



Answering 911: Life in the Hot Seat

Caroline Bureau

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You answer a call from a fourteen-year-old boy asking for someone to arrest his mother, who is smoking crack in their bathroom. You talk with him until the cops arrive, making sure there are no weapons around and learning that his favorite subject in school is lunch. Five minutes later, you have to deal with someone complaining about his neighbor's clarinet practice. What is it like to be on the receiving end of desperate calls for help . . . every day? Caroline Bureau, a former newspaper reporter and nursing student who couldn't stand the sight of blood, takes a job as an emergency dispatcher because she likes helping people. But on-the-job training at the comm center proves to be more than she bargained for. As she adjusts to a daily life of catastrophe and comedy, domestics and drunks, cops and robbers, junk food and sarcasm, lost cats and suicides, she discovers that crisis can become routine, that coworkers can be mean—that she must continue to care and, at times, learn how to let go.

Answering 911: Life in the Hot Seat Details

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Author : Caroline Bureau

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From Reader Review Answering 911: Life in the Hot Seat for online ebook

Brooke says

It has been a year since I read this book, I think I'll have to put it back on my list of books to re-read now that I have another year of dispatching under my belt.

Overall I think she hit the nail on the head describing what life in the dispatcher's seat is like. The most enlightening quote in the book came on page 4: "I'll figure out how to make you understand what it's like to be staring at a crossword puzzle and trying to think of a six-letter word for 'run rapidly' one minute, and the next, asking a twelve-year-old girl what kind of a gun her mother just used to blow her own head off." With only 2 years on the job, I have a similar story and at times it can be hard to grasp what we do every day and I think she does a really good job of explaining the stresses of the job."

edh says

I snagged this one while I was working a desk shift because the chair on the cover looked soooo comfortable... turns out, this slim little memoir was really engaging and engrossing! Caroline's transition from crack smoking, abused girlfriend to 911 dispatcher is bittersweet: just as she gains mastery over the hectic, oppressive atmosphere of the call center (just when DO you think they get time to vacuum a place that's occupied 24/7?) she's beginning to doubt whether she can do this job for 30 years like Kristen, Queen of the Main Line. She becomes jaded because of the constant exposure to crisis & misfortune, but also discovers that her detachment has given her an inner strength she didn't know was possible. The push/pull of "life in the hot seat" will keep readers glued to the page for more than just voyeuristic thrills. Give this one to high schoolers thinking about possible careers, or anyone who wants a glimpse into the inner workings of an extreme job.

Tom says

This past Christmas I received a Kindle e-reader from my lovely bride. I was anxious to utilize it during my 'slower times' at work. I was also somewhat hesitant to get caught reading "outside reading material", which our SOP forbids. Therefore, I checked Amazon for e-books about dispatching. Unfortunately, books about dispatching are pretty rare and not many have been converted into e-format. Amazon only listed one book about dispatching, "Answering 911: Life in the Hot Seat" by Caroline Bureau. I reluctantly downloaded the book, expecting possibly a dry and technical read. It is my pleasure to report the complete opposite. I read the whole book in just 2-days. I was so enamored by the book that I immediately decided to write a review of the book and submit it to the NHEDA Newsletter. It was my original intention to quote some sentences from the book so that others would understand why I liked this tome so much. Ironically, in the course of looking for those four or five sentences

that I could relate to my fellow dispatchers, I found myself completely re-reading the whole book.

The author puts us in the hot seat and shows us the madness, the sadness, and the gallows humor of a profession that serves and protects in ways most people would never dream. From the book, "You answer a call from a fourteen-year-old boy asking for someone to arrest his mother, who is smoking crack in their bathroom. You talk with him until the cops arrive, making sure there are no weapons around and learning that his favorite subject in school is lunch. Five minutes later, you have to deal with someone complaining about his neighbor's clarinet practice. What is it like to be on the receiving end of desperate calls for help . . . every day"

The author is a former nursing student who couldn't stand the sight of blood and then a former newspaper reporter who takes a job as an emergency dispatcher because she likes helping people. But on-the-job training at the comm center proves to be more than she bargained for. As she adjusts to a daily life of catastrophe and comedy, domestics and drunks, cops and robbers, junk food and sarcasm, lost cats and suicides, she discovers that crisis can become routine, that coworkers can be mean—that she must continue to care and, at times, learn how to let go. Overall I think the author hit the nail on the head describing what life in the dispatcher's seat is like. The most enlightening quote in the book came on page 4: "I'll figure out how to make you understand what it's like to be staring at a crossword puzzle and trying to think of a six-letter word for 'run rapidly' one minute, and the next, asking a twelve-year-old girl what kind of a gun her mother just used to blow her own head off."

