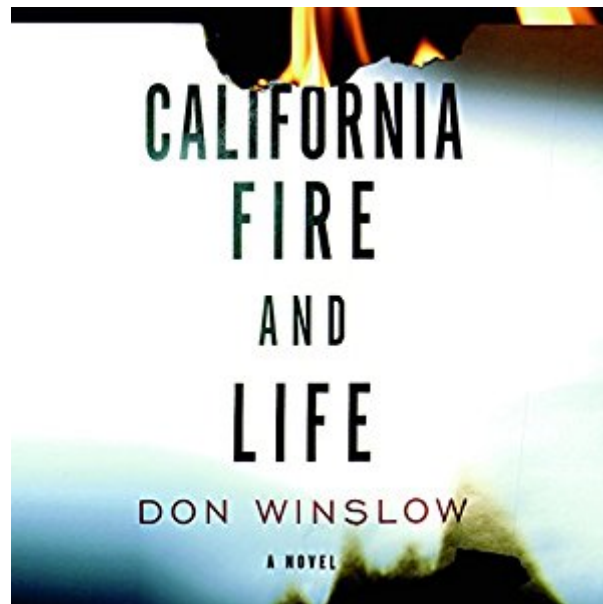


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California Fire And Life



Synopsis

Jack Wade, a claims adjuster for California Fire and Life Mutual Insurance Company, is one of the best arson investigators around. He's a man who knows fire, who can read the traces it leaves behind like a roadmap. When he's called in to examine an unusual claim, the tracks of the fire tell him that something's wrong. So wrong that he violates his own cardinal rule - "You don't get personal, you don't get emotional. Whatever you do, you don't get involved" - and plunges into the case. Real estate mogul Nicky Vale's house is one of the most valuable properties on this stretch of the Southern California gold coast - large, luxurious, crammed with antiques, set on a nice piece of land with a perfect ocean view. After a disastrous blaze tears through a wing of the house, it's only normal that Vale would file an insurance claim. But a \$3 million claim is rarely normal, especially not when it's filed within hours of the horrific death of the owner's young and beautiful wife. The County Sheriff's Department investigator, Brian "Accidentally" Bentley, has declared the fire, well, accidental - caused by Mrs. Vale's passing out in bed with a bottle of vodka and a lit cigarette - although a careful look at the evidence points to something more sinister. When Jack begins his investigation, he draws on his skill, experience and sheer stubbornness to uncover the truth of what's going on, but each step leads him further into a situation that's becoming increasingly dangerous. Soon arson is the least of Jack's worries, as the case grows to involve the Russian mob, Vietnamese gangs, real estate scams, counterfeiting and corporate corruption. In addition, Jack's forced to confront his own ghosts, including a fatal professional error, and to cope with the sudden reentry into his life of the best thing that ever happened to him: Letitia del Rio, a Sheriff's deputy whose bombshell looks are exceeded only by her smarts and guts.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Great start and early pacing, but too many coincidences and the finish feels like he ran out of time to get the manuscript to the publisher. It is a little hard to critique some of the flaws without giving away some key plot twists, but part of the problem is that the plot has more twists than a box of Red Vines... And one of the key plot twists becomes obvious to the reader long before the protagonist figures it out. The novel starts out well. The background is filled in well, and Winslow obviously spent a lot of time in a Fire Academy to get all the details (all of which I found fascinating). Things move well from there to about 2/3rds of the way through, when coincidences have piled up until the story is groaning under the weight of disbelief. In the last pages of the book, a veritable maelstrom of intersecting plot twists and the final resolution is just too hard to swallow. I love most of his novels, particularly his SoCal/Mexico drug life and cartel stories. This one could have been better had it stayed with what looked like the primary story through the first half, and found a more believable resolution (good or bad). I would still recommend it for the insights into arson, fire behaviors, and some interesting insights into some Russian Mob history.

