



Wildfire

Mary Pauline Lowry

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Detailed depictions of firefighting provide a context for gender inequality in physically demanding careers.

Mary Pauline Lowry's novel *Wildfire* provides an insider view into the world of the Pike Interagency Hotshots. Lowry, who spent two seasons working as a Pike Hotshot, takes readers behind the scenes of a dangerous job where a band of brothers grudgingly come to accept a woman working by their side.

As the novel begins, Julie has just signed on with the Hotshot crew. When she reports for work on the first day, the others—all experienced, all men—make it clear that they'd like nothing better than to send her packing. Julie keeps up with the long days and hard physical labor, but crew members continue to harass her. Sharing camp with convict crews is an additional threat. But the squad boss, Sam, takes her aside for special training, and tall, handsome Archie promises his help. It seems she's found her place—until an accident occurs, and everyone takes gender sides again.

The most engaging parts of the book are the descriptions of forest fires. In the hierarchy of firefighting, Hotshots fall between smoke jumpers and engine crews, digging fire lines and starting burnouts in advance of an approaching fire. "They lived to jump out, gear up, and start toward raging wildfires that anyone with good sense would flee. Wherever shit was burning, that's where the Pikers wanted to be."

The other members of the crew are memorably characterized. There is Tan, the ex-Navy SEAL, who taunts Julie at every turn; profane, big-bellied Hawg; Lance, who funds his snowboarding career by firefighting during the summers; and god-like Archie and his friend, Rock Star. Year after year, they return to work as Pikers. Mainly they come for the fire. Pikers have their own rules, and gradually, even the gender issues start to make sense. It's dangerous work, and there can't be a weak link.

Julie's relationship with her status-conscious grandmother provides a rationale for her love of firefighting, but the backstory is underdeveloped. At times, Lowry has the tendency to rely too much on dialogue for explanations. But these are quibbles. When she keeps her focus on fire and the Hotshots, the story burns bright. The Piker's final job of the season, the Big Sweet fire, will haunt readers long after they close the cover of this gripping, action-packed novel.

KAREN ACKLAND (Fall 2014)

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