Young Men & Fire Study Guide

Young Men & Fire by Norman Maclean

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

It was just after August 10, 1949 when Norman Maclean witnessed the Mann Gulch fire and became tied to it. The tragedy that killed 13 of the U.S. Forest Service's Smokejumpers would become a near obsession for the author who would work on finding impossible answers until he became too ill to write any more. The book was published posthumously in 1992, having been edited but not truly altered. That year, it won the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Maclean was at his cabin in Seely Lake, Montana when he learned about the fire in Mann Gulch. As a former member of the U.S. Forest Service, Maclean had to see it for himself. After it was all done, thirteen Smokejumpers from the United States Forest Service had burned to death when a blowup occurred at the top of a ridge. Most of the Smokejumpers were college boys.

Maclean spent decades examining and re-examining events that took place in Mann Gulch over a period of five days. As Maclean knew, the fire would not cease to affect the land and lives of those involved forever but that the fire itself would take years to truly stop burning. At Maclean's last visit to Mann Gulch, the author commented that saplings had just started to grow.

Maclean's journey takes him back to Mann Gulch many times. The author taps into every possible resource in order to find out what might have happened that day. Maclean created a time line of events to the best of his ability. Also created was a chain of events that, despite conflicting testimony, are as accurate as Maclean could fathom.

Almost thirty years later, the families of the Smokejumpers could not talk about the tragedy. The Smokejumpers that died had been memorialized but there was never a real end to the story.

Maclean managed to find and contact the only two remaining survivors, Robert Sallee and Walter Rumsey. Together, the men went back to Mann Gulch where some of Maclean's most important questions were answered.

Sallee had said in an interview that he did not want to revisit Mann Gulch but was obligated. A friend had told him that like it or not, Sallee was a part of history.

Maclean addresses the physical aspects of fire as well. There are several history lessons about the Fire Service as well as the progression of the role of the Smokejumper. In an effort to understand fire and its unpredictable ways, Maclean turned to Fire Behavior science, a field of study that did not truly begin until the 1950s. The reader is treated to thorough and interesting facts about the use of mathematics in fighting fire and how the Mann Gulch fire is responsible for improving the role of the firefighter in both ability and safety.

Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary and Analysis

Maclean was at his cabin in Seely, Lake Montana when the local postmistress informed the author about the fire. Upon hearing about the fire, Maclean had to see it for himself. After it was all done, thirteen Smokejumpers from the United States Forest Service had burned to death when a blowup occurred at the top of a ridge. Most of the Smokejumpers were college boys.

Maclean had worked for the Forest Service during World War I at age 15, four years younger than the youngest Smokejumper at Mann Gulch. Maclean says that once he spotted the fire in Mann Gulch, it possessed him.

It was believed that one of the local homesteaders started the fire. The theory was that the homesteaders who relied on an abundant source of deer for venison were angry when a big sheep outfit moved into the area. Sheep tend to eat the grass down so far to the ground that there is nothing left for the deer. As a consequence, the deer would move on in search for a new source of food. The homesteaders could not afford to allow that to happen. Starting a fire at the mouth of the main tributary of Fish Creek would burn up the canyon and cliffs, blocking any means of escape for the sheep. If the theory was true, the plan went awry when the fire jumped its supposed trail and leapt into a stand of brush. The blaze quickly spread.

Climbing to the top of the hill, Maclean spotted an apparition with a red face. The apparition was frightening and was bound to be a harbinger of things to come. A blow shattered the apparition up ahead. By this time, Maclean was exhausted and in tears. The author wanted nothing more than to escape from the fire and get to a hunting lodge up ahead at the main fork of Fish Creek. Mrs. Brown, a motherly woman, ran the lodge and would be more than willing to take care of Maclean once he arrived.

Maclean arrived at the lodge and was immediately tended to by Mrs. Brown. Maclean apologized for being black with soot but Mrs. Brown said that Maclean was just the opposite. The man was completely white. Maclean was put to bed and Mrs. Brown fed him water and frequently checked the author's pulse. As the period of convalescence ended, Mrs. Brown said that Maclean would surely get his limit of deer that season. Maclean asked if Mrs. Brown had started the fire but the woman would not respond.

Maclean stayed the night with the adopted Indian mother. The author was eager to return to the fire the next morning although Mrs. Brown advised against it.

The next morning, Maclean drove 150 miles to pick up his brother-in-law who had spent a few days as a volunteer firefighter at Mann Gulch. The pair stopped at the north side of Fish Creek where the fire had stopped at the river. The men spotted a deer that had been burned terribly and immediately regretted not having a rifle to put the creature out

of its misery. The deer drank incessantly from the creek and could not seem to stop. Maclean compared the deer to Hellman and Sylvia, two men that had been burned severely in the fire but did not die right away. The men, particularly Sylvia, could not get enough to drink even when it made him sick. Eventually, the deer saw Maclean and his brother-in-law. The deer acted euphoric, much like Sylvia had when the pain took over. A burning log fell in front of the deer and the deer ran straight into it, no longer able to jump. The deer lay itself down next to the log.

