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*On the Fireline: Living and Dying With Wildland Firefighters.* 2007. Matthew Desmond. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 369 pages. \$24.00 (cloth).

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Matthew Desmond's *On The Fireline* is an ethnography of wildland firefighters driven by the perplexing sociological question: Why do some risk in order to keep others safe? The book is beautifully written and theoretically sophisticated with truly surprising findings. In this review, I summarize Desmond's book and describe my experience using it as a capstone text in *Introduction to Sociology* that addresses four components of the sociological endeavor: What is a sociological question? What is one way we do sociological research? How can sociological theory guide us? And what's the pay-off of a distinctly sociological inquiry?

Desmond's research questions are propelled by a simple social fact: wildland firefighting is a dangerous job held disproportionately by a particular segment of the U.S. population—rural men (in some areas disproportionately American Indian)—who risk their lives in order to protect the lives and possessions of others. “Certain bodies,” he writes, “deemed precious, are protected, while others, deemed expendable, protect.” His questions address social psychological, cultural, and institutional dimensions in his exploration of why some people, and not others, choose to risk their lives as firefighters: What is their subjective experience of risk? How are their subjective experiences related to wider U.S. cultural norms? And how does the U.S. Forest Service affirm or disturb these subjectivities and the cultural norms of which they are a part?

Desmond's methodology is an unusually compelling facet of his book. Desmond served for several summers as a wildland firefighter in Arizona and, therefore, is able to bring more than just sociological theory, a tape recorder, and a notebook to the field. He also brings his body—as a trained firefighter—which he puts back on the line in order to understand risk intellectually, emotionally, and physically. (For instructors hoping to incorporate the corporeal turn into their courses, Desmond's book is particularly apt.) If desired, an instructor can assign his methodological appendix which discusses the differences between “going native” (studying something initially unfamiliar) and “going alien” (studying something with which you are intensely familiar) as well as his anxiety-ridden experience of asking his subjects to become his critics (he attains feedback on his arguments from each firefighter).

Desmond interweaves thick description and smart analysis in a way that shows students exactly how sociological insights are derived from bringing theory and life together. For example, Desmond convincingly describes what it feels like, literally, to “do” sociology as he transports readers into the boots of the sociologist-cum-firefighter. This helps students understand the operation of habitus, and all that it implies, in a way that they would not otherwise. When students read Desmond's meticulous descriptions of his own body working and the relationship between his work and his personal history, they gain a deeper sense of the ways in which their

own bodies have been shaped by social forces. Comparing the bodily knowledge that comes with a lifetime of working with nature to, for example, the bodily knowledge that allows students to drive, type, make music, or play sports, helps them to appreciate just how specialized their own bodies are and the way in which the advantages and disadvantages of their backgrounds translate into real advantages and disadvantages in society.

Perhaps most powerfully, Desmond's book illustrates the pay-off of good sociological inquiry. His surprising findings dramatically complicate both lay and sociological understandings of why men risk. Desmond's crew saw themselves as neither heroes (who take risks on purpose for the greater good) nor danger-seekers (bent on proving masculinity) because they do not believe fire to be dangerous. That is, these wildland firefighters find no discomfort or joy in taking on a risky job because they simply do not believe it to be risky. This is because his crew of firefighters believe themselves to embody a masculinity specifically related to country life, which they understand to be in opposition to both heroic and danger-seeking masculinities. As country boys, they have grown up learning to manipulate and predict nature as part of their daily lives. Fire, then, is just one more part of nature that they can manipulate and predict (as I will describe below, an ethic that is reinforced by their host organization). Desmond writes: "...my crewmembers are much more than confident on the fireline. They are comfortable."

Most students find the firefighters' belief that their job carries little risk to be, frankly, crazy. But it is quite easy here to ask students to think a bit harder about areas in their own life where risk is denied through a belief in competence. For many students, for example, driving includes a commitment to the idea that if they are good drivers (alert to others' mistakes and able to effectively manipulate their own vehicle), they largely eliminate the risks of driving. By objectifying a world foreign to most of them—wildland firefighting—students are better able to objectify their own word. That is, they are able to understand how studying firefighters illuminates *social* facts, not just facts about firefighters.

Desmond then turns to the institution in which firefighters are embedded, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), in order to account for the way in which the institution cultivates and capitalizes on the country boys' belief in their ability to control and predict nature. Desmond finds that the USFS recruits men from rural families and schools and creates an environment in which these men fit (in a Bourdieuan sense). Thus, when men enter the fire service, they often do so with a lifetime of skills that translate well in firefighting and work alongside men with a similar background. Together, they create a familiar and comfortable environment in which the habits and skills they already have are both valued and valuable.

The USFS also reinforces the belief that fire is safe with a persistent emphasis on the importance of individual competence. Through analyses of training manuals, observations of discussions, and fatality reports, Desmond demonstrates how the USFS reinforces the notion that all deaths must be caused by an individual's failure to understand and predict his natural environment. Amazingly, the cause of death is never determined to be fire, but the mistakes of the dead. That is, the institution blames the victim. USFS guidelines for the writing of the Factual Report (written up following any death on the fireline) state:

“Environmental causes *occasionally* are the cause of an accident. A lightning strike is the classic example. When this occurs, *look for human errors* that may have exposed the employee to the environmental hazard” (p. 248, emphasis by Desmond).

For the crew, who by and large accept the organizational imperatives and ideological commitments of the USFS, those who die on the job are, as one firefighter put it, “fuckin’ stupid” (p. 252).

Desmond’s demonstration of the way in which the USFS takes advantage of and reproduces the country boy’s relationship to nature finally brings home for many of my students the fact that all institutions are shaped by ideologies and, by extension, that we all are shaped by cultural contexts in concrete as well as abstract ways. Comparing the USFS to the institution(s) of education in the U.S. makes for a powerful exercise. When students think about how deeply they are invested in the education system (how much they would lose, for example, if grades, degrees, and institutional hierarchies suddenly failed to matter), they understand better how they, just like the firefighters, have taken on the commitments of an institution in which they are embedded and how this shapes their thinking and their behavior. Further, these commitments illustrate why all of us act, at least sometimes, to reproduce the institutions that reward us, even if we do not approve of how those institutions contribute to the reproduction of social inequality.

To conclude, *On the Fireline* illustrates the unique questions, methods, and findings made possible by the sociological imagination and is, thus, an excellent text with which to solidify a semester’s worth of sociological training. Further, because Desmond interweaves compelling narratives, complex theory, and a discussion of methodological rigor, it solidifies students’ understanding of exactly how useful, and fascinating, the sociological lens can be.