



Fighting Fire

Caroline Paul

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She fought the prejudice. She fought the stereotype. Then she fought the greatest force of all-- fire.

When the San Francisco Fire Department broke their all-male rule to hire women, Caroline Paul never thought she'd be chosen. She had already enrolled in film school. And Caroline, a strikingly beautiful Stanford graduate, didn't fit anyone's idea of a fireman. Except her own.

Even though she loved testing her limits on white water rivers or Alpine mountains, plunging into a flame-engulfed building would be different than anything she had ever done. Now, in hard-edged prose as crackling as a four-alarm fire, she tells her amazing story. From her fight to match her colleagues physically and mentally, to her silent determination to face her fears, she tells of infernos, heroism, and heartbreaking tragedy. And with a will forged by fire, she reveals one woman's realization of a dream burning in her soul.

Fighting Fire Details

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Author : Caroline Paul

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From Reader Review Fighting Fire for online ebook

E Dittmar says

Oh my god, finally an incredible auto biography of an amazing female firefighter. This follows Caroline Paul's career as a firefighter and the prejudice and physical and emotional conflicts she faces joining the San Francisco Fire Department at a time when minorities joining was a disaster. Once a feminist siding with the press against the prejudice and racism and sexism of the San Francisco firefighters, she begins to see the other side of things after joining the department with flying colors and realising not everything the press and people have said about the department is not what it seems. I learned a great deal more from this book about a career I am seriously considering, and it has inspired me. Following Caroline through unbelievable fires and medicals and horrifying rescues is an incredible trip, and easy to follow through her more than fantastic writing ability. A treat for every girl woman, and interested guy to behold. A true, honest, and real life story about everyday heroes seen in the most unlikely people. Genre: nonfiction/auto biography.

Betsy says

After I finished the book, I can say it was a well written book. I guess the subject matter, women breaking through the male barrier in fire fighting, wasn't particularly calling me. But on reflection, Caroline Paul, does a great job describing why anybody would want to fight fire. What the characteristics of personality that are needed to want to risk one's life on an everyday basis. It was a good change of pace for me.

Nancy says

very interesting look inside the SF fire department from the point of view of a woman fire fighter.

Mandy Huot says

great read! it had its share of lull spots but it flowed well, and brought to light the fact that women should, be allowed to enter whatever profession they feel led to.

Mairi says

I expected to enjoy this but, ultimately, pass it on. I have this personal rule that keeps my house from getting overrun with books: I only keep books I intend to reread, books I intend to loan out, reference material, and things with sentimental value. Everything else I borrow, nab as an ebook on the cheap, or purchase and pass along. I intended this to be the third option right up until I started it. I burned through eighty pages and stayed up way past my bedtime that evening and couldn't wait to finish it the next day. I don't know that I'll ever reread it but I will certainly be loaning it out again and again and will probably be a little sad if it ever rehomes itself.

Scott S. says

An exceptional, thoughtful and entertaining memoir from an unlikely firefighter. The attitudes and actions of some of her male colleagues and citizens will occasionally inspire disgust. A must-read for any young lady (or anyone, really) considering a first responder position.

Mills College Library says

363.37092 P3242 1998

Cindy Evans says

I thoroughly enjoyed this well written memoir by Caroline Paul, who as a Stanford graduate in the late 1980's pursued an unlikely career as a San Francisco firefighter. One of the first women admitted to the fire department, she battled long held prejudices with hard work and fearless dedication. Her poignant narrative frequently references the sentiments of a Dayak hunter to her years before: "why would you put yourself in harm's way?" She searches for the answer to this question as she rides with a rescue squad through the streets of San Francisco's Mission District among heroin addicts, prostitutes, and johns. Her story is both thoughtful and thought provoking. As she says herself "it is about the way the institution and its struggles changed me."

Kristin says

An interesting look at the author's career in the San Francisco Fire Department as one of the first women to gain entry following efforts to increase diversity on the force. That said, she didn't have it any easier because of the new rules, if anything it garnered more animosity from the 'old guard' who didn't look favorable on welcoming females and minorities to their ranks. To Paul though, it wasn't so much about being a trendsetter, moreso it was the thrill of realizing a dream in such an esteemed department, and she made the most of it. A lot of the stories were short recaps of the memorable calls she and her colleagues went on, plus life in the house between calls. The final story, which doesn't actually involve one of Paul's calls, but the major incident that occurred in the SFFD during her tenure, was the most intriguing, as it is that of a seemingly innocent house fire that took a tragic turn quickly. It kept me reading until the end of the book to find out what the aftermath was. Because these are based on real events, even though the names are all changed, I was able to find the actual new coverage of the fire and learn about the firefighters involved and what life has been like since the book was published.

