"They Would Put Out That Fire Like a Couple of Matches Burning": Climate Change and Reciprocity in George Stewart's Fire[1]

Grace Moore

University of Otago, Aotearoa/New Zealand

FIGURE 1. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist © David Pope/ *The Canberra Times*.

In the aftermath of the 2019 fire that devastated Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, the Australian newspaper the *Canberra Times* ran a cartoon that showed a firefighter offering a sip of water to an exhausted-looking gargoyle while holding its hand. The image, by David Pope, referenced an earlier iconic Australian moment from the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in which volunteer firefighter David Tree was photographed holding the paw of a distressed koala while

I am grateful to Professor David Palumbo-Liu for pointing out that this special issue of *Occasion* needed to engage with fire in a Californian context, and to the audience member at the Nineteenth-Century Studies Association conference, 2017, in Lincoln, Nebraska, who very kindly directed me to George R. Stewart's work. The broad body of research underpinning this essay was supported by the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions (CE110001011). Thanks, as always, to Tom McLean for reading and commenting on my drafts.

[1] George R. Stewart, *Fire*, (New York: Random House, 1948), 175.

offering her a drink. Both pictures evoke a spirit of community and empathy, whether between humans and animals, as in the photo of Koala Sam (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam_(koala)), or through the expression of sympathy from one fire-ravaged country to another that inspired Pope's cartoon. The two images speak to a sense of reciprocity, one between species and the other between fire-affected nations—a feeling that can resonate profoundly during times of crisis, particularly in relation to natural disasters like fire.

This kind of reciprocity in adversity is characterized by the arrangements surrounding "Elvis," an Erickson S-64 Aircrane helicopter, which has become an important signifier of the growing comparability of the North American and Antipodean firefighting experience. Each (northern hemisphere) summer, Elvis fights fires across the United States before heading to the southern hemisphere to be put to work during the Antipodean fire season. Elvis is not alone in this exchange, which sees wildfire-fighters from the United States and Canada heading down under during times of crisis, while fire management experts from Australia and New Zealand regularly reciprocate. Exchanges of this nature, however, are jeopardized by the extension of the fire seasons in both the northern and southern hemispheres, which will see those involved in controlling fire becoming more and more stretched.

We are living, as the environmental historian Stephen J. Pyne so eloquently expresses it, in the Pyrocene.[2] Our present is a time when human-generated climate change is causing megafires on an unprecedented scale and in which the climate, as we know it, is undergoing significant disruption. As the ecologist and former ranger David Carle observes, "Warmer and drier conditions during recent decades of global climate change have lengthened California's fire season by 75 days."[3] Carle continues to note that fifteen out of twenty of the largest wildfires California has experienced have taken place in the twenty-first century.[4] Protracted burning seasons inevitably pose a challenge to our conventional sense of reciprocity in relation to fire and might seem to point to a future in which insularity and individual self-interest reign supreme.

In this essay, I shall consider the importance of reciprocity in contending with fires, in dealing with their traumatic aftermath, and in facing a future in which they will occur with greater frequency. Beginning with a discussion of George R. Stewart's 1948 novel *Fire*—which is notable for its emphasis on environmental concerns as well as its drama—I shall examine how fires bring out connections and exchanges between communities, and between humans and other species. Drawing on Timothy Morton's notion of the "mesh," I shall consider how fire both challenges and consolidates our entanglement, before addressing how we might reconfigure our sense of interconnection in the future. Enmeshment offers a helpful way to approach the issue of climate change and how its effects reverberate throughout the world. Morton reminds us that climate concerns are not restricted to human beings when he asks, "Who or what is interconnected with what or with whom?"[5] He continues to answer his own question, noting that "The mesh of interconnected things is vast, perhaps immeasurably so. Each entity in the mesh looks strange.

2 Stephen J. Pyne, *The Pyrocene: How We Created an Age of Fire, and What Happens Next* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021). Writing about fire during a time of climate crisis inevitably changes at a very rapid pace. I am especially grateful for the very recent work of David Carle and Stephen J. Pyne, which has helped enormously as I have revised this essay.

3 David Carle, *Introduction to Fire in California*, 2nd ed. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 21.

4 Ibid., 106.

5 Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 15.

