

# On the Burning Edge: A Fateful Fire and the Men Who Fought It

*Kyle Dickman*

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**On the Burning Edge: A Fateful Fire and the Men Who Fought It** Kyle Dickman  
**NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY *MEN'S JOURNAL* • In the tradition of Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm* and Robert Kurson's *Shadow Divers* comes a true and heartbreaking tale of courage, difficult decisions, and ultimate sacrifice. *On the Burning Edge*, by award-winning journalist and former wildland firefighter Kyle Dickman, is the definitive account of the Yarnell Hill Fire.**

On June 28, 2013, a single bolt of lightning sparked an inferno that devoured more than eight thousand acres in northern Arizona. Twenty elite firefighters—the Granite Mountain Hotshots—walked together into the blaze, tools in their hands and emergency fire shelters on their hips. Only one of them walked out.

Dickman brings to the story a professional firefighter's understanding of how wildfires ignite, how they spread, and how they are fought. He understands hotshots and their culture: the pain and glory of a rough and vital job, the brotherly bonds born of dangerous work. Drawing on dozens of interviews with officials, families of the fallen, and the lone survivor, he describes in vivid detail what it's like to stand inside a raging fire—and shows how the increased population and decreased water supply of the American West guarantee that many more young men will step into harm's way in the coming years.

## **Praise for *On the Burning Edge***

“What makes this book a tear-jerking classic is the seamless manner in which Dickman weaves a century of fire-management history into the fully realized stories of the men's lives—the sweat, the adrenaline, the orange glow of fire within their aluminum shelters, and the chewing gum that hotshot Scott Norris left in the shower before telling his girlfriend, Heather, ‘I'll take care of it later. I promise.’”—*Outside*

“Dickman offers a riveting account of a dangerous occupation and acts of nature most violent—and those who face both down.”—*Library Journal*

## **On the Burning Edge: A Fateful Fire and the Men Who Fought It Details**

Date : Published May 12th 2015 by Ballantine Books (first published May 5th 2015)

ISBN : 9780553392128

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Format : Hardcover 304 pages

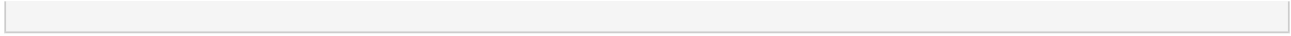
Genre : Nonfiction, History, Audiobook, Environment, Nature

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## From Reader Review On the Burning Edge: A Fateful Fire and the Men Who Fought It for online ebook

### Angela Cloud says

I originally read the article Dickman wrote in Outside and was fascinated. He tries very hard to replicate the writing style of Krakauer, and probably did a good job if I hadn't just finished Young Men and Fire by Norman Maclean right before. Maclean's writing left something to be desired with Dickman's prose.

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### Jill Crosby says

If you can't feel the heat & smell the smoke while reading this story of the Granite Mountain Hotshots who fell fleeing the flames of the Yarnell Hill Fire in 2013, you're not trying.

Still--I'm hoping John McLean turns his formidable writing chops loose on this tragedy, and offers more analysis and explanation as to WHY Yarnell Mountain happened, and how future hotshot teams can avoid a similar fate.

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### Dee Eisel says

After reading about the Esperanza Fire, I wanted to explore more about wildfires and their history in the United States. Most of the books that have been written about fires involve those that caused deaths, and the next book I found was no exception. "On The Burning Edge" tells the story of the Yarnell Hills fire, which caused the death of 19 wilderness firefighters. (I'll also be reviewing another book on this same fire in a few days.) I knew this wouldn't be a happy ending.

Unlike the Esperanza fire, the Yarnell Hills fire was caused by a lightning strike. I don't know why that made me feel a bit better, but it did. I was relieved that there wasn't an arsonist involved in this. But it was still a terrible, terrible day. I was already familiar with smoke jumpers - I actually know a guy who used to be one - and when they die the part of me that is afraid of heights just kind of shivers and nods and cries. The team of firefighters in this case was a hotshot team. Instead of jumping in, they come in on the ground and do the brutally hard work of eliminating vegetation and fuel in an area wide enough to keep a fire from spreading past the line. Their equipment includes chainsaws and picks and they hike in with their own water. They also, in the United States, use portable shields that in some cases can save lives. The Granite Mountain Hotshot team, headquartered in Prescott Arizona, used theirs. Unfortunately, the circumstances were wrong and the shelters could not save them.

