

Review: Wildfire: A Reader

By Alianor True (Ed.)

Reviewed by Mary Sue Rose

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Alianor True (Ed.). *Wildfire: A Reader*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2001. 248 pp. ISBN 1-55963-907-5 (paperback) US\$17.95. Recycled, acid-free paper.

The questions rage on. Set fires? Fight fires? Let fires burn without intervention? Scientists and environmentalists have been arguing for years about wildfire management. Editor Alianor True, nature writer and firefighter, has gathered an informative and extremely readable collection of essays and book segments on wildfire.

Drawing from 24 sources, True brings together thinking on wildfire, beginning with fire tales from the voices of Native Americans up to modern voices experiencing the severe fire season of 2000 in the United States. Thinking about wildfire management continues to evolve and this book captures the evolution. It is organized around shifts in thinking on wildfire management.

Because both ancient and modern fires play a defining role in history, writers throughout the ages have attempted to convey the power, beauty, terror, and changes wrought by fire. All of these aspects are captured by the selections.

Part I: Big Country, Big Fires includes, in addition to Native American tales, excerpts by Meriwether Lewis, Washington Irving, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Mark Twain, and Stephen J. Pyne. Part II: Of Fire and Landscape covers the time period from the mid-1920s through the mid-1980s when the way Americans related to the environment changed radically. The wilderness was no longer considered untamable. Dams, pesticides, and widespread fire suppression were the norm. Economic values prevailed. Writings included in this middle section of the book are by Aldo Leopold, Norman Maclean, Margaret Millar, Roger Caras, Edward Abbey, and Ed Engle.

Illustrative of the power captured by True is an excerpt chosen from "Panther" by Roger Caras. "The fire, only minutes old, had already consumed millions of lives, billions upon billions, really if the insects were included. Small pools had been sucked dry in seconds as the fire passed overhead. With a sizzling, snapping sound, water vanished and the mud curled and cracked and turned ash-gray. Birds rising late from grassy hides were snatched up by the heat and smashed to the ground, where they kicked convulsively for a second or

two, no more."

"The Incineration of Yellowstone" by conservationist Ted Williams is the first essay in Part III: Fire as Foe, Fire as Friend. This section includes personal accounts of life altering experiences fighting fire. Authors include John Maclean and John McPhee. The rise of delicate beauty from devastation illustrates the cleansing possible from wildfire.

The enormity of the impact of wildfire and the decisions regarding its management make this a book a useful addition to both public and natural science collections.

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