

A Review of *FIRE: A Message from the Edge of Climate Catastrophe*

by Margi Prideaux, Stormbird Press, October 2022.

**“WE ARE ALL DEPENDENT
AND WHEN DISASTER HITS, WE ARE BROKEN.”**

Stephen Harrod Buhner

*There must be those among whom we can sit down and weep and still be counted as
warriors.*

Adrienne Rich

I wish I'd had a copy of Margi Prideaux's remarkable *FIRE: A Message from the Edge of Climate Catastrophe* (Stormbird Press) 18 months ago. I was then in the midst of writing *Earth Grief: The Journey Into and Through Ecological Loss* and there was one thing I needed for that book that I could not find. I needed an extended account of the emotional and existential impacts a major climate change event makes on an individual and the community they live in. And that failure, if you think about it a minute, tells you a great deal about how dysfunctional the bureaucratic, researcher, and media responses are to the terrible circumstances we are facing. The voices of the actual human beings on the front lines, those who are dealing with the loss of everything that matters to them, are missing except in the most superficial sense. We might get a paragraph or two but there are no depth reports from the broken hearts of those who have looked into the face

of this kind of grief and loss. Until now.

I found what I had been looking for in Margi Prideaux's book. There is nothing else like it in the literature, nothing that compares in its power to convey the impacts of ecological grief and loss. I consider it a substantial and crucially important contribution for it reveals what is too often overlooked: what it is like when climate destabilization becomes personal. And that destabilization? It's going to come, for all of us. We need to know the emotional and existential territory we will soon find ourselves in. And though Prideaux might not think of it this way, in her hands we have a capable and honorable guide.

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I am often asked to endorse books but I rarely agree to do so. A common term in the writing world is "blurb sluts." These are people who will endorse any book that is sent to them; they almost never read them. I don't think that has a lot of integrity to it (but then I don't have a lot of faith in the publishing world's integrity anyway). And because I don't want to avoid mirrors for the rest of my life, I try, as earnestly as I can, to not become the enemy of my soul or my memories. Unlike many writers, I actually read every book I am asked to endorse. It is no wonder then that, compared to the number of requests I get, I very rarely write a blurb. Most books have little to say and, to make the reading experience more unpleasant, they say it badly. So, when I received an email from an editor at Australia's (quite remarkable) Stormbird Press asking me to take a look at *Fire* with a view toward an endorsement, I was skeptical to say the least.

Thus, I began the book with only half an eye, doing a surface rather than a deep read. I

like to know what kind of person the writer is, as well as the nature of their thoughts, before I let them deeply inside me. As William Gass once observed . . .

“For what is it to take a guest of this kind into the interior of the soul, from whence words rise like a sudden spring, what is it to offer your hospitality to the opinions and passions, the rhythms and rhetoric, of another, perhaps far from perfect character and mind? . . . In societies which depend principally upon the spoken word to establish and maintain community, the real origin of one’s words is a serious, even critical matter. . . . Rhetoric in the abstract [is composed of] words quite free of responsibility to anyone.”

As will become clear later in this review, that quotation from Gass, as it turns out, has a particular and important relevance to Prideaux’s book and work.

Unfortunately, I found that I couldn’t go very far into the book using a surface read. The way Prideaux had structured the book confused me and *that* intrigued me. So, I began to read again, this time more deeply.

From the beginning it was clear that she was doing something rather unusual with the book. And it didn’t take me long to realize that this was not another earnest, poorly written but shallow, look at “We are all gonna die unless we [fill in the blank] But wait! There’s hope” book. I opened myself to the book, letting it tell me about itself. It didn’t take long before I found its rhythm and began to discern her rationale for the book’s structure. Prideaux had made the unusual decision to interweave her personal experience of living inside Australia’s Black

Summer fire (which burned 46 million acres and killed over three billion animals) with the more reportorial style common in books on the environment. She was writing, as she said, “from the ashes of Berrymans Road, Gosse” and, importantly, she did it in such a way that I could feel what it is like to actually be on the front lines of climate catastrophe.

It is a common writing trope to share a bit of personal experience, then move into intellectual analysis, and then back again. But this was something else. Her writing was real, not a trope. She was digging deep, telling the reader of the truths she had found in the depths of pain and loss and grief. This book was something else again.