"On The Burning Edge" tells the story of that whole fateful summer, from the hiring of the rookies on the crew to the aftermath of the fire. Dickman is a firefighter himself, and his expertise came in handy as he explains how the training for these crews work and how they differ from structural firefighters. He clearly conjures the heat and awful environment in which the Granite Mountain team worked. He also rounds them out and lets us see the people they were outside of their coats and boots. Dickman's writing talent made the book fly by, and even though the story is tragic he brings out many moments of levity right up until the end.

Read this for insight into firefighting - which is only going to get more intense over time - and to understand

more about what they and their families sacrifice. Five of five stars.

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## **Lori L (She Treads Softly) says**

On the Burning Edge by Kyle Dickman is a highly recommended, in depth look at the 20 Granite Mountain Hotshots of Prescott, AZ., and the Yarnell, AZ., wildfire that claimed 19 of their lives.

Dickman, a former hotshot, spent five years fighting wildfires in California. His insider's knowledge and viewpoint give us information about the group and how they train and interact. While providing the information on a brief history of wildfire firefighting teams, and how a hotshot team trains and works fighting wildfires, he focuses mainly on the Granite Mountain Hotshots. He then gives us a well-researched inside glimpse at each of the members of the team. Dickman carefully covers each member of the crew and even includes their last text messages sent to loved ones.

The wildfire in Yarnell was sparked by a lightning bolt and quickly turned into an inferno that eventually devoured more than eight thousand acres in northern Arizona. Anyone who has ever seen a wildfire take off will understand the terror and unpredictability of a wildfire. Those of us who have done so, have also watched and applauded the dedicated crews coming in to fight those fires. While the actual firefighting portion of the book may seem scant, On the Burning Edge is a memorable and heartbreaking account of the men who fought the fire.

I remember vividly when living in the west seeing a lightning strike hit a nearby mountain and then almost immediately seeing smoke arise from the mountain. It is a horrifying feeling to watch a fire take off and know your family could be in the path of a wildfire. Furthermore, these fires seemed to be a yearly occurrence. So many people across the USA depend on the hotshots and crews of dedicated firefighters from across the West to come in and fight the fires. (A shout out to those flying helicopters and dumping flame retardant on the fires too.)

Dickman does a good job presenting the information and telling the story of the tragic event. It is also a story of warning and caution. With the increased population and well publicized decrease in the water supply in the West, there are certainly going to be an increase of fires that threaten populated areas and more young men will be in harm's way fighting the fires.

Disclosure: My Kindle edition was courtesy of Random House for review purposes.

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## **Lori says**

I won this as a goodreads first reads giveaway. I have an ARC. due to the instructions on my ARC I cannot write a review until it is released to the public. So my review of this book will come at that time. I read this book last month but could not write a review until it was officially out in the stores. Two years ago on June 13th the area of Yarnell Arizona made national news. An enormous fire engulfed the area. It all started with a lightening bolt. Within a couple days 19 firemen were dead. They were known as the "hotshots" They specialized in forest fires. of the 20 hotshots only one survived. This book describes what happened during this tragic time. There are interviews with witnesses. Many of the hotshot's lives are described. Many of these men were just starting families that tragically lost their husbands, daddies. This is a hard book to read since it talks of real life men who lost their lives. Part of the book also talks of other fires throughout history that cost many lives. So part of the book is about the 19 firemen who lost their lives, what they did to try and

survive. the interviews of witnesses. It can be a bit of dry reading in parts. but gives a lot of information about this tragic event that happened in June of 2013.

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### **Joe Hauglie says**

Gripping, funny, human, and moving. Excellent narrative of the Yarnell Hill fire in 2013. Having read both this and Young Men and Fire, there are many lines of comparison, but this story is probably more compelling since it happened so recently and in an much closer area.

