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Alianor True, ed. *Wildfire: A Reader.* Washington, DC: Island Press, 2001. xxiv + 246 pp. $21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55963-907-1; $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55963-906-4.

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Writing Fire

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Readers interested in fire ecology and the politics and mechanics of wildland firefighting will find much to like in Alianor True's *Wildfire: A Reader*. True has selected creative nonfiction pieces which, together, describe shifts in understandings of and attitudes toward wildfire in the United States. She provides a historical overview of fire in North America, from the deliberately set fires of Native Americans through the Forest Service's unquestioning promotion of wildfire-suppression to today's recognition of the dangers of suppression and the role of fire in maintaining the health and productivity of many ecosystems.

True emphasize new voices in the literature of wildfire: fire ecologists and wildland firefighters. She briefly but clearly explains some of the adaptations of plants and animals, and their communities, to a landscape defined by fire. Unfortunately, recognizing the forest's need for fire does not offer a clear solution to decades of fire suppression.

The first section offers creation tales from Native Americans and some excerpts from nineteenth-century American nature writers. In her introduction to this section, True explains that the creation tales refer to traditional uses of fire, and that nineteenth-century writers focused on the destructive aspects of fire. "Myths of the Cherokee: The First Fire" and the Miwok tale, "How Tol'-le-looo Got the Fire for the Mountain People," describe how animal spirits, Water Spider or Whitefooted Mouse, steal fire and give it to humans. However, neither the creation tales nor the nature writing excerpts offer much insight into Native Americans' use of fire to alter the land to suit their needs.

The selections from *The Journals of the Expedition under the Command of Captains Lewis and Clark* by Meriwether Lewis, *A Tour on the Prairies* by Washington Irving, "The Allegash and East Branch" (part of *The Maine Woods*) by Henry David Thoreau, and *My First Summer in the Sierra* by John Muir are all frustratingly brief excerpts in which fire is mentioned only as a peripheral concern. There are better, more detailed descriptions of wildfire available from this era, albeit from less well-known authors (e.g., *Life on the Prairie* by Eliza Woodson Farnham). Another selection by John Muir, from *John of the Mountains*, reads like notes from Muir's observation of a fire. The lurid descriptions of the burning forest–worse, in Muir's eyes, than the destruction of cathedrals–illustrates True's generalization that nineteenth-century nature writers focused on the destructive aspects of fire. However, in other works (e.g., *Our National Parks* or *The Mountains of California*), Muir explains how fire aids in the reproduction of his beloved Sequoia trees, which require the bare soil and bright sunlight that result from fires.

The selection from *Roughing It* by Mark Twain offers the most satisfying description of a wildfire from a nineteenth-century writer's point of view. After describing an idyllic campsite on an alpine lake, Twain tells how he and his companions were forced to retreat and watch as a campfire run amok destroyed the scene so lovingly depicted.

This section's last selection, from *The Big Blowup* by Stephen J. Pyne, doesn't quite fit the section's organizing principle. Although he is a writer of the late twentieth century, rather than the nineteenth century, this selection is the most interesting in the section. Pyne explains how reaction to the huge fires of the summer of 1910 influenced federal policies through the twentieth century. He argues that stories of heroism, such as that of Ed Pulaski, contributed to the mystique of wildland firefighters and helped promote a century of fire suppression, and he hopes that contemporary fire management will find just such an enabling myth to reflect and spread newer understandings of fire ecology.

In her introduction to the second section, True pro-

vides more history about how clashing philosophies and personalities influenced official policies regarding wildfire. From the 1920s through the mid-1980s, the Forest Service and the general public assumed that better knowledge of fire would lead to better suppression. Beginning in the mid-1960s, the growth of fire ecology as a scientific discipline led to greater recognition of fire's role in maintaining the health of many ecological communities.

Three of the selections in this chapter focus on the responses of landscapes to fire, while the other three offer accounts from writers who worked to suppress fires. In "Grass, Brush, Timber, and Fire in Southeast Arizona," Aldo Leopold describes the changing interactions of grass, forest, livestock grazing, fire suppression, and erosion in the desert southwest. Margaret Millar's "After the Fire" offers a naturalist's detailed description of the recovery and regeneration of a chaparral or scrub oak community in southern California. The selection from *Panther!* by Roger Caras is an account of a fire from the point of view of a Florida Panther and other animals in the Everglades. Leopold's piece is more expository and describes more complex ecological interactions, while Millar's is more descriptive and consciously literary. Caras's style is more narrative than the other two writers and offers the most dynamic description of a fire as it races through a landscape.