Bureau's transition to 911 dispatcher is bittersweet: just as she gains mastery over the hectic, oppressive atmosphere of the call center (just when DO you think they get time to vacuum a place that's occupied 24/7?) she's beginning to doubt whether she can do this job for 30 years like Kristen, Queen of the "Main Line" (which in her center is the primary frequency). She becomes jaded because of the constant exposure to crisis & misfortune, but also discovers that her detachment has given her an inner strength she didn't know was possible.

Bureau unpacked calls and events to tell a larger story with an important theme — there is such a thing as free will, you can't help everyone, and it is ok to take a cry break if you need one.

I loved reading about Bureau's connection with her job, even if the job didn't exactly connect with her right away. As someone who gets frustrated if she's not good at something the first time she tries, hers is a valuable lesson in persistence. And the humorous irony of dropping out of nursing school for being afraid of blood was not lost on her, which makes her story all the more interesting and worthy of telling. She's also a former reporter, the prodding kind she grows to detest when sitting on the other side of the desk. She's an interesting story herself with a refreshing and frank book worth picking up.

I highly recommend this book to my fellow dispatchers. I may even be purchasing a printed copy for the fellow dispatchers in my center.

Sarah says

NOTE - This book was poorly edited and there are countless spelling mistakes and errors.

NOTE - This book really could have only been 156 pages long the last 47 pages were not really crucial to the story and were more of a tirade/rant about the pros and cons of being a 911 dispatcher. I think this subject matter is demonstrated clearly in the stories and encounters the author shares with the readers.

At first when I started reading this book I was thinking of changing careers and that this was something I could go to school for and learn how to do. I was unsure of all the complexities and roles that the job truly entailed until reading this book. Now that I have read the book there is NO ABSOLUTE WAY IN HELL that I could ever do this job. It is high stress, high octane 100% of the time. The author showed when you are at work you cannot think enough about work and when you are away from work you can't think enough about work. Some of the situations, although incredibly real, were mind blowing to say the least and even the smartest individual may not have an idea as to how to handle the situation. There were a lot of good mini stories that captured various parts of the job of a 911 dispatcher that made this book worth reading, so if you can excuse the editorial mistakes and the extra filler pages please give this book a try it's very interesting at the core.

Chris says

this book was really awful. it was relatively short, and turned into so-bad-its-good every once in a while, so i was able to actually get through all of it. i'm glad i did because some of the best of the worst shit was in the last few chapters.

it became very clear early on in the book that this woman very likely has borderline personality disorder, which is probably not uncommon in a job like this. she is also the kind of person who thinks that the phrase "wherever you go, there you are" is profound and uses it as a thread of continuity throughout this book, which was literally agonizing to read every time it came up. she says she has been in Alcoholics Anonymous for over ten years, so she "knows things". she also uses quite a lot of the book to talk shit about her coworkers and then praise them in faux-piety a moment later.

by far the best part of this book (as in, the worst part of it) were the chapters called "On Wannabes", where she takes to task all the "self-appointed security guards", real security guards, wannabe cops, etc, and "The Job", where she alternates between praising herself, demeaning others, pretending that she is humble, that she isn't into all that draamaaaaaaaaaa (despite writing a book about it), and trying to cover her narcissism with meek obedience to her superiors/the rules, and finishes it off with a deluge of humble-brag.

a short excerpt from "On Wannabes":

"I only like cops and civilians. Anyone who thinks there is something in between is suspicious. I figure, why would anyone want to do a cop's job if he's not a cop? Because he thinks it's fun? ... The more an sasg tries to endear him or herself to me, the oogier I get. Same goes for wannabes. Sorry. Every day, all day, we are burdened with knowing all about the worst possible things that people do to others and to themselves.

Wannabes and SASGS go *looking* for the shit. It's not even a paid job for them; it's a hobby, a passion. I don't get that."

