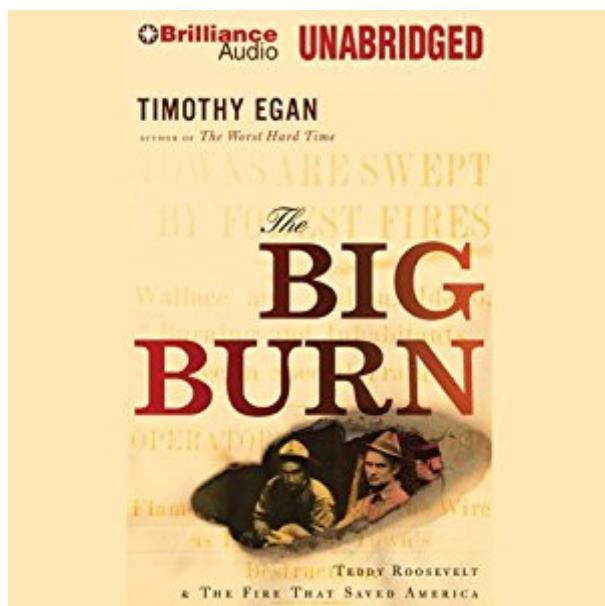


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The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt And The Fire That Saved America



Synopsis

On the afternoon of August 20, 1910, a battering ram of wind moved through the drought-stricken national forests of Washington, Idaho, and 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 the blink of an eye. Forest rangers had assembled nearly ten thousand men — college boys, day workers, immigrants from mining camps — to fight the fire. 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. Equally dramatic 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 and preserved for every citizen. The robber barons fought Roosevelt and Pinchot's rangers, but the Big Burn saved the forests even as it destroyed them: the heroism shown by the rangers turned public opinion permanently in their favor and became the creation myth that drove the Forest Service, with consequences still felt in the way our national lands are protected — or not — today.

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Customer Reviews

The author, Timothy Egan, is an excellent reporter and columnist for The New York Times. Here with *The Big Burn* he reveals again how well he also writes history. In this case, the searing tale of

the 1910 firestorm in the Northwest might have been lost to most Americans. Readers will find a wealth of information about not only the cataclysm itself but also what it represented for the management of the country's forests, the development of fire prevention policies that held for decades, and the political will that a strong president exerted for wilderness preservation. I especially appreciate the extensive research Egan undertook for this volume, poring over Forestry Service records, many newspaper accounts, and testimony from the people swept up in the horrendous fire and its aftermath. Readers become familiar with these individuals and care about the outcome for each of them. Egan's writing is crisp, clear, and not overdone with a story that might easily prompt excess. The Big Burn is a compelling account, history at its best with a strong narrative and accessible analysis. Michael Helquist, MARIE EQUI: Radical Politics and Outlaw Passions

Timothy Egan is a terrific storyteller, especially when he's giving us a history lesson. This very readable book recounts the biggest wildfire in American history, the 1910 conflagration in the Bitterroot Mountains of Montana and Idaho. To set the stage, Egan draws vivid portraits of the key players in the new conservation movement, among them Teddy Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot and John Muir, as well as those who opposed it. TR's successor, the feckless William Howard Taft, along with members of Congress beholden to big-money interests who viewed protection of millions of acres of wilderness a barrier to accumulating even more wealth, succeeded in defunding the nascent Forest Service, sewing the seeds of the disaster that followed in the drought-plagued summer of 1910. Comparisons to current-day political standoffs are inevitable. Riveting, suspenseful, often tragic, Egan's exhaustively researched account is every bit as compelling as "The Worst Hard Time," his book on the Dust Bowl. Highly recommended.

I knew little of the historical details surrounding the beginnings of the Forest Service, before reading this book. Now that I have read it, I am hungry for more. The accounts here of the horrific firestorm of 1910, and actions of conservationists such as Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir, and Roosevelt's newly installed Forest Service chief, Gifford Pinchot, are captivating. On one hand, the degree of honor and dedication of these early dedicated conservationists is above reproach. On the other hand, the degree of corruption and political scheming demonstrated by a few wealthy families, who practically ran the entire country, if they did not own it, provides uneasy insight into the political and economic history of our country at the turn of the twentieth century. The account of the actual fire brings the reader to the personal, individual perseverance and dedication of those who led the fight

against a firestorm that was unstoppable by almost any standard. One can hardly imagine the bravery of those early foresters, who often were not paid by the government on time, and whose salaries provided meager existence when they were paid. The lack of support by the government, and almost no payments made to injured civilians who joined the fight, or to their survivors, is scandalous. An inspiring, important story of early conservation movements is in this book, for those who are interested, and a cautionary tale of wealth and power is to be had as well. Definitely worth reading for many reasons. The author does an admirable job of presenting this time and place in history, while also providing numerous human touches with his carefully researched details into the personalities and lives of people who were there. Excellent read!

I am a huge fan of Theodore Roosevelt; I once played him in a re-creation of the 1912 presidential election, so I had studied him extensively in preparation. Thus, I knew a little bit about him before I read this book. I must say, for a historical account, this book makes gripping reading. The author makes clear in irresistible fashion the scope of the dreadful wildfire, and what made it happen, and the massive damage it left in its wake, and the lives it affected. However, I do have one serious quibble: I feel the title is a misnomer. Theodore Roosevelt is an incidental character in the story. Center stage is occupied by one of Roosevelt's chief lieutenants, Gifford Pinchot, who was one of the nation's first foresters and indeed the one who wages the fiercest fights against political opposition to conservation. I would also argue that there is scant attention devoted to how the fire "saved" America. There can be no doubt that it was a significant event and a substantial disaster, but that it saved America is a somewhat questionable conceit.

This is an extremely well-written and researched account of the establishment of the US Forest Service and the history of huge, destructive fires in America in the late 19th and early 20th century. I would highly recommend it to anyone interested in this because it determined how forest fires would be fought for the next 80 years.

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