Her account, I found to be, just as remorseless as the fire itself. She would give a bit of her emotional world and lived experience, then a bit more, and still more until the thing took on a compelling power of its own. For the journey did not end for her, or her community, when the fires were finally out. They found themselves in a new world now, a world filled with loss, trauma, deep grief, and terrible, debilitating exhaustion. She and her husband and her neighbors went to sleep every night carrying a burden of hurt as deep as anything I have ever read and they found it waiting for them every morning when they woke. Day after day after day after month after month after month.

I had been trying to find someone this brave for a very long time, someone who had the courage to write of the emotional impact that a climate change event had on them – and to do so without concealing themselves behind the usual armor plating that most of us have. “Grief,” as Leslie Head, has said, “will be our companion on this journey – it is not something we can deal with and move on.” But no matter how hard I searched, other than in the voices of people who had lost spouses or children, I had not found anyone with the courage to talk of the grief that

comes when the quiet, climate background of our youth suddenly finds its voice and says, “no more.”

Grief is a territory that, once it finds you, you live in. It is not a place you visit while on the way someplace else the way sadness is. Grief tears the self apart until there is nothing left. It reveals every nook and cranny of blindness, optimism, and mistaken assumptions each of us has about the real world. (That is, the ecological world that underpins our worldwide civilization and from which is drawn the resources it needs to continue.) Most of our illusions were *taught* us, we were not born with them. They are a gift from the virtual world of our civilization. But they have little relevance to what is underneath that virtual world, the foundational world we call Earth and that all virtual worlds depend upon.

As the foundational world makes its opinions plain about the massive corporate, technological, and scientific intrusions into its underpinnings, each and every one of us will, sooner or later, be forced into the landscape that we call grief. And we will live there for a very long time. Prideaux’s account reveals the nature of that landscape and, importantly, tells us what the journey into and through it is like. And so her book is a gift. It is only because of revelations like this will we have some intimation of what we truly face. (And that is part of the reason why the bureaucracies do their best to minimize these stories. The last thing they want is for the human face of their failures to become known.)

I am going to go into the book in a bit more depth in a moment but until then, here is my endorsement . . .

Margi Prideaux’s book should be on the bookshelf of every person who is

concerned about climate change or who has felt ecological grief. Most especially it needs to be on the desk of everyone who is studying and writing about what we are facing. (Bill McKibben and Kim Stanley Robinson, pay attention.) It is an egregious failure on their part if it is not.

FIRE: A Message from the Edge of Climate Catastrophe explores the real impacts of climate change on individual human beings and their community. In Prideaux's stories and words you can both hear and feel the deep mourning and terrible grief that accompanies the reality of what we are facing. It comes like a hurricane, a tsunami, an avalanche – but one made of fire. And nothing, nothing at all can stand in the way of fire unchained; there is no technocratic fix for the great powers of Earth when they are freed to do as they wish. Unchained Air, Earth, Fire, and Water is what we are facing now. Their power, as media reports tell us every day, dwarf our own.

Make no mistake, Prideaux's story is *our* story; it is a single instance of what the entire human species is facing. And it has at its core an emotional dimension that is nearly unbearable in its impact. It forces those of us who are caught on the front lines into an existential re-examination of our selves and our relation to a natural world teetering on the edge of complete collapse.

Unlike most articles and books on climate change Prideaux does not offer simplistic or techno-utopian solutions. Differently than so many she has turned her face to the truth, that climate change is already here, that tipping points have been passed, that there is nothing that can be done to stop what it happening. And

from that she arrives at the core truth of what this means: we must adapt and we will have to do that on our own. She is clear that this does not mean adaptation in the old sense of using the rational mind to exert control over nature but rather coming once again to accept that there are forces here far greater than ourselves, that it is the 4.5 billion year old life form we call Earth who makes the rules here, that we are ecological beings on an ecological planet, and from that, there is no escape. Our own *climate of mind* must change; that is the only way as a species that we can adapt and survive. In Prideaux's story you will see what true adaptation involves.

I do not say these things lightly, I mean every word. *Fire* is brilliant and powerful and deeply, deeply moving. It is not a book I will easily forget. And I suspect that as the years of climate collapse roll on, I will think of and turn to it many times.

