

# Five On Fire

"And then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomor'rah brimstone and fire.." Genesis 19-24

For their deviant transgressions, the Lord dropped brimstone, the biblical napalm, burning two cities to the ground and killing all inhabitants. Even General Curtis LeMay, who organized the firebombing of 66 Japanese cities and the dropping of two atomic bombs couldn't match that record. In a strangely perverse way, we can celebrate World War Two as the last conflict where the United States specifically targeted the killing of civilian populations, so we will begin with books on fire with the firebombing of the cultural city of Dresden, Germany, between February 13-15, 1945.

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*Slaughterhouse Five* (1969). Kurt Vonnegut. For what its worth, Modern Library rates it #18 of the best novels of the 20th century. Vonnegut was underground in a slaughterhouse as a prisoner of war as fire rained from the heavens on Dresden. This book is twisted conglomeration of fact and fantasy as seen through the eyes of soldier Billy Pilgrim as he time travels while pondering fate, free will, and the strangest of all arenas ... human behavior.

*World Fire: The Culture of Fire on Earth* (1995). Stephen J. Pyne. Of the author's seven books on fire, this one is his most sweeping work. The tour begins in Australia, then moves to South Africa, Brazil, Sweden, Greece, Iberia, Russia and India before making a final stop with a thought-provoking chapter on continent that has no fire (Antarctica). Pyne brings synthesizes centuries of knowledge in our ongoing quest to govern the ancient flame.

*Young Men and Fire* (1992). Norman Maclean. After a long career as a college English teacher, Norman Maclean retired and wrote two magnificent books. His first, *A River Runs Through It* (1976), will be an enduring classic. His second book took the remainder of his life to research. His subject was the 1949 Mann Gulch wildfire in Helena National Forest, Montana, that took the lives of 13 smoke jumpers. History written with care and concern.

*American By Choice* (2004). Alfredo Fuentes. It begins as the classic Horatio Alger success story: young boy migrates from Ecuador and through good character and hard work achieves the American dream, rising to the rank of captain in New York's fire department. Then it all caves in on September 11, 2001 as those who oppose the American dream buried him at the bottom of the collapsed world trade center. He survived and this is his story.

*Fahrenheit 451* (1953). Ray Bradbury. Although the book depicts a future society where books are outlawed and firemen burn books Bradbury claimed as late as 2007 that *Fahrenheit 451* is not about censorship but the destructive effects that television has had on the reading of literature. Interpret it either way, this book is not a 60 year old prune but still a delicious dish of cultural scenarios guaranteed to make a thinking person think even more.