Of the three selections dealing with firefighting, the one from *Young Men and Fire* by Norman Maclean is the most intriguing. Maclean provides the set-up to a story of firefighters who lost their lives in Mann Gulch fire of 1949. However, after introducing all of the characters, the selection is cut off just as the narrative gets interesting. Although the truncated story may leave readers frustrated, the excerpt provides an excellent introduction to the techniques and terminology of wildland firefighting. In "Fire Lookout: Numa Ridge," Edward Abbey criticizes the American public's acceptance of the Smokey-the-Bear theory of forest fires, despite our better knowledge of fire's role in healthy forests. Ed Engle's "Fire" provides an insider's view to fireline theory and life on a fire crew. Despite their belief that healthy forests need to burn, many firefighters still love to fight fires, not only for the money, but also for the thrill of the adrenaline. Together, these three accounts offer an interesting and enjoyable introduction to wildland firefighting.

In her introduction to the book's final section, True says that today more land managers than ever recognize the need for prescribed fire, but are justifiably afraid of the risk of using fire in forests that have accumulated decades of fuel, especially as more humans than ever have built homes in fire-prone areas. True also discusses the importance of firefighting to the economies of many western communities, further complicating arguments about how, and for whom, wild land should be managed.

The section has four selections dealing with the folly of fire suppression, all stylistically different but thematically similar. All four critique the American public's ignorance of fire ecology, arguing that human attempts to reduce fire are based on economic motives, promoting the profits of a few at the expense of the resources belonging to the public.

Ted Williams's "Incineration of Yellowstone" and Keith Easthouse's "The Shape of Things to Come," which tells the story off the infamous "prescribed burn" near Los Alamos, blame bad news reporting and the greed of the timber industry and of national park concessionaires for the American public's misunderstanding of our forests' need to burn. Both offer convincing details and clear explorations of the politics and economics of managing fire on public lands. Like Williams, Rick Bass's "The Fires Next Time" blames the timber industry for reducing forests' resistance to fires for the sake of profits. In the selection from his book *The Control of Nature*, John McPhee provides the most detailed exploration of how fire suppression actually makes the inevitable fires worse, more intense, changing the chemistry of the soil in ways that lead to catastrophic debris flows that can strip entire canyons bare of vegetation and fertile soil.

The selections written by firefighters fall into two categories. The stories by men emphasize the dangers of firefighting and the bravery of the firefighters battling an inexorable force of nature. The selection from *Fireline: Summer Battles of the West* by Michael Thoele is a tight, detailed narrative about a group of smokejumpers surrounded and overrun by a wildfire. The excerpt from John Maclean's *Fire on the Mountain*, like the selection from Norman Maclean in the previous section, is an engrossing narrative whose brevity may frustrate readers. Maclean provides an excellent exploration of the phenomenon of wildfire blowup, but the story ends just as the firefighters see the blowup beginning.

The selections written by women firefighters minimize the macho elements of the profession and explore the relationships and paradoxes of firefighting. In "Pride and Glory of Firefighting Is Hard to Resist," Louise Wagenknecht explains how many firefighters can see that suppressing fires does more harm than good, but still participate eagerly in order to experience the adrenaline

rush of applying advanced skills in challenging, even frightening conditions. In "Firefinder," Alianor True describes how firefighting gave her access to remote and beautiful places other people couldn't reach and provided her with a deeper understanding of trees and forests and a greater ability to perceive details in a landscape and see principles of ecology at work. Gretchen Dawn Yost's "First Burn" is a volunteer's description of her first firefight. Of the firefighters' stories, True's is the most interesting and satisfying, drawing the reader into a deeper appreciation of how fighting fires offers an intense relationship with the land, the kind of relationship that is hard to find in today's society.

In the end, the first section of *Wildfire* is not very successful in its stated purpose. It says little about Native American's use of fire to manage their habitat, and the excerpts from nineteenth-century writers are too brief to offer much information about fires or much insight into a given writer's style. The second section is definitely worth reading, because it provides a valuable introduction to the basic concepts and some particulars of fire ecology and fire suppression.

But the last chapter alone is worth the purchase price of the book. *Wildfire*'s greatest strength is the chorus of new voices it brings to nature writing about forests, the voices of those who have fought the fires and come to the conclusion that American forest managers are fighting the wrong enemy. The entries from women writers offer particularly intriguing insights into the relationships between firefighters, fire, and the forests they struggle to "save" from the fires that the forests truly need. Their pieces clearly differ in style and tone from the accounts of make firefighters, allowing readers to explore the intersections of gender and ecology.

Overall, this book is an entertaining and informative introduction to fire ecology and firefighting. Together, the selections in *Wildfire: A Reader* show how the stories that we tell to make sense of events can be far more influential than are the events themselves.

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