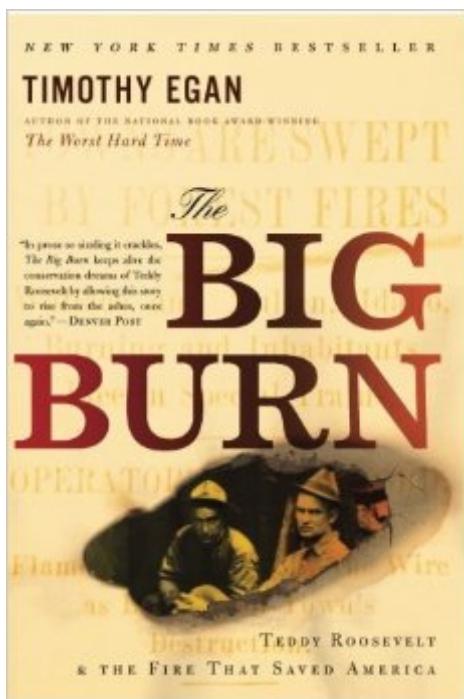


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The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt And The Fire That Saved America



Synopsis

In THE WORST HARD TIME, Timothy Egan put the environmental disaster of the Dust Bowl at the center of a rich history, told through characters he brought to indelible life. Now he performs the same alchemy with the Big Burn, the largest-ever forest fire in America and the tragedy that cemented Teddy Roosevelt's legacy in the land. On the afternoon of August 20, 1910, a battering ram of wind moved through the drought-stricken national forests of Washington, Idaho, Montana, whipping the hundreds of small blazes burning across the forest floor into a roaring inferno that jumped from treetop to ridge as it raged, destroying towns and timber in an eyeblink. Forest rangers had assembled nearly ten thousand men -- college boys, day-workers, immigrants from mining camps -- to fight the fires. But no living person had seen anything like those flames, and neither the rangers nor anyone else knew how to subdue them. Egan narrates the struggles of the overmatched rangers against the implacable fire with unstoppable dramatic force, through the eyes of the people who lived it. Equally dramatic, though, is the larger story he tells of outsized president Teddy Roosevelt and his chief forester Gifford Pinchot. Pioneering the notion of conservation, Roosevelt and Pinchot did nothing less than create the idea of public land as our national treasure, owned by every citizen. The robber barons fought him and the rangers charged with protecting the reserves, but even as TR's national forests were smoldering they were saved: The heroism shown by those same rangers turned public opinion permanently in favor of the forests, though it changed the mission of the forest service with consequences felt in the fires of today. THE BIG BURN tells an epic story, paints a moving portrait of the people who lived it, and offers a critical cautionary tale for our time.

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Customer Reviews

This book reads like a growing, raging wildfire: it starts out slow, then builds up to a spellbounding climax and finishes with a lengthy cleanup of loss and grief and the realization that the Forest Service is needed. Timothy Egan is a gifted writer who knows how to keep readers spellbound. I started reading the book yesterday "just to get a feel for it" and a few hours later couldn't put it down. He does a great job of pulling the reader into this subject, introducing the main characters of TR, Gifford Pinchot (first Chief Forest Servicer who met an early demise when Taft took over) and Bill Greeley (District Ranger), and all the wealthy New Yorkers who resented wild lands being put in reserves for future generations. In the background is John Muir, this country's first passionate nature advocate and preservationist. TR created the Forest Service in 1905 and Congress passed the first laws for its agency. With the buffalo, grizzly bear and wolf practically killed off from most lands, the last great fear was the wildfire. History has proven that even in the young United States, a ravaging fire could wipe out entire families, entire towns. After a brutally cold and wet winter in early 1910, the weather warmed up, drying the forests of the eventual burn area by April. Over 1000 smaller fires were already burning by late July. By then Roosevelt was out of the White House and a new man, William Taft, his successor. This book is divided into three parts: 'In on the Creation,' which describes the characters who were for and against the creation of the Forest Service and the western lands; the young underpaid progressives who were picked by Pinchot to be the first forest rangers, and all the wealthy senators and businessmen who were opposed to open lands for the public. The first rangers were more than just office administrators (like they are today), but young men who had to endure a two day grueling exam to prove that they could survive in the wilderness, hunt and cook their own food and build their own cabin. Part II describes in vivid detail the frantic attempt to recruit forest fire fighters among Westerners who were still more interested in logging, mining, hunting and whoring and opposing anyone and anything that would prevent them from doing so. But then those smaller 1000 forest fires bled into one humungous inferno in late August that ravaged so much of eastern Washington, northern Idaho and western Montana in a matter of two days. The actual fire is described starting in the chapter "Men, Men, Men!" on page 110 out of this 297 page book. Part III winds down with the postfire days and months in "What They Saved" with the realization that the Forest Service is a necessary evil for the landowners and corporations that do business from and in the wilderness. The reader sees how the complete story of all the