Nothing exists all by itself, and so nothing is fully 'itself.'"[6] Morton then develops this idea when he asserts:

> The mesh consists of infinite connections and infinitesimal differences . . . [E]ach being in the mesh interacts with others . . . The ecological crisis makes us aware of how interdependent everything is.[7]

In his novel *Fire*, the American disaster novelist and academic George R. Stewart captures the strong sense of mutual dependency that Morton outlines. Although Stewart's focus is primarily on a group of human characters, his writing is sensitive to what Morton identifies as "a mesh of entangled presences and absences," while also noting the dangers of asserting mastery over a forest.[8] His work is, furthermore, particularly attuned to the codependencies and connections that rise to the surface when fire threatens.

Stewart's biographer, Donald M. Scott, has described *Fire* as "the first novel about fire ecology."[9] The work reveals its author's deeply affective relationship with fire—which comes across as a source of both terror and excitement in his writing—while also exploring the interconnectedness between communities of firefighters and the natural world. Having witnessed the Great Berkeley Fire of September 1923, soon after taking up an academic position at the University of California at Berkeley, Stewart realized that if he was to live in California, he needed to understand fire. He was involved in the cleanup that followed the event, and it clearly left an enduring impression: besides *Fire*, a dramatic conflagration also features in the closing pages of his award-winning, postapocalyptic work *The Earth Abides* (1949). While its gender and racial politics are problematic, *Fire* is an environmentally prescient work, which examines the effects of wildfire on the human and nonhuman world. Stewart's work also considers the interdependency between communities during times of disaster, and offers a fascinating overview of the many different human components involved in fending off a wildfire.

The novel tells the story of a wildfire that takes hold in a California forest earmarked for lumber. A young student from UC Berkeley, Judith Godoy, has taken a post as a fire lookout in a forest in Cerro Gordo, California. It was not unheard of for women—who were known as "lady lookouts"—to take on fire observational work. According to Ray Kresek, the first lookout tower, built in Bertha Hill in northern Idaho, was staffed by Mable Gray, a camp cook:[10]

> During an unusually dry summer, with reports of large fires in other states, the manager of a timber company decided to post someone on top of a nearby mountain to keep an eye out for

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6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 30.

8 Ibid., 104.

9 Donald M. Scott, *The Life and Truth of George R. Stewart: A Literary Biography of the Author of Earth Abides* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 59–60. Scott notes that the Berkeley fire "destroyed more than six hundred homes and businesses."

10 Quoted in Don Scheese, *Mountains of Memory: A Fire Lookout's Life in the River of No Return Wilderness* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 46. Scheese offers a fascinating account of the difficulties involved in constructing towers in US national parks and nature reserves, also noting that "by 1945 more than sixty-three thousand miles of single wire telephone had been strung throughout America's national forests to link lookouts to fire dispatch offices," 48.

> smoke. So twice each day, Gray rode by horseback to the summit of 5,520-foot Bertha Hill and climbed fifteen feet up a hemlock snag to sit in a perch constructed for her by camp laborers. [11]

By the time Stewart was writing, towers were well established and could be anywhere from ten to one hundred feet tall. Women played an important role in fire observation and reporting, spending long stretches in towers and huts, observing and recording fire trajectories, and often preventing considerable losses through their work.

The first official female fire lookout for the US Forest Service was Hallie Morse Daggett who, at the age of thirty, took a position at Eddy's Gulch Lookout Station in the Klamath National Forest in California, where she served for fourteen years.[12] In advocating for this groundbreaking appointment the Assistant Fire Ranger for the region wrote to his supervisor that Daggett "has all the attributes of a first-class Lookout," going on to note:

> She is absolutely devoid of the timidity which is ordinarily associated with her sex as she is not afraid of anything that walks, creeps, or flies. She is a perfect lady in every respect, and her qualifications for the position are vouched for by all who know of her aspirations.[13]

According to Rosemary Holsinger, Daggett reported forty fires during her first year as a lookout. She was, by 1916, regarded so highly that the *Siskiyou Daily News* wrote of her, and the women who worked alongside her as telephone operators, that they "play a vital part in the fire suppression work as on their alertness depends the starting of the fire suppression machinery."[14] The article continues to imagine the women's role in a quaintly futuristic firefighting scene ten years hence, harnessing the very latest technology in the interest of public safety:

> Last Saturday at noon a fire was sighted about 70 miles west of Etna by Miss Daggett, aero-scout, in her biplane. The location of the fire was immediately reported to headquarters at Yreka by wireless telephone. Forest Supervisor Rider ordered out forest service zeppelin No. 2 from Ranger Gott's hangar with a crew of men. With the zeppelin piloted by Master Mechanic William Groom they were over the fire in one hour, and with the new chemical apparatus had it under control after it had burned over half an acre of timber.[15]

