



Young Men and Fire

By Norman Maclean

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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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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

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.

From Publishers Weekly

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.

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From Library Journal

Maclean grew up in Montana and was for many years an English professor at the University of Chicago. Following his death in 1990, the publisher completed the manuscript for this book. *Young Men and Fire* revolves around the 1949 Mann Gulch forest fire in Montana where 13 smokejumpers perished. Maclean, author of *A River Runs Through It & Other Stories* (G.K. Hall, 1976), is ever the storyteller. Here he crafts two accounts simultaneously. One is the story of the fire. The other is told with special urgency by an old man knowing he has little time to discover what happened on a flaming ridge over 30 years ago. To find the truth of the tragedy, Maclean climbs the steep slopes of the valley of death, projects himself into the short lives of the firefighters, and uses mathematical models to reconstruct events. Although some of the editing is rough, this remains a moving account of humanity, nature, and the perseverance of the human spirit. The release of the film *A River Runs Through It* in October may step up demand for this title as well.

- Daniel Liestman, Seattle Pacific Univ.

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Samantha Flowers:

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