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### **Edward says**

Truly a tragic story, but the book is both informative and interesting. The book provides an overview of the daily routine and responsibilities of a group of Arizona hotshots during fire season. It also introduces us to the hotshot crew, their personalities, their hopes and dreams. I was surprised, already knowing the ending, how moved I was by what transpired on that final day and afterward.

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### **Doug Bivens says**

very informative. I watched the new movie Only The Brave(which is based on this disaster) and was intrigued so decided to pick up this book. There is some science etc but its in language I got and the history of wildfire management as well as historic fires that shaped it was very interesting. My hats off to these heroes and all who fight the fires in this nation

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### **Chris McBride says**

Not sure why I didn't like this more, though it may have been the narrator as I listened to it on Audible. He didn't do a poor job, necessarily, but I felt my attention waning quite a bit. Fascinating information about the technical aspects of wildfires and how modern efforts have actually made things more dangerous in many ways. The final section, discussing the central event of the story, is compelling and heartrending. More so than I expected.

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### **Barbara says**

Little slow in spots early on but does justice to Granite Mountain.

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### **Matt says**

It's that time of year, and appreciable portions of the west are ablaze. With fire season upon us, it seemed an appropriate time to revisit one of the worst wildland fire disasters in American history.

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On June 28, 2013, in northern Arizona, lightning ignited a devastating wildfire that burned more than 8,000 acres. Men and equipment moved in to do battle. Residents of a nearby town prepared to evacuate. The fire feasted on dry fuel in the drought-ridden area. The area hadn't burned for 45 years, and it was highly flammable. The wind, as always, played its tricks. Two days later, 19 members of the Granite Mountain Hotshots – a team of wildland firefighters stationed out of Prescott, Arizona – were overrun by the fire while attempting to get to a safe zone. The hotshots deployed their fire shelters, but the aluminum, silica, and fiberglass devices were no match for the intense, 2,000 degree heat. All of them perished.

(Like the servant of Job, one member of the team who had been acting as a lookout survived).

This is more than a story of young men dying in fire. It is a mystery. Shortly before their deaths, the Granite Mountain Hotshots had been standing “in the black”. That is, they were at a place that had already burned. They were safe there. The spot could not burn again. If they simply remained where they stood while the fire flared and jumped and advanced at tremendous speed, they would be with us still. If they made any other decisions than the one that got made, they would still be with us. If they made no decision at all...

Yet they left the black.

The order to leave, likely made by superintendent Eric Marsh, is the animating feature of the Yarnell Fire disaster. It is a deadly riddle that calls out to be solved, or at least puzzled over. Probably the chief failure of Kyle Dickman's *On the Burning Edge* is that it does not realize this. Marsh's decision is only fleetingly scrutinized in this unfocused and frustrating book.

At 265 pages of text, *On the Burning Edge* is pretty short. Almost two-thirds of its length is devoted to the lead-up to the fire. Dickman pays special attention to the formation of the Granite Mountain crew under Marsh. He takes you through the training and certification required of a hotshot crew. Hotshots – not to be confused with smokejumpers, who can parachute into action – are often referred to as “elite” units. However, as Dickman points out, qualifications are pretty basic, and abilities vary from crew to crew. Granite Mountain comes across as a physically fit and able group, with a controversial leader who one person described as a “bad-decisions, good-outcome guy”. With a sometimes plodding thoroughness, Dickman provides accounts of the various fires that Granite Mountain fought in the 2013 season.

In presenting the Granite Mountain team, Dickman chooses to hone in on only a few individuals. These chosen subjects get the lion's share of the space, to the detriment of all the rest. One of the men Dickman follows isn't even at the fateful Yarnell Fire; despite this, we get several in-depth scenes with him and his family. I am loathe to use the word “filler” in describing any book's contents. It's an imprecise term often overused by readers with short attention spans. In this case, I think it's warranted. There is a lot of unnecessary padding at the start, and far too little actual substance at the end.

