

A Fire Story

BRIAN FIES

UPDATED AND EXPANDED EDITION

BOOK INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW

Written and illustrated by Brian Fies, the award-winning graphic memoir *A Fire Story* provides a deeply personal firsthand account of one of the most devastating wildfires in modern history. The story begins in the early morning of October 9, 2017, as U.S. wildfires burned at unprecedented speeds across Northern California, just hours before the flames reach Brian Fies's home. Even as Fies and his wife prepare to evacuate, they never contemplate that only hours later, their house, most of their belongings, and the neighborhood around them will be reduced to twisted metal and ash.

Shifting between his own personal tragedy and the impact of the wildfires on his community—including 44 fatalities and the destruction of 6,200 homes and 8,900 structures—Fies masterfully fuses together photographs, interviews, illustrations, and text to convey the true depth and breadth of this tragedy. As his family and community sort through the little that's left behind in the aftermath, *A Fire Story* underscores the long-lasting financial, emotional, and cultural impacts that don't often show up on the evening news or in newspaper headlines but whose devastation continues long after the final flames have receded.

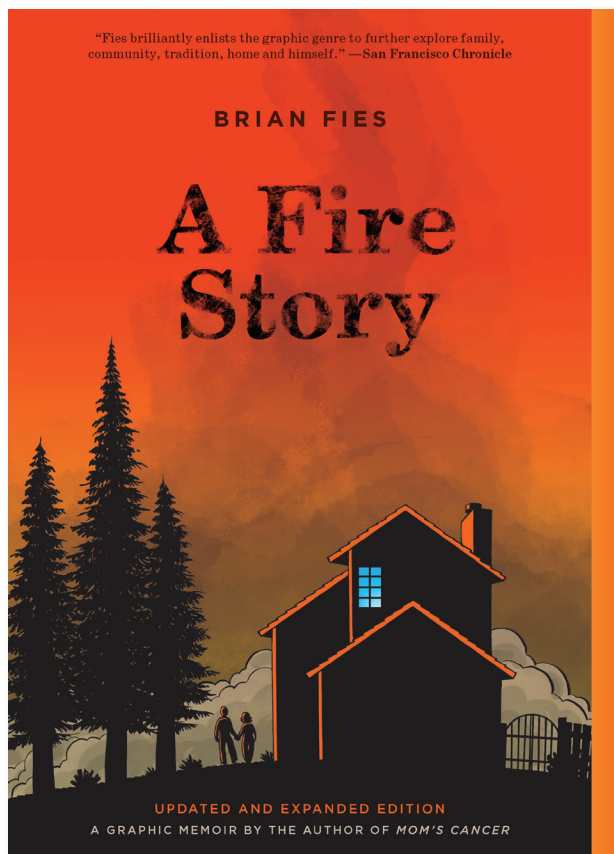
Fies published the beginnings of *A Fire Story* online on his blog just days after the fire. The 18-page story was then expanded and published in hardcover by Abrams ComicArts in 2019 to critical acclaim, and now an updated and expanded paperback edition of *A Fire Story* builds on the previous editions by providing even more depth and insight into the larger social, environmental, political, and economic forces at play during and after a natural disaster, providing a poignant and profoundly human story of loss and determination.

SETTINGS

Though *A Fire Story* includes a variety of locations across Northern California, the graphic novel intentionally lacks a central setting. From the very first page, readers—like Fies himself—instead move through a seemingly endless series of family and friends' homes, hotel rooms, and other locations across California. Fies employs these various settings to reveal the unpredictable world that many survivors of disaster live in, often never knowing where they may sleep the next day, week, or month. The only recurring setting in *A Fire Story* is the remains of Fies's house and neighborhood, where readers see Fies, his family, and neighbors sorting through the wreckage in an attempt to rebuild what they've lost.

CHARACTERS

Brian Fies is the central protagonist and narrator of *A Fire Story*. Over the course of the book, he introduces readers to his wife, family, neighbors, and others in his community impacted by the wildfires burning across Northern California. Just like the chaos and confusion after a wildfire, characters come and go throughout the book, staying only long enough to share their own painful stories of loss and tragedy. Fies intentionally includes characters from across the economic, political, and cultural spectrum to highlight the vastly different ways that—even in a single community—a disaster of this magnitude impacts each of their lives.