This vision of the future is striking for its alignment of teamwork with technology to tackle the blaze, not to mention the author's willingness to envision Daggett herself scouting from an aircraft, rather than assigning that role to a man. The behavior of the male characters in *Fire* suggests that Judith is still something of a curiosity in the very masculine world of 1940s firefighting, in spite of one character's observation that "pretty near half the look-outs in Region 5 must be girls—well, women, anyway."[16]

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11 Scheese, *Mountains of Memory*, 47.

12 Anthony Godfrey, *The Ever-Changing View: A History of the National Forests in California, 1891–1987* (California: USDA Forest Service, 2005), 124. https://foresthistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/The-Ever-Changing-View.pdf

13 Quoted in Rosemary Holsinger, "A Novel Experiment: Hallie Comes to Eddy's Gulch," *Women in Forestry* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 21.

14 "Forest Service Notes", *Siskiyou Daily News*, Oct. 26, 1916, 1, https://www.newspapers.com/image/694181697/. Holsinger's excellent article led me to this source.

15 Ibid.

16 Stewart, *Fire*, 60.

Judith (who is mostly referred to as "the girl" throughout the narrative) is rather less committed to fire watching as a vocation. She sees her posting to an isolated watchtower as an opportunity to retreat from a broken relationship, and from society more generally. The male characters are mostly concerned with her appearance, rather than her skills as a spotter, punctuating their conversations with banalities like "That Look-out's not bad" or "Bet she would make good cheesecake."[17] While she is positioned at an elevated remove that allows her to watch over the forest and identify fires in the distance, the lookout tower eventually becomes a place of vulnerability, as the fire draws nearer. It is perhaps inevitable from the story's beginning that Judith will need to be rescued from her outpost—a narrative arc that is often part of the fire story genre.

Judith spends much of the novel alone in the tower with her thoughts, but she is—like Miss Daggett—a diligent observer who pays close attention her surroundings. The omniscient narrator reveals that Judith has taken the time to learn about the ecology of the forest and also its history, which is an important predictor of where fires might flare up. If an area has burned in the past, it is likely to burn again:

> She had already been long enough on the Ponderosa to know about the Merriam's Mill fire... It had swept ten thousand acres, killed two men, and burned some houses, and a barn with horses and poultry. It must have been about eight years back, although she didn't know exactly. But she knew at least that among the personnel of the Forest it was a landmark like The Mayflower.[18]

Judith understands that fire returns and that it is an inevitable element of life in the forest. Stewart devoted considerable attention to understanding both firefighting and fire ecology, spending time at the Plumas Forest School, visiting fires with a Forest Service ranger, and even disappearing to fight a fire at one point.[19] He also worked with a mapmaker and a plaster model to be sure that the forest he had imagined seemed as real as possible to readers. As Scott notes, "The mythical terrain was so real that Fire's readers still drive north from the Tahoe National Forest looking for the Ponderosa National Forest—which exists only in the novel."[20]

The novel's plot revolves around the "Spitcat fire," which ravages the wooded landscape for five days.[21] The narrative moves between the consciousnesses of characters who are differently affected by the fire, including many who are involved in extinguishing it. In addition to presenting the perspectives of a range of forest service employees like the "Super," or superintendent, who is in charge of the whole operation; Dave Halliday, a meteorologist; and Bart Bartley, a veteran ranger, Stewart offers insights into the emotions the fire evokes in volunteers and bystanders. He shows the fear of the ten young men who will leap from a plane into the thick of the fire to fight

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17 Ibid

18 Ibid., 73.

19 Scott, *The Life and Truth*, 113–14. According to Scott, Stewart was found with a group of "drunks" enlisted to help tackle a blaze, a scene he reimagined in Fire when several alcoholics are persuaded to volunteer as firefighters.

