Count on Me

A Talk With Fireman/Writer Zac Unger

by Robert Burke

Generally speaking, I don't pay much attention to the "Making of a (fireman, policeman, doctor, or crossing guard; fill in the blank)" genre of memoirs. As a whole, they tend to be testosterone-driven, anecdotal narratives punctuated by dollops of treacle. I became interested in Zac Unger's contribution when I realized that he was a local author and a simple Google search kicked up his previous efforts: a diary for the online magazine *Slate*. While that diary recorded some of the material that would become the nucleus for the book, it also chronicled the story of the birth of his daughter, born three months premature. After following the diary, it occurred to me that Unger might, in his own way, be setting the genre on its head.

Working Fire: The Making of an Accidental Fireman will disabuse its readers of any romantic notions they may have about the nature of the work. For example, the majority of the calls nowadays are in relation to medical- not fire-related emergencies. Fire departments in most large cities today are filling in the cracks left behind by an increasingly fragmented and inefficient health care system. But more importantly, it chronicles the choices we all have to make if and when we decide that if our work is to have meaning, that meaning is found in service to our communities.

Working Fire
The Making of an Accidental Fireman
ZAC UNGER
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Unger didn't come to firefighting—or for that matter, the city of Oakland—as a matter of course. As the only son of a psychiatrist and a social worker, and as a self-described "insufferable disaster-geek bookworm," his neighborhood in Oakland, Rockridge, flows effortlessly into Berkeley and the cultural amenities that come with proximity to a major university. As he writes in *Working Fire*,

> *During my childhood in Oakland, most of the city was off-limits. There was no spoken prohibition; we just never went there. My experience of Oakland was my well-to-do north corner of town and a thin band of acceptability that ran along the line of the hills.*

All things considered, if Unger was destined to be anything, it was probably an academic with a penchant for granola and the great outdoors.

As he puts it, "I had this very sheltered life where I could go out there and do what I want and if I fail, no problem. I had a safety net. I never had to worry about anything. But the flip side of that is that you never have any responsibilities unless you put them on yourself. And even then, what responsibilities do you have to grad school, anyways? You let everything down and nothing would change in the world."

Though it would be easy to assume that Unger regards his upbringing with a certain disdain, it would be a mistake. What is clear from the book is that he regards it with a healthy dose of humor and irony:

> *I'd always attended earnest, progressive day schools where everyone was made to feel cuddly and special. ... [W]e ate teeth-shattering banana chips and drank cloudy apple juice before returning to our cooperative, non-violent games.*

Thinking about it now, he says, "It feels so unreal. I love academics; I had a great time in college and grad school. But I always wondered what the larger point was: here we are in our meta world and talking about how people actually lived. When I came out of Brown, I had no idea of how to do anything. I had no skills. I had a great time, but no skills. So this job, where all of a sudden I had people counting on me, where strangers are counting on me, that's a huge thing. Being responsible to your family is a no-brainer. But when you have a responsibility for other people and moreover responsibility for complete strangers, that's huge."

Like so many of the well-educated young men and women in the Bay Area, Unger came upon his career serendipitously. Home after college, between jobs watching elephant seals mate and searching for peregrine falcons on cliff ledges, he initially dismissed the fire department job announcement pasted to the back of a bus stop.

Fortunately for him, his mother saw the same announcement. And though his response, when she suggested "*that* might be fun" (as opposed to his own idea of getting yet another degree), was "I guess. Whatever," he seems to have seriously underestimated his mother's faith in her own intuition and his ambition. While Unger was away working in Utah, his white-haired mother, posing as a potential applicant, went down to the Oakland Fire Department's headquarters (the applications were only given out in person) and stood in line to get one.

It was the beginning of the process that eventually became *Working Fire*.

Unger's description of his first year at the Oakland Fire Department is as much about a community and a profession in transition as it is about one man's willingness to challenge himself to find a place in that community and profession.

Firefighting, as a profession, has traditionally been filled "by the children of firefighters and by tradesmen looking for more excitement and a steadier paycheck." It is also, even more traditionally perhaps, one of the last bastions of the kind of hypermasculinity that one usually associates with bad action films. That bastion has, however, been breached over the years, and Oakland's Fire Department is now a reflection of the men *and* women—of every race and ethnicity and background—who make up the city, including the son of upper-middle-class, Jewish professionals. Still, there is enough of the old guard and the old ethos left to create an uncomfortable friction.

