

AJEM BOOK REVIEW

Great Australian Bushfire Stories by Ian Mannix

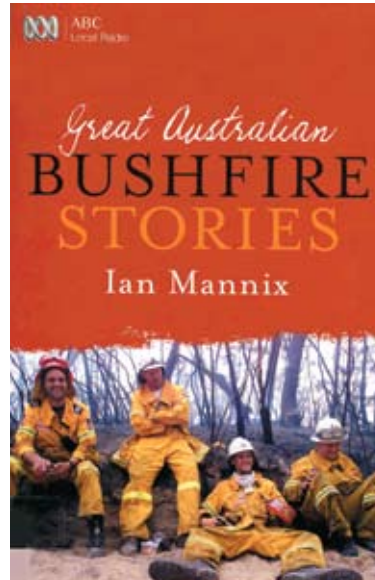
Reviewer: Alastair Wilson, Public Affairs, Emergency Management Australia, Attorney-General's Department.

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Someone said to me that I was either weird or obsessed to be reading a book about bushfire stories at the very time bushfires were raging across several states of Australia.

The reality is that in reading Ian Mannix's collection of 13 very personal stories was a seriously sobering experience. And having since driven through some of the Victorian communities worst affected in the February 2009 Black Saturday fires I now find that these stories give a strange yet wonderful sense of hope and strong belief in the resilience and courage that Australians have been renowned for over the past two centuries.

It is clear that Ian's substantial expertise as a journalist has come to the fore in writing this collection, not just because the stories are eminently readable but because he has been able to engender in those who tell of their experiences, a sense of quiet trust. Australians, especially those from the bush, don't brag of such exploits as you will read in this book. The quiet determination to face nature's worst, at times of unimaginable life threatening terror, will give a sense of inspiration to anyone interested in understanding what makes the human spirit rise to such occasions.



The various issues of preparation for bushfires, whether for the individual or a whole town; understanding what happens on a fire-ground with regard to the sheer intensity of this natural phenomenon; the stay-and-fight versus the leave-early viewpoint; and how fire warnings are regarded; are all traversed in one way or another through the voices of those who have been through this ordeal.

There are stories from the Canberra suburbs shocked by the bushfires of 2003, as well as from the forest towns outside the Capital; from farmers near the tip of the Eyre Peninsula who fought extraordinary fires in January of 2005; from those who made it through the early summer arsonist lit fires of 2006 in Gippsland and from the Alpine country of Victoria in the same month; then to threatened families in bad fire country southwest of Ballarat earlier in 2006; all stories of fear, passionate determination, and

heartbreak. Fires that forced people into the sea on Tasmania's east coast; and ones that tore through the beautiful trees of the Ku-ring-gai Chase on Sydney's northern outskirts in January of 2007; and New Year's Day 2003 in Brisbane Waters north of Sydney known by the understated name of Burning Sunday.

The author rightly gives great credit to the metro, rural and country fire service personnel – especially the volunteer fire fighters – of the several states spanned by these stories, as well as to the professional advisers he has consulted, and to the ABC's Local Radio people who throughout the worst of these terrible ordeals kept residents connected to their supportive communities.

To quote Ian Mannix in his Introduction: "The communities and individuals in this book have all learned from their confrontation with the 'red steer'. By allowing us to see their personal responses to Australia's summer menace, they have allowed us to understand better how to protect ourselves, our families and our communities." Ian was not to know the catastrophic impact of the worst-ever bushfires in recent history in this country that tore through the Victorian hill country in February this year. However we can be certain that when the stories of 2009 are told, the courage and grit, fear, sorrow and relief will again feature as we see Australians stare disaster in the face.