20 Ibid., 115.

21 Fires in the United States are named in relation to the places in which they burn, whereas Australian fires are named after days: Black Thursday (February 6, 1851), Ash Wednesday (February 16, 1983), Black Saturday (February 7, 2009), and the Black Summer (2019–20). The expansiveness of the "Black Summer" is a frightening signal of extending fire seasons. See https://theconversation.com/like-volcanoes-on-the-ranges-how-australian-bushfire-writing-has-changed-with-the-climate-126831 for a discussion of how fire narratives of the past offer evidence of our changing climate.

it from the inside.[22] He also captures the emotional contagion of a group of women, who rush to leave when they (erroneously) believe their town to be under threat. In moving from character to character in this way, Stewart conveys the shared emotions of everyone who is affected by the fire, while also reinforcing the scale of the operation to extinguish it.

Judith's isolation gives her—and Stewart's narrator—a vantage point from which to view the blaze, but which sees her sitting aloof from the mesh of everyday entanglements. Her elevated perspective is at odds with the novel's emphasis on the collaboration and cooperation required to extinguish a wildfire, and Stewart shows it to be an unsustainable detachment. The work contains a number of vivid passages in which Stewart personifies the fire, at times making it vengeful and malicious, at others greedy and devouring. He frequently couches the positioning of the firefighters in relation to the flames as akin to an army facing an enemy:

> [A] fire is not one thing. It's like a bunch of allies in the war, or maybe a team. There's wind, and temperature, and humidity, and lay of the land, and cover-type, and accessibility. There's all the little things you'll maybe never even know about—but they make the breaks. There's the men, too—the right man in the right place, or maybe the other way round. There's what happened to the men, maybe years back, to make them what they are now. If wind and humidity and the rest don't all work together... But if you get a hot dry afternoon and heavy timber on an up-slope and the wind decides to come in and help—God, boy, you better just run and hide, for there won't never be enough men and equipment got together in Region 5 to stop her.[23]

Here, Stewart gives the fire agency, but he also demonstrates the numerous factors involved in causing it to spread. The weather is of paramount importance, both in terms of creating the aridity needed for a fire to "take" but also in allowing it to sweep across the landscape. The narrator chillingly signals that some fires are simply too large to be fought, a scenario that was terrifying in the 1940s, when aerial firefighting was in its infancy, and which resonates deeply for readers in the twenty-first century.[24]

As one might expect from a novelist with an interest in apocalyptic futures, Stewart is engaged with the issue of climate change. In a scene in which the narrative voice has been reflecting on the life of the fire, Stewart devotes considerable attention to twigs and pine needles and dead trees, which provide fuel for the flames. He also considers the connectedness and interdependency of the trees in the forest, looking to the future to consider how the growth of an individual tree can affect the ecology of an entire forest. A tree's positioning, or its death, can ease

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22 Significantly, the "jumpers," who are most the endangered of all the firefighters we meet, are described with characteristics that strongly suggest they are African American (see, for example, *Fire*, 122–27). For a detailed and harrowing account of smoke jumping and its dangers, see Norman MacLean, *Young Men and Fire* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017). I am grateful to William Germano for this recommendation.

23 Stewart, *Fire*, 45.

24 Aerial firefighting, or "air attack," was trialed by the US Forest Service in conjunction with the US Air Force in 1947 at the Lola National Forest in Montana, using bombs filled with tons of water. In a report on the experiment, the magazine *Popular Mechanics* notes, "Speed is the biggest asset in fighting forest fires. Even with more roads, there are thickly wooded sections where foot and horse travel are the only means of access. Crews have taken a week to reach fires in such localities. As a result, in one holocaust, small fires merged to sweep a region 150 miles long and 25 miles wide, destroying timber, small towns and taking 87 lives." The report continues to note that 200 modified fuel tanks were converted into water bombs. "Water Bombs for Forest Fires," *Popular Mechanics*, October 1947, 127.

the path of a fire and cause widespread devastation. Stewart then thinks more broadly about environmental interconnections and their long-term ramifications:

> The duff, the little dead tree-trunk, the gentle afternoon wind—these at the moment and for the obvious future determined the life and growth of the wavering fire.
>
> So, for a baby in the cradle, the temperature of the room, the judgment of the mother, or a chance-borne microbe far outweighs all wars, droughts, and revolutions. But eventually the child, grown older, will be caught up, for good or bad, in the larger scheme of things. While he lies in the cradle his future may already be linked with an unusual melting of the distant polar ice, with the erosion of a near-by hillside, with the slow rotting of a beam in some distant house.[25]

This narrative interlude is striking in its anticipation of today's environmental concerns and its perceptive understanding of how an event in one part of the world might have long-term consequences in another region. It is also fascinating that he considers the future of the tree—and the development of the fire—alongside how climate can affect the life of a child. Stewart was attuned to environmental interconnections and understood how easily ecosystems could become unbalanced.