As Unger puts it, "The traditional masculinity thing was never a big thing in my life. There was no pressure to do sports or like cars. Definitely academic pressure, but not like the traditional gender roles kind of thing. I never felt that I had to

undergo these tests to become a man. I never even thought that I needed to do that; I thought that it was just growing up. But then you get into the fire department, and it's all about macho and masculinity. On the one hand, you have to prove yourself, prove that you're macho enough. And at the same time, just the idea that I would have to 'prove' myself at all was new to me.

"If you get into the job now because you want to fight fire, you're missing the boat. We do fight fire, but it's a small part of what we do. We are a social service agency. The thing is that it's a problem with the system more than it's a problem with the people. There should be some better way for people to be taken care of than by calling 911. You can't take it out on the patients. They need mental health, and they need rehabs, and they need counseling. I take care of them and I'm professional, but there's only so much you can do. There are guys who are really bitter about the fact that we do medical work and I feel sorry for them, because that's what the job is. If you're only looking for the fires, you're going to be disappointed. I love going to fires—it's a kick in the pants—but you have to enjoy all of it."

To his surprise, Unger discovered that he enjoyed living in both worlds. "It's not so much that I'm forcing myself to live in this world that I'm not accustomed to; it's not like I'm trying to put a square peg into a round hole. I'm a really odd-shaped peg, that's all.

"I didn't fit into the Berkeley world, and I don't quite fit into the firefighting world, but some part of me is fulfilled by both. That's where the writing comes in: I really value having an intellectual life and being part of a community that loves reading and writing, and getting that as an adjunct to the firefighting has been huge for me. I think that if firefighting was my main or sole occupation, I would get bored. Writing keeps one foot in Berkeley, and firefighting keeps one foot in downtown Oakland. It's a great combination."

Though Unger is the first to concede that there isn't any inherent value in yet another "coming-of-age, making-of" tome, it's the way he positions himself in relation to the material that makes *Working Fire* so engaging.

"People always ask whether I wrote it to make people appreciate firefighters more, but I don't think that's a problem. People appreciate firefighters plenty, and we don't need any more PR. I wrote it for two audiences. One, obviously, for the people who wanted to know more about the fire department behind the scenes. What was more important to me about the book was the 'stranger in a strange land' aspect of it. Because everyone has found themselves in situations where they are totally the odd man out and they don't know what's going on and they have to either run or assimilate. That's what's found the widest audience for the book. How do you assimilate into a new culture while still retaining your old self? How do you maintain your individuality? It's a fantasy, in a way. Everyone has some ambivalence about the life that they've chosen for themselves. Even if you like what you're doing, you kind of want to know what it would have been like if you'd been a doctor or whatever. It's as legitimate a fantasy as reading about trolls or elves or middle earth.

"I really love being a firefighter. I enjoy my work and get a lot out of it. Writing is fairly selfish. And I do enjoy it. That's why it's selfish, right? I mean, the world would be fine without any more books from me. I do feel that it's important and valuable to be giving back to your community. Firefighting is the most concrete public service that you can imagine. I guess that's selfish, too. Maybe there's something to that 'there's no altruism' argument. *Working Fire* is an enjoyable book, and it's good, and I think people learn something from it. But it's not actually *helping* anyone. As a firefighter and a paramedic, I have a set of skills and energy and I'm happy to give back to people in need. It sounds sort of cheesy saying that, but it's true.

"I think that's one of the reasons to be a social being—you submit to improve the world for the people around you. Firefighting is a much stronger way of doing that than the kind of writing I do. If you're exposing corruption and changing the world, that's one thing. But that isn't what I do.

"And working fire makes it really easy to be a good person. Your job is to go out into the world and be nice to people. That's the structure; that's what you do. And within that structure people make their decisions about whether they're going to extend themselves to other people or whether they're just going to do the job. But that's what makes the job special: having these brief connections with other people when you're seeing them at the very lowest part of their experience.

"For you, it's something you do every day. For them, it's the most important thing that's ever happened to them in their lives. You see 10 people every day who are at the lowest depths. ... This is an emotionally scarring experience for them, and how a firefighter or paramedic responds to a person in need is really going to shape their whole experience. It's not enough to be a mechanic or a technician." ■

REVIEWER: **Robert Burke** is a writer, a librarian, and a contributing editor to *The Bloomsbury Review*. He has lived in Oakland for most of the last 25 years.