I am not ignorant of the journalistic process. I understand that in order to write something like this, you need sources. An author is naturally going to write more about the people who gave him or her access. Unfortunately, the result is an unbalanced narrative. The girlfriends of some of the hotshots (who I assume were willing to speak with Dickman) are given far more depth than most of the crew. In fact, some of the guys who died with Granite Mountain are only introduced *at* the fatal fire. This just doesn't make any sense, narrative or otherwise.

Even the men Dickman writes about eludes us. He mistakes factoids with characterizations. We learn that one guy liked the movie *Tommy Boy* and another liked guns; what we don't learn is what that contributes to who these men were.

Scattered throughout Granite Mountain's story are interesting nuggets about the history of wildland firefighting. Gifford Pinchot and the Big Burn. Natural fire cycles verses fire suppression. This is important

context, but Dickman never molds it into a position. There is no discussion about the wildland-urban interface, and how the encroachment of developers requires a massive subsidy that is sometimes paid in lives.

In the movie *Backdraft*, an arson investigator played by Robert De Niro explains to one of the Baldwin brothers that fire has a mind of its own. That's not true. Fire is constrained by its own physics. Experienced wildland firefighters, aided by up-to-the-minute weather reports, can look at a fire and see the dangers before they unfold. How a fire runs faster uphill than down. How a fire will react to different types of fuel. How a shift in the wind can block an escape route. There is an inherent risk to fighting fires because fire is involved, and fire burns. But in terms of probability, firefighting is actually safer than more mundane occupations, such as garbage collection. This is due to our understanding of fire science.

When firefighters die in wildland blazes, it is typically due to human error. We see this time and again in lethal fires, whether it's Mann Gulch in 1949 (covered by Norman Maclean in *Young Men and Fire*) or the South Canyon Fire of 1994 (covered by Norman Maclean's son John, in *Fire on the Mountain*). Dickman recognizes this when he discusses the 1990 Dude Fire that killed six firefighters in Walk Moore Canyon. (The firefighters, apropos of nothing, were part of a convict crew). Humans are fallible, even those who are well trained. Under the duress of a seething, mushrooming inferno that is powerful enough to create its own weather system, poor decisions get made.

Despite this recognition, Dickman does not engage in any rigorous analysis of the fire scene. I'm not sure where this hesitation comes from. I sort of assume he refrained from any critique or judgment out of deference to the fallen. If so, he probably shouldn't have undertaken this project to begin with.

I expected more from Dickman, who is a wildland firefighter himself. It surprises me that there isn't a section in the book where he puts on a rucksack and goes to Yarnell to observe things with his own eyes. To walk in the footsteps of the doomed to see what they saw. To know the terrain. To understand their exertions as they tried to escape. This might have given him a crucial insight. A professional wildland firefighter tends to view ground with different eyes than you or me. A firefighter looks at a ridge and is unconsciously estimating how fast a fire might run along its spine. I look at the same ridge and get distracted by two bunnies humping.

There is a lot of material out there on Yarnell. There have been a couple of official investigations and at least one prominent independent one. There are also some good magazine articles about the disaster. Heck, Dickman wrote one of them for *Outside* magazine. (I recommend *No Exit* by Sean Flynn, written for *Esquire*). In terms of what else is out there on the topic, *On the Burning Edge* falls short.

In the wake of disaster, we are always trying to draw lessons. Most of the time, such attempts are futile. Not so with fires. The U.S. Forest Service, like the military, conducts staff rides at fatal fires in order to determine when, where, and how decision-making breaks down. This knowledge can be integrated into training and procedures so that the same mistakes don't get repeated. The question of why Marsh left the black is imperative to an understanding of the Yarnell Fire. Dickman treats it as an afterthought.

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## Candace says

This was a well written book. I wish he would have elaborated on all of the 19 firefighters and their personalities, as it seemed he just focused on a few. Also, I would have liked pictures of all of the

firefighters.

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**Michelle says**

Really well written with a pretty objective viewpoint on what is a sensitive subject.

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**Becca Guillote says**

This is a great, if heartbreaking, read. Dickman does a wonderful job of dropping you right into the heart of wild land fire fighting, I could almost feel the heat.

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**Leslie says**

I found this book an excellent written and emotional story of a tragedy. We must never forget 19 Granite Mountain hotshots.

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