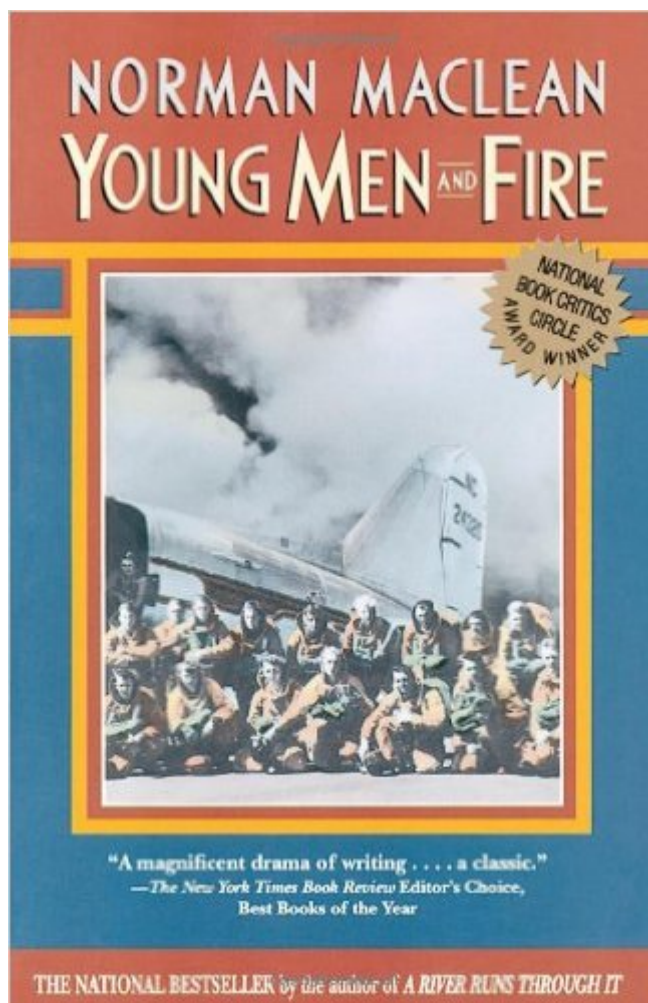


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Young Men And Fire



Synopsis

On August 5, 1949, a crew of fifteen of the United States Forest Service's elite airborne firefighters, the Smokejumpers, stepped into the sky above a remote forest fire in the Montana wilderness. Two hours after their jump, all but three of these men were dead or mortally burned. Haunted by these deaths for forty years, Norman Maclean puts back together the scattered pieces of the Mann Gulch tragedy. Young Men and Fire won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1992. "A magnificent drama of writing, a tragedy that pays tribute to the dead and offers rescue to the living.... Maclean's search for the truth, which becomes an exploration of his own mortality, is more compelling even than his journey into the heart of the fire. His description of the conflagration terrifies, but it is his battle with words, his effort to turn the story of the 13 men into tragedy that makes this book a classic."--from New York Times Book Review Editor's Choice, Best Books of 1992 "A treasure: part detective story, part western, part tragedy, part elegy and wholly eloquent ghost story in which the dead and the living join ranks cheerfully, if sometimes eerily, in a search for truth and the rest it brings."--Joseph Coates, Chicago Tribune "An astonishing book. In compelling language, both homely and elegant, Young Men and Fire miraculously combines a fascinating primer on fires and firefighting, a powerful, breathtakingly real reconstruction of a tragedy, and a meditation on writing, grief and human character.... Maclean's last book will stir your heart and haunt your memory."--Timothy Foote, USA Today "Beautiful.... A dark American idyll of which the language can be proud."--Robert M. Adams, The New York Review of Books "Young Men and Fire is redolent of Melville. Just as the reader of Moby Dick comes to comprehend the monstrous entirety of the great white whale, so the reader of Young Men and Fire goes into the heart of the great red fire and comes out thoroughly informed. Don't hesitate to take the plunge."--Dennis Drabelle, Washington Post Book World "Young Men and Fire is a somber and poetic retelling of a tragic event. It is the pinnacle of smokejumping literature and a classic work of 20th-century nonfiction."--John Holkeboer, The Wall Street Journal "Maclean is always with the brave young dead. . . . They could not have found a storyteller with a better claim to represent their honor. . . . A great book."--James R. Kincaid, New York Times Book Review

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Customer Reviews

On August 5, 1949, lightning came crashing down in the vast spruce forest above Seeley Lake, Montana, and touched off a roaring blaze. As every Westerner knows, lightning means fire, but the fire that raged through Mann Gulch that day was huge--the sort that occurs only every few decades. A battery of paratrooper-firefighters, many of them fresh veterans of World War II, had been anticipating it, and even looking forward to the chance to fight a great fire. Before the day ended thirteen of those smokejumpers lay dead, their charred remains evidence that something had gone terribly wrong. Norman Maclean gives a thorough account of the incident in language not meant for the squeamish: "Burning to death on a mountainside is dying at least three times ... first, considerably ahead of the fire, you reach the verge of death in your boots and your legs; next, as you fail, you sink back in the region of strange gases and red and blue darts where there is no oxygen and here you die in your lungs; then you sink in prayer into the main fire that consumes." After August 1949, he notes, the Forest Service came to recognize that not all fires need to be fought and that fire benefits most forest ecosystems.