Stewart's interest in fire and its effects is not restricted to human drama. He also demonstrates a deep concern for the nonhuman inhabitants of the forest and their survival instincts in the face of a wildfire. For Stewart, interdependency is not just a matter for human beings; he is also concerned with the relationship between animals and the landscape and how fire poses challenges to their interconnectedness. This emphasis on the fire's effects on the more-than-human world anticipates Morton's notion of entanglement, but it also highlights the forest's broad ecology.

In the novel's early chapters, the human drama is interspliced with scenes in the forest, where deer, squirrels, and foxes attempt to flee the fire. Toward the close of the action, Stewart focuses on a rabbit, with an extraordinary passage in which the omniscient narrator focalizes the terrified creature's experiences. Stewart presents the rabbit's fear of the fire's heat and noise, while also showing that the men tramping around him are a source of terror. This conflation of the fear of fire with a dread of people is significant, in that it brings two highly destructive forces together. Stewart describes the rabbit's horror vividly, showing the tiny animal on the brink of flight:

> His legs were tense and ready beneath him, and his feet rested firmly on sure ground for the push-off. His mind could hardly be said to think. His whole body was more like a coiled spring, set for release, as by the tripping of a trigger, when his eyes and ears and nostrils had piled up tensions in his brain to the snapping point.[26]

This visceral account of the rabbit's panic continues to show the entanglement of the human and nonhuman worlds, when his fear becomes too great. Instead of a pathos-laden scene detailing the rabbit's excruciating death, Stewart makes him an agent of the fire. The rabbit leapt through the flames, his fur caught light, "and he came out the other side as a smoking ball of running fire."[27] The knock-on effect is instantaneous, as the fire is transferred to the rabbit's landing site:

> The panicked and burning rabbit had taken not more than a second to emerge from the fire and disappear into the cover beyond the fireline. None of the crew had happened to see him during his momentary passage, because their attention was focused upon the burning of the

25 Stewart, *Fire*, 77.
26 Ibid., 286.
27 Ibid

> brush patch. Only when its smoke died down a little more did their crew-boss suddenly sense that there was more smoke.[28]

This fleeting yet destructive moment speaks to Morton's idea of the mesh, demonstrating what he describes as a "radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise."[29] The firefighters miss the rabbit's leap, as their attention is fixed on the burning landscape, but the effects of the creature's terrified act are almost catastrophic. In inadvertently spreading the fire, the rabbit reminds readers that a wildfire is not simply a human drama, that it involves massive loss of life throughout the forest, and that the fear of one small creature is bound up with significantly larger issues, including the burn's trajectory.

In the final chapter, Judith briefly considers the animals displaced by the fire, thinking about those who will become easy prey because their hiding places have been destroyed and those who will prosper because weaker animals have been left exposed.[30] Judith's thoughts here are part of Stewart's sustained interest in the forest's ecology as a whole, and they are part of a Darwinian thread running through the work:

> The ruin of the Glen was complete. It was a place of desolation and ugliness and death. From the bottom of the pool the mink emitted his breath in a chain of bubbles; rising cautiously, he broke the surface with his nostrils and refilled his lungs. Along with the trout, he was left alive.[31]

Stewart captures the ruthlessness of the natural order, which leaves the Glen apparently devastated. The novel's conclusion shows that the destruction is simply part of a cycle, noting that "fires die down and trees grow again," while also pointing to the ways in which fires of the past have been memorialized through place names.[32] While the fire at Cerro Gordo has been an "event" for Judith (who, it is strongly implied, has been rescued by her future husband), it is simply a cyclical part of forest life. The human drama surrounding the fire is intense and compelling, but Stewart here urges his readers to think of deep time, and the wider environmental necessity of a burning forest.[33] Indeed, he reinforces this message in the work's final sentence, in which the narrator offers a vision of "high-swinging cones, opened by the fiery heat, the winged seeds drift[ing] downward to the earth."[34]

While *Fire* moves between the perspectives of individual characters and their involvement in watching or combatting the flames, the novel is also concerned with the collective experience of firefighting. Stewart marvels at the sheer numbers involved in extinguishing a wildfire, noting that aside from those on the front—clutching hoses, digging trenches, or backburning in an effort to redirect the fire—there are also many participants behind the scenes, from the women who prepare the food to keep the team on its feet, to the dispatchers in offices who coordinate the effort from a distance. He shows how the homeless and troubled are drafted in to supplement the efforts, at times allowing readers into the consciousness of characters like Bo Fox, a down-and-out alcoholic who sparks panic and loses his life when he breaks the fire-line, believing that he

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28 Ibid., 287.

