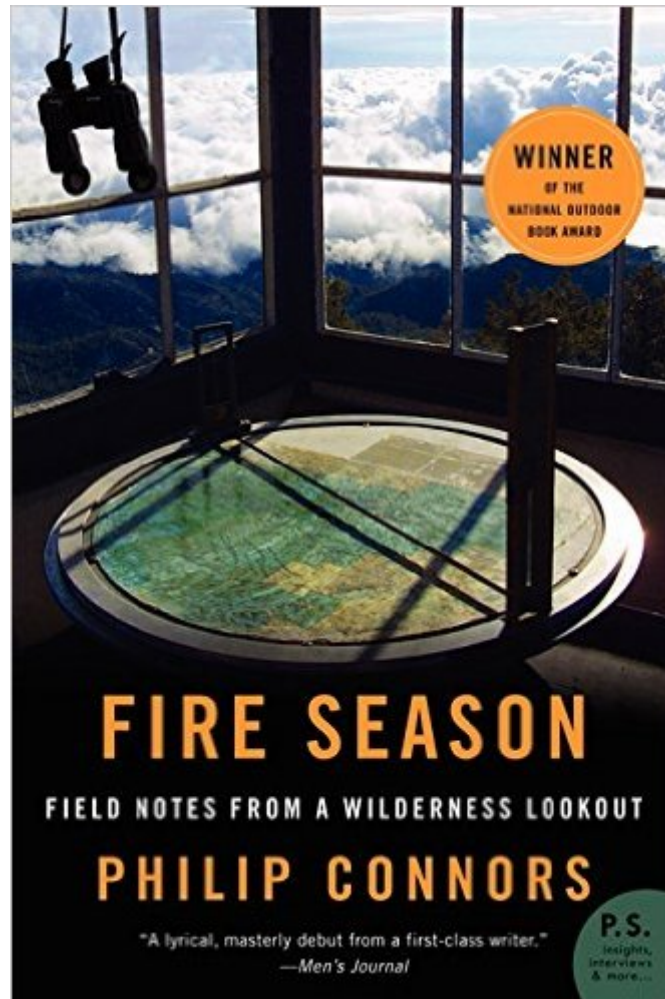


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Fire Season: Field Notes From A Wilderness Lookout



Synopsis

“Fire Season both evokes and honors the great hermit celebrants of nature, from Dillard to Kerouac to Thoreau” and I loved it.” J.R. Moehringer, author of *The Tender Bar* [Connors’s] adventures in radical solitude make for profoundly absorbing, restorative reading.” Walter Kirn, author of *Up in the Air* Phillip Connors is a major new voice in American nonfiction, and his remarkable debut, *Fire Season*, is destined to become a modern classic. An absorbing chronicle of the days and nights of one of the last fire lookouts in the American West, *Fire Season* is a marvel of a book, as rugged and soulful as Matthew Crawford’s bestselling *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, and it immediately places Connors in the august company of Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, Aldo Leopold, Barry Lopez, and others in the respected fraternity of hard-boiled nature writers.

Book Information

Paperback: 272 pages

Publisher: Ecco; Reprint edition (February 28, 2012)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0061859370

ISBN-13: 978-0061859373

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 0.6 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 6.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (124 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #125,783 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #30 in [Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Forests & Rainforests](#) #42 in [Books > Science & Math > Agricultural Sciences > Forestry](#) #92 in [Books > Science & Math > Earth Sciences > Natural Disasters](#)

