

STAF Spotlight: Scanning for Smoke

MFA Fiction student Charlotte Gross is writing from a California fire tower

Friday, September 18, 2020

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CHARLOTTE GROSS ON WOLF MOUNTAIN'S FIRE LOOKOUT TOWER

I'm perched in Banner Mt. Lookout sixty feet above the ground. Five miles to the west, the Jones Fire tears through brush and timber. Smoke billows up thick and white, then a bruised purple-brown as it drifts south over the ridges to Grass Valley. Wind shakes the tower. I feel helpless. There's not much a

lookout can do once a fire is burning. Everyone knows where it is. Scanning, constantly scanning with binoculars, I can at least watch for spots— new plumes of smoke indicating sparks have jumped beyond existing fire lines.

No silence on the radio. Dispatch, air tack, incident command, dozer and engine crews all talk at once. I remind myself to circle the catwalk in case a new fire has sprung up behind me. But the hills lie wrapped in haze. Impossible to find new smokes.

The Jones Fire plume thickens and darkens. Tongues of flame lick above the ridgelines, vermillion against dark trees. Fire is running up the drainages, threatening structures. Incident command says it'll reach them in thirty minutes.

I put down binoculars to sip water. When I raise them, I see a spot. A spark has jumped Highway 49. I dash inside the tower to the Osborn Firefinder: technology older than the ninety-year-old tower. I swivel the scope in the general direction of the tiny plume. Raising and lowering binoculars, I catch it in the crosshairs. 275 degrees for the azimuth. Approximately five miles. Just east of the highway. I'm about to call it in on the radio when I hear incident command, "Spot east of Highway 49. Homeowner just knocked it down with a hose."

Relieved, but disappointed, I trade radio for binoculars. Circle the catwalk again, scanning for new smoke.



VIEW FROM THE BANNER

MOUNTAIN FIRE LOOKOUT

While [MFA Writing](#) student Charlotte Gross's degree will be in the fiction genre, her above anecdote of the Jones Fire—which occurred in mid-August, covering about seven hundred acres of land—is based in her current reality. She has been spending the past few months in the Sierra Foothills as a lookout in three different fire towers.

Back in the spring, Gross had proposed coming to California to work in fire towers as research for her thesis, which is a collection of short stories centered on women in the outdoors. Her proposal earned her a [Summer Teaching Assistant Fellowship](#) (STAF), an award given by the UNH graduate school to students who have served as teaching assistants and have performed exceptionally well both as TA's and students.

Little did she know, her research would put her on the front lines of one of the most catastrophic fire seasons to date.

Gross's interests have long been in the world of wild fires, especially fire tower lookouts, which carry a long tradition in the literary realm. Writers such as Jack Kerouac, Edward Abbey, and Gary Snyder have all written in fire towers from the life of a lookout. Gross, however, wanted to carry on this tradition from a less traditional point of view—a feminine perspective.

“I think that to really be able to write about fire towers, which have such a particular culture and language, I need to do this work myself,” Gross says. “If you’re going to be writing from the real, you should be doing what you can to live in it to some degree.”



FIRE TOWER AT MOUNT HOWELL

For Gross, fiction writing and reading is primarily a practice of empathy. As opposed to nonfiction, she finds that fiction offers a more experimental (and potentially radical) space for empathizing because the character only exists in the world of their story.

“When you read a story, you can really enter into some very different worlds and perspectives, and feel with and for the character you’re reading about,” she says. “Whether that’s including women in the outdoor world or rethinking race, looking at fictional stories can help us to re-see what we’re dealing with in our lives right now.”

Gross is continuing as a fire tower lookout while working on her thesis. She plans to graduate this December.

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