

## The best books of the week

### Non-Fiction

## Show Me the Bodies — Peter Apps' chronicle of the Grenfell deaths

A harrowing account of the deadly 2017 fire navigates arcane building regulations to highlight state neglect and corporate wrongdoing



Grenfell Tower in flames in the early hours of June 14 2017 © Gurbuz Binici/Getty Images

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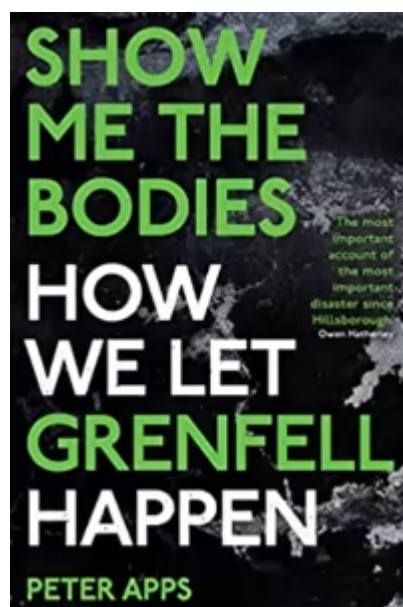
The fire at London's Grenfell Tower in June 2017 was sparked by a faulty fridge. But the causes of its terrifying spread up and into the building, where it claimed 72 lives, were long in the making.

For years, flawed building regulations and lax enforcement allowed big corporations to sell lethally combustible products for use on high-rise building in the UK as if they were safe.

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The world that gave us the tragedy that ensued in west London, writes the journalist Peter Apps, looks “irredeemably dishonest” — a place where corporate greed, institutional negligence, and a government “infatuation with cutting red tape” trounced concern for human life.

But as Apps shows in *Show Me the Bodies*, his account of the events that led to the tragedy at Grenfell, there were also glimmers of humanity. These were to be found in the individual bravery of firefighters and neighbours helping each other on the night, and in the victories that surviving residents have helped win in ridding other tower blocks of fatally combustible facades.



To their number Apps should be added himself. As deputy editor of *Inside Housing*, the specialist publication on social housing, Apps kept watch on the [five-year inquiry](#) into the Grenfell fire that wrapped up earlier this month, sustaining attention on its shocking findings when interest from the rest of the media waned. In the process, his reporting became a must-read for academics, lawyers and firefighters, as well as other journalists.

His book shows clearly where culpability lies, skilfully navigating the arcane complexities of building regulations, the way in which companies and project managers played these and how officials systematically resisted reform.

Apps maintains at the forefront of the narrative the very human consequences of government and corporate wrongdoing, painting a vivid picture of the multi-ethnic community that lived at Grenfell Tower and weaving in the terrifying experience, minute by minute, as flames engulfed their homes of residents on the night.

**That the companies  
knew of the dangers**

## years before disaster struck is most shocking

The result is both a harrowing account of the fire itself and a searing indictment of the society that allowed it to happen. At the crux of this was a persistent willingness by government, at different levels, to allow corporate profits and budgetary concerns to take priority over basic fire safety. There is a roll-call of Conservative politicians implicated in these failures.

But the book does not shy away from criticising the London Fire Brigade, too, with its outdated strategy of advising tower block residents to stay put in the event of a fire. When the building concerned is poorly maintained, clad in effect in the solid equivalent of lighter fuel and insulated with materials that give off deadly gas, that no longer makes much sense.

The complicity of the state in creating the conditions that made it possible for companies to sell such materials for use on high-rise buildings is spelt out clearly. But it is the evidence that Apps musters to show how the companies themselves knew of the dangers years before disaster struck that is ultimately most shocking.

He recounts the internal memos of Gerard Sonntag, marketing manager of Arconic, the supplier of the aluminium composite cladding that was used on Grenfell, after an industry conference in 2007. The use of 5,000 square metres of polyethylene-cored ACM “would have the same fuel power as attaching a 19,000 litre oil truck to its walls”, Sonntag wrote, before deliberating on the potential liability if a fire involving the product claimed 60 or 70 lives.

The company has denied misleading the regulator and argued that it was the responsibility of those using the product to assess “the fire performance of the chosen fabrication”.

Justice, meanwhile, remains some way off. Police are pursuing an active investigation, but there will be no charges brought until the findings of the inquiry are made public well into next year.

At a time when parts of the UK's governing Conservative party remain obsessed with deregulation as route to economic growth, *Show Me the Bodies* provides a potent case for holding companies to higher standards. “Grenfell was the result of a series of choices, the sum of state neglect and corporate wrongdoing across a variety of areas, the epicentre of myriad defects in our social fabric,” Apps writes.

**Show Me the Bodies: How We Let Grenfell Happen** by Peter Apps,  
*Oneworld £10.99, 352 pages*

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