Customer Reviews

This book crept up on me like a forest fire which smoldered for a while before turning into a long slow burn not easily extinguished. As I read, there were often passages covering material I knew such as the Muir-Pinchot divide, Leopold’s gradual enlightenment, and changes in policy toward forest fires. Sometimes I longed for more new material based on the author’s own experiences. But like the author, when *Fire Season* was over I found myself regretting that I couldn’t stay longer. It has to be a difficult task to write a book about being a fire lookout, knowing you’re following in the footsteps of lookouts/writers such as Abbey, Snyder, Maclean, and Kerouac. It also has to be difficult nurturing a marriage while living alone in a remote location for a third of the year, and that is

one aspect of the book which gets more attention here than in those previous authors' work. I enjoyed the reflections on solitude and those drawn to it, and on living a life which is split both in location and lifestyle, since I live a variation of that myself though not to the author's extremes of wilderness lookout and bartender. There are also brief looks at a wide variety of people, some who love the wilderness and try to live in it most of their lives, and others who can't cope with it and quit within a few days to return to urban life. Despite encounters with bears and lightning bolts, and some social moments, this is a quiet book. Norman Maclean is quoted, "It doesn't take much in the way of body and mind to be a lookout. It's mostly soul." For those with a love of and need for wilderness and personal freedom, this book will be a bit of nourishment for that soul.

Fire Season chronicles one of the many summers Philip Connors spent as a lookout in the Gila National Forest, sitting alone in a tower, scanning the treetops for smoke. Connors makes the arduous hike to his lookout post every year because "here, amid these mountains, I restore myself and lose myself, knit together my ego and then surrender it, detach myself from the mass of humanity so I may learn to love them again, all while coexisting with creatures whose kind have lived here for millennia." It is writing of that caliber, as much as the content, that makes Fire Season worth reading. Although Connors writes lovingly of trees and grass, Fire Season is as much a tribute to solitude as it is an appreciation of nature's beauty. Connors writes that he does "not so much seek anything as allow the world to come to me, allow the days to unfold as they will, the dramas of weather and wild creatures." Connors channels (and makes frequent reference to) Abbey and Leopold in his descriptions of majestic nature, but also brings to mind (and sometimes quotes) Thoreau in his loving homage to isolation. Connors peppers his book with lessons in history (the Warm Springs Apache hid from the Cavalry in the wilderness he now surveys) and biology (while moths, beetles, and tarantula hawks are some of the smaller creatures he observes, bears are a more frequent subject of comment). He provides a brief overview of conservationist philosophy and its history. Connors makes interesting what might in the hands of a less talented writer be dull, but the work still comes across as a hodge-podge: clusters of random facts connected only by their shared geography. Although the book is quite short, it reads as if Connors was searching for filler: a section discusses the unpublished notebook Jack Kerouac kept during his experience as a lookout; another discusses his experiences on 9/11; another recounts the vanishing wolf population in the Southwest. And given that the book is so short, it contains a surprising amount of redundancy: there are only so many times a writer needs to say that some fires are good and others not so good before the reader gets it. My larger complaint (if it can be called that) about Fire Season is that it

contains so little that is fresh. I'm not a biologist or ecologist or forester, but I knew before reading *Fire Season* (as I suspect most people did) that fires are necessary to the health of a forest environment, that the Forest Service didn't always understand that, and that public policy decisions about whether to let a fire burn are difficult to make and often controversial. Connors adds no depth to that discussion; his job is to look for smoke, not to make policy decisions, and his career is in journalism (and bartending), not forest management or firefighting. (There is, in fact, little in the book about the actual suppression of wildfires. Readers looking for an excellent fictional account of fighting forest fires should check out Andrew Piper's *The Wildfire Season*.) I'm not sure there's much to learn about fire from reading Connors' book that a reasonably well read person won't already know. Connors' writing is strongest when it is most personal. Having a spouse who lives by himself in a tower every summer might challenge some marriages (while it might improve others); I thought it was interesting to read about the impact Connors' summer career has had on his marriage. When he writes about finding a fawn (apparently injured) and encountering hikers and the workings of his mind, *Fire Season* shines. Connors brings his dog into the wilderness for companionship and his description of the dog's personality change when transitioning to mountain life reinforces my belief that all books are made better by the inclusion of a dog. In short, what Connors does in *Fire Season* has been done elsewhere, often in greater detail and with more authority, but the book nonetheless has value for the glimpse it provides of the sort of person who is content to sit in a tower for long stretches, pondering the wilderness, and for Connors' beautiful descriptions of (mostly) unspoiled forests and mountains.

