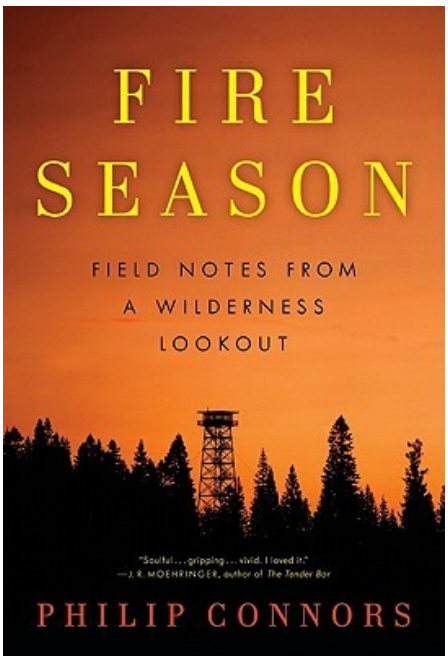

Fire Season: Field Notes from a Wilderness Lookout

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A decade ago Philip Connors left work as an editor at the *Wall Street Journal* and talked his way into a job far from the streets of lower Manhattan: working as one of the last fire lookouts in America. Spending nearly half the year in a 7' x 7' tower, 10,000 feet above sea level in remote New Mexico, his tasks were simple: keep watch over one of the most fire-prone forests in the country and sound the alarm at the first sign of smoke.

Fire Season is Connors's remarkable reflection on work, our place in the wild, and the charms of solitude. The landscape over which he keeps watch is rugged and roadless — it was the first region in the world to be officially placed off limits to industrial machines — and it typically gets hit by lightning more than 30,000 times per year. Connors recounts his days and nights in this forbidding land, untethered from the comforts of modern life: the eerie pleasure of being alone in his glass-walled perch with only his dog Alice for company; occasional visits from smokejumpers and long-distance hikers; the strange dance of communion and wariness with bears, elk, and other wild creatures; trips to visit the hidden graves of buffalo soldiers slain during the Apache wars of the nineteenth century; and always the majesty and might of lightning storms and untamed fire.

Written with narrative verve and startling beauty, and filled with reflections on his literary forebears who also served as lookouts — among them Edward Abbey, Jack Kerouac, Norman Maclean, and Gary Snyder — *Fire Season* is a book to stand the test of time.

Fire Season: Field Notes from a Wilderness Lookout Details

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From Reader Review Fire Season: Field Notes from a Wilderness Lookout for online ebook

Petra Eggs says

Five stars because I enjoyed reading the book, but for everything else, content, prose, direction, it's closer to a three-star. The book is absolutely ideal to listen to as an audio book because nothing much happens and so if you drift away, you won't miss anything. It is a bit like a day dream, you come back to reality with a pleasant, peaceful feeling and don't even give a thought to what was going on meantime.

I probably wouldn't be so hard on this book in the review if I hadn't just finished Bernd Heinrich's One Man's Owl. Heinrich is an absolute master of writing about not a lot happening in the woods, in this case, observations of a semi-wild owl,a couple of crows and a log cabin. His books have a depth I would have enjoyed but didn't find in Fire Season.

Still, the feeling of peace in the wilderness, months of a pleasant reverie interrupted by bouts of important excitement does make for good reading and it is worth the five stars.

K says

In the spring and summer of 2011 the mountains and prairies of the southwest United States burst into flame. Some fires were started by lightning, others were man-made. No matter what started the fires the end result was that large swaths of land became charred wilderness. While fires that started in populated areas were easily spotted the fires in more remote areas were harder to see and therefore to control. The forest service’s first line of defense in these remote areas are the fire lookouts – men and women sitting high up in towers scanning the horizon for telltale smoke and calling it in to the firefighters.

Author Philip Connors gives us a look into this unique job through his personal experiences working as a fire lookout in the Gila National Forest in New Mexico.

For five months (April – August) Connors lived in a small cabin with no electricity, running water, bathroom just yards from his “office”. As he states “My tower is small and spare, seven-by-seven, purely utilitarian – more office than home. It can hold four people standing, assuming they’re not claustrophobic. At fifty-five feet tall, it is one of the highest lookouts still staffed in the Gila.” He goes on to state that “In summary, then, I have a view of spruce-fir high country, ponderosa parkland, pinon-juniper hills, several river valleys, arid grassland mesas, dry arroyos, high-desert scrublands, and the occasional fire scar grown back in aspen and locust.”