29 Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 8.

30 See Ibid., 317–18.

31 Stewart, *Fire*, 277.

32 Ibid., 319.

33 Fire is a necessary element of forest ecology and some trees (including some species of pine) have evolved to depend upon the intense heat of a fire to release their seeds.

34 Stewart, *Fire*, 320.

is trapped. Bart, the most senior ranger, figures the group effort against the fire as an onslaught against a shared foe:

> The crews who had been ordered back from the trail to Reverse Flat . . . were coming into camp now. They were a motley crowd, but Bart suddenly felt a great human love for them all. They fought a common enemy, and not a lot of other men just like themselves. In a war you had to teach men the causes, so that they would hate . . . But once let a man see a crown fire, and you didn't ever need to tell him it was an enemy of all men.[35]

The scene continues with a description of the people of different races and beliefs who have been brought together, noting in particular the role of "Conchies," or Conscientious Objectors, who have no qualms about volunteering to fight the fire. By imagining the flames as having a life and personality of their own, the community puts asides its usual divisions. For Bart, the process is a natural one, in which those who are threatened by the fire instinctively combine to defeat it.

Stewart's interest in fire and its suppression extends to the serendipity of the direction in which it blazes. He thoughtfully addresses how a sudden change in the weather can completely alter both the severity and the trajectory of a fire. The meteorologist Dave Halliday thinks to himself about this phenomenon as he sets out for Judith's watchtower:

> The air was just as hot and dry and glary and uncomfortable as ever, and there was a slight acrid smell in it. High overhead the smoke-drift covered most of the sky. But at the edge of the smoke, south and west, he picked up a single thin mare's-tail of cloud. High cirrus . . . and damn high, too! Well, wind or rain? Funny, two thousand men were working on that fire, and yet they were just so many babies in comparison with what that cloud might mean.[36]

It is significant that Judith is saved not by a firefighter but by a "weather man"—as the other characters call him—whose understanding of wind patterns aids their retreat from the fire-endangered tower. Stewart here seems to subtly suggest that the weather forecaster is at least as heroic as those on the frontline, a notion that resonates for readers in the era of climate change. The plot is not, however, simply a romance story in which a vulnerable young woman must be swept off her feet. Rather, it is also a story of Judith's reintegration into her community as she relearns to connect and recognizes that she too forms part of a team. While she initially relishes her watchtower's isolation, Judith is gradually reanimated by the fire: "Yes, she was happy in spite of the fire—really, to be honest, because of it. For with the fire she had suddenly come back into the world again. She was no longer a girl by herself on a mountain-top, in flight from what she had not faced; she felt herself now again to be a part of humanity."[37] Later, as she listens to the other lookouts reporting their perspectives on the fire, she is struck by an even stronger sense of belonging: "Being a part of all that was happening along with so many people had made something break or unloosen inside . . . The fight was moving in closer to her, and she was more a part of it than ever. Again, she knew that she had lost the old tenseness and fear, and was moving out from herself once more, one among many comrades."[38] In realizing her vulnerability as the fire draws nearer, Judith also registers the importance of her "comrades." She must, of course,

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35 Ibid., 207.
36 Ibid., 289.
37 Ibid., 177.
38 Ibid., 264.

accept her connectedness to allow her dramatic rescue to realize its full romantic potential. But in a novel that stresses integration, it is essential for her to relearn how to belong to a team and contribute to the common cause of thwarting the fire.

