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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ BIOGRAPHY

Out of the Fire

David Hobbs
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"…the only people for me are the mad ones the ones who are mad to live mad to talk mad to be saved desirous of everything at the same time the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing but burn burn burn…" —Jack Kerouac *On the Road*

David Hobbs had to go to a tree-blanketed wilderness of physical and spiritual ridges and canyons before he was prepared to find his place in the world. *Out of the Fire* chronicles an unevenly maturing young man who shifts away from certain atheism in the 1960s to Christian faith in the mid-1970s building a tentative belief in himself. College student Hobbs languishes during the academic years passing but not shining in Music and Forestry. After the intensely testing rookie fire season of 1966 time spent back in civilization becomes a pale purgatory. The life lessons are many fighting blazes and wrestling internally in California's Klamath National Forest and later the Rogue River National Forest of Oregon. The memoirist swoops about with cracked-cowboy helicopter pilots and comes face to face with walls of flame sometimes armed with no more than a shovel. He says "Life contains fullness for the one willing to face his fears."

At first Hobbs pleases the old salt father figures of the U.S. Forest Service something he has a psychological need to do. Return stints though are complicated by marijuana follies and felonies and then married women roughing up the personnel file. When freedom itself comes into question only Ken Kesey's counterculture lawyer has a chance to save the day.

The slow fire summer of 1970 a laconic freefall is objectively sad but amusing as well: "Just as we had a reputation with some of our own people for being screw-ups so with many of the state people we had a reputation for laziness and moral depravity." "I was truly happy." Hobbs comes across as an unfinished but decent young guy trying on roles a thinker of relativistic adaptability a bit of an eager follower. His "unvarnished" confessions could have repercussions for other people—real names are associated with extramarital activities and Berkeley / Humboldt County drug experiments.

Out of the Fire contains a decade of personal development and setbacks. The coverage is slightly dense but by that it also reveals the Forest Service's mores and subculture. Lucid character sketches of outdoor careerists whom the memoirist admired or resented capture old school tough guys and nepotistic slackers. The large campaign fires are unpredictable sequences each approached differently with varying degrees of peril. In these pages are watershed moments results of instant decisions uneasy bouts of anticipation when the woods are tinderbox dry… In the final analysis David Hobbs is able to say "I was needed. I mattered." He found purpose tangible and otherwise. (August 21, 2009)

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