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Young Men And Fire: A True Story Of The Mann Gulch 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

I picked up this book by chance, captivated by the title and by the jacket. Since I first read it seven years or so ago, I have returned to it time and time and time again. (Indeed, I am using sections of it in a course I will be teaching soon on men and masculinity). The publishing world has seen a plethora of non-fiction books on tragedies and natural disasters in recent years, with "The Perfect Storm" and "Into Thin Air" perhaps the most successful. But those two bestsellers pale in comparison with the subtlety, the grace, and the sheer power of Maclean's story of discovering what happened to a dozen young firejumpers on a steep Montana hillside many years ago. In the final fifty pages, as remembrances of survivors mix with a technical discussion of wind and flames, Maclean's prose is so vivid, so pure, so unadornedly beautiful that I had to put the book down three or four times because my eyes were filling with tears. 'Tis a rare work of non-fiction that can do that!! I am a deeply urban person. I know nothing of forestry or firefighting. I have never been to Montana. And I was gripped by this book from start to finish, even as Maclean skilfully avoids even the slightest shred of bathos or melodrama. It is a marvelous meditation on heroism and death, and on masculinity itself, and well, well worth the read.

When this book was reviewed on the front page of the "New York Times Book Review," I noted the subject and thought it would not be my cup of tea. The review changed my mind and it was only a moment from the time I finished it to being on the way to the bookstore to get the book and read it immediately. I was not disappointed. This is certainly one of the two or three best books I have ever read. Obviously, the quality of the writing is important. But, so, too, is the fact that this is simultaneously the story of a particular event in a particular time, and the quest of an aging man to resolve in his own mind what happened forty years before to young men fighting a fire in a place near where the author himself, as a youth, used to fight fires. I was more interested in the author's physical and mental determination; a colleague to whom I recommended the book was more

interested in the sections that discuss the science of fire and fire-fighting. A rereading will probably lead to a fascination with some other element in the book. But, then, that is probably one of the signs of a great text. Since reading this book, I have been on the look-out for another book of this kind. So far, I have not found one. At times, I have seen this book linked to works that discuss the death of mountain climbers and the like. But MacLean did not write that kind of book. And as far as I can tell, no one has written another book like his. Not finding another book like this is existentially exhilarating. But, for a reader, there is also regret.

I don't do much reading, but this book kept me captivated from the moment I picked it up. Books based on true stories can be dry and uninteresting; however, MacLean combines fact, speculation, and emotion in a way that keeps the reader clamoring for more. I was inspired to read "Young Men and Fire" after hearing Richard Shindell sing James Keelaghan's song, "Cold Missouri Waters" (based on MacLean's book) on the "Cry Cry Cry" CD. After reading this book, I feel compelled to visit the 13 crosses marking the tragic ending for those men on that Mann Gulch hillside.

I decided to read "Young Men and Fire" because "A River Runs Through It" is one of my favorite novels/movies of all time. I'm afraid that my love for Maclean's other novel artificially inflated/changed my expectations for this one, but once I adjusted to the different style, I slowly grew to love this book. The book is basically cut in half, with the first half being a re-telling of the story of the Mann Gulch fire, and the second half being more of an expository on how Maclean researched the facts of the event in order to tell the story. Quite honestly, I was bored with the book when I started it, despite the fact that the event was tragic and the characters were heroic. It felt more like a newspaper article than the literature I loved in "A River..." But, as I pushed through the story, I came to appreciate it for what it is. Mclean exudes passion for this subject, and this book is really a beautiful intersection of his prose-like writing style (it's there, if less visibly than in "A River..."), his inexplicable passion for a subject to which he had no direct connection, and basic forensic study (ala CSI TV shows.) Being a lover of outdoors and books that take place there, I can appreciate Mclean's felt kinship with the Smokejumpers that are the central figures in this story. I was entertained by his constant ratings and comparisons of woodsmen that enter his story, much like others debate the merits of sports figures or politicians throughout time. And that leads me to this point -- Mclean was a lover of the woods and the mountains and his brethren who shared this passion. Towards the end of his life, he found a passion that helped him to keep his mind sharp and to exert himself in the mountains he loved. The exercise was cathartic. Because of Mclean's passion

and talent, I believe the book ends up being a great read. He brings to life the sense of invincibility that young people tend to feel, and paints a vivid picture of the tragedy that the Smokejumpers endured. His analysis in the second half is eye-opening and helped me understand how difficult it really is sometimes to piece together exactly what happened in these sorts of tragedies. Often times, not knowing what happened and why is more haunting for the families of those who died than the actual loss itself. Mclean gives everything he has to give those people an explanation. Mclean obviously threw himself into this book, and as soon as you get in tune with the different rhythms and flows that pulse throughout this book, you will enjoy it as much as I ended up enjoying it.

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