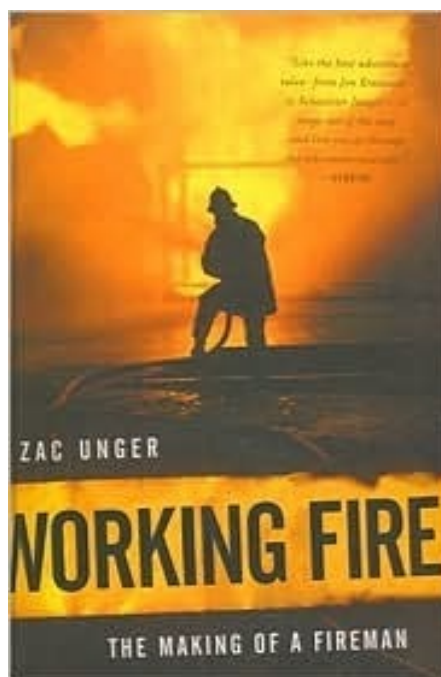




Working Fire: The Making of a Fireman

Zac Unger

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Working Fire: The Making of a Fireman Zac Unger

Zac Unger didn't feel like much of a fireman at first. Most of his fellow recruits seemed to have planned for the job all their lives; he was an Ivy League grad responding to an ad at a bus stop. He couldn't keep his boots shined, and he looked terrible in his uniform. **Working Fire** is the story of how, from this unlikely beginning, Zac Unger came to feel at home among this close-knit tribe, came to master his work's demands, and came to know what it is to see the world through a firefighter's eyes. From the raw material of his days' work—alarm calls both harrowing and hilarious, moments of triumph and grief—Unger has forged a timeless story of finding one's path, and a rousing adventure about the bravery and sacrifice of everyday heroes.

Working Fire: The Making of a Fireman Details

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From Reader Review Working Fire: The Making of a Fireman for online ebook

Bill Littell says

Lexile: 1070

Very much in the style of Jon Krakauer. Working fire is a lucid, articulate treatment of a field that very few of us truly understand. The writer is analytical without being tedious. At times, the text is hard to put down; at others, it gets a little prosaic. I got Tim O'Brien vibes at times.

Words of Wisdom: The word "firefighter" has a strange connotation. It seems like a natural cousin to "crime fighter," but it's different. Fire fighting isn't really about fire in the same way that police work is obsessed with crime. I don't have fire in my blood; I'm not obsessed by it. I respect fire and believe it can be beautiful at times, but I don't lie awake nights thinking of it as my sworn enemy. Fire fighting is not about the thing we conquer but about the things we save. The fire is secondary; the lives are always first. For all our macho posturing, we're just caretakers.

Ann Schaffer says

Since my husband is a firefighter, I've read quite a few books on the subject. I mostly read them because I find they're all over the house; they wouldn't normally be my first choice. Compared to other firefighting books, this is 5 stars. Working Fire stands out because it reads like it was written by an honest to God paycheck-earning author, not just a firefighter who has some good stories to tell. I can't remember the last time I read a book that is this well written. The author IS a firefighter though. I'm sure of it because of the accuracy in his descriptions of the daily life, mindset, and language. I mean, sometimes I turned to my husband, and we laughed at how spot on he was. His descriptions are refreshing, thoughtful, and often funny. I'd like to meet Zac. Clever!

Sharat says

GENRE: Autobiography

SERIES: n/a

READING LEVEL: Young Adult

This book is an autobiography by Zac Unger, he writes about how he got into the profession and how he felt like he didn't fit. Later in the book he writes about daily life as a firefighter and how the job might not be as people imagine it would be like.

I liked the book because it gave me an idea on what it's really like to be a firefighter, I also liked the book because it wasn't all about fighting fires, it was also about training and life at the station. A great quote from the book is, "Firefighting is not about the fire. It's about the save. It's about keeping the flames from licking too deeply into a vulnerable life and wreaking havoc there. (Unger 184)"

Ann G. says

I see that this book has an average rating of under 3.8. What those people were thinking, I cannot imagine. I found this book absolutely fascinating. Unger, the son of an upper-middle-class Oakland Jewish family, was always drawn to outdoors work and went into firefighting almost on a whim, not realizing that many men try for years to get into a company like Oakland's. What he learned, in his training and on the job, reflects on how we run our cities, how we treat our elderly, our poor, our drug addicts and mentally ill, how we value human life, how we get along with people of other races and socioeconomic classes, how men and women relate to each other in good times and in bad - and oh, yes, how firefighters actually put out fires. An amazing book.

Rodney Jones says

An enjoyable read no doubt, but as a fellow firefighter, I found it a bit over-dramatized at times. No offense to Mr. Unger, but constantly referring to his gear as "smoke-stained" and "blackened" was just a little over the top for me by the end. It seems as though Mr. Unger, to his credit, felt it his responsibility to keep alive the myth of the heroic firefighter, as I assume many of the readers of this book will be non-fire service individuals. I certainly could relate to many of the situations and atmospheres he described both in and outside of the firehouse. They made me chuckle as I recounted nearly exact scenarios that I experienced at one point or other. It mostly made me wish that I had documented more thoroughly my time as a rookie firefighter so that I too could have one day put it all into a memoir.

