

A Review of Fire Weather by John Vaillant (Alfred A. Knopf 2023)

This is an excellent book. It tells the story of the great forest fire at Fort McMurray, Alberta, in May 2016, which may be the hugest fire, and the most catastrophic natural disaster in Canadian history. It is a Canadian story, happening in Alberta, that he connects to the worsening global climate crisis and global problems such as the earth's rise in temperature, the warming of the oceans, increasing global consumption of gasoline and oil, and to the effects on our health and agriculture and industry. This book is one of the most important current environmental studies, frequently quoted and alluded to in places like The Globe and Mail and The New Yorker. Fire Weather reads like a novel. It tells the hour-by-hour drama as the fire at Fort McMurray grew and gathered force so suddenly. Sensors at NASA detected heat so huge that they at first thought the cause was a nuclear detonation. Vaillant knows his science. The book is exhaustively researched. It recounts how a perfect storm of causes – drought and very dry timber, dry cold Arctic air, understandably inadequate preparedness (a fire this size had never been seen before) and the weather (hurricane like wind) created by the fire produced this catastrophe.