



## **Gunflint Burning: Fire in the Boundary Waters**

*Cary Griffith*

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**The story of the Ham Lake fire, at the time the most destructive wildfire in modern Minnesota history—the blaze, the firefighters' battle, the human toll**

On May 5, 2007, two days into his twenty-seventh trip to the Boundary Waters, Stephen Posniak found a perfect spot on Ham Lake and set about making a campfire. Over the next two weeks, the fire he set would consume 75,000 acres of forest and 144 buildings. More than one thousand firefighters would rally to extinguish the blaze, at a cost of 11 million dollars.

*Gunflint Burning* is a comprehensive account of the dramatic events around the Ham Lake fire, one of the largest wildfires in Minnesota history. Cary J. Griffith describes what happened in the minutes, hours, and days after Posniak struck that fateful match—from the first hint of danger to the ensuing race to flee the fire or defend imperiled property to the incredible efforts of firefighters and residents battling a blaze that lit up the Gunflint Trail like the fuse to a powder keg.

We meet locals faced with losing everything: the sheriff and his deputy tasked with getting everyone out alive; tourists caught unawares; men and women using every piece of equipment and modern firefighting technique against impossibly high winds and dry conditions to suppress a wildfire as it grew to historic proportions; and, finally, Stephen Posniak, who in the aftermath tragically took his own life—the fire's only fatality.

In sharp detail, *Gunflint Burning* describes the key events of the Ham Lake fire as they unfold, providing readers with a sense of being on the front lines of an epic struggle that was at times heroic, tragic, and sublime.

## Gunflint Burning: Fire in the Boundary Waters Details

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# **From Reader Review Gunflint Burning: Fire in the Boundary Waters for online ebook**

## **Cheryl Olseth says**

This book will be enjoyed by anyone who has a soft spot for the Gunflint trail, Superior National Forest, the BWCA or enjoys time in rugged wilderness areas. The 2007 fire exemplifies the power of mother nature and how small we really are.

I also now have a new level of respect for wildfire fire fighters. Amongst weather chaos, they make a containment plan, work the plan yet continuous adaptations must occur based upon humidity levels, wind speed, wind direction and path of the blaze. The fire fighters goals are always loss of life first, safety for their peers and minimization of structure loss. The knowledge, training, bravery, stamina and commitment amongst these women and men is often the secondary story in a large fire. The media focus is given to those who are displaced, but without the fire fighters many more persons would possibly lose their homes or worse their lives.

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## **Lisa says**

Griffith's account of the 2007 fire is a cautionary testament to those who flirt with the rules. The story traces the accidental cause, the drama of conditions and the fight, and the aftermath of the huge fire that caused massive property damage but thankfully no lives. The author used testimonies, interviews and written and oral accounts of the time period in question, and also visited the sites. Written ten years following the fire, Griffith makes no excuses, no accusations that weren't already on the table, and makes no judgments where none are due.

The book is set up as a daily account of the events. He employs a prologue and aftermath which aren't strictly necessary since they are part of the story. There are numerous names and titles used throughout, as well as a nice sense of setting and people in the Gunflint Trail/Ham Lake area. There are a couple of repetitive places and quite a bit of conjecture which the author explains at length at the end. An exhaustive resource list is included. Recommended for those who are fans of true firefighting stories with thrilling real adventure and for those who love the Boundary Waters.

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## **Karen Wright says**

This was an interesting read for me since I'm from the state of Minnesota. It leads the reader through the big fire from many perspectives - that of the person who started it, the firefighters, law enforcement, residents of the area, etc. It also does a nice job of describing the northern part of Minnesota and helps us understand the culture of the area. It's great info about fire fighting too!

The book reads like a story --- incorporating fiction (of what the man- Steve Posniak- who started the fire may have thought or done); and factual information from reports of officials and individuals who were there. The man blamed for starting the fire ended up committing suicide, so obviously, he couldn't be interviewed for the book. It did bother me a bit that the author put words in his mouth because we never will really know

what he was thinking or what he actually did. But it did make the story a more interesting read by telling his story.