Part One

Part One Summary and Analysis

According to Maclean, the Smokejumpers in 1949 were not far from their original purpose as parachute jumpers, who often turned into stunt performers at county fairs. At the same time, they were also the best firefighters in the Forest Service. Yet many did not realize that they were still relative newcomers to fighting forest fires. The first parachute jump was made in 1940; the Smokejumpers were officially organized in 1941.

The Forest Service was introduced in the 1905 about the same time as the airplane. Maclean states that the airplane was the most effective invention in fighting forest fires. By 1925, planes were used to help spot fires, replacing scattered lookouts. By 1929, supplies were being dropped to firefighters from airplanes, and it seems logical that the firefighters would soon drop from the airplanes as well. There were equipment and psychological difficulties that prevented parachute jumpers from diving into wildfires. It took several years of training before the first jumper attacked a forest fire. The major psychological problem faced by the Smokejumpers was that parachute jumpers were often considered by the public and the government to be a little bit crazy. Maclean states that it is likely a few of them were. Kevin Kelley, from one of the Forest Service's regions based in Missoula Montana, stated in 1935 that dropping the men from airplanes was a bad idea. "The best information I can get from experienced fliers is that all parachute jumpers are more or less crazy - just a little unbalanced, otherwise they wouldn't be engaged in such a hazardous undertaking."

Maclean states that many of the Smokejumpers obviously have a touch of the Icarus complex. In 1934 Kelley had made a psychological examination of parachute jumpers including Frank Derry, a California stuntman who had the idea of jumping from an airplane dressed as Santa Claus. Derry's landing was perfect and he quit his job in order to become part of a flying circus act. Derry was one of the original Smokejumpers for the Forest Service. Derry also became one of the best jump instructors, best riggers, and made vast improvements in the jumpsuit and parachutes.

Fortunately, many of the Smokejumpers were mechanically gifted, unlike Icarus. The concept of parachuting from the sky was not invented by the United States Forest Service. In fact, Leonardo da Vinci studied the problem, and in 1783, the first successful parachute jump was made from a tower by the French physicist Louis-Sebastien Lenormond.

Maclean discusses the problems inherent in the design of the parachute, many of which were eliminated or reduced by Frank Derry. One of the major problems was that as a parabolic object it would drop with in a bell-like motion. As a parachute descends the air is forced up into it and has no place to escape, causing the parachute to rock from side to side. Until the excess air was released, the parachute was virtually impossible to steer.

Although the Forest Service was officially formed in 1905 by Pennsylvania Governor Gifford Pinchot and President Theodore Roosevelt, it wasn't until 1910 that the need for the service became apparent. Nearly 3 million acres in Idaho and western Montana were burned. The fire took place, largely over the period of two days and 87 people died. Maclean claims to remember the fire very well. Maclean's family was on vacation on an island in the Bitterroot River. An elder in Maclean's father's church became scared and sent a wagon to rescue the family. The elders carried at Mrs. Maclean across the river and the author and his father followed, fishing rods in hand. Maclean was seven years old.

Because of the 1910 fire, the Forest Service realized that there had to be a succession of efforts designed to get firefighters to fires as soon as humanly possible. The sooner the firefighters could arrive, the less damage could be caused by a fire. If Smokejumpers had been able to get to Mann Gulch the afternoon the fire started it would have been able to be kept under control - at least until a bigger crew arrived. The Mann Gulch fire burned for five days before it was under control and there were 450 men at the site. The men had little to do with stopping the fire, at least not as much as the rockslides and surrounding cliffs. Maclean includes graphs of Region One forest fires. The graphs include "Total Number of Fires Per Year" and "Number of Fires Rated Class C and Larger." Class C fires range from 10 to 99 acres. Maclean goes on to discuss statistics of Class C fires since 1945.

Maclean states that Smokejumpers seem to have visible bloodlines. For example, the three Derry brothers seem to have been drawn to adventures. On the weekends the brothers often rented a Cessna 180 and went jumping "just for the hell of it." The men also tried to make money to spend the winter in Honolulu. Missoula, Montana seems to be an excellent base for Region One of the Forest Service because it is the home of the University of Montana, which boasts a large school of forestry. Out of the 13 firefighters that died in Mann Gulch, that summer, five of the men were forestry students at the University; two were forestry students at the University of Minnesota. Two out of the three survivors were also students at the University of Montana. All are very good students.

Smokejumpers have a short career. A jumper is finished at age 40, and those who want to stay in the business have to apply for one of the few maintenance or administrative positions. Even after Smokejumpers retire they consider themselves to be one of a select group, much like the Marines. There is a hierarchy, much like the Masons or Knights of Columbus, where the ultimate goal is becoming a Smokejumper, much like a Shriner or Knight Templar.

Maclean states that few Smokejumpers plan to remain in the Forest Service for the rest of their careers. Many are students working toward a master's or Ph.D. and even more will go on to be doctors, lawyers or dentists.

No matter what the Smokejumpers went through, they always kept an eye on one another. The jumpers must act as the team even after the training is done. They tend to back one another up, even if one is losing a bar fight.