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KEY THEMES

- **Loss and Grief** are primary themes throughout *A Fire Story*. As Fies and members of his community face tremendous loss and uncertain futures, they are given little time to grieve as they work to reorganize their lives and rebuild what they've lost. Gradually, they realize that their feelings of loss and grief have a long-lasting reach far into their futures.
- **Trauma** and how it impacts our way of viewing the world is a theme Fies touches on often. Like many survivors of natural disasters and other traumatic events, Fies highlights how his daily life is still affected long after the fire. Almost overnight, everyday experiences—wind gusts, the smell of smoke, even a walk around the neighborhood—suddenly become heightened and threatening, showing the psychological toll that natural disasters can have on our sense of safety and security.
- **Change and Control** are driving and at times contradictory impulses within the story. After Fies and his community see their homes burned to ash overnight, they are immediately thrown into a system of constant change that does not stop for months or even years. As a result, many people seek out ways to regain control over their lives, such as Fies's repeated efforts to go back to where his house burned down and dig through the wreckage, hoping each time he will find another small piece of his previous life.
- **Renewal and Rebuilding** are some of the more hopeful themes throughout the book. As Fies and his neighbors work to reconstruct their homes and their community, they also begin to build new connections with one another, along with a deeper appreciation and respect for the world in which they live.
- **Equity** around natural disasters comes up throughout *A Fire Story*. Through multiple interviews and his personal experiences, Fies shows how disasters like this also expose the social and economic inequities we so often overlook. Despite a tendency to only pay attention to newspaper headlines and the fire itself, Fies shows that it's just as important that we focus on the aftermath of natural disasters and how we treat their survivors.
- **Perspective** is something that Fies discusses throughout the book as he struggles to match his personal tragedy with the larger, communal tragedy. Throughout *A Fire Story*, he oscillates between deeply intimate portraits of his own struggles and the struggles of those around him, or his desire to think logically while being flooded with emotions—helping himself and readers gain a broader perspective on the short- and long-term impacts of this natural disaster.
- **Climate Change** is only directly addressed briefly in the book, Climate Change and its impacts are an undercurrent throughout Fies's entire account. Since the events of *A Fire Story*, similar wildfires have only become more common in the US and around the globe, showing the increasingly destructive impact that unmitigated Climate Change will continue to have.



PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

RESEARCH THE CALIFORNIA WILDFIRES

Before reading the book, students can conduct brief research on the 2017 California wildfires. Student research should include multiple sources such as broadcast media coverage, written media coverage, reports, personal reflections, etc. Students can begin by clicking on these links for PBS's coverage:

- [How Brian Fies used art to process a devastating wildfire, PBS NewsHour](#)
- [A Santa Rosa Cartoonist's *A Fire Story* Comes to Life, KQED Arts](#)

STUDENT REFLECTION

In *A Fire Story*, author Brian Fies details his experience in the 2017 California wildfires. The book also goes into great detail about Fies's personal handling of tragedy and growth during and after the event. To help prepare students to discuss and analyze these themes, students can reflect on a life-changing experience and how they made it through. What growth, if any, did the students experience because of it? Students can discuss as they feel comfortable.

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KINTSUGI

Near the end of *A Fire Story*, Fies makes a reference to *kintsugi*, the centuries-old Japanese art of repairing broken ceramics with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. Have students conduct brief research into the art of kintsugi. After, have students look at the front and back covers of the book. Discuss what connections they think there might be between kintsugi and *A Fire Story*.

TIMED ESCAPE PLAN

In this exercise, students will get in the mindset of escaping a pressing danger. Instruct students to imagine that they had to evacuate their houses due to an emergency. Then, set a timer for 5 minutes. Have students write down how they would spend those 5 minutes, including what items they would bring during their escape. Finally, discuss as a class what people have chosen to bring and why.

- **Extension** After reading the book, ask students to reconsider their lists. Is there anything they might change after hearing Fies's account?