In 1845 Henry David Thoreau left his cabin on Walden Pond for a trek deep into the Maine woods because he "wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach." Every April, for much of the past decade, Philip Connors, the author of this engaging natural history, accompanied by his dog Alice, takes up life in the Gila Wilderness in southwestern New Mexico for much the same reason. Connors found the opportunity to do so by becoming a Forest Service fire spotter on Apache Peak, 10,000 feet above sea level, in the southeastern quadrant of the wilderness forest. His job called on him to spot and then report the lightning and camper-started fires that occur during his five month tour of duty. His *raison d'être* for performing this solitary task is "to slip away from the group hug of a digital culture enthralled with social networking. . . . I prefer to live...out here on the edge, where worship of the material recedes and acquaintance with the natural becomes possible." He describes "the seduction to solitude in a stretch of the world as we were given it, a seduction that stretches across all human cultures and all

human history." Of solitude he has plenty. He may go for a week without seeing another human being. He may be bored sometimes, but never lonely. He is right where he and Alice want to be. Their walks along the Black Range ridge line, down into the valley, off to a trout stream inspire and stimulate both of them. This book, the tale of a "smoke-besotted stylite," grew out of the field notes of his day-in day-out observations about himself and about the natural world around him. His work cycle, 10 days on, four days off, exigencies permitting, allows him and Alice to hike the five and half miles out to his pickup truck and drive back into town for a reunion with his wife Martha, for provisions, and then, as the hankering to return to his peak grows stronger, to make ready to head back to Apache Peak. Good nature writing has the capacity to enthrall, to give voice to our common yearning to escape the city, to seek out nature on its own terms. Connors' hero and spiritual mentor is Aldo Leopold, the Forest Service ranger turned conservationist. It was Leopold who, in the 1920's, convinced the Service of the need to preserve as much of the remaining unroaded wilderness in the United States as it could. The Gila Wilderness established in 1924 was the least touched, most obvious place to start and it became the world's first designated wilderness. In the 1980's, the Service added 200,000 acres to the Wilderness and named the addition for Leopold. For all its incidental charms including Connor's marriage (Martha is to be cherished and he knows it) and the relationship of this man and his dog which enlivens and helps carry the story, the book as published seems to have shortchanged its author and its readers. It cries out for a map of the Gila Wilderness, one which locates Apache Peak and the other tower locations Connors mentions, and which shows the small towns near the head of the trail that leads to Connors' station. Published as endpapers, the map would add a great deal to the book. The book also begs for photographs of the author and his dog on the trail and at the station, photos of the long views that open up to the author every morning as he climbed the 55-foot ladder to his observation post, and of the long forgotten Military Cemetery with its graves of 12 Buffalo Soldiers and three of their Indian scouts which Connors came across on one of his hikes. Perhaps Harper Collins wasn't sure that sales of this ECCO imprint would justify the expense. Too bad. End note. Reading "Fire Season" brought to mind three rewarding natural histories which are all available from (as is Leopold's "A Sand Country Almanac). "The Journal of a Disappointed Man" by W.N.P. Barbellion, Hogarth Press (1984) (first published in 1919). A distinguished, self-trained British naturalist wrote this book to provide an estate for his young wife and child as he was dying from multiple sclerosis at age 27. "A Country Year Living the Questions" by Sue Hubbell. Random House, 1986. Hubbell's account of her life as a beekeeper on her 100-acre farm on a peninsula between two rivers in the Ozark Mountains in Missouri will take you in. "A Year in the Maine Woods" by Bernd Heinrich, Addison Wesley 1994.

Heinrich, accompanied by his pet raven, takes up where Thoreau left off.

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