



**GUNFLINT**

**BURNING**

**FIRE IN THE**

**BOUNDARY WATERS**

**CARY J. GRIFFITH**

**AUTHOR OF *LOST IN THE WILD***

## A BOOK DISCUSSION GUIDE

for *Gunflint Burning: Fire in the Boundary Waters*

by Cary J. Griffith

### PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

“In *Gunflint Burning*, Cary Griffith has penned the consummate story of one of the great wildfire disasters in the history of Minnesota. Expertly reported and cleverly written, this account of the Ham Lake fire of 2007 reads like a thriller and an environmental treatise all in one. This is no coincidence, given Griffith’s bona fides. *Gunflint Burning* is one of those rare books for just about anyone.”

—PETER GEYE, author of *Wintering*

“Cary J. Griffith invites his readers beneath the smoke and flames of a running crown wildfire to show us the massive coordinated response to one camper’s carelessness. His precise research and his clearheaded storytelling serve admirably to underscore the skill, selfless dedication, and love of place and community that sustained foresters, firefighters, outfitters, pilots, food suppliers, and residents through a truly heroic struggle.”

—CHERI REGISTER, author of *The Big Marsh: The Story of a Lost Landscape*

“Skillfully wielding his narrative talent, Cary J. Griffith leads readers into the blistering heart of the 2007 Ham Lake fire, one of the most destructive in Minnesota history.”

—PETER M. LESCHAK, author of *Ghosts of the Fireground* and *Letters from Side Lake*

“*Gunflint Burning* brings the adrenaline, the falling ash, the smell of smoke, and the jarring scream of a crown fire to its detailed narrative of a wildfire in one of America’s best-loved wilderness areas. Cary J. Griffith carries the reader over portages, across lakes, and through burning cabins to show how wildfire increasingly burns through our lives.”

—ROCKY BARKER, author of *Scorched Earth: How the Fires of Yellowstone Changed America*

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

On May 5, 2007, two days into his twenty-seventh trip to the Boundary Waters, Stephen Posniak found a perfect spot on Ham Lake and set about making a campfire. Over the next two weeks, the fire he set would consume 75,000 acres of forest and 144 buildings. More than one thousand firefighters would rally to extinguish the blaze, at a cost of 11 million dollars.

*Gunflint Burning* is a comprehensive account of the dramatic events around the Ham Lake fire, one of the largest wildfires in Minnesota history. Cary J. Griffith describes what happened in the minutes, hours, and days after Posniak struck that fateful match—from the first hint of danger to the ensuing race to flee the fire or defend imperiled property to the incredible efforts of firefighters and residents battling a blaze that lit up the Gunflint Trail like the fuse to a powder keg.

We meet locals faced with losing everything; the sheriff and his deputy tasked with getting everyone out alive; tourists caught unawares; men and women using every piece of equipment and modern firefighting technique against impossibly high winds and dry conditions to suppress a wildfire as it grew to historic proportions; and, finally, Stephen Posniak, who in the aftermath tragically took his own life—the fire's only fatality.

In sharp detail, *Gunflint Burning* describes the key events of the Ham Lake fire as they unfold, providing readers with a sense of being on the front lines of an epic struggle that was at times heroic, tragic, and sublime.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**CARY J. GRIFFITH** is the author of four books, including *Lost in the Wild: Danger and Survival in the North Woods*; *Opening Goliath*, winner of the 2010 Minnesota Book Award; *Wolves*, winner of a Midwest Book Award; and *Savage Minnesota*, which was published serially in the *Star Tribune*. He lives in Rosemount, Minnesota.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Returning to the Boundary Waters year after year was important to Stephen Posniak. Can you relate to the connection to place that he feels so strongly? Where is somewhere that you're connected to, and how did this bond form?
2. While confronting the catastrophe, many people involved experienced a loss of control; the fire was too monumental to restrain in the first few days. Posniak struggled to put out the growing flames. Bob Monehan remained at the mercy of the fire in his house. Firefighters couldn't overcome the strength of nature. In which parts of your life do you exhibit a lot of control? No control at all? How do you handle losing control over something you deem extremely important?
3. Its rural location is a large reason why residents near Ham Lake live where they do. Part of this means that resources are far away and difficult to access. Discuss some of the benefits and dangers that come with living in such an isolated area. How could we make it safer? Would these changes compromise the sanctity of the region?
4. Griffith covers in great detail the events leading up to and during the fire, but leaves most of the aftermath for the reader to imagine. How do you think this tight-knit community reacted in the wake of such a devastating loss? How might they have reconstructed what was lost, both physically and emotionally?
5. While the Ham Lake fire was the largest and most destructive fire in Minnesota history at the time, it certainly wasn't the first. Compare this wildfire and the series of events leading up to it with other fires that have occurred both before and since then. What allowed this fire to be so devastating? Could someone have prevented these things from happening, or was nature simply too powerful to stop?
6. The events at Ham Lake took place more than a decade ago. What perspective does reading the story so many years later give us? How would you react differently if you read it in the immediate aftermath of the fire?

7. After the fire at Windigo Lodge the community created a volunteer fire department, which proved to be very helpful in fighting the Ham Lake fire. What lessons can we learn from this fire that could help prevent future fires? Is there more that citizens and government could do to protect the forest from fires?
  
8. Which questions did the story leave you pondering? Was there a specific perspective that you would like to explore further and know more about? If you could ask the author anything, what would it be?
  
9. Many newspapers and journals published accounts of the fire during and after its occurrence. How does Griffith's voice and position in the story differ from other accounts of the Ham Lake fire? What makes it unique?
  
10. Which decisions did the firefighters and community make during the fire that seemed most monumental in stopping the fire? Did they make any mistakes that influenced the outcome of the fire?
  
11. How do the legal and moral perspectives align in this instance? Were the legal charges appropriate consequences for Posniak's actions and mistakes? How might this case and the consequent events affect future forest fire indictments?