



Wildfire: On the Front Lines with Station 8

Heather Hansen

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Wildfire brings equal measures of science and drama to the issue of combating ever larger, more intense wildland fires. Author Heather Hansen spent eighteen months immersed in fire science and policy, shadowing the elite firefighters of Station 8 near Boulder, Colorado, through their daily training regimens, public interaction, and an all-out, week-long battle against a mountain blaze that tested their intensively honed skills and endurance.

Hansen explores many aspects of wildfires, from the history of the national parks and development of forest management techniques to the most up-to-date computer models of fire behavior and micrometeorology. Her lively reportage combines interviews, mountain hikes, visits to fire labs, and even her game attempts to keep up with hotshot trainees and the Station 8 firefighters during their rigorous workouts and Rabelaisian bacony feasts.

Her expertly deconstructed insights come together in a taut final chapter that chronicles the July 2016 Cold Springs fire. Hansen neatly balances analysis of the policy struggles over prescribed burns as they ran against residents' desires to live in wildland-urban borders surrounded by scenic trees and landscaping.

Though she gives equal voice to all sides in these debates, she questions unrealistic public expectations when fire breaks out. The sustainability of continued development in wildland areas comes into doubt. She is also never without quiet admiration for the focused, dedicated firefighters and the multiple challenges they face in their important and dangerous work.

As human-driven climate change ratchets up air temperatures, droughts, and extreme weather events, the prospect of more frequent and expensive megafires in the American West looms large. This thoughtful book answers some questions about mitigating human and environmental effects but also warns of political and economic roadblocks. As Station 8 knows well, wildfire is an inevitable and natural occurrence, and we must develop better funding and policies to deal with it.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (March/April 2018)

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