



Fire on the Mountain: The True Story of the South Canyon Fire

By John N. Maclean

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In 1994, a wildfire on Colorado's Storm King Mountain was wrongly identified at the outset as occurring in South Canyon. This unintentional, seemingly minor human error was merely the first in a string of mistakes that would be compounded into one of the greatest tragedies in the annals of firefighting. Before it was done, fourteen courageous firefighters—men and women, hotshots, smokejumpers, and helicopter crew—would lose their lives battling the deadly, so-called South Canyon blaze. John N. Maclean's award-winning national bestseller *Fire on the Mountain* is a stunning reconstruction of the killer conflagration and its aftermath.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Colorado and its neighboring states battle thousands of wildfires every year, scrub and sagebrush blazes often ignited by lightning strikes in the dry, hot days of summer. A vast, intertwined firefighting infrastructure combining local resources with agencies like the Forest Service and the BLM, reacts to these flare-ups as if going to war--and in theory, the coordination and communication ensures that fires are fought in the most efficient and safe manner possible. But while most wildfires in Colorado end up costing just over \$60,000 on average with no loss of life, the catastrophic South Canyon fire of 1994 burned for 10 days, at the ultimate cost of \$4.5 million and the lives of 14 firefighters. OSHA would later describe the coordinated action flatly as a "management failure," and concurrent investigations would reveal a tangled web of jealous rivalries, bureaucratic bungling, and severe morale problems. (One of the early on-scene supervisors would later tell investigators, "Leadership in this state sucks.")

John Maclean (son of Norman Maclean, who wrote both *A River Runs Through It* and an award-winning account of Montana's deadly 1949 Mann Gulch fire) skillfully unfolds that summer's foreboding blow-by-blow. *Fire on the Mountain* weaves together a tense narrative of almost cinematic action, starring ballsy cowboy smokejumpers, frustrated federal middle managers, seasoned "hotshots" flown in like commandos, pissed-off tanker pilots, and well-intentioned but spin-wary politicians. Maclean's well-sketched personalities bring the action on the ground convincingly to life--and knowing up front that many of his main characters won't survive South Canyon makes this tragic tale that much more compelling. --Paul Hughes

From Publishers Weekly

With a reporter's objectivity and brisk prose, Maclean describes a series of small blunders in fire management that led to tragedy in July 1994 in western Colorado when a thunderstorm on Storm King Mountain, mislabeled by a dispatcher as South Canyon, killed 14 firefighters. As rain evaporated in the severe heat and drought, lightning ignited the high desert forest of scrub oak, pinion pine and juniper. Maclean's evenhandedness works against him: the reader longs for more outrage at the series of blunders and misfortunes that first led to a delay in responding to the fire and, later, to fatalities among those who battled the blaze. Maclean does bring the terrain and the fire to life with clarity and economy, and he paints a vivid portrait of the rugged firefighters who supply the most thrilling and saddest moments, men and women who displayed remarkable bravery and sheer physical effort. Among the 49 firefighters assembled on Storm King Mountain by the National Interagency Fire Center were "smoke jumpers," who parachute onto fires; "helitacks," who attack fire from helicopters; and "hot shots," mostly younger ground teams with a mix of skills and experience. Nine of the deaths were hotshots from Prineville, Ore. Maclean handles their deaths respectfully and manages to communicate the lessons to be drawn about fire management in the course of a suspenseful narrative filled with admirable, everyday heroes. 7-city author tour. (Oct.) FYI: The author's father, Norman Maclean, wrote the classic *Young Men and Fire* about the 1949 smoke jumper disaster in Mann Gulch, Mont..

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From Library Journal

In 1992 Norman Maclean published *Young Men and Fire*, an account of the deadly 1949 Mann Gulch fire in Montana. Two years later the horror was relived when 14 firefighters, including four women, died when a fire blew up on Storm King Mountain in Colorado. Maclean's son John, a former reporter and editor for the Chicago Tribune, now writes his own account of the fatal Colorado fire. While lacking the urgency of his

late father's work (the elder Maclean revealed that he was dying and was thus rushing to complete his investigation), this is nonetheless a gripping account of a more recent tragedy that probably could have been avoided. The benefits of hindsight notwithstanding, Maclean unravels a host of lost opportunities, snafus, and human failings that combined with horrific consequences. Expect high demand for this moving and gripping account of human tragedy, as it will be heavily promoted. Recommended for public and academic libraries. A Daniel D. Liestman, Kansas State Univ. Lib., Manhattan
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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