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There's a terrible image that has stayed with me over the years. I encountered that image in another story about the Black Summer fires, the source long lost to me. It's about a father, his skin so badly burned that it was sloughing off his body. He had used his fierce devotion and love to survive long enough to carry his child to a neighboring ranch (protecting the child with his own body). He handed the child to his neighbors and asked that they care for him. The article did not say, but I can't see how the man survived.

I see him sometimes in my mind's eye. That moment (and the man's terrible bravery) is a part of my life and was, until now, the most graphic experience that I'd had of what climate tipping points mean to living, human beings. All of us now live in a world in which our protective coverings are sloughing off, one by one by one. Our homes, our cities, our electricity, our cars . . . the protective barrier behind which we have become domesticated. And what we find when that skin no longer surrounds us will not be civilized language or behavior but the primal terror and helplessness and pain of the domesticated human deprived of their civilizational skin.

Underneath that domesticated skin are people who are truly and deeply unprepared for adaptation. As Prideaux makes plain, all of us must begin reclaiming our individual capacity to respond to what is happening. This is something that all our ancestors knew how to do; it is a skill base we must reclaim. We can no longer wait on institutions to save us, to respond to what is happening, for those institutions were built around a particular climate as well as a particular climate of mind. That climate of mind can function fairly well within a stable, predictable climate but once that climate is gone, the elites are as adrift as the rest of us. And it is each of us using our own individual genius, often working in local communities, that will enable successful adaptation to the crises that are now occurring one right after the other. There is no longer a normal to go back to.

As Prideaux succinctly comments . . .

“These searing accounts of surviving the fire are laced with grim warnings, stories of heartbreaking loss, and humble acts of care and bravery that helped to save

lives and livelihoods. These eyewitness testimonies matter: not just as a record of loss and destruction, but as a dire warning. It is communities who stand at the coalface, not governments or bureaucrats who make the decisions. Individuals who know each other and risk it all to protect what and who they love. As we stand on the cusp of escalating changing climate tragedies throughout the world, beyond the edges where people have congregated in cities and sprawling suburbs, our first line of defence from disaster are the people in our communities.”

Unlike most books on climate change, Prideaux keeps the focus of the book where it should be, on the human dimension. She has the courage to go deeply into the horror that she and her neighbors experienced in those terrible wildfires. This section from Chapter 11, “Splinters of Glass” will show you what I mean . . .

“Life from within the changing climate curve is tough when all around you bear the scars of each other: children evacuated from burning farms by mothers driving like maniacs through fire and thick roiling smoke past their child’s treasured dog, or sheep, or horse. Young people, restrained in the back of a car knowing they were leaving their pets to perish while hearing the choked sobs of their mother, don’t recover from that easily. Meanwhile, fathers and farmers remain on their land fighting to save burning sheds that held the tools of their grandfathers, their faces streaked with tears as friends literally dragged them from the fire’s path. The shock of losing cherished family heirlooms casts a totally different shadow on the

situation and takes a long time to recover from, emotionally and physically. . . .

Physical wounds were made worse, and likely permanent, because injured people who should have been hospitalised kept fighting the fires or accepted only rudimentary treatment. Others abandoned medical care altogether so they could fight uncompromising blazes that continued to threaten their homes and livelihoods. The ferocity of the fires tested and broke time-honoured practices. In the past, all generations of family stood shoulder to shoulder to fight impending threats. But when older members had to be evacuated for their own safety, despite believing they possessed the strength to stand and fight as they had for their lifetime, they lost their dignity. These brave guardians hadn't lost their nerve or been shuffled off. They just faced an adversary that was too fierce, too big, and too consuming for them to survive it. Ravine is the fire that robbed them of a part of themselves. Dozens of people had the harrowing task of entering the remains of badly burnt neighbouring homes to sift through hot ash and rubble for bodies. That almost everyone survived is a miracle worth rejoicing, but the emotional legacy of having to search has left deep scars. In the retelling of these events, the harmed adopt a manic tone in an attempt to plaster over deep hurt with humour. What isn't written within these pages are the whispered stories of those encounters too painful to voice; the events that trail off before the teller has finished their story, as if their brain has said, 'Enough, you cannot survive this image so I will distract you with blue skies.' All these experiences are connected across the community. An entire community teetering on the edge, their lives

threatening, at any time, to splinter into a thousand shards of glass.”

