Review Essays

On the Fireline

David Grazian


Since firefighting represents one of the more dangerous occupations remaining in modern society, our culture tends to make heroes of its brave men and women in uniform—we cheer on their bright red trucks and trusty Dalmatians at hometown parades, venerate them for not only rescuing babies from burning high-rises, but terrified kittens from trees, and, most notably, as a country we lionized them as national martyrs in the wake of the tragedies surrounding 9/11. Yet while our gratitude toward firefighters charged with putting out building fires in populated residential areas and commercial districts (known as structural firefighters) appears infinite, as a largely urban people we tend to ignore the thankless work of the wildland firefighters of the U.S. Forest Service who spend their summers battling deadly flames from Montana to New Mexico. But, of course, containing a destructive fire as it burns out of control over thousands of acres of wooded wilderness surely invites comparison to the riskiest of human pursuits. Given its obvious dangers and lack of accompanying celebratory myths—after all, what five-year-old kid wants to play with a green fire engine?—what drives these firefighters of the West to chase black smoke, season after season, all while living in the isolated quarters of the American wild?

According to Matthew Desmond’s gripping book, On the Fireline: Living and Dying with Wildland Firefighters, there are many reasons, but the penchant for risk, for seeking out what Erving Goffman once referred to as “where the action is,” does not necessarily rank as one of them. Desmond, a budding sociologist who spent his college summers working for the Forest Service as a wildland firefighter in northern Arizona, turned his final season into a reflexive ethnographic journey in which his constant companion was a field notebook tucked into his Nomex flame-resistant fire pants. Embracing the spirit of participation observation in the most literal way possible, Desmond tirelessly

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interrogated his co-workers and his own taken-for-granted assumptions for months as he and his crew chased down burns, dug line with heavy furrowing tools, sliced up timber with chainsaws, and drank themselves silly on their nights off at their home away from home, the Elk River Fire Station. The end result is a masterful account of how young men (the Elk River crew is exclusively male) are able to face down wildfire, and why they volunteer for such an enterprise in the first place.

The underlying thesis of On the Fireline argues that those who pursue wildland firefighting have been training for this type of hands-on work and its necessarily rustic lifestyle for most of their lives. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s work on social reproduction, Desmond argues that the development of a habitus defined by “country masculinity” provides one with the appropriate disposition necessary for desiring such an occupational life and its attendant pleasures—the freedom and sanctuary offered by the expansive forest, the locker-room camaraderie of male-dominated life at Elk River, and, admittedly, a fascination with fire that at times seems to border on pathological pyromania. Desmond’s fellow crewmembers were raised on the great American frontier (or what is left of it), their lives steeped in small-town tradition and rural working-class culture. Growing up in a countrified environment, as young boys they learned to hunt, fish, and camp from their fathers and older brothers, who also taught them to wield power tools, drive ATVs, repair pickup trucks (or at least have the confidence to roll up their sleeves and fiddle under the hood before calling AAA), and properly chew tobacco. While in the Boy Scouts, they developed survival skills and competencies necessary for outdoor work (including how to handle a rattlesnake, tie a slipknot, and identify poison ivy), and through high school athletics they learned to value physical training, respect hierarchical authority, and engage in joking bouts and other male bonding exercises. And, of course, among Desmond’s fellow crewmembers, four are the sons of wildland firefighters, while the rest grew up around such role models.

Since Desmond himself not only came of age in this environment but also managed to transcend it through his scholastic endeavors in what he calls “the cosmopolitan academy” (p. 34), he approaches the social world of forest firefighting as both insider and outsider, native and stranger, with illuminating results. A truck accident during a routine forest patrol presents an opportunity for understanding how firefighters rely on country competence when performing the mundane tasks required by the job. When Donald Montoya, a crewmember, pokes around the engine and identifies the mysterious cause of the accident—a loose cotter pin—Desmond is floored by Donald’s tacit knowledge of auto mechanics, as well as by the fact that 13 of his 14 crewmembers could also identify this seemingly insignificant engine part simply by recalling their adolescent experiences tinkering in their families’ garages. Meanwhile, an episode of trash talking, practical joking, and comeuppance recalled by crewmembers as “the Twinkie incident” (to which no book review can do adequate justice) exposes the extent to which the situational and overtly
homosocial context of Elk River and its norms of competitive interaction shape the fragile relationships existing among firefighters.