Get that? She just does it for the paycheck. She's not into all that draaamaaaaaaaa! Anyone who is interested in that is a fucking weirdo (she says, in a book about 911 dispatch). Then it's just a skip hop and a jump over one other chapter to "The Job", and we find, as she is talking shit about some "new girl" named Sela and her incompetence, and displaying a stunning lack of any kind of self-awareness whatsoever:

"Within a couple of weeks, Sela was transferred to an admin job downtown. Everybody was a little bit frosted about that, because we heard she didn't have to take a cut in pay. If there's anything that helps us slog along in here, it's the feeling that what we do is harder and worth more money than typing memos and making copies.

I don't know if I believe she actually got no cut in pay and weekends off. Still, no more 911. Wouldn't you miss that? ... A lot of people think that if you can't hack it in dispatch, you could never make it as a cop. That would imply that being a cop is more challenging than being a dispatcher, or that being a dispatcher is just a stepping stone to being a cop. Either way, cops tend to make more money than dispatchers, which nobody seems to question."

jesus christ. how did this get published?

Cassandra Crenshaw says

I recommend reading this book if you have any interest at all in joining a dispatching crew. She doesn't sugar coat a thing! It's a good picture of the personality a person needs to possess to do that kind of work. It also brings insight to the struggle of separating home and work. She struggles with whether she can perform her duties effectively and up to par which is something everyone can relate to especially me.

Maureen says

I was a dispatcher pre-911. Different world. When I dispatched in the 1970's if someone needed the police for an emergency or for just some bull-shit, they all called on the same phone line. No big fancy computers way back then, you sort of flew by the seat of your pants, waiting for information for officers on the street that took way too long. I worked for a small department with only three or four cars on the street on a shift, and the fire department when they went out. Caroline really hit it on the head describing the emotions a dispatcher goes through while handling an emergency call or a routine call. Good job Caroline.

Rhiannon Johnson says

Answering 911 Life in the Hot Seat by Caroline Burau

Caroline Burau acknowledges the general public's fascination with her job. As a 911 dispatcher she fields calls from people in danger as well dangerous people. We follow her from her first day on the job, to on-the-

job training, through her rotation at multiple stations within the call center.

I empathized with her back story. She had been through drug addiction and come out on the other side. I also thought that being a 911 operator might be the worst job for a recovering addict in regards to being exposed to triggers on a daily basis. But I was optimistic, I was cheering her on.

The 911 calls themselves are the most fascinating. I suppose it is my voyeuristic nature. However, I quickly became annoyed at Burau's attitude towards her newly adopted stepdaughter. Burau doesn't express many motherly concerns but then makes comments like an exasperated mother. She brushes her stepdaughter off because she doesn't make trouble and gets good grades, but she is annoyed that she talks too much. This insight into Burau's nature was the first to rub me the wrong way.

Read my full review here: <http://www.ivoryowlreviews.blogspot.c...>

Dawn Mateo says

GREAT book! Absolutly phenominal!! If you work in fire, police, or EMS, this is TOTALLY the book for you! I laughed out loud several time and shook my head in agreement with the author even more. Outstanding book! A great new author is on the horizon!

Lmcn says

I am a fairly new 911 Dispatcher (4 yrs) and was really, really searching for some insight and inspiration. I absolutely loved this book and wished that this writer would do more. I felt like I was reading about my own dispatch centre. It helped me realize that some of the things that occur and some of the feelings I feel at work are normal...I'm not an anomaly. I have recommended this book to my other co-workers and my 911 partner read it while we worked together, we laughed so hard because it was so similar to how things are at our work place, mice included!

Thank you to the author...I now realize that I like to help people too! It reinvigorated me at work and I have kept certain quotes handy for days when I need a pick me up!

Jennifer says

As a 911 dispatcher, I loved this book. It was nice to read some of the things that I have felt throughout my years working this job put into words. I found my self nodding or laughing at the similarities. I skimmed over previous reviews that mentioned how cynical the writer was, however, until you sit in that chair and field all of those calls, which was the point of the book, you can't understand that skewed vision and sense of people and the world around you we see.

I loved the descriptions of the lack of cleanliness of the dispatch center to the frustration of all the different personalities melding together in some of the most tense of situations.

Kudos to the author for all of the credit that she gave the officers and agencies, as well as underlining the importance of being a dispatcher.

It was nice and a little discouraging to know that dispatch centers across the states are so similar! I will be sending/recommending this book to some of my friends and family. As a close, I would have to say that the

part of the book that rang most true with me and made me laugh, was the excerpt about how at the end of the day you find yourself staring off, hearing your phone ring and have found that you have lost the ability to "chat" and that having meaningful conversations become difficult as you adjust to needing to know the point of the conversation IMMEDIATELY!!