I learnt a lot about fires and about claims handling. The book is definitely a page turner. First I thought that the plot was rather unrealistic. However, I consulted with a friend of mine, a retired claims adjuster, who confirmed that the author was not inventing things. As per him, "Actually that book was pretty accurate in all respects, from how to investigate a fire loss to the interesting people whether agents, brokers, or company management. I really found no real fiction in it sadly". What I disliked very much was the primitive and one-dimensional language the author used, not only for the characters involved - they all speak the same vernacular, including the Russian general who addressed his fellow Russian as "dude" - but also for telling the story. No graduation, no differentiation. Result: an interesting book, told in a very crude language

I found California Fire and Life to be at times fascinating and at times kind of silly. The hero, Jack Wade, seems to go out of his way to do the wrong thing, over and over again. For example, he's offered a second chance to spend his life with a sexy Latina, and punts. The passages laying out the nuts and bolts of investigating a suspicious fire were really interesting and well written. The 30

pages or so which were supposed to be the villain's backstory were over-the-top violent and not integral to the plot. And at the climax of the book, the villain, Nicky Vale, goes on a page-and-a-half rant/confession worthy of a Bond villain. The fiery conclusion is tailor-made for Jerry Bruckheimer's next big dumb summer movie.

Great read by the Master, Don Winslow. Follows an insurance investigator who uncovers a murder when the police see an accidental fire. Great character development, a bad guy you love to hate and a good guy you love to root for. And the California setting is Winslow's hallmark. He creates a great sense of place and the characters are fully fleshed and believable.

Having just finished reading Michael Connolly's groundbreaking "Lincoln Lawyer", I thought I'd pretty much tapped out my stash of superlatives in book reviews. Then I picked up "California Fire and Life" - and let me tell you, if you looked up "blockbuster" in the dictionary, a picture of Don Winslow holding a copy of this book would pretty much sum it up. Jack Wade is the stereotypical Southern California Zen surfer dude, though while pushing forty, an aging one. But he is no slacker. The ace claims adjuster for the fictional California Fire and Life, Jack possesses an uncompromised work ethic and speaks fluently the language of fire. When a multi-million dollar cliff-top home burns, taking the young mother and wife with it, Wade gets the job of confirming that the fire was in fact accidental before writing the big checks. Jack meets homeowner and less-than-grieving widower Nicky Vale, aka Diaziatnik Valeshin, a Russian immigrant who took full advantage of the American dream, transforming himself from penniless cab driver to multimillionaire real estate developer over a short couple of decades. The sheriff's department has ruled the fire accidental, Cal Fire and Life is ready to pay the claim, but the maverick Wade sees the evidence differently. Convinced that the fire was arson and that Nicky is guilty of murdering his young wife, Wade takes on the system, and is engulfed in a fiery orgy of chainsaw-toting Russian mobsters, corrupt cops, Vietnamese gangs, outlaw bikers, scams, cons, and deception. While this may sound like central casting for the standard LA crime novel, Winslow uses these usual players effectively as props to back this classic tale of the good Jack vs. the evil Nicky and his creepy "Mother Russia". Winslow writes in the easy ebb and flow of SoCal vernacular, but where the "likes", "goes", and "dudes" could get old soon, Winslow keeps a watchful eye on the annoyance meter, resulting in a refreshingly hip and irreverent style that is all his own. Fans of Lee Child will see a lot of Lee Child's stoic loner Jack Reacher in this Jack, but unlike the nomadic Reacher, Wade likes Southern California just fine, and is content to remain there as long as the wild coast stays that way - undeveloped. Aside from a clever plot and

characters able to stand up to the engaging dialogue, Winslow backs his story with an authoritative and highly educational tutorial on the science of fire and fire forensics, adding depth while building credibility. As with the finest authors, Winslow begins his tale with a number of seemingly disconnected threads, drops obscure hints along the way, and in the end succeeds spectacularly in whacking the reader with a powerful climax as rich in irony as it is in suspense. In short, this is about as good as crime fiction gets; one of those books that you'll wish just didn't end, for you know it will be a long time till you find an equal. Well done, Mr. Winslow!

I don't remember ever starting a novel I "couldn't put down," although this comes about as close as any. It's a great story about fire and arson, an engaging plot with well-developed (and some likable) characters. It's smart, with some detailed science about fire and arson investigations. Plus a satisfying number of laugh-out-loud moments. It doesn't end as I had expected it to, or admittedly as I had hoped, but it ends satisfactorily.

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