Once the fires were out and the rebuilding of homes and communities began, Prideaux, like so many others, thought the worst was behind them. Only one aspect, the fires themselves, of it was over. Afterward she and her neighbors found themselves caught in a bureaucratic nightmare. The people most directly affected by the fires had to deal with functionaries who had no conception of what the ones who survived were facing. She and her community had lost their homes, their trucks, their farms, their animals, and every possession they owned. They had nothing left.

Many of them had lost all government identification papers, including birth certificates. But without government identification they could not get government identification. And without government identification they could not get power restored to their farms to enable the rebuilding. So, each and every day Prideaux returned to the hamster wheel, struggling to find someone, anyone, willing to respond and help. As she comments . . .

“By mid-year we were in the clutches of three traumas—a wildfire, a pandemic, and an Escher-like bureaucratic landscape that showed little compassion. We had become homeless people constantly fighting an uphill battle, and often felt stigmatised by those tasked to help us. . . . Rebuilding homes and refurnishing lives has been, perhaps, the toughest journey of all. It’s not a subject I ever imagined I would write about, even as I began the process of research for this book. I naively imagined there would be government support to guide us through the process. Keep in mind that none of us woke the morning after the fires with

our heads full of dreams for new homes. All of us were worsted and beaten.”

They found, as they turned to governmental systems for help, that the bureaucracies they encountered are, like all bureaucracies now, not all that interested in helping individuals who are in need. As well, bureaucracies have become adept at utilizing language specifically designed to deflect responsibility. Finding anyone who might have enough power to make a decision – and who cared enough to do so – took months and for some, years. The passive avoidance and disinterested responses of government entities that are supposed to help does indeed add an additional, terrible trauma as Prideaux makes plain. It is all too similar to something that Samuel Gerson, a therapist who treats holocaust survivors once said . . .

“An overwhelming aspect of the trauma of genocide was that the violence was initiated by political and government entities, and carried out by individuals, whom the victims had reason to believe would, at the very least, act with a basic concern for human life. Beyond the terrors of the actual experience of violence, the victimized individual must also contend with the loss of faith in a protective world.”

Prideaux speaks of a friend who had, similarly to Prideaux, lost everything to the fires. The bureaucratic indifference to their needs as well as agency insistence on following the same old patterns of behavior reveals one of the great problems that all of us now face: the incompetence and utter indifference of bureaucratic systems and their functionaries to the reality of climate

change and the lives of those of us on the front lines.

In fact, many of the landholders that had been burned out had tried for years to get permission for controlled burns on their own property . . . but could not. This enabled a massive build up of plant matter which, when ignited, created the worst wildfire Australia had ever known. (In the national forests the problem was far worse. The controlled burns that aboriginal peoples had used for millennia were outlawed to “save the forests” and thus “increase tourist revenues.”

Prideaux says of her friend that . . .

“She had already commissioned a Significant Environmental Benefit (SEB) Management Plan that outlined the need for prescribed burns but struggled with the bureaucracy to follow through. ‘I had a list of threatened species on the property that was three pages long,’ she says. ‘But there was no support. We see huge flows of money going into the pockets of big cashed-up conservation organisations and into the government agency charged with this care, but the community is working for free.’ Even though she had placed a Heritage Agreement over her land, and the government considered her property part of the ‘heritage estate,’ the implied perspective was that she was a private landholder and on her own.”

In short, governmental bureaucracies and systems are abandoning their citizens and failing to act, as Gerson says, “with a basic concern for human life.” As Prideaux comments, “Black Summer

burned out of control, because of a balledup, metric-driven interpretation of laws that suppressed cool, controlled fires which could have saved a significant portion of the species and habitats that were lost.”

While Prideaux is blessed with a large, comprehensive, and responsive community that has come together in mutual support, the government has broken the trust that must lie between governmental systems and its citizens. Those who live and work in the cities don’t know and don’t care to know what it is like on the ground, out there where Earth is still wild and undomesticated.