DISCUSSION

Pose this question to the class: When responding to a natural disaster and its aftermath, what responsibilities should fall to the government? What responsibilities should fall to volunteer aid organizations? What responsibilities should fall to the average citizen experiencing the disaster?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The first part of the book is an adaptation of Fies's original webcomic (which is reprinted at the end of the book on pages 179–183), “written and drawn in the few days immediately after the fire.” How are these pages different from the rest of the book? How does this set the tone in the book? What do these pages reveal about Fies's character and personality?
2. Consider how Fies describes the scene upon discovering that his house and neighborhood have been destroyed. What does his description of the scene tell us about his thought process in the moment? What do you think your reaction might be in this same moment?
3. How does the tone and pace of the narrative change after Fies and his wife arrive at their daughters' home? How does this shift affect the reading experience?
4. In many moments throughout the book, Fies reconciles an inner dispute between what he feels and what he knows to be logical. What are some examples of these moments in the book? Did any of these moments have a particular impact on you? Why or why not?
5. Fies's storytelling oscillates between factual accounts and striking emotional commentary, often quickly and without warning. What does this do for the reader's experience? What does this tell us about Fies?
6. What are your thoughts on the vignettes from the other fire victims? How do they make you feel, and what do they make you consider that is different from the rest of the book? In what ways do they add and/or take away from Fies's story? Why do you think they are included where they are? Why did Fies choose to make them visually different than the rest of the story?
7. Since Fies's experience losing his home to the wildfires, the COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc across the United States and much of the rest of the world. What parallels can you draw between the two experiences? What specific elements from *A Fire Story* can you relate to having experienced during and after the pandemic?
8. What is a surprising consequence of the fire that you may not have thought about before reading *A Fire Story*? What elements of Fies's post-fire experience do you think would be trickiest to navigate? Why?
9. In *A Fire Story*, Fies includes experiences from many different people. What demographics are missing throughout the book? Why do you think that is?
10. What purpose do the “A Day in the New Life” interludes serve in the larger narrative? How are they different than the rest of the book?
11. In “Mary & Larry's Fire Story,” Larry states how after the fire, “Everything was still there. It just changed shape.” How does this theme weave itself through the rest of the book?
12. On page 114, Fies states, “I'm self-aware enough to recognize the classic symptoms: sleeplessness, loss of appetite, mental lapses, mood swings. Sadly, understanding trauma doesn't really help relieve it.” At what points in the narrative does this idea present itself most prominently? At what points does it present itself more subtly?
13. On page 132, Fies says, “Being part of something so big makes perspective elusive.” What do you think he means by this? Where and how does this tension between differing perspectives show up throughout the book?



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- Throughout the book, Fies and his family interact with many volunteers and aid workers. What can we learn from Fies's experience with these people about being compassionate, empathetic, and effective volunteers and aid workers helping those in crisis?
- Why do you think Fies chooses to jump two years forward at the end of the book?
- Are there any specific pieces of text or insights from the book that you found poignant or that could help you in your own life? How so?

PROJECT IDEAS

ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY

There is no doubt (and copious evidence) among the science community that climate change exists and is contributing to increased natural disasters across the globe. In *A Fire Story*, Fies states, "Nobody could blame this particular fire on climate change. But as heat builds up in the air and oceans, and historic weather patterns shift, disasters like these will become more common." First, ask students to conduct research on the causes of climate change and the causes of recent wildfires in California. Then, ask students to write an argumentative essay arguing for specific and feasible actions that can prevent increased wildfires and their spread in the future.

