

Book Review

## ***Between Two Fires: A Fire History of Contemporary America* by Dr. Stephen J. Pyne, 1st ed.; University of Arizona Press: Tucson, AZ, USA, 2015**

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*Between Two Fires* [1] is one of many books that Dr. Stephen J. Pyne has published about the wildland fire scene. Although this latest opus from Dr. Pyne has been out for a couple years now, it is worth a review to ensure that it takes its rightfully recognized place as the second sun in the binary solar system of fire-related books that he has crafted. It is a welcome and long anticipated addition to the wildland fire history canon.

Let us get the inevitable comparison that has to be made to his earlier and seminal *Fire in America* (1982) out of the way. True, both of these books were more or less written in the same vein and intent, and *Between Two Fires* builds upon the concept of following the historical narrative of wildland fire policy and fable. Roughly where *Fire in America* lets off, *Between Two Fires* picks up the story, and carries it through 2011. It must be emphasized however, that they both rightly stand on their own and are not directly lined up sequentially in their narratives. Importantly, *Between Two Fires* indulges itself to reach back into the past to pick up some of the pieces and strings that are pertinent to the contemporary story.

Because *Between Two Fires* catches the story up to recent, it is particularly important for the current generation of firefighters, and for those now interested in the endeavor, such as the public and academia. I can think of no other book existing that I could hand to a young firefighter and say—here, read this, and understand how we got to this place. The fact that Dr. Pyne was able to meld the utter complexity of the last 50-odd years of wildfire into one cogent book is astonishing. Especially so in that it flows easily from topic to topic, skipping here and there in time and space, but all the while methodically guiding the reader through the most important American wildfire moments of the recent past.

Anyone that reads it will come away with a better collective understanding of the discord that has reverberated into our current fire culture. It illustrates the seeming inanity and dysfunction in the American wildfire service, while also acknowledging the inherent altruism that is pervasive throughout the fire ranks. At the same time, the book maintains that despite many of our best intentions, sometimes we can be our own worst enemy, unable to articulate to the masses (even ourselves) the complexity associated with our work, much less project a clear way forward.

*Between Two Fires* wonderfully depicts the glacial movement that has pushed forward the broken pieces of wildfire policy, quixotic initiatives, silver bullet solutions, heroes and patron saints, lessons learned and lore into what is the alluvial fan of our collective experience on the fireline. The writing style is unique and crisp, and solidly referenced. In fact, the reference section alone makes the book worth having. Pyne clips along a rapid pace, wasting very few words along the way. This narrative style makes the history engrossing, and while reading it you find yourself transported into the echoing corridors and around the hefty tables of decision making.

The overall theme of the book is evidenced by its name. So, what are the two titular fires? Are they the fires set and the fires lit? Perhaps the fires judged good and the fires judged bad? The old fire, or the new? The literal fire and the figurative? The fires near and the fires far? Pyne is crafty enough to never come outright and provide the answer to this question, however this is one of the aspects of the book that I enjoyed the most, and kept me reading on. It could be argued that any fire contains within itself a dual nature, especially as viewed by our human role juxtaposed to fires own impetuous existence. I have my own thoughts on what the nature of the two aforementioned fires are, but you may come away with a different view. Such is the amorphous essence of fire.

I will not pretend to say that this was an easy book to read; but for the subject matter, I would not want it to be, either. That said, I firmly believe that the material is reachable for any reader who is genuinely interested in learning about the fascinating and complex history of wildfire. I offer that you join the challenge of this literary endeavor, as the rewards of reading *Between Two Fires* are intangible, especially if you consider yourself a true '*student of fire.*' In a time when so many of the books written about wildfire have the mental nutritional benefit of Frosted Flakes™ (*we get it—jumping out of planes is beyond awesome*), it may do you good to eat some more vegetables.

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## References

1. Pyne, S.J. *Between Two Fires: A Fire History of Contemporary America*, 1st ed.; University of Arizona Press: Tucson, AZ, USA, 2015.



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