When the flames are finally suppressed after five days, the "Maps-and-Records man," who is responsible for keeping note of its trajectory, estimates that it has burned approximately ten thousand acres. He reflects upon real-life fires of the past: "Any old-timer could recall a score of greater [fires], and would expect that the years to come would bring many more. In comparison with the Tillamook, which in eleven flaming days had wiped out 311,000 acres of the best forest in Oregon, the Spitcat was a mere waste-basket blaze."[39] Having contemplated the damage to the forest, he then considers some of the additional losses, noting that "[T]he cost of suppression alone would run well over a hundred thousand dollars. Two men had been killed, and a score of others had suffered injury. The value of the burned trees would pass a million dollars, figured at current prices."[40] His thought process then shifts to the environmental cost of the fire. The narrator informs readers that "its effects could be reckoned ahead in centuries," continuing to observe that "the flaming disaster of those few days would not be undone in a hundred years. Even after five hundred, a skilled forester might still be able to trace the scar of that old burn."[41] Significantly, for a novel whose drama has stemmed from the enormity of the blaze, in the closing pages the narrator stresses that, although the Spitcat fire's perimeter was thirty-two miles, it will not be a memorable fire, even for the rangers immediately associated with the region. In drawing this conclusion, Stewart reminds us that Californians live with fire, a fact that Stephen J. Pyne has emphasized with his assertion that "anyone familiar with California knows it burns… the fires burn with a character and on a scale commensurate with the state's size and political power."[42]

Throughout the work, Stewart provides a number of narrative interludes that highlight North American settler society's relationship with fire. While these interjections have an important role in tempering the intensity of the novel's drama, they also compel readers to consider how Western society has lost its ability to cohabit with fire. These remarks signal that, according to the settler worldview, fire somehow sits outside the mesh. The narrator suggests that "before they had even built Jamestown, the English knew that they had come to a land of fire," continuing to observe that "during three hundred years the American went west with the smell of smoke in his nostrils."[43] Stewart presents a catalog of historic wildfires across the US and Canada, focusing particularly on the west coast, but reinforcing the fact that fires have always been an accepted part of North America's environment. His account also notes, however, that fires have increased since the arrival of Europeans, highlighting the timber trade and deforestation as bearing responsibility for the increase in "fiery whirlwinds."[44]

While Stewart does not linger on the issue of human agency, when he chooses to mention it, he does so with great force, signaling his understanding of the destructive role settler society played in interfering with North America's natural fire ecology. Embedded within the novel are a number of critiques of land clearance and logging, including several digs from characters employed

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39 Ibid., 304.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., 305.

42 Stephen J. Pyne. *California: A Fire Survey* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016), 4.

43 Stewart, *Fire*, 81.

44 Ibid., 82.

as rangers who dislike their boss's commercial interest in trees as lumber.[45] Here, Stewart engages directly with contemporary discussions about fire and logging, particularly in relation to giant redwoods, which as Laura and James Wasserman note, had been seriously endangered by the transfer of public land to business concerns in the late nineteenth century.[46] David Carle notes that fire management in California was traditionally implemented very differently by Native Americans:

> For over 9,000 years, California's Indigenous peoples set fires to manage the landscape … They burned to reduce the threat of wildfires near their villages, to stimulate resprouting of straighter stems needed for basketry, to keep meadows and grasslands from converting to shrublands or forests while stimulating the growth of seeds and bulbs used as food.[47]

This traditional method of prescribed burning recognizes that wildfire is an inevitability and seeks to redirect—rather than avoid—large fires through comparatively small-scale burning. Pyne helpfully lays out what has changed in more recent times, highlighting the accumulated impact of attempts to remove fire from the landscape altogether. As he expresses it:

> In nineteenth-century America, megafires broke out because logging slash lathered landscapes over large areas and human ignitions littered the countryside; in twenty-first century America, megafires respond to global warming acting on landscapes typically stuffed with combustibles from decades of fire's exclusion.[48]

Later in his study, Pyne distinguishes between good and bad fire, noting the variability of the idea of controlling fire and pointing to traditional ways of living with it—accepting our enmeshment with fire—rather than constantly fighting it.[49] This is not to suggest that prescribed burning has fallen out of use, but rather that—as Bill Gammage shows in his essay for this special issue—it needs to become much more pervasive and acceptable.[50] Pyne registers that this reconfiguration of how we interact with fire will not be easy, since Western society is accustomed to thinking of suppressing fire in forest regions as an act of protection. But it is simply not possible to extinguish every single blaze. Like Stewart's characters, we think of fire as an adversary. Yet, given that we can never fully prevent forests (or areas that were once wooded) from burning, it makes sense to think of how we might learn to accept and live with fire in a more conciliatory way.

The philosopher Bruno Latour has coined the phrase "living apocalyptically"[51] to characterize what he sees as the horror of fire impinging itself on everyday life. He has asserted that we

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45 At the beginning of the chapter entitled "Third Day," the narrator charts the mythology surrounding fire from the ancient Egyptians through to the Early Modern period, commenting that "In later centuries the rain fell more steadily, and woodlands were scantier. Then the English forgot. Neither Chaucer nor Shakespeare thought of forest-fires—unless we take the witches' blasted heath to be a flame-scarred moorland. Milton, almost by himself among English poets, used the figure, likening the fallen Archangel to the withered glory of a mighty pine, lightning-struck and standing as a blackened snag," 40.

