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Fire, Myth and Mankind - An Experiment in Education

Lauren Fins¹, Michael Nitz², Bill Loftus³, Rob Caisley⁴ and Nancy Lee-Painter⁶

This freshman course is designed to explore our complex and intimate relationships with fire as a cultural symbol. The image of fire as both a creator and destroyer of worlds is deeply rooted in the mythos of almost every culture. It is the stuff of ancient legend and distant myth, and as modern as the yellow kevlar-cloaked heroes who march into the burning hills with Pulaskis over their shoulders. Frequent, often intense wildfires are a natural part of the American northwestern landscape and play a critical role in sustaining and rejuvenating its tall forests. Yet our traditional view of these fire events is one of devastation and destruction and our approach to management has been to eliminate or suppress forest fires no matter where they occur. Media coverage of the 1988 fires in Yellowstone National Park, while initially inflammatory, began to recognize the controversial nature of traditional fire-suppression policies and have been documenting the historical role of fire in northwestern forest ecosystems. This course provides a framework for understanding the importance of fire in forest ecosystems, and the power of journalism and theatre to use language, stories and visual images to create myth, persuade an audience and forge social change. Instructors engage students in a variety of learning experiences from the more traditional educational methods of lectures and exams to the more experiential methods used in communications and theatrical presentations. The latter include: self-discovery (students examine their own belief system and personal experience about fire), other-discovery (students interact with and interview firefighters, actors, journalists), and integration/communication (students demonstrate the power of language and storytelling through written, oral, and performance-based work). Ultimately students develop an understanding of the technical, cultural, and social complexities of our views of forests and wildfires, the importance of media in shaping public awareness and perceptions, and the possibilities of theatrical presentation to reach audiences on an emotional as well as an intellectual level. The paper will provide examples of the successes and failures of this unique class.

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