“What I came to understand in that first year is that Australian governments, at all levels and of all colours, were wholly and profoundly unprepared for this disaster. They lacked any comprehension of what was faced by individuals on the ground. Inside government departments people seemed to maintain their normal work cycle of rostered days off and holiday leave without anyone recognising the need to bring in extra workforce or relief cover for when key decision makers were away or just overwhelmed with the volume of work.”

This failure is and will be a continuing feature of climate meltdown. It is difficult to convey the emotional and existential shock that occurs when the truth of it is finally accepted. And it takes time to do so, for each and every one of us who goes to the bureaucracies that are supposed to help us can’t quite believe that they are actually indifferent to our suffering and our need. As Prideaux and her neighbors have learned, each and every one of us is on our own in dealing with

the unraveling of the Earth's ecosystems. As she says . . .

“This all means that where impact is actually felt, there is a gaping powerless wait for help, instituted by the very structure that governs our entire society. To a greater or lesser degree this is the same situation in pretty much every other political jurisdiction across the world. The labels applied may be different, but the powerlessness of actual people is the same. . . . I have lost all respect for the self-servicing politicians and their willing minions negotiating a path between here and hell.”

Her particular community has, because of its immersion in the bush and its direct interaction with life and death, developed a resilience that few other communities in the developed world have. I think this is true of most Americans as well. We have been domesticated, trained to do only what the systems tell us we are permitted to do. And as civilizational structures fail we become similar to hermit crabs who have outgrown their shells and are now crawling across the sea bottom looking for another in which to protect their vulnerability. But there aren't any other shells for us. And there's not going to be any. The closest we are going to get to anything like that are communities similar to Prideaux's. Despite this crucial truth, government bureaucracies continue to gaslight and demean those communities.

“The new Chief of the newly formed National Recovery and Resilience Agency, Shane Stone, in an interview with Nine Entertainment rightly said that flood plain

development should end, but then destroyed his sensible point by victim blaming, as if those at risk are somehow responsible for their plight. ‘You’ve got people who want to live among the gum trees – what do you think is going to happen? Their house falls in the river and they say it’s the government’s fault,’ he said. ‘Australians need to have an honest conversation about where and how people build homes. The taxpayer and the ratepayer cannot continue to pick up the bill for these huge, catastrophic damage events.’

“This was a transparent attempt to shift the media attention away from the agencies’ failure and to place the responsibility for flood damage on the shoulders of people least able to defend themselves. Many of those homeowners purchased their homes long before climate chaos was an evident reality, and certainly without their council informing them of the scale of risks they might face. Many of these towns have histories of more than 100 years. The responsibility for those homes being newly in a catastrophic flood or fire zone remains at the feet of government who failed to take the changing climate seriously decades ago, when there was still time to reduce harm.”

And here she makes the crucial point that the elites in every industrialized nation on Earth are missing or simply do not care about.

“Those of us ‘in the gum trees’ are communities surrounding the farmers who put food on tables and fibre on backs. We are the teachers, and doctors, and nurses,

and firefighters, and retail store workers who make rural life possible. We are the regions who feed and clothes the millions sequestered with assumed safety within the metropolis. The arrogance of Stone's statement, especially at such a fragile moment for so many individuals, is astonishing."

The truth is that the working class, those of us who keep things going, are considered lower life forms, incapable of intelligence, merely a whining impediment to the superior intelligence and rationality of those in the bureaucracies (of whatever sort). And so, Prideaux comes face to face with what those of us on the front lines are forced to come to, sooner or later. We are on our own.

In many respects this is the hardest truth to face. And I am unsure how to convey the emotional and existential impact of it even in a review as long as this one. There literally is a physical, emotional, and spiritual tearing that occurs inside the self as the bonds that connect us to exterior systems are broken. The damage is real and as Gerson found in his work with holocaust survivors, not all the people who lived survived. The impact of this realization guts the interior self, leaves one adrift. And we who have gone through it experience "a tear in the fabric of reality." Once that happens, individuals are forced to rebuild their internal world one difficult step at a time. It begins with seeing and accepting the truth. As Prideaux comments . . .

"Once I had dismantled the protective brick wall in my mind, a painful truth was exposed. It is already too late to save the world as we know it. The tools we have developed are designed for a time already past. The fire revealed that no level of physical protection can defend an ecosystem from extreme climate events. . . .