Some parts of the writing repeated throughout the book and I think it could have gone through a couple more edits to eliminate some redundant parts.

My 14-year-old son said he would rate the book a 4.5 out of 5 stars.

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## **John says**

"Gunflint Burning" is about the Ham Lake fire, which occurred in Minnesota's Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in 2007.

It's likely to be of interest mostly to people who live in or near the Boundary Waters, people who have spent time there, and people with a particular interest in wildfires -- perhaps all three. At the time it was Minnesota's most destructive fire in a long while, but I'm not sure its scale would have even gotten much notice in the American West. It destroyed more than 75,000 acres of woodland and 144 buildings and cost \$11 million to fight with, thankfully, no loss of life. As I'm reading this, California's Mendocino Complex Fire has consumed an estimated 283,000 acres -- granted, the biggest single fire in California history -- and it isn't finished yet.

But by Midwestern standards, Ham Lake was a big fire, and it occurred in a beloved wilderness area. It takes the book a while to get to the fire itself, but the descriptions of the early phases of the fire are gripping.

Unfortunately, the narrative then gets bogged down in too much inside baseball (when a Type III fire becomes a Type II fire and then a Type I fire, and what that all means) and way too many acronyms. The author has an unusual tendency to refer to his sources by their first names, and it feels like there are a lot of Toms and Tims and Dans and Dons and Michaels and Mikes. It all becomes confusing, and then tedious. My thought, long before I reached the finish line, was: I'm not sure I'm all that interested in this.

Having said that, I did learn things from reading "Gunflint Burning." Here are three takeaways:

1. In dry, windy conditions with lots of available fuel, it's very, very easy to start a wildfire. OK, I knew this, but I didn't REALLY know this. The lone camper who unintentionally started the fire was violating regulations by burning his paper trash merely stepped briefly into his tent to get something, and when he came out he had a fire on his hands that he couldn't put out.
  2. A wildfire seems to have a mind of its own. It doesn't, of course; it's guided by winds and available fuel and by what firefighters do to try to alter or stop its course. But it almost seems like a thinking entity with a personality.
  3. It's interesting, at least on the basis of this account, to know how much of the firefighting strategy involves literally fighting fire with fire. I'm sure doing so is often the best course, but it's also dangerous. In one instance documented in this book, it very nearly went disastrously wrong.
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## **Laura says**

I've been waiting for a book about the Ham Lake fire for years, so I was excited when this was published. The author has done a lot of great research and I enjoyed the read, but I felt that at times complicated technical details were mentioned and then skimmed over, which left me wanting more explanation. I also think there is enough detail in terms of where and what direction the fire was burning that some additional maps would have been useful to orient the reader.

Overall a good read and an enjoyable one, especially if you're familiar with the Gunflint Trail and/or interested in wildfires.

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### **Robert Johnson says**

This was a well written, exciting book that lays out the true store of the upper Minnesota forest fire of 2007. The writer keeps the story flowing while detailing what it takes to fight a fire, how it is done and the level of response. It is a good read, and a great story in the hands of a talented writer. If you love nature, are fascinated by books about wilderness fire fighting, or enjoy reading about the heroics of the brave firefighters this book is for you.

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### **Christina says**

I'll admit that some of my interest in this book stems from my fondness for northern MN and trips to the Gunflint Trail. However, it is an amazing, well researched book about the devastating 2007 Ham Lake Fire that occurred in the Boundary Waters. Griffith does an outstanding job of making sense of all of the different agencies and individuals who would ultimately be involved in fighting this fire. He also tells the stories of residents and resort owners who were affected by the fire. The research into the story is meticulous. I learned a lot about firefighting and the challenges of dealing with such a big fire amidst dry conditions and changing winds. This is an excellent book. My only complaint is that I wish it included a more detailed map. There is a map, but it's pretty tiny, and not as detailed as I wanted. Otherwise, an excellent and compelling book.

