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## Reading Group Guide for WILDFIRE

*A Novel*

By Mary Pauline Lowry

“The Hotshots’ world is exotic and specialized and the entry Lowry offers is stunning and rare... Here is an original and special voice.”

—**Anthony Swofford**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Jarhead*

“Mary Lowry’s *Wildfire* is absolutely riveting. A vivid, evocative, and emotionally complex journey through a dangerous and beautiful world.”

—**Lou Berney**, Pushcart Prize-winning author of *Gutshot Straight* and *The Road to Bobby Joe and Other Stories*

“*Wildfire* is the funniest, saddest, most harrowing, most exuberant novel I’ve read in years.”

—**Stephen Harrigan**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Gates of the Alamo*

*Wildfire* tells the gripping story of a young woman’s quest for self-worth and belonging as a “hotshot”—the West’s fiercest firefighter. A novelist, screenwriter, and former wildland firefighter, Mary Pauline Lowry draws on her real-life experience to capture the grueling work, grave dangers, and ongoing challenges—physical, emotional, and gender-related—her heroine Julie faces as the lone female rookie on the elite twenty-member Pike National Forest hotshot crew.

An orphan with a pyromania flirtation in her past and a secret eating disorder, Julie struggles to prove herself, fit in, and find her own sense of purpose and peace while chasing down raging blazes from Colorado to southern California. Reflecting the everyday facts of hotshotting—from the standard-issue gear (including a silver fire shelter) to the peculiar mix of camaraderie and loneliness, to the daunting odds against survival and routine risk of being burned to death—*Wildfire* is a fascinating, gritty, and powerfully affecting novel.

### **About the Author**

**Mary Pauline Lowry** joined the Pike Interagency Hotshot Crew fresh out of Colorado College. After two years of fighting forest fires as the female minority, she left to pursue another burning passion: writing. She received an MA in English, with a concentration on creative writing, from the University of Texas at Austin. For several years, she balanced writing with her mission to end violence against women. Starting as a counselor at the Southwest Safehouse in Durango, Colorado, she later worked as a bilingual advocate on the National Domestic Violence Hotline and as a public policy analyst for the Texas Council on Family Violence. Mary has also worked as an open-water lifeguard and on a construction crew. She currently writes about women’s issues for the *Huffington Post* and *xoJane*. She lives in Orange County, California.

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The following questions are designed to spark a lively, thoughtful discussion of *Wildfire*. We hope your reading group enjoys the adventure of stepping inside the hotshots' world!

1. In Chapter One, we meet Julie at a gas station, asking for directions to the Pike Fire Center. What was your first impression of her? How did Julie's experience of getting lost and duped foreshadow the challenges on her rocky road to acceptance as a hotshot?
2. Written in the first person, *Wildfire* is Julie's story, told from Julie's perspective. If the novel were written in the third person, would it have made you less sympathetic towards its protagonist? Would it have changed your view of the forbidding hotshots' world?
3. What was your emotional reaction to Julie's memories of playing with fire at age twelve, after her parents' death?
4. When did you realize the severity of Julie's eating disorder? How did being afflicted with bulimia shape Julie as a character? How did it affect your feelings about her?
5. *Wildfire* centers on Julie's quest for belonging. Why do you think this young woman, raised by her prim grandmother, feels "at home" on the tough male-dominated turf of wildland firefighters?
6. Do you think Julie signed on to be a hotshot simply as an act of rebellion against Frosty? Or was her motivation driven by something deeper and more complicated?
7. How would you react if your daughter, granddaughter, or niece decided to become a forest firefighter?
8. Discuss Julie's conflicted relationship with her grandmother. Did you view Frosty as a resentful or a reluctant guardian? What was your initial reaction to Julie's bitter recollection of Frosty comparing her to her father? How did differences in personality and temperament widen the gulf between Julie and her grandmother?
9. Throughout *Wildfire*, Julie battles to not only prove her strength and stamina as a rookie, but also to overcome being dismissed purely on the basis of her gender. Are men who routinely brave grave dangers on the job—whether fighting fires, crime, or enemies in combat—justified for putting more pressure on female colleagues to prove their worth?
10. In the course of the novel, another woman takes up residence at the Pike Fire Center. Discuss Julie's reaction to sharing her female-minority status with Bliss.
11. How did winning the nut roll eating contest mark a significant turning point in Julie's development?

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12. Discuss Julie's relationship with Sam compared to Julie's relationship with Archie. Did you see both men as father figures for Julie? Were you surprised when one of those relationships took a romantic turn?
13. Julie feels an intimate bond with Archie after witnessing him narrowly escaping being crushed to death by a falling tree. Have you ever experienced a life-threatening disaster with an acquaintance or stranger? If so, did the experience bring you closer together?
14. Loss is a major theme in the novel. What most struck or impressed you about how Julie handled the tragic loss of Archie?
15. *Wildfire* captures the unique camaraderie within a hotshot crew. Do you agree with Sam's assessment that friendship beats romantic love?
16. *Wildfire* has been optioned for a major motion picture, currently in development, with a script written by Mary Pauline Lowry. If you could cast the movie, who would you choose to play Julie?

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