There is no safety in this space. So, I stare at these reflections, and discover the pain I am feeling is because it hurts to let go. I am letting go of everything I had, everything I thought I was, everything I thought I knew.”

And, as she has found . . .

“In life-defining moments you discover there are few places to lean upon. Despite your profession, class, or monetary worth, despair creeps in. With each choice you contemplate, strong emotions propel you to either drastic new heights or onto a cliff’s edge from which there is no return.”

Helpless, she and her community watch as the bureaucracy actively turns back to the very procedures and behaviors that were found to not work to begin with.

“We are an island isolated by our own short-sighted imagination of what can happen. What is perhaps more shocking to me is that since the fires, there has been no visible self-assessment of what went wrong and what to do next time. There are no visible steps being taken to plan for the future, let alone to even discuss what that future looks like. Our council sadly, has slipped back to a focus on ‘rubbish and roads’, following the lead of a limp and ineffective State Government-led recovery process that has focused most of its effort on government agencies, and not helping the community to adapt for the future. Our

council has abrogated any preparedness leadership, leaving it to manifest in the community at large.”

And finally she says this . . .

“A broken bureaucracy is one thing. There is something deeper missing in the mix that also worries me. The National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (NSDR) from 2011 and everything that follows it, seems to assume that government’s role before a disaster is to educate the community about resilience—as if telling us to be bushfire-safe or to take care around fast-moving water is the limit of their responsibility. I see little evidence of genuinely strategic, high-level intervention by governments to direct Australia’s infrastructure and communities towards resilience, especially conversation around how critical rural communities are for food security, let alone biodiversity conservation. There are few plans to mitigate future risk.”

So, she becomes a heretic and takes the final, difficult step in her undomestication, and writes, “Maybe fuel load management or flood mitigation should be in our hands. Maybe climate chaos adaptation should be under our control.” This, of course, does not go down well with either the bureaucracies or the legacy conservation societies . . .

“The rift between conservationists and the farming communities also grows

deeper. Both sides are being bloodyminded and neither wants to hear the other, but it must be said the conservation sector has harmed its reputation at a significant level by focusing, wholesale and blindly, on the recovery of a few iconic wildlife species, while the surrounding community that fought the flames to protect those same species is still in deep pain. The phenomenal sums of money raised for conservation work are staggering and many, many times greater than the human community has received. The other factor that is unsettling is the various committees and processes that were launched to effectively guide the rebuilding process for the community, without the community being invited into the tent, including those who had been directly impacted by the fire. Over time I've come to understand that mostly these processes spent their time deciding how government agencies should direct their programmes. It was about infrastructure, and mental health services, and national parks, and roads. It wasn't about the community—about who we were then and who we needed to become. It was focused on how government agencies could shuffle their budgets around to do what they were always charged with doing.”

Further . . .

“And herein is, perhaps, the biggest of the dangerous divisions. The community is asked to stretch further and harder every time there is a major fire event, to a point where the sinews of muscles break, yet the government coffers remain

comfortably closed. Equipment in remote regions remain old and tired, prone to frequent breakage, and there are insufficient spare parts at hand. The well-heeled, elected-few feel none of this pain. The community is so beaten and worn, we've lost sight of the fact that trucks, and tracks, and equipment are not favours provided to us by a benevolent uncle. They are our resources and our needs. They are paid for by our taxes, and represent our rights for safety."

Prideaux is a highly experienced climate activist but until the fires impacted her lived life she was blind, as she revealingly tells us, to what it really means to people on the ground. As the days and weeks progressed she found herself moving further into self-reliance and further away from trusting or relying on any government agency or NGO to solve what we are all facing.

"We are a community who faces grave changing climate impacts, without the autonomy to adapt to these impacts because we are shackled to a political system that does not respect our community. Our lack of autonomy is demonstrated in the cascading failures I've already outlined. At no stage does anyone ask us what we want and who we want to become. The reports released by our state government speak to them and their processes, not to us and what we need. With the benefit of hindsight, I can see the lack of respect begins in the early stages of recovery. I have detailed our journey in the previous chapters and I am watching it happen all again in the 2022 catastrophic floods."

