that go beyond the established model of property insurance, which does little to address underlying causes, and in fact, often exacerbates them through discrimination? What shape would a city take were it to actively confront and redress its violent past and immiserating present? And if the actuarial stranglehold on the future were slackened or even broken, what freedom dreams might be realized?” As you imagine the best possible future, where does insurance fit in? How do you imagine the structure of insurance shifting alongside a larger, shifting landscape?