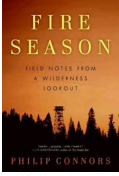


Fire Season: Field Notes from a Wilderness Lookout



This book describes my dream job, being a fire lookout out west. I could handle the wild creatures, the solitude, even the lightning strikes, but maybe not cleaning out the cistern after vandals pollute it. In the tradition of writers, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, Edward Abbey and Norman Maclean. Philip Connors leaves his job as a *Wall Street Journal* editor and while on vacation signs up on the spot to detect fires for the National Forest Service, or as he jokingly calls it "The National Forest Circus."

By luck, [Philip Connors](#) got assigned to a high lookout (a 7 foot by 7 foot perch) in the Gila Wilderness Reserve of New Mexico. In one funny scene he describes all the phobias you must not suffer from in order to make it as a fire lookout. They include: fear of heights, fire (obviously), closed spaces, lightning, animals, in particular, bear, spiders and snakes, and even fear of the moon.

This book is structured as one fire season from April to August but is in fact an amalgam of Connors' first nine years at the same lookout. He writes about everything: his need for solitude, his wife's acceptance of their long separations, and the camping and fishing trips that Connors takes. He also explores the history of the Gila Wilderness, how naturalist and forester Aldo Leopold proposed wilderness like this for the first time in history and actually brought it into being, a land kept wild without roads and machines, the "Leave no Trace" philosophy now embraced by so many.

Connors writes beautifully about nature. But he also records the drama of a lookout's life: storms, crawling over snow to reach his little cabin at the start of the season, the incredible high of fighting fires (he does not fight them but watches and radios vital information). He also describes run-ins with bears and snakes in the wilderness, conversations with long-distance hikers, and technical info about how fire-spotters pinpoint exactly where a fire is, how they record daily humidity, and how they fight fire with planes, helicopters, and even by setting fires themselves.

Other intriguing elements covered are the Forest Service's changing philosophy on managing fires including the more ecological one of letting them burn. This tremendous change in philosophy was also pioneered in this wilderness and suggested by Aldo Leopold. Connors delves deeply into the history of the region including our government's bloody battles with Native Americans.

For similar books try Edward Abbey's essay collection [Confessions of a Barbarian](#) in which he describes his experiences being a fire lookout and [Solitude: Seeking Wisdom in Extremes: a Year Alone in the Patagonia Wilderness](#) by Robert Kull. To enjoy some fantastic nature writing, read the book by Connors' hero, Aldo Leopold. It's called [Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There](#).

Posted by Dory L. on August 20, 2011

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