And so . . .

“I have come to recognise that starting that vitally important community discussion means understanding how all our problems relate to each other, how we can take control of our future and what that control will mean. We have to unpick the wicked Gordian knot by ourselves. We have to reorient ourselves to respond to our long-term collective interests so that this tragedy can be overcome. We need to collectively accept the inevitability of disaster; to understand our limitations, improve our existing capabilities, and develop innovative, creative solutions well ahead of future events. ‘Loss can be planned for better, or ignored for worse.’”

Because of all this, it is clear that . . .

“To change our status quo, we need to be prepared to step outside the system. To chase clarity about the reality of our situation and then take the necessary steps to protect our future. Think for just a moment about how much of society is built on a foundation of rules, regulations, and economic capacity that directs who can do what and when. I’ve already expanded on the example of farms that must submit costly, complex, scientific applications to seek approval to conduct controlled winter burns to reduce fuel loads on their properties. Forestry is likewise constrained. Our local council, that barely has enough funds to collect our rubbish,

manage our road surfaces, and act as the approval body for the State government building regulations, is responsible for management of the same in the vegetation so beloved by our tourists and conservationists, that snakes around the island in a connected mosaic of roadside corridors and habits. The system of mitigation threats is so deeply bureaucratic and centralised in its thinking, that neither farms, or forestry, or our local agencies have the money, skills, or headspace to seek, then plan, and execute the blindingly obvious tasks of reducing threats and protecting biodiversity. As a result, year in and year out, wildfire mitigation does not get done. And while we grumble about this failing, we do nothing about it because we remain captured inside the systems ourselves. And, during a fire, there are rules about who can be where. Fire trucks must obey their chain of command, even when the directions of that chain are clearly, obviously wrong. To veer off and do what they know is right risks criminal responsibility falling on their heads. The legendary farm fire units, sitting as mavericks outside that command system are a secret weapon employed and cherished by our homegrown firefighting force. They are nimble and go where larger fire trucks cannot. But here is a deep secret laid bare. Most of the farm fire fighters are also our professional fire fighters, active in their own units on the days they have been rostered off from their firefighting duties. Most took no more than two or three days of rest throughout the full two months of the fire. Yet, to my knowledge, not one farm fire unit was consulted in the two Government enquiries about this fire season. Because, the system doesn't really want them there."

The change that Prideaux is speaking of comes from shifting human orientation from top down systems to individuals and communities that live on the affected lands. It comes as well from the decision to make Earth and landscape dominant and human beings and behavior subordinate to that larger and much older system. The Australian fire revealed what indigenous and long-term farming communities have long known, that we must work in concert with the land, that local peoples are responding to complex ecological communications which differ from landscape to landscape (that there is no one size fits all way of responding to what is happening), and that there must be people who can understand the language of the place in which they live so that when the time comes for a prescribed burn, it is exactly the right time for it and no other. Only those who have made their peace with the ecological realities of this planet can do this. But it takes training, years of it, from grandfather to father to son. From grandmother to mother to daughter.

“Together we should develop a road map that has no concern for the boundaries of tenure and fencelines, or political alignments and the power-plays of government agencies a world away. Instead, our road map should respond to rivers and gullies, to wind and to rainfall. It can protect what we value from tools and crops, to trees and creeklines. It captures all the expressions of our community and the wisdom held in its many forms. It could be a plan with bold frankness that identifies our vulnerability, like health, or income, or food security. It could stand on the shoulders of our inherent strength like firefighting lore, hard

physical labour, and a community that fixes and makes things, that experiments and tries. It need not cut us off from the world, but empower us to face that world on the foundation of our internal strength.”

As she continues . . .

“I’ve spent hours wandering around in my mind in the weeks and months between bouts of writing. Understanding we are a community who faces grave changing climate impacts, without the autonomy to adapt to these impacts because we are shackled to a political system that does not respect our community, it’s been difficult to pin down a solution until I reached this final mile. When asked what we do to protect our future, in a hundred different ways, my community told me three things: We must control our own destiny. We are entering a period of change and we need to think differently. We need to trust each other because alone we are condemned. I am at that end point now and their voices come forward with clarity. I believe they are right.”

