

Writing *Fire Weather* took a toll on author John Vaillant: ‘It turned my hair grey, for one thing’

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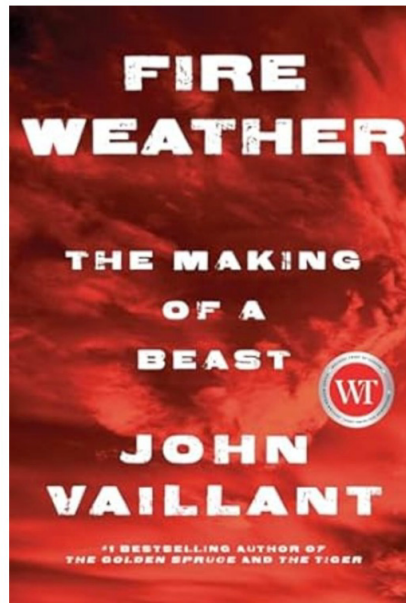
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Writer and journalist John Vaillant’s fourth book, *Fire Weather: A True Story from a Hotter World*, explores humanity’s changing relationship with fire – particularly in the wake of the devastating 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire – from evolutionary touchstone to a preview of climate disasters to come. He spoke with The Globe and Mail about the book.

Fire Weather recounts the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire. Why did you choose to tell this story?

This terrible summer has been vindicating in kind of a grim way. Today, 2016, which feels so recent but in 21st-century wildfire history is a long time ago, seems almost like a quaint time. Paradise, California, hadn’t happened yet. The Redding, California, fire tornado hadn’t happened yet. Lahaina hadn’t happened yet. Australia hadn’t burned the way it did. The northwest coast hadn’t burned. Canada hadn’t burned. And this is just seven years ago that I started working on this book.



HANDOUT

That fire was so colossal and so outsized that it obviously caught everybody’s attention, but how it caught mine was I was thinking that if fire can do that there, in one of the wettest biomes on the planet, the boreal forest, to a city as wealthy and well-equipped and fire-aware as Fort McMurray, then it can

happen anywhere. And that's what we've been seeing for the past seven years – fires like that happening everywhere.

We're wrapping up the worst wildfire season in Canada's history, and likely the warmest year on record. Your book is about a particular fire, but what does it tell us about climate-change wildfires more generally?

Fort McMurray was a bellwether, and it was an indicator and a kind of compressed example of many of the issues, threats, horrors and manifestations of 21st-century climate change that we're going to be experiencing for the rest of this century, for the rest of our lives. So, it behooves us to become well acquainted with these characteristics and qualities of 21st-century fire, as I call it, because we're going to be seeing a lot of it. And Canada is unfortunately going to be in the middle of that.

Last summer was an aberrant summer, only because we haven't had one like it. But 10 years from now, it won't look like an aberration any more. We may have a wetter, cooler summer next year, and I really hope so, but the curve is only going one way, and it's going toward hotter, drier, more flammable summers, especially for Canada. So, we're entering a new regime where fire behaves differently. And what that does is it changes what everything else means. It changes what security means. It changes what home means. It changes what homeland means. So, this new climate – driven, enhanced, exacerbated by relentless fossil-fuel burning over the past 200 years – has forced us into an existential reckoning.

Your book is resonating with people. It's a No. 1 bestseller. It's up for several awards. It's extraordinary. But lots of great books go nowhere. Why did Fire Weather become such a success at a time when the non-fiction market is extremely competitive?

I think Fire Weather is resonating for a couple of reasons. One is obvious. You can look at the cover, you can look at almost any page in the book, and then you can look at the newspaper or look into your own local sky and see evidence of "Oh, this is really happening. This isn't some abstract thing that's happening in Australia or California. This is happening right here where I live." And it doesn't matter if you're in Ottawa or in Tofino, you can relate to it.

