

by Judy Cooper



**HOUGHTON MIFFLIN** 



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**BOSTON** 

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#### Rome Is Burning

It is July 19 in the year 64 C.E. It is a hot summer day, and Rome is bone dry. The people of Rome are going about their daily business. Chariots clatter down the streets, and the shops are open for business. It is a perfect day for a fire. All that is missing is a spark or a torch to set things off.

At the time, Rome was the biggest and most powerful city in the world. It had more than a million people. It was the capital of a huge empire, and it was about to go up in flames.



The Roman Empire covered a vast area.

#### The Fire

Most experts think the fire started in one of the wooden shops that ringed the Circus Maximus. This was the stadium where chariot races were held.

Soon, winds picked up the flames and blew them across the city. A few times, it looked like the fire had burned out. But it was only dormant. The flames returned with a fury.

After the fire, the Colosseum was built. It became a symbol of Rome's power.



The hungry fire gobbled up the wooden apartment buildings and stores that filled Rome. As the day went on, the fire grew bigger and stronger. Soon the fire was so hot that not even the luxurious stone houses of the rich were safe.

The Great Fire of Rome burned day and night for over a week. The fire was like an angry, fire-breathing dragon. It didn't care if you were rich or poor. Emperor Nero's palace burned, and so did the wooden apartment buildings of the poor. Only a small fraction of the city was left untouched. The heart of the mighty Roman Empire would soon be in rubble.

### The Fire's Fury

The narrow streets of Rome filled with crowds of terrified men, women, and children. They had given up trying to salvage any of their belongings. Most were trying to flee. Many made it out of the city, but the flames trapped others.

Gangs of looters roamed the city. They chased away anyone who tried to put the fire out. Some were even seen throwing torches into buildings. Many shouted that they had been ordered to do so. Was this true? Or were the thugs just trying to scare people away so they could continue looting?

Many people needed someone to blame for this disastrous fire. They pointed their fingers at the emperor, Nero.

### Rome's Firefighters

Rome had a paid force of 7,000 firefighters. They lived in firehouses across the city and patrolled the streets day and night. Fire engines were pulled by horses and had water pumps. They also used mattresses to soften the fall of people jumping from buildings.

#### Nero and the Fire

Rumors about Nero spread almost as quickly as the fire. Nero was so cruel, many believed he was insane. He had murdered his own mother and wife!

The most famous of the Nero rumors claimed that he was seen standing on the palace roof playing his fiddle while Rome burned. This story has been passed on for almost 2,000 years. But is it true?

In fact, Nero wasn't in Rome when the fire started. He was away at his summer

palace. When Nero heard the news of the fire, he rushed back to Rome.

Nero tried to help put out the fire. He let the homeless take shelter in the main palace. He bought food to prevent people from starving. But people still blamed him for the fire.



It was well known that Nero dreamed of building an opulent new Rome. But the Roman Senate wouldn't give him the money for the project. To some, this proved that Nero had started the fire. Now that it was in ashes, Rome <u>had</u> to be rebuilt.

#### Nero Turns the Tables

After the fire, Nero grew more and more unpopular. People were angry. They had lost everything, and they said it was all Nero's fault.

Nero began to worry. He feared that there might be an uprising against him. He and his advisors agreed that something had to be done. To stop the rumors, someone else had to be blamed for the fire.

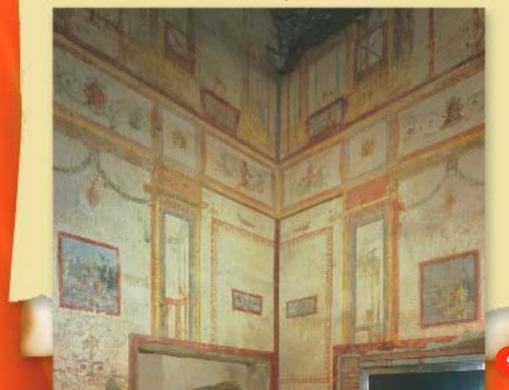
What they needed was a scapegoat. It could be a person, or it could be a group. It didn't matter. Most importantly, they needed a scapegoat that was believable and one that they could easily overpower.

