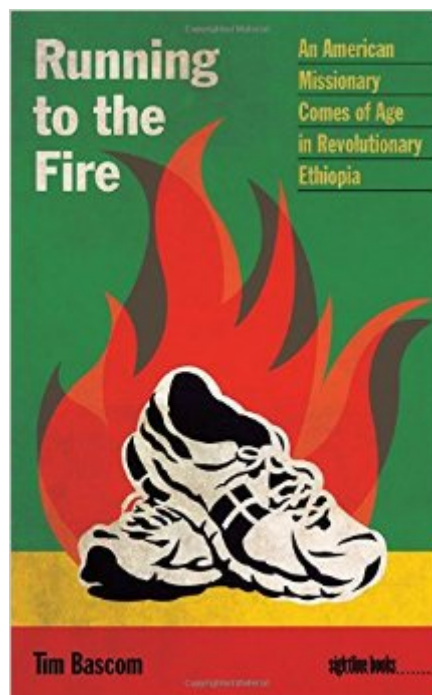


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Running To The Fire: An American Missionary Comes Of Age In Revolutionary Ethiopia (Sightline Books)



Synopsis

In the streets of Addis Ababa in 1977, shop-front posters illustrate Uncle Sam being strangled by an Ethiopian revolutionary, parliamentary leaders are executed, student protesters are gunned down, and Christian mission converts are targeted as imperialistic sympathizers. Into this world arrives sixteen-year-old Tim Bascom, whose missionary parents have brought their family from a small town in Kansas straight into Colonel Mengistu's Marxist "Red Terror." Here they plan to work alongside a tiny remnant of western missionaries who trust that God will somehow keep them safe. *Running to the Fire* focuses on the turbulent year the Bascom family experienced upon traveling into revolutionary Ethiopia. The teenage Bascom finds a paradoxical exhilaration in living so close to constant danger. At boarding school in Addis Ababa, where dorm parents demand morning devotions and forbid dancing, Bascom bonds with other youth due to a shared sense of threat. He falls in love for the first time, but the young couple is soon separated by the politics that affect all their lives. Across the country, missionaries are being held under house arrest while communist cadres seize their hospitals and schools. A friend's father is imprisoned as a suspected CIA agent; another is killed by raiding Somalis. Throughout, the teenaged Bascom struggles with his faith and his role within the conflict as a white American Christian missionary's child. Reflecting back as an adult, he explores the historical, cultural, and religious contexts that led to this conflict, even though in doing so he is forced to ask himself questions that are easier left alone. Why, he wonders, did he find such strange fulfillment in being young and idealistic in the middle of what was essentially a kind of holy war?

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Customer Reviews

Talk about a front-row seat for a revolution! Tim Bascom reluctantly left Kansas at the beginning of his high school years to move with his family back to Ethiopia, where his father, a Baptist missionary, would serve as a doctor. In *Running to the Fire*, Tim reflects, decades later, on his experiences there. Living in Addis Ababa, going to a boarding school for missionary kids, he was somewhat protected. Through the fence, though, and while on outings, he saw the fruits of the Marxist uprising in the checkpoints, the dead victims on the road, the changes in the streets. *Running to the Fire* is a nice mix of Ethiopian history, reflections on the missionary life, and of coming of age as a Christian. To Bascom, the verdict is mixed. The Marxists were pretty bad, but in some ways the Orthodox church's persecution of other Christians was worse. He appreciated his parents, the sacrifices they made, and seemed to admire their work, but he ponders Western arrogance and the sometimes negative impact of Western missions in the developing world. And his own faith--well, it's clear that the legalism of his upbringing pushed him away. He is still a Christian, but exhibits a healthy skepticism: "Skepticism sweeps over me when people seem to have an unwarranted conviction about what God wants--what exactly is God's desire or plan. . . . I continue to doubt when others act convinced by their own special revelation." I would encourage anyone involved in foreign missions to pick up *Running to the Fire*, especially if they have kids on the field, and even more especially if they are in a more legalistic, conservative tradition. I'm not a missionary, but I appreciated his perspective as a teen in a rigorous religious tradition.

I received an advance review copy of Tim Bascom's second memoir and was gripped by its central question: *Why do some people run to fire?* His family flies into Ethiopia's ill-fated communist revolution from tranquil Kansas in the 1970s just as other expats flee. Compassion, heroism, faith, doubt and adventure interplay as Bascom wrestles with why his medical missionary family returned during Ethiopia's most tragic human rights turn of events—one that claimed .25 million famine deaths. Yet what triumphs is Bascom's own life among worlds lived in 3D hyper-drive—and in reverse—as his adult self interjects analysis 30 years later. Telling his story as one trying to understand all sides, Bascom entangles us in complex questions without easy resolutions. At boarding school in Ethiopia, gunfire in the streets shatters the night and Bascom realizes people are risking death for what they believed. I loved his experimental address to readers: "What would have that much value for you?" I enjoyed the history and the telling. Yet

Bascom is at his best when he bares his soul: his periodic doubt juxtaposed with his father's bold faith; his learning to hunt and kill birds versus his father's apparent willingness to die. His cold daily devotions versus the hot, rebellious devotions of imprisoned Christians. Throughout, I was buoyed by Bascom's lush, poetic language, and lifted with him on a beautiful peak in Bulki, south Ethiopia, when he finally reaches his home village. Adding meaning and relevance, as though digesting the story with us, Bascom's older voice breaks in to extend the experience and linger over its personal, intellectual, spiritual and historical depths.

RUNNING TO THE FIRE, by Tim Bascom. The subtitle of this memoir is a mouthful; unfortunately it promises more than it delivers - "An American Missionary Comes of Age in Revolutionary Ethiopia." Because Tim Bascom was not a missionary. He was the adolescent son of Evangelical missionaries. And even though he characterizes himself as a 'volunteer' for "this heart-splitting tour of duty," I got the distinct impression that he and his younger brother were simply carried along as part of the family with not a lot of say in where they were going. And because of the increasingly hostile atmosphere created by the ongoing Marxist revolution, that "tour of duty" only lasted seven or eight months, before all the missionary types were evacuated from Addis Ababa and the outlying missions. It was a struggle for me to even finish this overly melodramatic, often sentimentalized look at a couple years in the life of teenage Tim Bascom. Because it did seem that his story was, in the end, much ado about nothing much, at least for him. I suspect his parents and their adult peers may have been in some real danger at times, but Bascom and his fellow dependents, or "missionary kids" - MK's - as they called themselves, were for the most part cloistered away in schools and dormitories of walled compounds and had very little contact with the natives and the sporadic ongoing shooting and violence that was, I have no doubt, gripping Ethiopia in those years (the 1970s). And I couldn't help but wonder, if the parents really were concerned for their children's safety, why didn't they leave them at home, back in the U.S.

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