Quick read, but easy to read in small pieces before bed, for example.

Dawn Mateo says

Such an amazing woman and author! I really enjoyed this book (and her other book: East Wind, Rain). It really gave an insight as to what women endured in the fire service.

Sita says

I picked this because the cover looks interesting. A female firefighter? So I had to read it. Doesn't disappoint. It details the battery of tests you have to go through to be a fire fighter, what the job involves, how does it feel to put out your first fire and life at the station. She also tells about problems she encounters at work and how she dealt with it. Well written and very interesting. She's also the twin sister of Baywatch Captain. Not that anything to do with being a fire fighter ;)

Liralen says

Fire taps something ancient and vital in each of us, something both snarling and reverential. Fire harkens back to our wilder selves, the parts we let out only when we think no one is looking. (69)

Rather like Zac Unger, Paul was an unlikely firefighter: from a white-collar background; educated at Stanford; in graduate school. Female. Like Unger, Paul came to firefighting by accident—in Unger's case, his mother persuaded him to apply; in Paul's case, she took on the application as something of a challenge. The San Francisco Fire Department had gotten a lot of bad press and (not unrelatedly) wasn't particularly welcoming to women or minorities. *How*, Paul asks, *did an institution that stands for courage and self-sacrifice get such a terrible reputation?* (55–56) And yet—in she went, and in she stayed, at least long enough to find her niche.

Unlike Unger, finding a niche didn't wipe away all of Paul's concerns. Oh, I liked Unger's book quite a lot; in both cases you have qualified, thoughtful writers who happen to be (or have been) firefighters, and that's worth a lot. But Paul is both less angsty about her place in it all and more critical, talking about second-guessing her instincts, for example, to hold the hand of a nursing home patient, because if a male firefighter did so it would be seen as kind but if a female firefighter did so it would be seen as weak.

Maybe Paul was never going to be satisfied with being solely a firefighter (or, for that matter, solely a filmmaker or solely a writer), but even if it was initially largely a score to settle (with herself? with sexism? with the people saying 'can't?'), well, she owned that challenge. Excellent book.

Random quotations that pleased me:

[Cooking] remains my least favorite part of the job, but I am no longer so anxious. I am still fairly useless, and stick to a painfully narrow list of tried-and-true meals. If I am particularly stressed, I have no qualms about taking shortcuts that [another firefighter] would find blasphemous. Instead of making sauces or salad dressings, I buy them. If I feel energetic, I may try to hide the cans or bottles. I pour the product into a bowl and place it on the counter as if it were my own. One day, with time running out before dinner, I took the thirteen heads of lettuce I needed for salad and, after running water over them, threw them into the washing machine.

They were spun dry in no time. The tart, tingly taste of fabric softener was only barely discernible. People do not expect much from my meals, so they did not mention it. (155)

Of course, traditions die hard. I once found a hay fork in the bowels of Truck 53. The tiller operator shrugged when I held it up to him. He said it was used long ago when the horses were here (and as the last horses retired in 1921, it was a very long time ago). No one had bothered to remove it. "It's good for stuff," he said vaguely, and we put it back. Tradition is both the cornerstone and the lodestone of the San Francisco

Fire Department. (223)

Original review written February 2016; edited to fix a typo August 2016.

Jim says

YES YES YES

amazing book, best fire fighting autobiography i've read

Cheryl says

Riveting throughout. Excellent memoir of self-possessed and strong-willed firefighter who joined the predominately male fire department in the aftermath of affirmative action. Acceptance by some, active harassment by others, her experiences are well detailed with a curious sense of detachment that added to the credibility.

In the chapter labeled "Firewomen", I was impressed with her assertion that the vilification of Elizabeth Mandel actually helped the other women who came after her. "She is so vilified that the rest of us gain by contrast. Once we are seen to be less defensive or combative than Elizabeth--and rumors about her took on such grotesque proportions that it was impossible to come even close--the firefighter is so relieved that he is friendlier than he might otherwise have been".

In a book full of interesting information and observations, the events surrounding Todd Lane could have been easily missed. For me, it was an important reminder that during times of change, people's first reactions, especially during such a difficult time, are not necessarily their ultimate opinions. That change is hard, especially when many felt that "the fire department was the best men's club in the world." and resented the change. That the power of a heartfelt apology can be immense and freeing to both the one who freely offers it and the one who was imprisoned in the anger and frustration. "Suddenly, from the Rescue desk, Todd Lane beckons me over. He hitches his pants and clears his throat. 'Listen,' he says, his voice low. "Is it too late, four years too late, to say I'm sorry?"

I definitely think this book is well worth reading and is one that I would have read with my daughters.

Erica says

A stay up all night because you can't sleep until you finish it book.