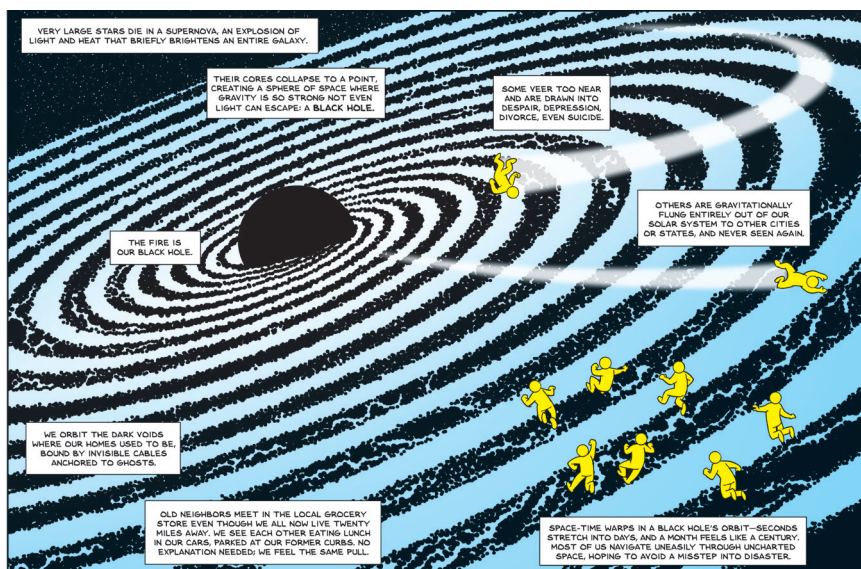
SYNTHESIZING INFORMATION AND EMOTION

In *A Fire Story*, Fies connects with readers by weaving personal, relatable, and often emotional insights throughout his detailed account of the events during and after the destruction of his home. For this project, ask students to tell a personal story in a medium of the students' or teachers' choice (prose writing, comic, video, digital presentation, etc.). Students' narratives should include a detailed, factual retelling of an event, enhanced with artistic techniques that connect the reader to the narrator, similar to those found in *A Fire Story*. These techniques might include maps, photos, found objects, poetic language, metaphor/simile, comparisons, etc.

ADDITIONAL VIGNETTES

In *A Fire Story*, Fies includes personal stories from others affected by the wildfires, including other victims and public service workers. First, ask students to identify demographics whose stories were not told in the book but whose stories they think would add to a greater understanding of the collective experience. This could include but is not limited to:

- Populations of victims not represented in *A Fire Story*
- Insurance agents
- Politicians
- News media
- Firefighters
- Volunteers
- Construction workers



After identifying a population, students should research that population's experience during the fires as best they can through various means. Finally, students should use their research to create a fictional character, then tell their "fire story" in a style similar to what is found in *A Fire Story*.

ART TRANSFORMATION

Art has always been, in part, a means for artists to express and work through difficult emotions such as grief and trauma. In *A Fire Story*, Fies mentions *kintsugi*, a Japanese art style of repairing broken ceramics using lacquer and with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. Fies even uses his own twisted iron gate, transformed by destruction, as art in his yard. Ask students to produce a work of art that communicates its message, or communicates a new message, through destructive transformation. Students should reflect on their own journey of personal growth, or overcoming great obstacles, when conceptualizing their pieces.



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COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

The reading of this graphic memoir in combination with a thoughtful analysis through writing, presentation, or discussion (such as the projects and discussion questions within this guide) can promote the teaching or reinforcement of the following 11th and 12th grade Reading: Literature Common Core standards, as well as various Writing, History/Social Studies, and Speaking & Listening Common Core standards.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.2

Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3

Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.3

Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.5

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.6

Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.7

Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2

Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2

Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3

Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.5

Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6

Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6

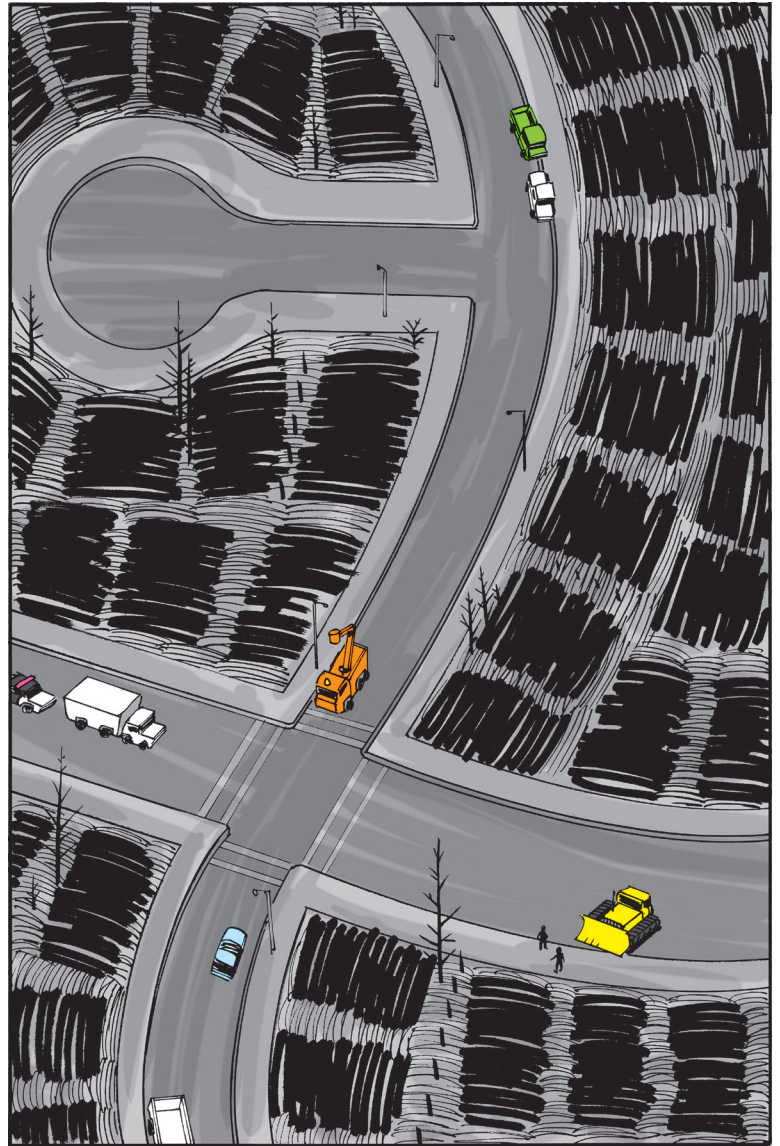
Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness, or beauty of the text.



FURTHER RESEARCH

IN PRINT

- Backderf, Derf. *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio*. Abrams ComicArts, 2020 (graphic novel)
- Backderf, Derf. *Trashed*. Abrams ComicArts, 2015 (graphic novel)
- Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home*. Mariner Books, 2007 (graphic novel)
- Brown, Don. *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans*. HMH Books for Young Readers, 2017 (graphic novel)
- Bui, Thi. *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir*. Abrams ComicArts, 2017 (graphic novel)
- Fies, Brian. *Mom's Cancer*. Abrams ComicArts, 2009 (graphic novel)
- Fies, Brian. *Whatever Happened to the World of Tomorrow?* Abrams ComicArts, 2012 (graphic novel)
- Kaufman, Moises, and the Tectonic Theater Project. *The Laramie Project*. Dramatists Play Service, 2001 (play)
- Lowitz, Leza. *Up from the Sea*. Crown Books for Young Readers, 2016 (novel)
- Mills, Wendy. *All We Have Left*. Bloomsbury USA Childrens, 2017 (novel)
- Neufeld, Josh. *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*. Pantheon, 2010 (graphic novel)
- Noah, Trevor. *Born a Crime*. Spiegel & Grau, 2016 (memoir)
- Spiegelman, Art. *Maus*. Pantheon, 1996 (graphic novel)
- Takei, George, and Justin Eisinger. *They Called Us Enemy*. Top Shelf Productions, 2019 (graphic novel)



INTERACTIVE GAMES AND PROGRAMS

- *Valiant Hearts: The Great War*. Ubisoft, 2014 (video game)
- *That Dragon, Cancer*. Numinous Games, 2016 (video game)
- “[FireWorks Educational Program](#).” [FireWorks](#). Accessed March 15, 2021. Lesson plans and activities on wildfires for grades 1–12.
- [CAL FIRE. The State of California](#). Accessed March 15, 2021. Information about California wildfires, including statistics about individual fires from each recorded year.



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