On Aug. 5, 1949, 16 Forest Service smoke jumpers landed at a fire in remote Mann Gulch, Mont. Within an hour, 13 were dead or irrevocably burned, caught in a "blowup"--a rare explosion of wind and flame. The late Maclean, author of the acclaimed *A River Runs Through It*, grew up in western Montana and worked for the Forest Service in his youth. He visited the site of the blowup; for the next quarter century, the tragedy haunted him. In 1976 he began a serious study of the fire, one that occupied the last 14 years of his life. He enlisted the aid of fire experts, survivors, friends in the Forest Service and reams of official documents. The result is an engrossing account of human fallibility and natural violence. The tragedy was a watershed in Forest Service training--knowledge and techniques have since been improving--and this work will interest Maclean's many admirers. Photos not seen by PW. 30,000 first printing. Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This

text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Book Review: Young Men and Fire: A True Story of the Mann Gulch Fire This is a multidimensional story. It is the story of the sixteen-man team that in 1949 fought a wildfire at Mann Gulch, Montana and of the thirteen who died there. It is also the story of an on-the-spot innovation, subsequently made famous by studies of quick thinking when crew leader Wag Dodge saved himself from the fire by lighting another, burning the fuel and then sheltering in the burned out area. It has the problem of organizational behavior and small-unit cohesion among a group and a leader unaccustomed to working with the team. There is the story of fire-science that was greatly stimulated by the events at Mann Gulch. We could talk about the investigation of incidents and court cases resulting or about the investigation, much of it never to-be-resolved, finished as much as it ever will be by the author almost forty years after the event, with the final report cut short by the death of the author himself. So, I recommend this book for if you are interested in any of the above subjects, or if you just want an excitement or are attracted by the forces of nature. Since I cannot cover all the details, I will go after those most related interest and experience. I bought this book as part of my study of the ecological use of fire and "Young Men and Fire" is a classic for fire science. But I first became aware of the book when studying innovation and organizational behavior, so I will talk about those things. My study has concerned mostly prescribed burning in Southeastern pine forests, but I have also looked into ponderosa pine in the West and in tallgrass prairie ecosystems. The ecology in Mann Gulch included grassland brush along with ponderosa pine and Douglas fir. This was no prescribed or controlled fire. Maclean sets the stage very well. He describes the young smoke jumpers, their attributes and attitudes. They were fit young men whose mission was to parachute ahead of fires and put them out before they got too big. Consider that in 1949, not long after World War II, the parachute was still a relatively new technology. Paratroopers had been heroes of the War and this was no doubt not lost on the young smoke jumpers, who saw themselves in military terms, fighting fires as they would any other enemy. They knew that their task was dangerous, but they had the confidence of fit young men who had not seen failure. An important flaw in this organization, and one that may have been fatal, was that smoke jumping crews were assembled from a list of volunteers at each need. They were not a team used to working together. And their leader, Wag Dodge, although experienced in the woods and with fire fighting, did not know them well. Humans are not interchangeable. When the crisis breaks and they need to rely on quick thinking or training, it is important that the team think a time. The men in Mann Gulch did not. It is also to think back to the mindset of the Forest Service at that time. This was before the science of

