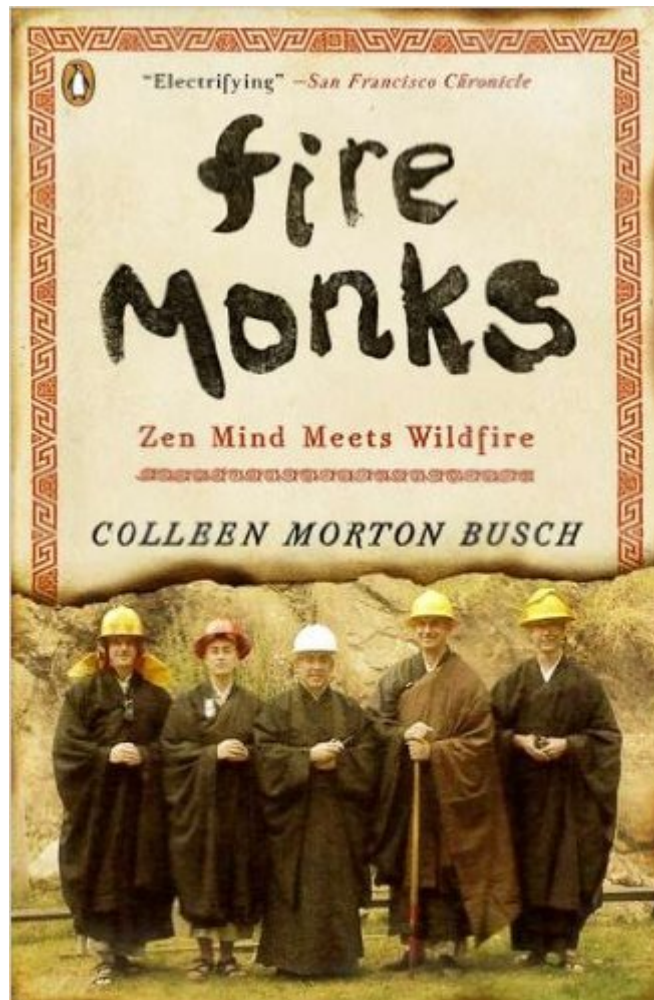


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Fire Monks: Zen Mind Meets Wildfire



Synopsis

A San Francisco Chronicle Best Book of the Year
A Publishers Weekly Best Book of the Year
In June 2008 more than two thousand wildfires, all started by a single lightning storm, blazed across the state of California. Tassajara, the oldest Zen Buddhist monastery in the United States, was at particular risk. Set deep in the Ventana wilderness north of Big Sur, the center is connected to the outside world by a single unpaved road. If fire entered the canyon, there would be no way out. Disaster struck during the summer months, when Tassajara opens its doors to visitors, and the grounds fill with guests expecting a restful respite. Instead, the mountain air filled with smoke, and monks broke from regular meditation to conduct fire drills. All visitors were evacuated, and many Zen students followed. A small crew of residents and firefighters remained, preparing to defend Tassajara. But nothing could have prepared them for what came next. When a treacherous shift in weather conditions brought danger nearer still, firefighters made the flash decision to completely evacuate the monastery. As the firefighters and remaining residents caravanned out the long road to Tassajara, five monks turned back, risking their lives to save the monastery. *Fire Monks* is their story. A gripping narrative as well as an insider's portrait of the Zen path, *Fire Monks* reveals what it means to meet an emergency with presence of mind. In tracking the four men and one woman who returned "all novices in fire but experts in readiness" we witness them take their unique experiences facing the fires in their own lives and apply that wisdom to the crisis at hand. Relying on their Zen training, the monks accomplished the seemingly impossible "greeting the fire not as an enemy to defeat, but as a friend to guide." *Fire Monks* pivots on the kind of moment some seek and some run from, when life and death hang in simultaneous view. Drawing on the strength of community, the practice of paying attention, and the power of an open, flexible mind, the Tassajara monks were able to remain in the moment and act with startling speed and clarity. In studying an event marked by great danger and uncertainty, *Fire Monks* reveals the bravery that lives within every heart.

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Customer Reviews

"Fire Monks: Zen Mind Meets Wildfire at the Gates of Tassajara" by Colleen Morison Busch is the non-fiction account of the 2008 California fire which almost destroyed the Tassajara Zen Mountain Center. The story is told from the perspective of those who stayed behind to protect Tassajara. A massive wildfire has surrounded Tassajara Mountain. So massive that even the fire crews have decided that it would be wiser not to fight it. Five monks stayed behind to try and save Tassajara. They risked life and limb to stand in the way of the immense wildfire which surrounded them and became an inter-national sensation. "Fire Monks: Zen Mind Meets Wildfire at the Gates of Tassajara" by Colleen Morison is not only a gripping narrative of the 2008 wildfire events, but also how Zen allows people to meet such colossal crisis with a focused mind. The Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, near Big Sur in California, is well known in the Zen community. The center is not only famous for meditation and training, but also for their bread baking and vegetarian cookbooks. The 2008 fire, started by lightning, consumed more than 240,000 acres. While the small group of defenders in Tassajara watched for three nerve-racking weeks while the fire consumed everything in its path towards them. Watching the weather carefully before the order to evacuate came, five senior members of Tassajara decided to stay behind. The book is not only the story of the fire, but also the history of Tassajara, introduction to Buddhism, and tracking of the destruction the fire cause on its path. I used to be a volunteer fire fighter for about four years.

I'm a Buddhist, an avid long trail backpacker, I've lived almost all my life in the western US and I've read a lot of books about wildfire. Zen Mind, Beginner Mind is probably the most important book I've

ever read in my life and a friend of mine use to be the Tenzo at Tassajasa. So naturally I was primed to like this book after a friend of mine who does fire mgt for the USFS here in CA was reading it. I was soo disappointed. The author has an ill-informed agenda and it's clear that she ins't going to let the facts get in the way.1) The author missed a great opportunity to discuss the complex issues of fire in the west from a place of "don't know mind." She admits that the landscape at the site is made to burn but fails to go anywhere with that fact. Instead she rants about the USFS not wanting to protect buildings and on a RED FLAG day. Meanwhile she spends a lot of time chattering away about what's for breakfast. Fire is a key part of this western landscape that we have removed. As a result we are creating a time bomb. Tassajara is physically sitting right in the middle of this dilemma...let's talk about that.2) There is a sense of glorification about the monks walking back into the site on a RED FLAG day. Let's talk about attachment! The place could easily have blown-up (and with a little more wind probably would have) on that day and they just got lucky...no zen super hero stuff pa-IEAzzze. It was a very stupid thing to do and any attempt to remotely suggest that it was in anyway honorable lacks understanding about what could have happened. Tassajara will be threatened by fire again...is there now a precedent for a core group to stay behind should another RED FLAG day occur? It's like surfing a category 5 hurricane.

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