Each chapter is a month of his summer and each begins with a quote about fire lookouts or our national forests to give us an understanding on how others saw them. The chapters are filled with his fire lookout job plus he includes some of his experiences and wanderings in the mountains with his dog Alice and the few moments he gets to spend with his wife Martha (who stays in town). But since there can only be so much written about his life as a lookout (most of the time it is just staring out over the mountains) he includes information on other famous fire lookouts and foresters of the past, including Aldo Leopold (who wrote A Sand County Almanac), beat novelist Jack Kerouac, and Norman Maclean (who wrote A River Runs Through It which was made into a well received movie and the fire fighters book Young Men and Fire).

But it is more than a monthly activity journal as the author ruminates about history of fighting forest fires. As he pointed out, he hoped that the book “will offer another view of fire and its place in nature, a view too little glimpsed on our television screens.” Throughout the book he slips in quite a bit of information, almost too much, of the history of fighting forest fires in our nation. While giving us both points of view (whether to fight a fire or not) at times he is so thorough that I feel he could have gotten his point across with a little less “padding”.

The author is very poetic in his writing. This is how he describes his job: “The brutal winds of spring, when gales off the desert gust above seventy miles an hour and the occasional snow squall turns my peak white; the dawning of summer in late May, when the wind abates and the aphids hatch and ladybugs emerge in great clouds from their hibernation; the fires of June, when dry lightning connects with the hills and mesas, sparking smokes that fill the air with the sweet smell of burning pine; the tremendous storms of July, when the radio antenna sizzles like bacon on a griddle and the lightning makes me flinch as if from the threat of a punch, and the blessed indolence of August, when the meadows bloom with wildflowers and the creeks run again, the rains having turned my world different shades of green. I’ve seen lunar eclipses and desert sandstorms and lightning that made my hair stand on end. I’ve seen fires burn so hot they made their own weather. I’ve watched deer and elk frolic in the meadow below me and pine trees explode in a blue ball of smoke. If there’s a better job anywhere on the planet, I’d like to know what it is.”

The book goes quickly except in parts where his thoroughness begins to feel a bit boggy. But his writing did give me a wish to be a fire lookout – to join him in the hunt for both the fire and the quiet seclusion of the fire lookout. As I read this book I just wanted to grab a back pack and a sleeping bag (OK, maybe also a lantern, a few books and my needlepoint) and join the lookout crew for a number of tedious days sparked with some thrilling action.

Jeffrey Keeten says

”I do not so much seek anything as allow the world to come to me, allow the days to unfold as they will, the dramas of weather and wild creatures. I am most at peace not when I am thinking but when I am observing. There is so much to see, a pleasing diversity of landscapes, all of them always changing in new weather, new light, and all of them still and forever strange to a boy from the northern plains. I produce nothing but words; I consume nothing but food, a little propane, a little firewood. By being virtually useless in the calculations of the culture at large I become useful, at last, to myself.”

The cabin and Lookout Tower that Philip Connors used.

I had a roommate in college who was a forest fire fighter. He was also a ballet dancer which may seem like two odd interests to put together, but both required strong legs. He earned enough money in the summer running all over the country digging line and operating a chainsaw to pay for his schooling during the winter. He eventually even commanded his own truck and crew. He had long, curly red hair which I often thought must have been a warren for errant sparks while out there in the smoke and roar of mother nature taking back what she had allowed to grow.

I couldn’t help but think about him as I read this book. I wondered if he is still out there fighting fires or if he has settled down to some form of domestication. You see he is off the grid. Not a big surprise. I can imagine that if he does get on a computer it is only to google himself and see if his name appears.

Philip Connors did what he was supposed to do. He went to college and afterwards landed a job in Manhattan working for one of the most prestige newspapers in the world...The Wall Street Journal. He grew up on a farm in Southern Minnesota. There is just something about farm kids that makes it hard to place us in a mold and hold us down long enough for us to be the same cookie as everyone else. Corporate cubicles are cages. I can picture him squirming in his seat.