Prideaux knows what it is like to be on the front lines and she’s made the difficult journey from dependence to reclaiming her and her community’s autonomy. She has become what she calls, “radically local.”

“The time for pretty words and hollow targets is over. Communities must adapt to

survive and save what we can before it is too late. We have experienced the beginning of the climate change curve and we cannot bequest this hell to future generations. . . . We are not safe. We now live in a climate-changed world and none of the rules from before apply. But we are learning our landscape anew and charting a course of becoming radically local.”

And she is quite clear, as I and so many others on the front lines are, that what Prideaux calls “hopium” must be abandoned as the addictive drug it is. We *must* see the world as it is now, the bureaucracies for what they are, our domestication for what it is, and recognize that those who live on, know, and love the land are the ones who understand most clearly how to work with it when responding to climate change.

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As you most likely know, it is very unusual for a review to go on at this length. It is also very unusual for a review to quote from the book in this depth. Believe me, I wanted to include more. Prideaux is so honest and her writing so powerful and the knowledge she has of the territory we are in so deep, that it has been difficult to not go on at more length. To make it clearer, the passages I have quoted here are just a few of the highlights, the book is filled with them. It is filled with something that used to be called wisdom, something that our current world has little interest in. But wisdom is an important and crucial element of human communities. And it is only from deep, sustained, integrated grief that wisdom can emerge.

Allowing Prideaux's entry to my deeper self, well, her book lives inside me now as do her stories and her bravery and her hard won wisdom. It has made my life better.

One of the reasons her book has impacted me so strongly is that as I write this we are ourselves surrounded by fire in our beloved Gila wilderness and forest. Our homes, too, are under threat. Unlike Australia we don't have such a large volunteer firefighting force. Nor do we have as strong a community. And like so many of the fires in Australia, the worst ones in New Mexico were created by the forest service doing controlled burns during the hot, windy season of the year and, well, as they say, things just got out of hand. The Forest Service did not wait, as they had been urged to do by those who lived there, until the late summer monsoons had soaked the land and the winds had calmed. And as with the Black Summer Fires in Australia homes, lives, businesses, ways of life centuries old, have been lost. We, too, find the government bureaucracies using a dissociated language, empty of any human qualities. Each group tells a different story to those of us worried about our homes and lives. And most of the stories they tell are inaccurate to the situation those of us on the ground are experiencing. Our voices, as is true of those in Australia, don't count.

So far, the Black Fire in the Gila Wilderness near our home doesn't have a found source. But as it grows ever closer the lack of usable information from the Forest Service continues to escalate. When we point that out, we are told we are attacking "the brave men and women out fighting the fires." And despite our very loud urging, they never did close the forest to camping. As far as we could tell they kept it open for the tourist season, inviting as they did so more campfires in a region already far too dry. (A neighbor recently roused a camper from his tent in the middle of the night. Nearby he'd left a campfire burning as he slept. His response? "What fire

restriction?”)

Despite the Forest Service’s gaslighting and linguistic games we continue holding its reps feet to the fire. The expression on their faces when the bovine herd known as the public turns on them reveals a rationalist bureaucracy whose members don’t really know what to do. They just won’t give up the appearance of being in control.

My forty years of activism for the implementation of Earth supportive corporate and government behavior, has led me, as it has led Margi Prideaux, to the uncomfortable realization that if we wait on rationalist bureaucratic systems we are doomed. The solution of course is to turn to the individual genius of people on the ground who know what is needed and know how to do it. Earth’s ecological orientation has always been from the bottom up, never top down. Earth systems demand accommodation to their ecological reality. In other words they demand adaptation and if there is one thing that bureaucratic systems can’t do is adapt.

I sincerely thank Margi Prideaux for writing this book; the world’s people need it. I need it.

Stephen Harrod Buhner is the bestselling author 24 books focused on Earth ecology and sustainable habitation of our planet. Among them is *Earth Grief: The Journey Into and Through Ecological Loss* as well as a BBC environmental book of the year *The Lost Language of Plants*. Stephen is a Fellow of Schumacher College in the UK and was recently honored with the McKenna Academy Distinguished Natural Philosopher Award for 2022. He lives in the United States in New Mexico, deep in the forests of the Gila.