Maclean goes on to talk about several individual jumpers, including William Hellman, a second in command squad leader. At the end, Hellman claimed that "he wished he had been a better Catholic" and Hellman's men actually wept when they saw that the squad leader was one of the survivors. There were three other survivors, R. Wagner "Wag" Dodge, Robert Sallee, and Walter Rumsey. Dodge only lived for a few years after the fire, and Sallee and Rumsey spent many years trying to forget the Mann Gulch fire. Part of Maclean's quest was to get Sallee and Rumsey to return to Mann Gulch to see what they remembered and what had been forgotten.

Maclean talks about the isolation of the Smokejumpers, and how many of the first-year jumpers had no knowledge of the "women of the world" except when they went to a local bar that was a 4 1/2 mile walk from the training site at Nine Mile.

Maclean compares Smokejumpers to prizefighters, "all washed up when their reflexes began to slow by fractions of a second and when they could no longer absorb a beating and come back to win."

The author makes a point to say that it is more important to catch the fires when they are small because small fires can be put out with an ax or a shovel. The big fires are the ones that pose the most problems both for the Smokejumpers and the forest service rangers on the ground.

Maclean refers back to the graphs and Class C fires. When the Forest Service arrived at Mann Gulch, the fire was categorized as a Class C. Suddenly the fire blew up, elevating the Mann Gulch fire to a Class D, which is a category for fires that cover 100 to 299 acres. When the Mann Gulch fire was finally under control, a total of 4,500 acres or between 7-8 square miles had been burned.

The author reiterates once again that the Smokejumpers were responsible for landing on a forest fire when ground crews would not be able to reach the source or the worst of the fire. As Maclean states, "The primary purpose of the first Smokejumpers, then, was still primary to the Smokejumpers of 1949 - to land on a forest fire in a difficult or otherwise inaccessible country before suddenly the universe tried to reduce its own frame of things to ashes and charred grouse."

When the Mann Gulch fire was the first spotted from an airplane, the spotter, crew foreman and pilot categorized it as a "fairly ordinary fire." The fire was reported to be a ground fire that had crowned in one spot and already burned out. There were no spot fires that could be seen from the air.

The author states that it is important to know the difference between fires created by man and those created by nature. The majority of fires in the West, approximately 75%, are created by lightning. Lightning was responsible for starting the Mann Gulch fire. This information is somewhat confusing since it was previously theorized that the homesteaders started the fire. At this point, Maclean states that the Mann Gulch fire was started by lightning.

Most ground fires are controlled when a fire trench is dug around its flanks to contain it or to force it on to rocky ground or into open meadow. Maclean states that the chief danger that could occur from a ground fire, is that it might turn into a crown fire, which means it would jump into the branches or crowns of the nearby trees. After a fire crowns, it can spread as fast as the lightning that caused it. The author goes on to explain how a fire can spread without the flames actually advancing from one place to another. Also discussed is the point of origin and the manner by which a blowup can occur. When Maclean and the others returned to Mann Gulch they will attempt to re-create the largest blow up, even though almost no one that witnessed the event lived to record it.

The author talks about Harry T. Gisborne, one of the first and greatest pioneers involved in the science of fire behavior. In 1929 Gisborne was at the largest man-made fire in Montana up to that point. The fire had covered 90,000 acres at Half Moon in Glacier National Park. According to Gisborne, even large ground fires do not advance faster than one half to 1 mph. However, the blowup that was witnessed by Gisborne devastated at more than 2 square miles in only one to two minutes. Gisborne returned to the site two days later, where he found a young grouse, its head and neck "still alertly erect in fear and wonder." The bird's feathers, beak and feet were completely seared away. The same could be said of a nearby squirrel that was stretched out as if trying to run from the fire. The author states that the Smokejumpers that died at Mann Gulch died so quickly that they could be compared to the squirrel.

The Smokejumpers were dropped from a C-47 airplane. Earl Cooley, the spotter, lay on the left side of the floor by the open airplane door equipped with headphones. So he could exchange information with the pilot. The crew foreman, wag Dodge, lay on the floor on the right side. So he and Cooley cooed watch the country below and speak without alerting the crew. According to the head of the smoke jumping the project, Cooley and Dodge were the best men for the job.

At this point, Maclean introduces Robert Jansson, the forest ranger at the Canyon Ferry District. Maclean explains that the Canyon Ferry District and the Helena District eventually merged but at the time of the fire, the Canyon District was a separate entity. Jansson was known for being so entirely devoted to the land of the entire district the ranger he was constantly out in the field, even when superiors wished that he would spend more time at the ranger station. As a result of the devotion, Jansson knew every inch of land in the district and would prove to be a valuable resource.

Jansson's presence at Mann Gulch proved to be necessary as men of the men that had been recruited to fight the fire were college students, bums, or men hanging out in the bar. In other words, these men had no experience and would need guidance.

Jansson was the first person to spot the fire. Rather, Jansson spotted smoke and knew that it had to come from a small fire somewhere around Mann Gulch. Jansson reported the fire to his supervisors and then continued to fly over the gulch, searching for "sleepers," or small fires that may have been offshoots of a larger blaze.

Jansson had ordered 50 men and equipment to go into the Gulch. The 16 Smokejumpers were on a plane to the fire. It was decided that it was too late in the day to send out another plane, as the Smokejumpers would not be able to make it back before dark. It was 2:30 in the afternoon.