I can tell he suffered from the same uneasiness that I felt living in San Francisco. It took me a while to figure it out, but one day I drove down to stare at the ocean. I could feel the tension leaving my body, not because of the ocean, but because for the first time in a long time I had a horizon stretching out before me. I could see for miles. I never feel as comfortable as when I have a lot of nothing stretching out around me for miles in every direction. People are optional, but only if they are quiet.

Philip Connors

Connors ran into a friend that changed his life. She was a fire lookout and something clicked for him. The next thing he knew he had quit his job, convinced his lovely wife to move to New Mexico (later), and took a job sitting around on a mountain top scanning the world for vestiges of smoke. Not everyone is fire lookout material. Let's just say you better be almost phobia free.

"When you consider a person has to be free of a fear of fire (pyrophobia), a fear of confined spaces (claustrophobia), a fear of being alone (isolophobia), a fear of heights (acrophobia), a fear of steep slopes and stairs (bathmophobia), a fear of being forgotten or ignored (athazagoraphobia), a fear of the dark (nyctophobia), a fear of wild animals (agrizoophobia), a fear of birds (ornithophobia), a fear of thunder and lightening (brontophobia), a fear of forests (hylophobia), a fear of wind (anemophobia), a fear of clouds (nephophobia), a fear of fog (homichlophobia), a fear of rain (ombrophobia), a fear of stars (siderophobia), and a fear of the moon (selenophobia), then it's little wonder most people aren't meant to be lookouts."

I think the one that will get most people is Isolophobia. We are so interdependent on each other that most of us have a hard time flying solo.

Give me a shelf full of the right kind of books and I can do without human interaction for a good long time. Longer yet if I can bring in a few baseballs games on the AM radio. The first time a hiker wandered up the trail I'd have to catch myself before I said something like "Greetings Human!".

Desolation Peak, Washington a place that Jack Kerouac spent 63 days scanning the skies for smoke while creating a lot of smoke himself.

Connors talks about the connections with writers he likes and their time spent as fire lookouts. To a writer it seems like ideal conditions to expand the mind, focus the mind, and write the Great American Novel. Jack Kerouac discovered that he was willing to hike miles to pick up the makings for cigarettes during his 63 days on Desolation Peak. Connors discovered that Kerouac kept a diary during that time in shirt pocket sized notebooks. They were housed with his papers in the New York Public Library. Connors, with a number 2 pencil spent three days feverishly (Keetenesque) copying those diaries. They would prove to be a solace to him many times while pulling a long shift high above the treeline with nothing but sky between him and the next world.

Edward Abbey in the glass cage checking for smoke and pounding away on his typewriter.

There was also, famously, Edward Abbey who was teaching at the University of Arizona while I was in attendance there. He wrote two books: Black Sun and The Journey Home about his time in the Forest Service as well as at least one short story. It proved to be productive time for him sitting, watching, and thinking.

"The life of a lookout, then, is a blend of monotony, geometry, and poetry, with healthy dollops of frivolity and sloth. It's a life that encourages thrift and self-sufficiency, intimacy with weather and wild creatures. We are paid to master the art of solitude, and we are about as free as working folk can be. To be solitary in such a place and such a way is not to be alone. Instead one feels a certain kind of dignity."

There was the professor Norman MacLean.

"I was expected to sit still and watch mountains and long for company and something to do, like playing cribbage, I suppose. I was going to have to watch mountains for sure, that was my job, but I would not be without company. I already knew that mountains live and move." Norman MacLean

The Norman MacLean fire lookout tower at Grave Peak, Idaho.

Don't forget Gary Snyder and the poet Philip Whalen also spent time on lookout towers.

One of the benefits besides solitude, and having a million dollar view is the plethora of wildlife that is teaming right beneath Connors's nose.

"One evening I'm cooking dinner over the stove's blue flame when I look up and see, through the west-facing windows, two bull elk with their muzzles to the ground in the meadow. They are massive, majestic, the muscles in their hindquarters rippling as they shift their weight. One of them lifts his regal had and seems to look at me, his antler stark against the gray sky; he shakes his jowls and returns to his grazing. I slip out the door and sneak around the corner of the cabin. When they hear me coming they look up, crouch slightly, then bolt, their hooves thundering down the mountainside. My blood races. Their musk hangs heavy in the air."