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### **Deb M. says**

Being from Minnesota, loving the BWCAW, and remembering the Ham Lake fire made this a must read book! It was extremely interesting learning about the complexities of fighting a wildfire. The different types of wildfires, the way fires are investigated and managed made this one a real page-turner. If you canoe the Boundary Waters pick this book up, you will not regret it.

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### **Gail Harris says**

The beginning of the story was very moving and a great reminder of how easily accidents become tragedies. It is humbling to know how many lives are endangered with wilderness rescues.

While this was incredibly well researched, the delivery was a combination of Luther's Ninety-Five Thesis and Rob Lowe's autobiography.

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### **Jeanne says**

Since I'm familiar with the area, I enjoyed this book and certainly learned more about wildfires and fighting

them. I was expecting more anecdotal stories about how the firefight affected others on the trail. But I recommend this book to those who remember the fire or are interested in the subject.

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### **Theresa says**

Fascinating book and worthy of 4 stars. I grew up in the area affected by The Ham Lake Fire and my Dad even fished in some of the lakes as well. I know this part of Minnesota very well as I've spent a lot of time visiting and I grew up in Silver Bay, Minnesota; about 50 miles from the where The Ham Lake Fire happened. I did not know what it actually took to distinguish a forest fire and all the manpower; incredible detail. However, at times, to a fault. I felt so bad for Mr. Posniak and feel the government over-reached in their decision to go after him as the prime suspect of starting the fire. Since he had no record and was older, he should have been given probation and some remuneration, but sadly that was not the case. No spoilers here, but I was not pleased with what ultimately happened to Mr. Posniak. Clearly, it was an accident and he did not "willfully" start the fire, but the grand jury did not recognize that nor did the judge. I feel that the court system and the government were out to make an example of him, unfortunately.

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### **Jen Juenke says**

I loved this book. I am from the North Woods of Minnesota and it was a delight to read the great way that neighbors came together to fight this fire. The book is exciting and fast paced. I could not put it down! The author is very good about moving the story along and making you feel part of the story! BRAVO to the author for a great book!

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### **Carlene Amaro says**

The book was incredibly interesting. Despite having followed the news about the fire as it occurred, I felt I really knew very little. This book was filled with details about the path of the fire, structures that were threatened, and the complexities of managing the fighting of large scale fires. I have been acquainted with a few trained firefighters over the years who were called to different parts of the country to fight wildfires. Yet, before I read *Gunflint Burning*, I had not realized the national, and even international cooperation necessary to beat back a raging fire of this magnitude.

The book also seemed uniquely Minnesotan regarding the "above and beyond" actions taken by the citizens and professionals dedicated to limiting, as much as possible, the impact of this immense conflagration.

My only note about this book is that it could have used another round of editing. Small parts of the book bogged down a little with details that had already been presented and felt repetitive. In some cases, conversations had a novelized feel, and I had to fight back a little skepticism that people's memories could not possibly have recalled them with such accuracy.

Appropriately, The book reads like the script to a documentary, one which I would now like to watch, but it succeeds on its own as a fascinating read.

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## **Doug says**

Griffith's non-fiction narrative of fighting the largest forest fire in Minnesota's recent history is a compellingly readable story. Exacting detail, vivid characters, and visual clarity make the reader empathize with real individuals who were impacted by a single, careless act. Of special interest to Minnesota history buffs, naturalists, fans of real-life heroes, and those wishing to know more about forest-fire fighting, this will be a favorite on many shelves - right along with Griffith's other non-fiction books of real Minnesotans in the woods (*Lost in the Wild*) and exploring caves (*Opening Goliath*).

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## **Judy Diedrichs says**

Fast paced book about the Ham Lake Fire in Minnesota. A compelling story about the people and property threatened during the fire and the numerous men and women that played roles in fighting it. It was fascinating to learn about the various ways in which fires are fought and the strategies employed.

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