Of the 50 men needed for the mission, only ten volunteered. Jansson and another man began combing bars but found only a total of 10 men that were willing to set foot outside the bar and into Mann Gulch.

When Jansson arrived at Hilger Landing to take a boat that was supposed to be waiting for him, Jansson found out that the owner of the boat had rented it to sightseers that wanted to see the fire. Jansson was extremely angry but had no choice but to wait.

The fire worsened and all available men from nearby Meriwether Canyon had been sent to handle the York fire, south of Mann Gulch. Maclean claims that Dodge's actions during this time, setting the small fires to deter the larger blaze, must have seemed crazy to the men. Dodge knew what he was doing, however. The main issues with those small fires included confusion among the men on which way to run as well as the fact that the small fires were burning out too quickly to do much good. Years later, Sallee and Rumsey would tell Maclean it was certain that most of the men were not close enough to hear Dodge's instructions. The two men did, along with a friend and William Hellman, who responded, "To hell with that, I'm getting out of here." Hellman split from the other men and ended up going down gulch and too close to the main fire while the others went up gulch to reach the top of the ridge. Hellman reached the top of the ridge badly burned. Hellman died the following day in a hospital in Helena.

Maclean states that the timeline he has created is as accurate as possible although it does not exactly match the statements from Sallee or Rumsey; not does it coincide precisely with composite accounts. However, Maclean feels that the timeline he created is the closest thing possible to the truth.

Sallee, Rumsey, and their friend, Diettert, continued to head toward the top of the ridge as they had been taught. Along the way, the men spotted a crevice in the rocks and decided that it would be a good place to keep safe for a while and to reduce the blistering heat. For some reason, Diettert did not follow Sallee and Rumsey and continued up the hill. Diettert did not survive.

The choice to enter into the crevice in the rocks most likely saved the lives of Sallee and Rumsey. The men were at a higher elevation and Sallee finally saw what Dodge was doing with the escape fires. Still, many of the men did not understand or chose to run rather than standing in the circle of fire where they had a much better chance of survival. Later, Sallee was asked if he would have followed Dodge's orders if he had known at the time what the man was planning in the way of strategy. Sallee said that he could not be sure what he might have done but if the escape fire would have been part of his training and there had been a diagram, the young Smokejumper would have understood it and might have followed Dodge inside the circle. Dodge was also

interviewed later and asked if the concept of the escape circle was in his training. It was not. Dodge simply said that it made sense.

Maclean believes that it is the job of the storyteller to remember the characters in the story. With this in mind, the author talks a great deal about Dodge and the others.

As night began to fall, Jansson began to panic. The original plan was to get the Smokejumpers and others out of the forest by nightfall. No one had shown up at the top of the ridge by Meriwether Canyon. Consumed by logistics and the safety of the men overhead, Jansson finally realized that the men in the Gulch were most likely in grave danger. Radio calls went out to find the men, putting the rescue mission ahead of the importance of the fire.

The first men to surface were Sallee, Rumsey and the severely burned Hellman. Hellman was immediately attended to by the medics on the scene. Jansson was informed that there were people dead in the Gulch. At this point, it was unclear who had survived aside from those three men, if any.

The next person to be rescued was Joe Sylvia. Sylvia was also badly burned and very cold. The only blanket available had gone to Hellman, so men stripped off their shirts to keep their colleague warm. Doctors could not understand at first why Sylvia seemed so happy, considering his physical state and knowledge that he was going to die. The author stated that with burns that severe, there is often euphoria.

Maclean writes all that was known about the possible effects created from the wind, which inevitably caused the large blowup responsible for so many deaths. The author also refers back to Gisborne's work in the 1950s.

Part Two

Part Two Summary and Analysis

Maclean starts Part Two by saying that the entire Mann Gulch fire took place in a blur of time and bewilderment. There would never be a complete knowledge of what happened atop what Maclean refers to as "a nearly inaccessible hill." Maclean also talks about being torn between the public outrage and sense of deep mourning shared with the families of those who were lost in the fire.

The public outcry that followed was extreme and the Forest Service knew it would have a lot to answer for in the way the disaster was handled. Leading the pack was Henry Thol, Sr., father of the youngest Smokejumper and retired forest ranger. Thol, Sr., was from the "old school" and was extremely vocal about what went wrong. The grief-stricken father paced through Mann Gulch, studied and analyzed the scene. Eventually, 8 lawsuits were brought against the Forest Service on behalf of 4 of the dead, 2 lawsuits by each parent. Thol also appeared in court. All accused the Forest Service of negligence. It was also stated that Dodge's escape fires blocked the path of the firefighters and in the end Dodge was responsible. Thol's anger and grief extended beyond the loss of his son. Thol and Hellman were from the same town and Thol grieved with Hellman's pregnant widow. Thol also had anger toward the Forest Service for other reasons.

Although the court cases went through the entire circuit, including the court of appeals, no damages were awarded. The courts had decided, however, to increase the burial payment from $200 to $400 per person.

Although the case had gone to the Supreme Court and ended without restitution to the grieving parents, there was almost an immediate silence that ensued. The reasons for the silence were different. The Forest Service, although not proven to be negligent, wanted the disaster to go away. The families were reduced to silence by intense grief. In 1979, Maclean visited the mother of one of the Smokejumpers to speak about the fire but the woman could not talk about her son's death. Maclean approached the boy's father who tried to put on a stoic face and failed.