As you can probably tell this book produced a lot of fond memories for me, bringing a lot of my past forward into the future. Connors even mentions Dave Foreman, the progressive leader of Earth First!. When the FBI busted in his door, arresting him, and many others in his circle I was one of those people trying to decide how many rings of separation I was from having my own chat with the FBI. Connors talks about the devastation of Four-Legged Locusts overgrazing government lands and the negative effects of Aldo Leopold himself leading the charge to eradicate the wolf from New Mexico and Arizona to satisfying the fears of cattleman so proud of their historical heritage; and yet, so craven at the sound of a wolf howl. He gives us an overview of Victorio and his fight to remain free, using the Mexico border effectively, to prolong his ability to continue to be a thorn in the plans of the federal government.

Victorio, an Apache chief intent on not giving in.

We can only hope that fire lookouts will continue to be a refuge for a future generation of writers. Philip Connors feels he may be among the last to get this opportunity. We are in the age of technology eliminating jobs, corporations shipping American jobs overseas, and many of the rest of us being left with soulless jobs;

jobs without dignity. Philip Connors for 240 pages gives you an opportunity to experience a job that it is simply amazing still exists. You too can be **”Caged by glass but caressed by sky.”**

Kimbolimbo says

This was super fascinating. I really truly for-reals want to live in a wilderness lookout for a summer or two. I loved the references to several books/authors/people that I have read over the course of my life and many of which I still need to read. Great read. Does have a few mature topics.

Scottsdale Public Library says

Fire: a tool, a fascination, a hazard…and an important part of natural ecology. With "Fire Season", Philip Connors – journalist and seasonal fire lookout – tackles all of these aspects and more in his narrative version of a season’s lookout-diary in the Gila National Forest of New Mexico. Interwoven with his direct experience are his musings on the history of the area and the nature of America’s national parks and forests, from their inception as rigidly managed resources to the evolving philosophies of wilderness management and use that are still being debated today. Not just one man’s half-romantic half-lonely sojourn on a watch-post, it is an examination of fire as a necessity for healthy wilderness – and of wilderness as a necessity for healthy ecology. Thought-provoking and lyrical. --Hillary D.

Mrtruscott says

I give this a happy 3.75 stars...it was not a perfect book, but a radical change of topic.

As I read it, I realized that I was a strange, bookish teenager, and am weirdly well-schooled in the world of fire-watching from reading Kerouac et al. on the topic.

Connors is no Kerouac, and, to his credit, he doesn’t try to be Kerouac. At times he got a bit didactic, but it could be that some of the science/naturalist topics were a lot to take in. He even threw in some Forest Service humor. He had a fairly good balance between the factual info, the nature lover passages, and how he navigated between the isolation of fire-watching and ‘real life.’ There is a back story about how and why he became a fire-watcher, but it’s not in this book.

I don’t want to know when the last of the fire-watch jobs were filled by drones.

I actually live within driving distance of Desolation Peak, where Kerouac spent a couple of months. I see that the trail is rated “difficult,” so... armchair travels for me.

Connie says

In 2002 Philip Connors quit his job as a copy editor at The Wall Street Journal to head to a lookout tower in the Gila Wilderness of New Mexico. His home for the summer was a small cabin, and a lookout tower topped by a 7'x 7' glass room. His job was to call in weather conditions and to scan the mountains for signs of fire. After his day in the tower was done, Connors would take his dog Alice for a long walk before cooking dinner. He often went for weeks without seeing another human, but had plenty of wildlife to keep him company. Connors writes, "If there's a better job anywhere on the planet, I'd like to know what it is."

The author also also writes about the history of the Gila Wilderness. One of the most unfortunate events in Gila history is when the Apaches, led by Victorio, were slaughtered around 1979-1880. He refers back to other writers who worked as lookouts, naturalists, or foresters such as Jack Kerouac, Norman Maclean, Edward Abbey, Gary Snyder, Aldo Leopold, John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and more. He discusses firefighting, including whether the Forest Service should allow forest fires to burn or extinguish them. There is also controversy about the gray wolf, and about cattle grazing on public lands.

The book is an engaging mix of personal experience, fire lore, history, literature, and humor. Best of all, it is written by a man who is still in awe of nature after a decade of summers in the lookout tower.