Of course, while a habitus defined by rural masculinity and country competence can prepare a firefighter for a career spent felling trees, slurry bomb- ing, and smoke jumping into wildfire, it can be culturally constraining in plenty of other ways, as Desmond illustrates in a subtle but brilliant account of his crew’s night out at a local hangout, Dave’s Sports Bar and Grill. Although his crewmembers regularly perform with confidence under the titanic pressure that accompanies, say, a scorching plume-dominated fire, they freeze under the watchful and evaluative eye represented by polite company. At the bar, Desmond keenly compares “the uncomfortable interactions between crewmembers and their young girlfriends” to “the timid courting rituals of a high school dance.” As he observes: “Everyone seemed to be having a good time, but there was an awkwardness and unfamiliarity to it all ... There was a stiffness to their movements, made even more rigid by their starched and clean clothing, and a polished politeness in their hushed speech .... To them Dave’s, though a no-frills sports bar, nonetheless required some control and etiquette. They were no longer hidden deep within the forest but were exposed to the scrutinizing and civilizing gaze of others, some of whom knew them and their parents intimately—and they had to act the part of gentlemen for a night” (pp. 76–77).

Unlike the public fishbowl of Dave’s Sports Bar and Grill, the shady woods provide a sanctuary where firefighters thrive, and not only because the forest offers its quiet solitude, but because it is among the trees, grass, and brush where crewmembers believe their country competence can save them from the ravages of wildfire. As Desmond points out, firefighters, surprisingly, do not make heroes of their fallen comrades, for to suffer a firefighter’s grisly and hellish death is to shamefully reveal one’s lack of competence. Although deaths on the fireline occur for a number of structural and ecological reasons—equipment malfunction, communication breakdown, institutional error, command failure, extreme environmental conditions—the “internal eulogies” of the U.S. Forest Service always emphasize the victim’s own inability to follow what Desmond shows to be an unrealistic and ineffectual set of organizational protocols known as the Ten Standard Orders and the Eighteen Situations That Shout “Watch Out!” Firefighters themselves internalize this institutional logic (which conveniently leaves the Forest Service blameless in the face of its own occasional incompetence) by reimagining systemic or managerial failure as a moral collapse of individual responsibility on the part of “the incompetent dead.” Rooted both in nineteenth-century parables of the self-reliant and individualistic American pioneer, as well as in the organizational imperatives of a government agency responsible for regulating 193 million acres of protected landscape under conditions of unpredictability, the Forest Service instills this myth in its young recruits and seasoned veterans alike as a means of shaping their specific orientation toward firefighting. Of course, such a worldview hardly runs counter to the more general set of
dispositions held by rural, working-class men who define their character in terms of country competence and masculinity.

In the end, this goes a long way toward explaining why firefighters are willing to put themselves in harm’s smoky path in the first place. As Desmond acutely observes in his book’s devastating final chapters, the most ironic consequence of firefighters’ blind belief in the myth of “the incompetent dead” is their willingness to observe its absurd corollary—that firefighting presents no real danger at all, since their country competence will always save them from the fiery flames. As Donald tells Desmond: “Is it dangerous? Sure it’s dangerous, if you have stupid people working with you. If you know what’s going on and you have other people that know what’s going on, it’s actually not that dangerous” (p. 264). Firefighter George Canton agrees: “You really have to do something wrong, when you’re dealing with fire, to be in a situation where it takes your life ... There’s just stuff you know to watch out for, and if you don’t do it, it’s gonna get you. But not that many people die on fires” (pp. 256–257). Of all the impressive accomplishments of On the Fireline—its incisive organizational analysis, critique of hegemonic masculinity, and critical yet sympathetic portrait of rural working-class life—perhaps its most lasting achievement remains its haunting images of these young and free spirits hardening into organization men as they develop into firefighters who increasingly fail to see the forest for the trees.

Meaning and Morality in Everyday Life: Beyond “The Social Construction of …”

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The constructivist and interactionist turn in sociology was a pivotal moment. Reacting against macro perspectives that glossed over situated action

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