46 Stephen J. Pyne, *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 341.

47 Carle, *Introduction to Fire*, 15–16.

48 Pyne, *The Pyrocene*, 17–18.

49 Ibid., 142.

50 See Stephen J. Pyne, *Fire in America*, 324, and Laura Wasserman, *Who Saved the Redwoods? The Unsung Heroines of the 1920s Who Fought for Our Redwood Forests* (New York: Algora Publishing), 2019.

51 Bruno Latour, quoted in Anders Dunker, ed., *Rediscovering Earth: Ten Dialogues on the Future of Nature: Conversations with Anders Dunker* (New York: OR Books, 2020), 16.

are "living in the end times."[52] Speaking of the horrendous California fires of November 2018, he cautions:

> We must distinguish the apocalypse from the special effects, from Hollywood's depictions of the end of the world. The fires that have ravaged around Hollywood are much more terrifying than any special effects. The end of the world is becoming literal, and at the same time there is a lack of apocalyptic imagination. We live as if we are safe, in a kind of timeless paradise of prosperity, while we are, in fact, in very concrete ways, about to destroy the planet.[53]

For Latour, these fires are an excruciating form of hyperreality, signifying an end we cannot avert and a just punishment for the excesses of Western consumer culture. Pyne considers several less bleak possibilities that involve adaptation by "[a]llowing nature to work itself through changing fire regimes"[54] or "some variety of planned and controlled fire."[55] Cultural memory, reciprocity, and respect for Indigenous ways of being with fire might bring about a rebalancing, not only of our relationship with fire but perhaps even of the Earth's broader ecology. As Pyne expresses it, "[f]ire crises can catalyze reforms that were needed anyway."[56]

Carle reminds us that while fire has become increasingly prominent in the twenty-first century, it has become more deadly largely because of *where* it burns:

> California's eternal wildfire challenges intensified from 2010 through 2020, when the deadliest and most destructive wildfires in the state's history ignited. The number of wildfires started in those years and the total acreage burned were actually not far outside of historical norms. Before the California gold rush, natural ignitions and fires purposely set by the native population had touched about 4 million acres each year. But comparing historical statistics with recent fire totals did not capture essential changes: a few massive holocausts, particularly in 2017, 2018, and 2020, began racing across the landscape, driven by extremely high winds, and in those years, wildfire killed far too many people.[57]

Carle's comments here are a stark reminder that it is not necessarily *fire* that kills, but rather it is *fire that has not been allowed to burn*, through settlement, logging, and other human activities. At the end of *Fire*, Stewart reflects on the role of settler society in generating catastrophic burning, when his narrator once again invokes the importance of memory:

> Remember also Peshtigo and Cloquet, Hinckley and Bandon. There the red wolf broke from the forest; the houses were like brushwood before the heat; the men and women ran . . . until flame swept around them and left the charred bodies to grin, hideous, in the morning sun. All this too was part of the price of the taking-over of the land.[58]

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52 Ibid., 17.

53 Ibid.

54 Pyne, *The Pyrocene*, 130.

55 Ibid., 132. Pyne is not prescriptive in his recommendations, rather he outlines a sequence of different possibilities for living with fire.

56 Ibid., 143.

57 Carle, *Introduction to Fire*, xv–xvi.

58 Stewart, *Fire*, 320.

This shift from the huge collective effort involved in dealing with a wildfire to a consideration of settler culpability is at the heart of Stewart's attitude to fire. In moving from his thrilling anthropocentric plot to a reflection on how it features in the forest's longer history, he demonstrates a need to substitute our sense of mastery over the natural world with a deeper connectedness. Reciprocity and community are the traits that make us human, whether through articulating empathy to a nation in mourning for a beloved cathedral or through sending backup when lives and homes are threatened. Stewart, though, shows us that by limiting these characteristics to human tragedies, we have lost our sense of enmeshment. Now, more than ever, reciprocity—both international and interspecies—is essential. Ecology by its very nature *is* interdependence, and in recognizing our entanglement with the more-than-human world, we may yet be able to live in less exploitative ways. A