Jackie says

This is a beautiful book about a rare man with an even rarer summer job--he's one of the last fire spotters in existence. 5 months of the year he leaves civilization behind, drives 40 miles then hikes 5 more (sometimes having to literally crawl through snow on his first trip up in late April) to a lookout tower and a small cabin and millions of acres of trees, desert, and mountains. On a clear day he can see for 200 miles from his posting. Alice, his dog, is generally his only company other than smoke jumpers, the very occasional hardcore hiker, and his astronomically tolerant wife who visits a few times when work and school permit her to. This book is about the beauty of nature and the history of wilderness in America--its changing values, maintenance, political standing, and its amazing beauty. This book is a rant, a love letter, a fairy tale, a plea and a journal that is both funny, deep, thoughtful, angry but always, always baldly truthful. A fantastic and memorable read.

Deb (Readerbuzz) Nance says

Philip Connors left a job at the Wall Street Journal ten years ago to work atop a fire lookout tower in the remote Gila National Forest in western New Mexico. He never looked back. Working in the tower for five months out of the year, scanning the horizon for the first smolder of a fire, and hiking, camping, eating, drinking alone for the most part, is Connors' perfect job.

This book is Connors' story of his day-to-day life during a season in the wilderness lookout.

Rebecca says

A meditation on nature and solitude fit to rival Sara Maitland's *A Book of Silence*, Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and, I imagine (I hate having to sheepishly admit I still haven't read such a classic), Thoreau's *Walden*.

"That thing some people call boredom, in the correct if elusive dosage, can be a form of inoculation against itself. Once you struggle through that swamp of monotony where time bogs down in excruciating ticks from your wristwatch, it becomes possible to break through to a state of equilibrium, to reach a kind of waiting and watching that verges on what I can only call the holy...you need a good stretch of alone to really fall in love with it."

Liz says

When I bought this book, I was excited to read it and hoping for insight into solitude and a different way of life. What I got instead was a steaming pile of self-absorption. Connors seems to fancy himself another Kerouac, going off into the wilderness to drink alone, be manly, and have profound experiences—none of which came through in his writing. There was a lot of hero-worship going on in the book, and I get the impression that Connors wants to see himself added to the list of great wilderness writers.

Unfortunately, Connors's love for solitude is hard to appreciate vicariously, because he focuses too much on how awesome he is. After reading the book, I know how well HE knows the mountains, and how cool it is that HE goes hiking and fishing, and how annoying it is that he has to scrounge for tips as a barkeep for nine months of the year, and how lame people in the regular world are with their less-romantic day-to-day lives. But there was no room for me as a reader to feel that I could connect to his experiences through him. Obviously, all memoirs and travelogues have to focus on the author, because he or she is the one doing cool stuff and writing about it. But an author is at his best when he makes other people feel connected to what he's writing. Connors's wife's description of his activities as "little boy games" wasn't that far off, if we're being honest. I get the impression that he wanted me to read the book, then send him a scout badge and a pat on the back.

The book's various forays into the history of government attempts to preserve/control/use the environment were interesting at times, but tended to go on so long that I found myself asking whether it was over yet.

Krenner1 says

Reported tonight on the national news, a 150,000 acre fire in New Mexico's Gila Forest is not yet under control. After reading this book, I wonder who first spotted the fire; who was in the tower. The author spends summers solo in a fire watch tower in the Gila. This book about that solitude, the beauty of the mountain, and his contentment with both is a slow read. You really have to love the mountains and wildlife to love this book. Which I do, and did. Along with his musings, he veers off into history about the Forest Service, how

strategies for fighting fires have changed, recalls the ephiphanies of Leopold Aldo, and the writing of Jack Kerouac when he did lookout duty in the Northwest. It's a little bit of everything...as the reader you're out there with him in the middle of nowhere with not much to do and no place to be and nothing besides the hummingbirds, flowers, bear, and your own thoughts (both inspired and tortured) as you watch for that first puff of smoke on the horizon.

Will Byrnes says

Philip Connors tried his hand at a number of jobs and did pretty well. But his true love was the outdoors, particularly the remote outdoors. So, when an opportunity presented itself for him to spend half a year in a fire tower in remotest New Mexico, he dropped his reportorial gig at the Wall Street Journal and headed southwest. He knew a fair bit about the outdoors before beginning, from his Minnesota upbringing, and learned even more on the job. He kept on learning as he kept on re-upping for one more season, then another and another, amassing a lifetime's worth of insight, contemplation and appreciation.