Sabrina Duran says

This book is too short; I wanted to follow Zac Unger into more burning buildings, more troubled streets, more firehouses. It's a thrilling story, not just because it's a rookie fireman's but because of Unger's bravery and his brain: he is an outsider-turned-insider, a preppie who heard the call. I'd like to read about Zac Unger doing almost anything because you can feel what he is going through with everything he describes as he tells us. His story is remarkable and inspires anybody wanting to go into firefighting career. We truly gave firefighters respect after the incident 9/11 and they deserve much more. I recommend this book and loved it!

Robert E says

The book is called Working Fire, by Zac Unger. I thought it was a great book and it wasn't hard to read. I like how the author puts you into the book and make you feel like you're the characters. I can relate to the book because I'm on a volunteer fire department is a little different than a non volunteer department but the fires are the same.

I would recommend this book to people that want to learn more about fire departments or like action.

Kristin says

Unlike most of the other firefighting books I've read, this one focuses almost exclusively on the training period Unger had while learning the ropes of firefighting, as the book title suggests. He is a rookie throughout, so even once he finishes the training academy, his experiences working in a firehouse are peppered with lessons and words of advice from his colleagues. A good portion of the early book is focused on the training academy for firefighters in Oakland, CA. While Unger describes himself as an 'accidental fireman' in the title and backs it up by saying he learned about the opportunity from a flyer in a bus stop, he was a young guy who seemed to have done a few odd jobs here and there during and since college, but I could see how those experiences could steer a man towards a career in firefighting. Compared to his fellow trainees at the academy, Unger also didn't come with a family pedigree, the latest in many generations of firefighters, instead growing up in a white collar Jewish family and graduating from an exclusive private high school in Oakland instead of the rougher public ones that most of the others came from, so he feels like an outsider at first, but once all the gear is on, the job is the same.

Unger talks a little bit about his first firehouse, where he really didn't fit in, if for no other reason than to contrast it with the firehouse where he did most of his training and found the bond common among groups of firemen and women. There, he found guys committed to their jobs and each other as well as the occasional commander who demonstrated how NOT to lead his men, so both this good and the bad shaped him as he went out onto each call. Unger expressed how few of his calls were for actual fires that many people picture the job of a firefighter involving, instead doing many medical calls, false alarms, wildfires, and fires where the building involved was either too far gone to do anything but let burn to the ground or small such that only the first men on the scene were needed to attack it. He also addresses the tragedy of losing one of his fellow firefighters, a guy he barely knew but learned a lot from in the short time they spent together, in a building collapse and the outpouring of support the fire department experienced at his funeral.

Overall, it was an enjoyable quick read. I would have liked a few photos, to be able to see the faces of the brave men and women he describes and some of the equipment, because it's a lot easier to comprehend what he means when he talks about 6 people needed to operate a 50 foot ladder if there is a picture of said people working with the ladder.

Juanitomandujano says

The book speaks for itself. Zac Unger needed a purpose in life and he found it in an application for the Oakland Fire Department that his mama went and got for him. Not really a slacker, but unsure what he wanted to do in life, he went to school basically to become a biologist despite the fact he hated biology, but he only chose that major because he enjoyed being outdoors.

Long story short, this is his story of his days at the tower, as the academy was referred to as, and about his first couple years on the force. It is funny, and sometimes sad, but reality.

LOVED IT.

Liralen says

He crosses himself, then kisses his wedding ring, and I make a mental note to develop a ritual for myself, some sort of secular facsimile of prayer that I can use before I go running into a burning building. (2)

Firefighters are like astronauts or medical doctors to me—I'm never going to be one, and that's just dandy, but in the meantime I'll happily read a whole bunch about them.

Now, as the subtitle suggests, Unger didn't expect to be a firefighter. He grew up California-crunchy, went to Deep Springs* and Brown for undergrad, went to UC Berkeley for a master's degree, comes from a family of white-collar workers. On his graduation day, when he becomes a firefighter, he says of his parents that *The closest they'd ever come to a group of men with badges was the time a troop of National Guardsmen with batons and tear gas had run them out of People's Park in Berkeley* (58). Still, despite his comments about how much his mother must worry, it was she who set him on the path, recognising that he really didn't want to be tied to the desk job that he was heading towards.

Is Unger really so different than his contemporaries? Probably not. Differences in background, yes, but as he tells it, he basically fit in fine. His reservations ease over time; he acclimates to the banter and the reality that firefighting is at least 75% non-fire-related duties. But he spins a good story: from the training period to his first fire to later, big ones when he is more fully trained, he gives a great sense of both the overarching situation and what he was going through and learning. I loved the way he depicts the more senior firefighters: constantly ribbing on each other, jockeying for the 'best' positions (most danger, most glory)—and then, when thwarted, immediately making a teachable moment out of it.