characters falls into place. Egan knows how to make popular history interesting without dragging down the story with too many details. Describing the people involved in this story is no easy feat, yet reading "The Big Burn" is excitingly fast, highly entertaining and most interesting. Egan does an extraordinary job describing the constant tug and pulls that were going on during Roosevelt and Taft's administrations between Congress and especially Senator Weldon Heyburn from Idaho, wealthy railroad owners and businessmen on one side, and the growing young progressives pushing for reform across the country on the other. The reader becomes familiar with all the corruption, crimes, lies and stalls that went on for years in the early 20th century between land owners and land conservationists. (Preserving land for public use was unheard of at a time when large corporations were given it free to exploit for its natural resources.) Add in the popular yellow press at the time and all the many social changes going on in the working class, the final product is a well written social history that deserves to be read, enjoyed and passed on. A reader who enjoys history will gain greater insight into all the behind the scenes bickering that went on not just because of the Big Burn, but in society as a whole. Many of those progressive changes are with us today. This book is Timothy Egan at his best.

Even though Teddy Roosevelt figures prominently in the title of this book, he has left office by the time of the August 1910 wildfire in the Bitterroot Mountains (along the Idaho-Montana border) at the true center of this story. Roosevelt has left behind Gifford Pinchot to lead the conservation efforts of the nascent US Forest Service. Pinchot's efforts are underfunded and unpopular with influential senators, congressman and powerful industrial figures who want to leverage western timber and mineral reserves to enhance their personal empires. By the time the fire strikes, William Taft is serving ineffectually as president, essentially leaving Pinchot to do the best he can with what he has. Timothy Egan lays out the political and historical scene setting in animated detail, providing well documented insights. He adds life and personality to the central players in the coming conflict between powerful people (with vastly differing agendas) and nature (with just one). He then shifts to the fire itself. In 1910, the towns of the Bitterroots were populated by a diverse group of immigrants with social issues that could have come from today's op-ed pages. Writing about an influx of Italians, Egan says: "The Italian surge, in particular, angered those who felt the country was not recognizable, was overrun by foreigners, had lost its sense of identity. And they hated hearing all these strange languages, spoken in shops, schools and churches." The events of this book take place at the intersection of many disruptive influences in America; railroads, telephone, freed blacks (the Buffalo Soldiers play a prominent role in the firefighting in this book). As we watch western fires

threaten lives and property today, challenging even our advantages of aircraft (the US government owned two airplanes in 1910), communications and road transportation, it's hard to imagine the odds faced by those on the front lines in this book. The final third of this book is an emotional look at hard men and women making hard choices in the face of fire fueled by dry timber and spread with hurricane-force Palouser wind. Some were deliberately heroic, others purely self-serving, and some simply met their end as they ran out of options while doing their duty. Egan captures the time and place with honesty and respect, and leaves you in awe of their pioneering spirit and the power of nature over humanity. The next time you see video of a woodland firefighter wielding a "Pulaski Axe", you'll appreciate its history...and know something about the man who gave it its name.

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