


7-20-2015

Who by Fire by Fred Stenson

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Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Scriver, Mary H.. "Who by Fire by Fred Stenson." *The Goose*, vol. 14 , no. 1 , article 7, 2015,
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol14/iss1/7>.

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Who by Fire by FRED STENSON
Doubleday Canada, 2014 \$32.95

Reviewed by MARY SCRIVER

Ten thousand years ago, human beings turned from hunting/gathering to agriculture. They quickly became powerful enough to invade North America and destroy the hunters and gatherers there, though some of those were also farmers. With metal, horses, special seeds, and smallpox, the Europeans quickly settled across the high prairie and began to raise their families. But 200 years ago, some of the same people discovered fossil fuels and invented the Industrial Revolution.

In the beginning, the high prairie saw only railroads and welcomed them as marketing tools for their bonanza of small grains (in a lucky year). But fossil fuels were pooled beneath the farmland and soon began to change the terms of ownership. Since then, we've gone on to build mighty dams, to mine radioactive ore, and to industrialize the wind, all to assure power for machines but taking a toll on the land.

Who by Fire by Fred Stenson is a clear, vivid account of two generations of a high prairie rural family whose lives were controlled and sometimes snuffed by high sulphur oil wells that released not just fuel but also a form of hydrogen that was poisonous, corrosive, and explosive. It turned lungs to wood, ate the iron out of barbed wire and farm machinery, destroyed the stainless steel tubes that were supposed to contain it, and, when uncontained, exploded like a bomb. You can find all this online or in old newspapers.

Fred Stenson grew up in Southern Alberta, so part of the story was lived by his own family and neighbours. Still, when I go to Cut Bank or Shelby shopping, I get whiffs

of sulphur. The worst damage was early, before people really understood what was going on. The "industrial" enterprises are so technical that only trained engineers can understand, and that's the inclined plane the core story follows: a physically suffering boy who becomes an emotionally suffering engineer because he doesn't understand that the trauma of ordinary farm folks trying to reconcile the destructive changes in their existence have also tied his psyche into knots. Engineers aren't good at emotional dynamics.

Because this story covers two generations—one nearly smashed and one slowly crawling back—it's not a simple muck-raking novel, though as the characters work their way through the facts, we also learn a lot. It doesn't plunge us into the abyss of despair but leads us along the faithfulness and constant effort of ordinary people to some kind of new balance. Eventually the machinery that is supposed to remove the stench and danger begins to work better, maybe even well enough to live with, though it's clear that major corporations have bought out politicians, regulators, and even newspapers so citizens are forced into constant vigilance and monitoring. Thank goodness for the Internet and for the gathering strength of the Indigenous Peoples.

To the north are the Tar Sands, and in the northeast corner of Montana is the Bakken formation. They, too, began as though they were gold strikes, soon becoming grinding miserable places that pushed out the previous quiet lives, and then started to suck up money to control murder, "accidental" deaths, illness, and a growing under-culture with global connections.

Billy's love of pure physics is recognized as poetry by a short inter-chapter in which his father shows the child how to

put a thread on a rod so it creates a bolt that will take a nut. But he becomes a compulsive gambler and a drunk—like a lot of other people. It's plain that no matter how clever the strategies of local people, when they are up against international corporations, they are basically pulling the lever on a one-armed bandit. But the universe marches on and the CEO gamblers also sometimes lose. Given enough time, they cannot win because all natural commodities are finite and the values of the larger culture grow and change. We didn't know about the greenhouse effect then.

Fred doesn't touch on the depletion of the next commodity: grain itself. The prairie topsoil revealed by the first European generation's metal-prowed plows has now grown into an industry as powerful and unrelenting as oil-cracking plants with machines to match. The biological substrate of roots and other biota is thinning as much as the small animal and insect life that once inhabited it. Educating the city slickers about what happens when there is no grain won't be as easy away from the Ukrainian farmers on the prairie who lost ancestors to Stalin's economically imposed grain famine.

Billy's parents fight hard to save their marriage and family, and though they endure a lot of damage, they manage to hang on. In fact, Billy and his two sisters remain attached enough to that imperiled old homestead to return to it at retirement age, scarred but feisty. I particularly enjoyed the chapter in which one of Bill's "big sisters" decides to

wake him up. She has a smart mouth and clear understanding of what goes on.

Two letters are key to the plot. One is a sort of gesture towards an impossible love that becomes a potential lever that could win a major lawsuit. The other, by the same person, becomes the key that unlocks frozen Bill enough for him to accept help. Throughout, there are people who wish him well and try to help him in spite of his resistance and the "stink" on him that he can't seem to crack. This book will not leave you despairing.

But it will make you wary and it ought to. It's meant to. The writing is clear and apt enough to be understood and appreciated by the people who live in this country, leaning against a hard cold wind, walking with their dogs, talking in their heads to people who are no longer living. This is not a book for city dwellers, no matter what Western phenomena they wish to hug. It's meant to help locals dig in their heels and fight.

MARY SCRIVER is retired and living on the east slope of the Rockies in Montana, in sight of the Canadian border, with historical family ties across Canada. She came to this place in 1961, and she has sometimes left physically, though never emotionally. Her biography of Bob Scriver, *Bronze Inside and Out*, was published by the University of Calgary Press. She is an ordained Unitarian minister whose book of prairie sermons, *Sweetgrass and Cottonwood Smoke* was published by the Edmonton Unitarian Church.