

Review of:

Rachel K. Wentz. *Let Burn. The Making and Breaking of a Firefighter/Paramedic*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013. 275 pp. \$24.95, paper; ISBN 978-1-61186-071-9.

Let Burn (a policy of forest managers that allows wildfires to burn unchallenged to rejuvenate the soil and encourage new growth) is a particularly apt title for the story of the rise and fall of Rachel Wentz's first career as a firefighter and her professional rebirth in a second career as a noted anthropologist. In both careers, she chose public service and the satisfaction of helping others, while vigorously pursuing personal ambitions.

In a collection of short chronological chapters, Wentz recounts challenging episodes that occurred during her paramedical and firefighting service, each of which shaped her life perspective and character. Divided into four parts, the book reveals a path of intense training, discipline, dedication, long hours, and the determination of a woman to succeed in a profession that traditionally has been a "brotherhood" of men. Along the first part of this path, the reader is taken from fire academy boot camp, along midnight ambulance runs, into the trauma room, and to the scenes of horrific traffic accidents and tragic suicides. Graphic descriptions, as only someone who has witnessed these events can provide, are treated in a straightforward narrative that includes lessons learned and a growing understanding of the unpredictable cycles of life. Wentz recalls her responses to fatal accidents (P. 82):

"These calls have a way of merging into one long, silent movie. They flash before my mind's eye in grainy black and white, yet I see each scene in fine detail. I hear the sounds that accompanied each call: the splashing of boots in water, the ping of cooling metal. The smells return: those of spilled oil, battery acid, and blood."

Part 2 describes the author's initial years working for the Orlando Fire Department, responding to more emergency calls, accidents, suicides, fires, and deaths. The reader learns about the ways in which the firefighting apparatus (engines, ladder trucks, and rescue vehicles) are used, and what it's like to drive a fire engine (p.130):

"The massiveness of the truck accompanied by the wail of sirens makes the blood rise to your cheeks and your heart race. The trucks are equipped with a wind-up siren controlled by a floor pedal on the passenger side of the truck. The lieutenant controls this siren and can wind it up to a deafening scream. My heart rate still jumps when I hear a siren's wail. It is familiar music."

Of particular interest is Wentz's portrayal of the anthropology of a fire department, what life is like at the fire station, where firefighters eat, sleep, and spend a third of their lives. Amid constant deprecating jests and practical jokes, humor appears to be the life blood of the fire

service, a relief valve from the pressures of the job. Daily dinners are portrayed as the most important mechanism for bonding among firefighters; on-duty personnel sometimes cook, but most fire stations employ full-time cooks. In the world of the fire station, it's first come, first served.

Each of the chapters in Parts 3 and 4 begin with a quote from Orlando Fire Department training materials (which Wentz studied intensely as she rose through the ranks) that best characterizes the subject of the chapter. For example, a chapter entitled "A Fork in the Road" that shares her desire, while working for the fire department, to pursue more intellectual studies in forensic anthropology, is prefaced by the following quote:

If fire is working inside a concealed space, get ahead of it, open up, and cut it off --OFD Support Activities.

Part 3 covers the portion of Wentz's career as a lieutenant, learning to lead and to command and training to become a district chief. As only the eighth woman to be employed by the Orlando Fire Department, she was determined to become the second woman to serve as district chief. This meant directing the activities at a fire scene and the realization that many of the men of the fire department were not eager to take orders from a female. This section also includes a fiery episode that changed her perception of what she was doing as a firefighter, when she and her team were almost consumed by flames in an empty building.

The final part of the book describes a series of steps that led to Wentz's demotion and eventual resignation from the Department. During response to a dangerous fire in a local transmission shop and warehouse containing highly flammable materials, she angered a superior officer by suggesting that he withdraw a team ordered inside without backup (contrary to procedures) because the fire had spread to the second floor. There followed charges of insubordination, with hearings, a verdict that was unsuccessfully appealed, and a demotion, which the local firefighters' union board declined to arbitrate. Alienated and disillusioned, Wentz took her drive and ambition elsewhere—to graduate school at Florida State University, where she soon earned a Ph.D. in anthropology.

For those of us who dreamed as a youngster of becoming part of the "world's noblest profession," Dr. Wentz shares an illuminating and candid portrayal of her personal experiences of what it's like to be a firefighter. *Let Burn* is a fascinating journey into a reality few of us witness, except for when we pull over and stop for the wailing sirens behind us.

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