And another thing about it, a quality that I'm really proud of and deeply grateful for, are the people who inhabit the book. I feel like I violated one rule of

non-fiction where there isn't a through-line character. Many reviewers have noted, fire is the main character, but the people who interact with it, whether they're firefighters or ordinary civilians or scientists, were so generous with me and so forthcoming that they really bring the book to life. I think readers are relating to them. They're standing in for us, they're taking the hit for us.

Do non-fiction writers have a public-interest duty to tell stories that raise consciousness, that raise the alarm?

The sense-of-duty question is a tricky one, because if an editor had called me and said, "John, this fire thing looks pretty serious, maybe you can write us a book about it?" I think I'd almost say no on principle. I think for good writing to happen, fiction or non-fiction, you have to be viscerally, emotionally moved and invested. There has to be something about the topic that resonates deeply for you. And I'm talking even at a historical and psychological level, and I do a little bit of self-analysis as I write – not too much, you don't want to sort of chase the muses away – but I think I've had some past experiences with fire that raised my consciousness. Especially after talking to the people in Fort McMurray, I felt so deeply for them and about them that became its own kind of motivation.

That work takes a toll, right? Especially when you're writing about something like extreme weather and climate change. It's extraordinarily difficult. It can be a grief-ridden undertaking. How did writing about that affect you and how did you manage that?

It took a huge toll on me. It turned my hair grey, for one thing. It ruined my sleep, and I really felt I was sort of getting up every day to stare into this furnace. And, so, on a daily basis, I was getting my eyebrows burned off, metaphorically speaking. And walking the ground in Redding, California, shortly after the fire tornado touched down there, the destruction and the death there was so profound and so violent that I'll never get over it. Likewise, I felt that way being up in Fort McMurray and walking around these ruins and then standing with people next to the hole where their house used to be and they had feelings. I saw a lot of grown men cry, and I cried myself.

It's terribly, terribly sad to see the things that we depend on most, that we trust the most, our homes and our neighbourhoods, undermined in such a violent and violating way. And we think of Canada as this calm, gentle, orderly place and fire is disorder made manifest.

Can writing about climate change help push people beyond despair and serve as a catalyzing agent – an agent of action, of hope, even?

Absolutely. I couldn't have written this book if I was in despair. I feel fear and I feel genuinely worried about what's coming, but at the same time, I also find it really galvanizing. To me, the act of writing is its own act of defiance, and writing this book in particular is a defiance against this moment that we find ourselves in, which is still petroleum-driven and can't be.

A couple of things that really excite me are one: Almost every place except Canada and maybe Russia is going through a dramatic energy transition. It's a very exciting time. And when you look at the stats coming out of Australia or the U.K. or Germany or Texas, the megawatts being generated and added to the energy grid from renewable sources are staggering and just they're going up. So, we're entering this extraordinary new phase of renewable energy.

The other thing that excites and galvanizes me about the state of the environment right now is nature is forcing us to put down our phones and get out of our cars and reacquaint ourselves with its incredible energy.

I think this summer it felt like the default mode of the Canadian forest was to burn, but ultimately the default mode of nature is to grow and to flourish and to be abundant. That's this incredible gift that we get as inhabitants of planet Earth. And now I feel like the Earth is slapping the phone out of our hand and saying, "Hey, I'm here and if you disconnect yourselves for me through your centrally heated, petroleum-driven lifestyle, I'm going to react to that." And nature is reacting to this fire-driven civilization that we've been experimenting with for the past 150 years and is going to keep telling us in ever more emphatic ways that we need to shift our focus and return to being collaborators with the planet rather than simply exploiters and users.

We tried the experiment of a petroleum-driven society and the results are in. I would say on one level the experiment succeeded in terms of generating incredible wealth and mobility, but only for the short term. It ultimately failed in that it's undermining every single system that we depend on for life and real prosperity, which is a healthy ecosystem that provides food and water in a regular and predictable way. We've undermined that now, but I don't think we've undermined it in an irredeemable way.

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