Philip Connors – from HarperColllins

In addition to the poetry of his language when writing of the natural world, Connors takes on policy issues as well, looking, for example, into the effect of publicly subsidized cattle grazing on public land, and on the impact of years of uninformed fire suppression-at-all-costs. Some fire is good, indeed is essential for the well-being of some environments. Smokey the Bear need not apply.

Cabin and Fire Tower – from Connors' site

Connors is a gifted story teller and peppers his narrative with welcome side-trips. For those of you who remember Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom, there is a wonderful story here about Marlon Perkins. When Connors tells of retrieving Jack Kerouac's unpublished fire-watcher logs from the New York Public Library, it is like opening Tut's burial site for the first time. There are enough southwest characters here to fill a good sized bar, each with an attached tale.

Railroad Fire – from Connors' site

Fire Season is a work of deep love. Connors brings a poetical sensibility to his descriptions of the natural world he experienced. To be unmoved by his nature prose is to be unmovable. He also offers information and insight into issues relevant not only to our national forest and national parks, but to our land as a whole. Hopefully, *Fire Season* will spark greater interest in our national forests and support for the people who take care of them.

Originally posted - October 2010

==========**EXTRA STUFF**

Fire Season was named the best 2011 Nature book by Amazon

The author’s web site is definitely worth a look.

A short promo vid for the book, of Connors in the field, on Youtube.

An NPR story about Connors and the book, text and audio. It includes a wonderful, brief interview with the author. The Joys Of Life In A Lookout Tower In 'Fire Season'

Kerrie says

The fire tower lookout (aka "the freaks on the peaks", as they are called by the Forest Service) is a dying breed and Philip Connors gives us a tantalizing glimpse into that isolated existence - which only last 3-4 months, but can feel like a year of misery depending on the hardiness of the person. This is a life that he embraces, considering he has done it for 8 seasons, and his descriptions of the joy of solitude, the contentment of watching and listening to the mountains, experiencing all the nature around him with all of his senses was very vivid. I've read some reviews where people took issue with his "tone" - condescension of those who quickly realize that a fire lookout life is not for them, that they crave the social atmosphere and fear being alone and in the dark. I can see some of that tone, but he also points out his own weaknesses, when he's craving a return to civilization for even just a couple days after a 10-day stint on a mountaintop in one of the most remote parts of the Gila with only the occasional hiker passing through for social contact.

This book wasn't all about him, however. I really enjoyed the tangents he took into the history of the failed fire policy of the Forest Service and how nearly a century's worth of suppressing every fire is now the culprit for the explosive conflagrations that we're seeing all over the West. I previously had only the briefest understanding of it, but it's a topic that I will be reading up on and exploring more.

He also takes many opportunities to opine about the current range policy (a prisoner to "tradition") and how cattle and ranching has also led to the disintegrated state of the ecology of the West which doesn't help the land deal with wildfires like they would have in a more untouched and undeveloped condition. If you're on the side of the ranchers, or think that the New Mexican wolf should be eradicated because they do what predators do and attack cattle, then I can see how this book would come across as excessively preachy. But to me he was singing to the choir so it didn't bother me at all.

I'm knocking this down a star because I thought the tangent to 9/11 was unnecessary. He brought it in when talking about the closest he's been to fire and smoke, but what does the incinerated dust of collapsed skyscrapers have in common with the crown fires of ponderosa pine? I'm tired of every book written by someone who happened to be in NYC that day having it shoehorned into the narrative. It comes across to me as an obvious emotional ploy, and it falls short every single time.

But overall, I thoroughly enjoyed it and thought there was a pleasant balance between the history of the Forest Service, Aldo Leopold's transformation from Forest Service utilitarianism to wilderness advocate, fire policy, previous famous fire lookouts like Kerouac, Victorio's raids, and his own personal story of self-enforced solitude in what has to be one of the most beautiful places on Earth, the Gila of southern New Mexico.

Paul says

A beautifully written memoir of Connors time in the American wilderness as a lookout for fires.

It is tinged with melancholy, because of the tragedy of his brothers suicide, but this is the place that he feels most alive in.
He writes of the wildlife that he sees, the majesty of the views and the terror and power of the amazing electrical storms.

He has a way of writing that makes you feel like you are breathing the same air, looking from the same tower, watching the same wildlife.