Nero finally decided on a scapegoat. It was a small group of religious people called Christians.

### **■ The Golden House**

After the fire, Nero began rebuilding Rome. He built an enormous new palace called the Golden House. In front of the palace, he erected a huge statue of himself. It was covered in gold, as were the rooms inside the palace.

The walls of the Golden House were covered with paintings.



#### The Christians Are Blamed

The Christians were a small, little-understood group whom most Romans disliked. The Christians did not respect the Roman gods, and they refused to serve in the army or worship the emperor.

In the poor parts of town, Christians had been saying that a great fire would one day burn Rome to the ground. This fed right into Nero's plan.

First Nero's supporters started the rumor that it was the Christians who set the fire. Once the rumor spread, Nero began arresting them. Then he subjected the Christians to painful tortures.



The public tortures drew large crowds. Thousands filled the Circus Maximus to watch Christians being attacked by lions and dogs. Many Christians died. There seemed to be no limit to Nero's cruelty. He seemed to enjoy watching people suffer.

Nero's plan to scapegoat the Christians failed. Most people still blamed him for the fire.

Large crowds watched Christians being eaten by lions.





Nobody knows for sure how the Great Fire of Rome started. Until recently, most historians thought Nero did it. We now know that Nero wasn't in Rome when the fire started. But there are still good reasons to believe Nero ordered the fire set.

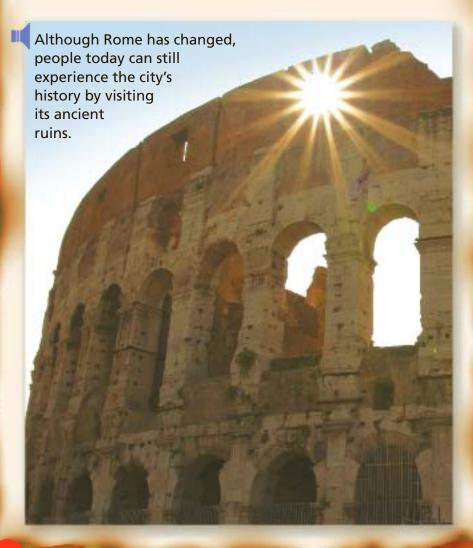
Today, some experts think the fire was started by accident. But they can't actually prove it. That's hard to do since the fire happened so long ago. We may never know for sure exactly what happened.

Whether it was an accident or not, the fire led to change. Rome was a much safer city after it was rebuilt. The Christians, however, would be persecuted more harshly than ever before. As for Nero, things only got worse. Finally, he fled Rome and took his own life.

Who knows what would have happened if there had not been a fire? Maybe the Christians would not have been treated so cruelly. Maybe Nero would have remained emperor. Nobody really knows.



Unexpected events, like the Great Fire, often bring about change. The changes can be for better or worse, or a little of both. Some of that is left up to the people, even up to you.



### Responding

#### TARGET SKILL Main Ideas and Details

One of the main ideas in *Rome Is Burning* is that Nero may have started the fire. What details in the book support this idea? Copy and complete the diagram below.

Main Idea: Nero may have started the fire.

Supporting Detail: He wanted to build a new Rome.

Supporting Detail: ?



**Text to Text** You have read about the Great Fire of Rome. What other book have you read about an ancient disaster? Write a paragraph explaining what you have read. Be sure to use your own words.

### TARGET VOCABULARY

dormantoutlyingimprintssalvageluxurioussubjectedmeagertremorsopulentunaffected

- TARGET SKILL Main Ideas and Details Identify a topic's important ideas and supporting details.
- TARGET STRATEGY Visualize Use text details to form pictures in your mind of what you are reading.
- GENRE Informational Text gives facts and examples about a topic.

Level: Y

**DRA:** 60

**Genre:** 

**Informational Text** 

**Strategy:** Visualize

Skill:

Main Ideas and Details

**Word Count: 1,214** 



## HOUGHTON MIFFLIN Online Leveled Books