Stina says

I've never worked in a 9-1-1 call center, but the emergency telecommunications field has been on the fringes of my life for many years. My husband (from whom I borrowed this book) became a 9-1-1 dispatcher back in the '90s, and I began working in law enforcement administration myself in 2005. I currently work in Records for the local Sheriff's Office, so many, many of the scenarios Burau describes in this book are familiar to me. I type them up every day. My co-workers and I have the same dark and twisted sense of humor. I know it sounds sick, but it's just that kind of detachment that keeps me from crying when the third suicide note that week lands on my desk. So I can definitely identify with Burau's cynicism and burnout oddly balanced by a genuine desire to help people.

On the other hand, I recognize that my job is pretty cushy in comparison to that of a dispatcher or a cop. So I appreciate Burau's ability to communicate to a lay readership the unique pressure that 9-1-1 professionals are under. This is a segment of the public safety industry that gets precious little recognition for or even basic acknowledgment of what they go through on a daily basis. Burau does a good job of putting a human face to these anonymous, invisible voices. I just wished sometimes that she wouldn't talk quite so much about the minutiae of her personal life or that she would quit whining about personality conflicts in the workplace.

Overall, this is an interesting and occasionally thought-provoking read. Three stars seems a bit stingy, but the sometimes disjointed style was just jarring enough to keep it from being a four-star book.

Amanda says

I stumbled upon this book one day while browsing GoodReads, and was immediately drawn to the cover.

It was a perfect quick weekend read, and let's face it, I'm a sucker for memoirs detailing lives more interesting and fast-paced than my own.

Of course, I assumed like most people Burau describes when they hear she is a 911 dispatcher – "Oh, you must have interesting stories." I thought it would be neat to read a book about interesting stories, not realizing that the most "interesting" involved someone's worst (and possibly last) day on earth. "Interesting" can also leave you jaded and color your view of humanity permanently. So in that sense, it's not a book with interesting stories at all.

But instead of depressing everyone like she could have, Burau unpacked calls and events to tell a larger story with an important theme — there is such a thing as free will, you can't help everyone, and it's ok to take a cry break if you need one. I need to remember that last one more often.

I loved reading about Burau's connection with her job, even if the job didn't exactly connect with her right away. As someone who gets frustrated if she's not good at something the first time she tries, hers is a

valuable lesson in persistence. And the humorous irony of dropping out of nursing school for being afraid of blood was not lost on her, which makes her story all the more interesting and worthy of telling. She's also a former reporter, the prodding kind she grows to detest when sitting on the other side of the desk. Not to mention, she is a recovering crack addict. She's an interesting story herself with a refreshing and frank book worth picking up.

Ashley says

My career in a nutshell.

I have been in emergency communications for over 5 years now and this author couldn't have gotten the story anymore right. It's up it's down it's happy it's sad you're constantly in a state of uncertainty and constantly questioning why you still remain. I recommend reading this book if you are a telecommunicator or family of one. You may wonder why your daughters or sons or husbands or wives carry on in ways you can't understand. If you've ever wondered with anger why they don't handle you in a nurturing way.... read this please.

Terri Ann says

The tales of the book are very gripping, but the rest of the book is brimming with mundane details (I don't need to know that her bra opened during a call and that she had to "wait to tuck the girls back in" after the call.) This book is more about the opinions of the author about the callers themselves, not the situations at hand. I was hoping that the book would be a compilation of experiences, but instead it was a snarky arrogant tale of the author's disdain for most of the callers that called in. While I could very well understand her annoyance at many of them, she just came off far too judgemental for me to feel comfortable if I ever (god forbid) had to deal with her on the other line.

In all fairness regarding the previous reviews about the author being a former addict, this is irrelevant and never comes into play during the book except in the introduction to the reader how she came to become a dispatcher in the first place. It is such a minute part of the book that it shouldn't even be an issue, and I am not sure why the previous reviewers felt the need to make it one. I have no bias regarding her past addiction, and the role was so small that the author could have left this out of the book completely.

It is a short read, an easy one, and as one reviewer mentioned, a good "weekend book". I am disappointed that the author spent the bulk of the book mumbling aloud about wanting to be happy and finding the right job and complaining about the callers that the impact of the calls themselves fell to the wayside. I would have appreciated more substance, less venting.