In 1952, a movie was made about the Mann Gulch fire, titled, "Red Skies of Montana." In the movie there had to be an ending while in real life, an ending could never be found.

Maclean spent many years trying to uncover the complete set of facts about Mann Gulch, at least what was known. The government records were sanitized and spun by PR people so that much of the information was relatively useless to the author. The well-informed members of the Forest Service were not good interviewees, either. The men had seen so many fires in their careers that one seemed to blend into another, disallowing for concrete proof and accurate information.

Many of the years spent trying to uncover information meant that Maclean hit many brick walls and attempted to find ways around them in order to get the entire story.

It made sense to Maclean that the best way to find out what happened at Mann Gulch was to contact Sallee and Rumsey. More than thirty years had passed and no one knew if the men were even alive. The ex-postmistress in Seely Lake knew of a Sallee that worked at a large paper mill. Maclean followed up and found relatives of the fire survivor. Through Sallee, Maclean was able to find Rumsey. Both men had gone on to be very successful in their trades. Sallee had become a consulting engineer in Portland, Oregon and Rumsey had continued on in soil conservation in Boise, Idaho before transferring to Nebraska.

The men were wary of Maclean and his partner, Laird. Each thought the author and his colleague were up to no good and it took a while to convince the men of their purpose. The men agreed to return to Mann Gulch.

The men traversed to the top of the ridge where Sallee and Rumsey had headed and which ultimately saved their lives. Maclean would never find out exactly why the other men did not follow but surmises that it was twice as far overland as it was to the river, which made more sense. Rumsey had always believed that the top of the hill is always the safest and thought of nothing but getting there.

The men found Hellman's cross and told Maclean that it was in the wrong place. The men even found a rusty tin can from Hellman, from which he drank potato juice to quench his unquenchable thirst. The true site of Hellman's death is approximately half a mile away.

Maclean spends time discussing and examining topography and how it affected the fire and the failed escape attempts. According to the author, if one does not know the ground, then everything else is most likely wrong.

One of Maclean's most burning questions was to finally be answered. Maclean wanted to know why Sallee and Rumsey chose not to go straight up gulch to the ridge but rather veered to the wide pass where they would encounter a reef that went on for an indeterminate distance. All of Maclean's theorizing was met with Sallee's simple answer. By the time Sallee and Rumsey got to the pass, the fire had blocked their way.

Sallee expresses anger at the fact one of the investigators on the case told the survivor he was wrong about where he and Rumsey traversed the ridge. The investigator insisted it was elsewhere and refused to listen to Sallee's protests.

While Maclean, Laird, Sallee and Rumsey were in Mann Gulch, they were also given the responsibility of checking out the crosses made by the Smokejumpers to memorialize the places where their colleagues had died. Any damage was to be reported by Maclean. The author goes on to describe the simple white crosses with bronze nameplates.

The men went on to find the crevice that had saved Sallee and Rumsey as well as several other key locations, including the sites of Dodge's escape fires. Over the next several years Maclean still searched for several key points at Mann Gulch.

The author states that ever since the fire occurred at Mann Gulch, there have been no fatalities among the Smokejumpers, suggesting that much was learned from the tragedy of 1949.

Maclean spends a great deal of time discussing the mathematics of fire and how the science has evolved significantly. There are examples, charts, formulas and patterns that routinely assist the Forest Service and other firefighters in the quest to save the earth from uncontrolled fire.

Part Three

Part Three Summary and Analysis

Part Three is a ten-page summation of what Maclean learned at Mann Gulch. Even to those firefighters that have decades of experience, there will always be sights and sounds at a fire that seem to have no scientific or earthly explanation. Even the things that can be explained, such as a wall of flame, are completely different when seen first hand.

In the end, there are only two real emotions left - fear and pity. When the fear has burned away, all that is left is the pity for those who died and perhaps in some way, for those who survived. Maclean refers to the thoughts of Sallee and Rumsey as they climbed the ridge in fear for their lives. Both men were too young to die and had the same thoughts as the Messiah who said, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Characters

Norman Maclean

Norman Maclean (1902-1990) is the author of "Young Men and Fire" as well as the bestselling novel "A River Runs Through It."

Maclean was born in Iowa to a Scottish Presbyterian reverend that controlled Maclean's education for more than a decade. At the age of 7, the family relocated to Missoula, Montana. It was about this time that Maclean had his first experience with fire when the family was rescued while camping on an island.

At age 15, Maclean joined the U.S. Forest Service because he was too young to serve in World War I.

After graduating from high school, Maclean attended Dartmouth in New Hampshire. Maclean stayed in New Hampshire to teach at Dartmouth until 1928 before heading west. The author went on to the University of Chicago for graduate work and eventually became the Dean of Students.

"Young Men and Fire" was almost an obsession for Maclean and the author worked on the book until he became too ill to continue. The book was eventually edited and published posthumously. In 1992, it won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Maclean had also been nominated for a Pulitzer for "A River Runs Through It" but a Pulitzer was not awarded in the category during that year.