There's not a lot of 'obvious' research (i.e., no fact-dumping, etc.), but enough background to lend credibility. (Also to teach this reader random things: did you know that the 'four criteria for immediate determination of death in the field' are decapitation, obviously protruding heart or brain, decomposition, and total incineration (page 189)? I didn't.) Sometimes it feels as though he analyses his motives/actions a bit much (sometimes a snappy comeback is just a snappy comeback), and I did conclude that wilderness firefighting interests me considerably more than city firefighting...but what can you do. Didn't make me any less excited to read *Fighting Fire*. (More firefighting! Female! *Lesbian!* Don't tell me it's too good to be true.)

*Deep Springs is a two-year college in rural California. It only has 26 students and is all male and is one of the very few reasons I have ever wanted to be male (though Wikipedia tells me that it's supposed to start accepting women soon). I might have rounded this book up from 3.5 stars just because I am so fascinated by the idea of Deep Springs (which is mentioned only in the author bio). Unfortunately, a couple searches didn't turn up any readily accessible books about it.

Trent Partridge says

Great book for whoever likes/wants to be a fireman/woman. A great story by Zac Unger where every chapter is the climax. From fighting big fires to car accidents this book has some of the best action any book.

Kathy says

My uncle was a fireman. I know several firemen. Once, our house was on fire and the whole crew came and saved it, even though it was considered 49% destroyed by the insurance company. As part of the general public I thought I mostly knew what fire fighting was about. We see it all the time on the local news, right? This is a great behind the scenes look at Zac Unger's first three years as a fireman, including his time at the academy. His wry sense of humor and honest emotion make this into an adventure tale about the actual men who do the job and why they do it. (I was surprised at the number of NON fire fighting runs they take with their engines.) If you enjoy true life exploits, you would like this book!

jared says

Not sure why this got a 3.9... I found this book (Zac's story) very enlightening, entertaining, and well balanced in the sense of the honesty it conveyed about the job and calling of firefighting. Great story well told!

Loren says

Zac Unger grew up in Oakland, California with a desire to rescue people. He channeled that into scuba diving and studying to become a forest ranger until his mother encouraged him to become a fireman.

Rather than telescoping chapters that evolve from one another, *Working Fire* unfolds in a series of essays. This makes for some odd jumps in time where the reader senses quite a lot must have happened to get Unger where he was when the story unfolded. One of those leaps seems central to the point of the memoir.

You would think that a book called *Working Fire* would be primarily about fire — its colors, its hungers, its beauties and dangers. Several fires do appear in the pages of Unger's memoir as breathless set pieces that completely absorb the reader. But though Unger continued to work as a fireman, at some point he grew bored with waiting for fire to break out. He went back for his paramedic certification so that he could actively save the lives of people who'd dialed 911. The paradigm shift from saving buildings to saving people is huge, but isn't explored in any detail. The only training Unger recounts here is his initial academy experience before joining his first firehouse. The point of that story seems to be that one needs to suppress any individuality one has in order to succeed. In terms of being a fireman, it is an important lesson, but doesn't suit the arc of the book as much as exploring how he chose to get his hands bloody might have.

The fires Unger chooses to recount are strange ones: the time he got lost in a smoky basement full of pipes and survived only because the other firemen got the flames put out; the fire they couldn't reach because the hose was too short; a grass fire in the Oakland hills; finally a real battle inside an apartment. I would have been happy with story after story about facing fire.

That said, the most emotionally intense event in the book involves no fire at all. Unger's firetruck was summoned to an accident on the Oakland freeways. A woman was pinned inside her "black luxury car" by the engine block in her lap. As the firemen struggled to free her, Unger crouched beside her and told her they were going to get her out. One of the ambulance medics warns him to step back as soon as they pull the dashboard away from her: "That's when they always bleed out. It's like they wait until you're ready to save them, and then they just die on you." Like it's a choice the unfortunate victim makes. In the end, the ambulance took the woman away and Unger never knew if she survived.

The heart of Unger's book comes in the chapter called "Things I Wish I Didn't Know." In it, his prose approaches poetry: "Fire fighting is not about the fire. It's about the save. It's about keeping the flames from licking too deeply into a vulnerable life and wreaking havoc there." In his final chapter, he spells it out: "Fire fighting isn't really about fire in the same way that police work is obsessed with crime....Fire fighting is not about the thing we conquer but about the things we save." It's a distinction that I didn't understand until reading Unger's book.

Laurie says

picked this one up from the NY state fireman's museum. this book was SO FUNNY and TRUE! no matter where you are a firefighter, the things Unger talks about in his book are constants across the board. from the training academy to rookie school to finally feeling comfortable and knowledgeable in the station, his account of the oakland fire department is just like all the rest. this is comforting and finally makes me understand why people keep calling this career a "brotherhood".
