

The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire That Saved America

by Timothy Egan

Discussion Questions

The book begins with people scrambling to evacuate Wallace, Idaho, as the fire advances. What would you take with you if you were forced to evacuate with what you could carry in your arms (no suitcases!)?

Egan used the first hundred pages of the book to set the stage, giving us the context in which the fire occurred. What did you think about that format?

What did you think of Egan's writing? Were there any descriptions you found particularly delightful or illuminating? One that I liked: Pinchot became a "Roman candle of self-righteous indignation."

Did you know anything about Gifford Pinchot before reading this book? What did you find most striking about him? What propels someone born with a silver spoon in his mouth to reject a life of leisure and pursue a cause that garners lots of enemies? What did you think of his 20-year relationship with a dead woman?

Why were the Little GPs so loyal to Pinchot?

Teddy Roosevelt was very much an action-oriented man. What examples of this from the book did you find to be particularly interesting or illuminating?

Do you think a president like Teddy could be elected today? Why or why not?

What did you think of the way William H. Taft was portrayed? Did you feel any sympathy for him?

Senators Clark (Montana) and Heyburn (Idaho) and their allies adamantly opposed Roosevelt's conservation agenda. They favored extracting the land's riches (mining, lumber, railroad, settlement) and saw no value in preserving wilderness. Do you see any parallels to political attitudes today?

Have you ever been in a fire that was burning around you? What was it like?

What did you think about the Buffalo soldiers as you read the way Egan told the story?

How did Congress fail to support the Rangers? What did you find most disturbing before, during and/or after the fire?

Ultimately do you see the rangers who fought the fire as heroes or as victims?

Have you ever handled or used a Pulaski tool? Did the story make you want one for your garden? How might the story been different if Pulaski had done the paperwork to apply for a patent?

Our national forests continue to permit logging, mining and grazing. Should forests be managed for profit? Besides pure preservation, what consideration should be given recreational uses (hunting, hiking, boating, etc.), water quality and even carbon sequestration? How can these concerns be balanced against economic development?

What did we learn from the fire? Is controlling fire just a pipe dream? If you read the piece in Dropbox by NY Times writer David Wallace-Wells, what did you think about it?

Pinchot and his allies used the tragedy of the fire to advance their political agenda. Can you think of other examples of that strategy in the past or in contemporary life? Proponents say we need to learn from these events while opponents often say they should not be politicized. What do you think of that strategy?