R. Wagner Dodge

R. Wagner "Wag" Dodge (1916-1955) was the crew foreman and one of the spotters on the Mann Gulch fire. According to Maclean, Dodge was a fastidious man who had a reputation of being the best at his job. The crew and Dodge rarely knew much about each other but the crew knew of Dodge's reputation and knew that the man could be trusted.

The author was well acquainted with Dodge, in part because Maclean and Dodge's wife had known each other since childhood. Mrs. Dodge said that when they married, Wag said to her, "You do your job and I'll do mine, and we'll get along just fine." This was an example of how self-contained Dodge was and when Maclean approached Mrs. Dodge for help with the book, she was unable to give any valuable information.

Dodge was, by all accounts, handsome and intense. The man was gifted with his hands. Even when the fires were bad, Dodge always exited the plane as a fashion plate while the other men were covered head to toe in black soot.

Dodge was a man that could think on his feet. Atop one of the ridges in the forest, Dodge realized that the crew's escape to the river had been cut off. There was no way that the crew would ever be able to outrun the fire that was advancing so quickly. Dodge ordered his men to drop their heavy equipment and run. Still, the fire kept coming. Dodge set fire to a 10'x10' grassy area to block the oncoming fire and ordered the men to run in a certain direction. Some of the men did not understand and headed for the ridgeline where many died. The grass fire saved Dodge and several other Smokejumpers.

Dodge died of cancer in 1955.

Frank Derry

Frank Derry was a stunt man from California, who first jumped from an airplane dressed as Santa Claus, and then went on to join a flying circus act that traveled throughout the West. Derry was one of the Forest Service's nine original smokejumpers. According to the author, Derry was one of the Forest Service's best jump instructors, one of its best riggers, and made vast improvements to both the jumpsuit and parachute.

Robert Sallee

Robert Sallee was a teenager at the time of the Mann Gulch fire. Sallee was among the three survivors of the tragedy and is currently the only remaining survivor.

Walter Rumsey

Walter Rumsey was a teenager at the time of the Mann Gulch fire. Rumsey was among the three survivors of the tragedy.

Seely Lake Postmistress

The Seely Lake Postmistress was an important source of information to Maclean regarding the Mann Gulch fire. It was through the Postmistress that Maclean learned about the fire and the actions that had been taken to try and stop it.

William Hellman

William Hellman was one of the surviving Smokejumpers. Hellman died a short time later.

Stanley J. Reba

Stanley J. Reba - One of the Smokejumpers that died at Mann Gulch.

Henry J. Thol, Jr.

Henry J. Thol, Jr. was the youngest Smokejumper at Mann Gulch. Thol was only 19.

Robert Jansson

Robert Jansson was the Forest Service ranger at the Canyon Ferry District in the Helena National Forest.

Objects/Places

Mann Gulch

Mann Gulch is the site of one of the largest and deadliest fires in the history of the U.S. The Gulch is located in the heart of the Helena National Forest in Montana, not far from Missoula. The Gulch also borders the Missouri River.

In 1949, Mann Gulch was the site of a devastating fire that claimed the lives of 13 Smokejumpers, members of the U.S. Forest Service that routinely jumped from airplanes into the heart of a forest fire with the hopes of containing it or extinguishing the blaze.

Mann Gulch is the central location in the book as the author relives his experiences at Mann Gulch as well as those who were directly involved in the tragedy. Maclean, having been in the U.S. Forest Service in World War I, had an intense desire to see the fire and experienced first hand the devastation it caused.

In the beginning, it was thought that one of the local homesteaders started the fire. The theory was that the homesteaders who relied on an abundant source of deer for venison were angry when a big sheep outfit moved into the area. Sheep tend to eat the grass down so far to the ground that there is nothing left for the deer. As a consequence, the deer would move on in search for a new source of food. The homesteaders could not afford to allow that to happen. Starting a fire at the mouth of the main tributary of Fish Creek would burn up the canyon and cliffs, blocking any means of escape for the sheep. If the theory was true, the plan went awry when the fire jumped its supposed trail and leapt into a stand of brush. The blaze quickly spread.

In the end, only three Smokejumpers survived the fire. Today, there are grave markers of Smokejumpers who died and there is still evidence of the burned out areas.

United States Forest Service

The United States Forest Service was founded in 1905 by President Theodore Roosevelt and Pennsylvania Governor Gifford Pinchot. Pinchot was a diehard outdoor enthusiast. Both men felt that there was a need for a government entity that would protect the forests of America and hopefully, prevent the forest fires that devastated much of the land, particularly in the West.

Currently, the U.S. Forest Service is responsible for the care of 193 million acres of land throughout the country. The organization is under the auspices of the Department of Agriculture.

The Forest Service's first true test came in 1910 when the need for the Forest Service became apparent to the public. Nearly 3 million acres in Idaho and western Montana

were burned. The fire took place, largely over the period of two days and 87 people died.

Although introducing Smokejumpers was a dangerous undertaking, it became obvious that unless fires were contained as soon as possible, hundreds of thousand of acres would burn out of control each year. Once a fire gets beyond a certain point, it is difficult if not impossible to control. However, if the Forest rangers were able to get to the fire sooner, it may be able to be put out with something as small as a shovel or ax.