ecology had developed, before fire behavior science had developed and before the idea the fire could be a natural and necessary part of the environment was even seriously considered. The Forest Service treated fire in the way you would a fire in your living room. Put it out, they hoped before 10am. Lurking in the minds of all the rangers was the memory of the Big Burn fire of 1910, which had burned more than three million acres and killed at least 78 fire fighters. (You can get a good background on that from "The Big Burn" on the "American Experience.") The Mann Gulch fire behaved in particularly nasty ways for a variety of reasons. The topography was important. The walls of the gulch channeled the wind and the rock faces created eddies, sort of mini-tornadoes of flame. Beyond that was the combination of timber and grass. A timber fire can get very hot but does not move very quickly. A grass fire is very rapid but not as hot, as the grass burns quickly and then goes out. Often only the grass burns. The Mann Gulch fire combined the dangerous attributes of both, with the rapidly moving grass fire supported behind by the intense heat of the timber fire. It was hot enough to kill the firefighters and fast enough to outrun them. The Mann Gulch became a blow up fire, which is a sudden increase in fire intensity or rate of spread accompanied by violent convection. The smoke jumpers just were not expecting this. The smoke jumper ethos was based on the idea that they would be able to put out small fires before they became big ones. Their tools were simple. They used shovels and simple tools to bury fire and beat it to death. These tools and methods are unsuited to a big fire which Mann Gulch became evidently in a matter of minutes. The firefighters have to stop fighting and get out of the way of what they cannot stop. This was the problem; they could not get out the way fast enough. The fire was coming fast because of the wind blowing up the gulch and from the wind created by the fire itself. Large fire creates its own wind. You can see that in a campfire or a fire in a fireplace. The fire draws in cool air, heats it and pushes it out. The hot exhaust and gasses are what often kills. It burns lungs and suffocates. According to Maclean, it is ironically similar to drowning. The fire also moved faster because it was going up hill. Fire burns up faster than it burns down. On the other hand, humans are slower running up hill. The young man did not have much of a chance to outrun the fire and this is where Wag Dodge has his idea. He no doubt understood the idea of a back-fire, i.e. a fire set in front of an oncoming head fire designed to burn combustible material in advance of the big fire. Deplete it of fuel and it goes out. (This is one of the principles of conducting prescribed fires. Burners set a backfire to end the progress of a head fire.) But nobody had used that principle to create an escape fire. Dodge set a fire that burned the grass in front of the oncoming big fire and then laid on the ground in the ash and let the fire burn over him. He tried to get his fellow firefighters to join him, but they evidently (we can only know) did not understand or thought the idea was insane. Dodge survived and the principle of an escape fire

entered the training manuals for fire fighters. BTW, the escape fire works in grass but not in timber fires. A timber fire burns slower but much hotter and longer. I recommend the book, as I wrote above, but I do need to point out that the book is inconsistent through not of the author. Maclean died before the book was finished. His editors tried to do what they thought he would have done and they usually succeed, but there is a little too much step-by-step description of Maclean's last v Mann Gulch. I suspect that these were first drafts or notes that Maclean would have tightened up. Young Men and Fire has become classic in diverse fields of fire science, forestry and organizational behavior is also generally fun to read. One advantage of a classic is that it has been in print a long time. You can get book for one penny (plus shipping) on .P.S. This fire and the crew involved has been studied in great detail. The story of Wag Dodge has become an example of innovation, while the problems of coordination have been studied by organizational theorists. Th a good online exploration of the ground Mann Gulch at this link.P.S.S. An added aspect of this tragedy is that it need not have happened at all. Researchers have talked ab the tactical problems of leaders, organization, geography, weather and bad luck. All these thing indeed came together in a kind of perfect storm. But there is a mega-issue. This fire did not need to be fought at all. Fire natural part of this ecosystem and there was nothing that needed to be saved in Mann Gulch. If you look at t photos of Mann Gulch today you are seeing the natural landscape. The fire was severe and deadly. It killed thirteen brave young men. But it did not destroy or even harm the long-term natural environment of the gulch. In fact, the natural environment today would have been worse had they succeeded in controlling that fire by as we the Forest Service standard of the time.

Forest fires were expected to be put out by 10 o'clock in the morning after Smoke Jumpers are dropped on them. Alas, in the Mann Gulch fire of August, 1949, this wasn't possible as most of the Smoke Jumpers were dead within hours of being dropped on site. With his forestry background, the author combined knowledge of the subject and his ability to write beautifully to create a disaster book masterpiece. He excelled, especially, at telling the story of the fire and also telling the "what changed as a result." The lengthy middle section of the book--his attempt to track down information--seemed unfinished. This is not surprising because his search for answers and his writing of this book were ongoing at the time of his death, before this book was completed. There's some truly memorable writing here. For instance, from the final portion: "From the elevation of retrospect we can see it all coming together more clearly and sooner than those who were there and running. For us the signs are many that in minutes the blowup would bring a total convergence of

sky, young men, and fire, and after that, the dark; on the top of the hill, though there are only occasional partings in the smoke, the flames themselves were blinding and those inside the flames and smoke could no longer see what was happening to them and would happen next."I loved, too, how the author managed to suggest what the dying Smoke Jumpers may have felt. He does so in a beautiful, reassuring way. Due to the fact that the foreman built an escape fire at the last minute, something that hadn't been done before, this fire remains controversial, a mystery. Did the escape fire contribute to the deaths of some of the Smoke Jumpers or could it have saved them? Perhaps if the author could've finished this book before he'd died, we might have a better answer. This is a truly fascinating book, in need of some polishing, but unforgettable nonetheless. Very highly recommended!!

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