Missoula, Montana

Missoula, Montana - Missoula, Montana was the base for the largest crew of Smokejumpers.

Meriwether Canyon

Meriwether Canyon - A canyon located beside Mann Gulch.

Helena National Forest

Helena National Forest - Mann Gulch lies in the heart of the Helena National Forest.

Seely Lake

Seely Lake - A small rural town inhabited mainly by hunters and fishermen. Also the location of Maclean's cabin.

Black Ghost

Black Ghost - The Black Ghost is another name for the blackness that comes with fire.

Missouri River

Missouri River - The Missouri River is the closest river to Mann Gulch, viewed as a potential source of safety.

Fish Creek

Fish Creek - The Mann Gulch fire started at the mouth of the Fish Creek tributary.

Bitterroot Creek

Bitterroot Creek - Home to Wag Dodge and area well traveled by the author.

Themes

Loss

Loss is one of the main themes in "Young Men and Fire" by Norman Maclean. The fire that erupted in Mann Gulch in the Helena National Forest in Montana in 1949 brought with it a great deal of devastation, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Many of those who survived the fire and its aftereffects suffered a deep and prolonged sense of loss that haunted them for decades to come.

The fire that started out as "an ordinary fire" went on to destroy 4500 acres of national forest, taking with it many lives - both human and animal.

There were 13 people that died in the Mann Gulch fire and some did not last long beyond the tragedy. William Hellman, for example, died shortly after the fire although he was considered to be one of the survivors.

The loss of life in Mann Gulch was tragic. The only blessing might be that the deaths happened so fast that the men could not have known what was about to happen. The result of those deaths deeply touched the Smokejumpers' family and friends, their community, the Forest Service, and the nation.

The emotional toll was too much for some to bear. One of the most heart wrenching examples of this can be seen in the life of Robert Jansson. According to Maclean, ""It had got so that he could not sleep at night, remembering the smell of it, and his dog would no longer come in but cried all night outside, knowing that something had gone wrong with him."

Disaster

Disaster is one of the main themes in "Young Men and Fire" by Norman Maclean. In 1949, a fire erupted in Mann Gulch in the Helena National Forest in Montana that would eventually claim 4500 acres of national forest over a period of five days. The Mann Gulch fire started out as "an ordinary fire" but soon accelerated to the point of no return and along the way it took many lives - both human and animal. In the end, 13 people died in the Mann Gulch fire and some did not last long beyond the tragedy. William Hellman, for example, died shortly after the fire although he is still considered to be one of the survivors.

Some saw the fire as the destruction of trees and land while others saw it as the ruination of natural beauty, a way of life, and a livelihood. According to Maclean, the Mann Gulch fire was the largest of its kind since the fire of 1910, when nearly 3 million acres in Idaho and western Montana were burned. The fire took place largely over the period of two days and 87 people died. It was that tragedy that truly utilized the Smokejumpers for the first time. The job of a Smokejumper is a dangerous undertaking

but necessary as fires broke out in places otherwise inaccessible to Forest rangers. Once a fire gets beyond a certain point, it is difficult if not impossible to control. However, if the Forest rangers were able to get to the fire sooner, it may be able to be put out with something as small as a shovel or ax.

The author discusses exactly how a lightning fire can occur and spread in such a way that seems to defy the laws of science and nature. There are explanations for such disasters, however, and they are explained. Also discussed is the point of origin and how the Smokejumpers did all they could to contain and stop the tragic fire.

Determination

One of the traits in a U.S. Forest Service Smokejumper is determination. Although the act of jumping from an airplane into the heart of a burning forest may seem more than a little crazy to most, which the Smokejumpers often were, the men were determined to try and stop a fire and its effects before it got out of control. The determination to save the forest as well as livestock and homesteads was especially admirable considering the relative youth of the Smokejumpers.

Wag Dodge was by far the most experienced and the most determined to participate in the Mann Gulch fire. At age 33, Dodge had the most experience and was by all accounts, excellent at his job. Whether it was in the airplane or on the ground, Dodge did all he could to keep his men safe while doing whatever was necessary to put a stop to the disaster.

One example of Dodge's experience and determination was the setting of the grass fire. Dodge knew that the fire would hold back the larger fire and enable the men to get to safety and continue on their mission.

A prime example of determination belongs to the author. Norman Maclean visited Mann Gulch as a spectator and concerned party. Maclean had experience as a forest ranger and knew quite a lot about fire, its devastating qualities and unpredictability. The Mann Gulch fire changed Maclean's life. Even after the fire was mostly put out, Maclean continued to traverse the Gulch in search of bodies. There were grave markers and a monument erected. Maclean was determined to gather all the information he could about the fire and put it into this book.

Style

Perspective

Norman Maclean (1902-1990) is the author of "Young Men and Fire" as well as the bestselling novel "A River Runs Through It." Although Maclean spent many years as a teacher and university administrator, the author never forgot his experiences at Mann Gulch and continued to revisit the canyon numerous times in order to collect information and not to forget the tragedy that had occurred at the site.

At the age of 7, Maclean's father, Reverend John Maclean relocated the family to Missoula, Montana. It was about this time that Maclean had his first experience with fire when the family was rescued while camping on an island.

At age 15, Maclean joined the U.S. Forest Service because he was too young to serve in World War I. During the time spent in the Forest Service, Maclean learned a great deal about fire, from its origins to physical properties and devastating as well as life giving effects.

"Young Men and Fire" was almost an obsession for Maclean and the author worked on the book until he became too ill to continue. The book was eventually edited and published posthumously. In 1992, it won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Maclean had also been nominated for a Pulitzer for "A River Runs Through It" but a Pulitzer was not awarded in the category during that year.

Tone

The tone in "Young Men and Fire" by Norman Maclean varies from analytical and objective to nostalgic and partisan, depending on the text and section of the book.

The book is written in the first person point of view, which allows the reader to see the events in Mann Gulch in August 1949 through Maclean's eyes. The author describes everything about the fire and its accompanying events that create a powerful statement to those who did not see the disaster first hand.

Maclean expresses concern when he first hears about the fire from the local postmistress. Like other residents in the community, even those that were temporary, Maclean had a fondness for the postmistress who was responsible for spreading the local news and gossip. It was those ongoing sessions at the post office that spurred Maclean to go to Mann Gulch to see the fire with his own eyes.

The tone captured while Maclean is in Mann Gulch is one of fear, curiosity, knowledge, and empathy. Even though Maclean knew about fires and the forest, the author was unprepared with the raging fire and expresses what it was like to be in the midst of it all.

There is a definite tone of sorrow and loss in regards to the lives lost at Mann Gulch. Nostalgia enters the picture as Maclean gathers information for this book and repeatedly revisits Mann Gulch to remind himself of the events that took place in 1949.

Structure

"Young Men and Fire" by Norman Maclean is a work of non-fiction containing 298 pages. The parts of the book are broken down into two short chapters and three substantial sections.

In Part One, there are seven chapters. In Part Two, there are 8 chapters. Part Three is comprised of one chapter.

Chapter One, Black Ghost, contains 11 pages. Chapter 2, Young Men and Fire contains 2 pages. These chapters serve as a preview as well as an overview of the Mann Gulch fire as well as the author's involvement and passion for uncovering the facts surrounding the tragedy.

Part One contains 124 pages; Part Two contains 150 pages; Part Three contains 10 pages. The average length of the Parts and first two chapters is 59 pages.

The book is written in chronological order of the events surrounding Mann Gulch with some additional information that preceded the fire. Also included are some pieces of information about the eventual whereabouts of the survivors as well as the locations of the bodies of the Smokejumpers that died.

Also included in the book are 16 pages of photographs, most of which depict the various areas in Mann Gulch. There is a photo representation of a topographical map with the author's notations as well as photos of grave markers, a monument, and a picture of Robert Sallee and Walter Rumsey, two of the survivors.

Quotes

"In 1949 the Smokejumpers were not far from their origins as parachute jumpers turned stunt performers dropping from the wings of planes at county fairs just for the hell of it plus a few dollars, less hospital expenses."
Page 19

"Since 1910, much of the history of the Forest Service can be translated into a succession of efforts to get firefighters on fires as soon as possible - the sooner, the smaller the fire."
Page 23

"So it shouldn't be surprising that many Smokejumpers never intended to remain Smokejumpers or even to work in the woods for the rest of their lives."
Page 28

"The primary purpose of the first Smokejumpers, then, was still primary to the Smokejumpers of 1949 - to land on a forest fire in a difficult or otherwise inaccessible country before suddenly the universe tried to reduce its own frame of things to ashes and charred grouse."
Page 33

"Although young men died like squirrels in Mann Gulch, the Mann Gulch Fire should not end there, smoke drifting away and leaving terror without consolation of explanation, and controversy without lasting settlement."
Page 37

"It is not surprising, considering the punishment the jumper takes at both ends of the jump, that no big man can be a Smokejumper."
Page 54

"Some fire whirls, not all of them, are flame throwers."
Page 88

"The most strange and wonderful thing on the hillside as the escape fire swept up it, shutting it out of sight in smoke and heat, is that a spot of it remained cool."
Page 102

"Although Ramsey says they were both 'half hysterical,' they were objective enough to see that the fire as it approached them was following the patterns of a fire coming over a ridge and starting down the other side."
Page 107

"After the fire passed the rock slide 'it really started rolling' downhill, replacing trees with torches."
Page 107

"For the next few hours, the Smokejumpers who had landed in Mann Gulch passed from human remembrance perhaps as completely as they ever will."
Page 110

"It had got so that he could not sleep at night, remembering the smell of it, and his dog would no longer come in but cried all night outside, knowing that something had gone wrong with him."
Page 123

Topics for Discussion

What spurred the author to make the trek to Mann Gulch?

Would Maclean have become involved in the fire if he had been back east rather than at the cabin in Seely Lake?

How might the fire have been handled differently today?

Why did the fire service think that the homesteaders started the fire?

What possible explanation is there for the appearance of the Black Ghost?

Robert Sallee did not want to return to Mann Gulch but felt it was his duty. Why do you think Sallee felt obligated?

If you had been at Mann Gulch would you have gone to help fight the fire? Explain your reasons.

How do you think the Mann Gulch fire affected the way the Smokejumpers performed on future missions?