

Review: 'Burn' by Jane Fulton Alt

By **Michael Zajakowski**

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In 2007, when photographer Jane Fulton Alt was a Ragdale Foundation fellow in Lake Forest, she happened to observe a controlled prairie fire on the grounds. Captivated and compelled by the consuming power of fire and the billowing smoke, Alt saw great visual potential and made arrangements to accompany restoration ecologists on future burns. What started as an artist's survey of nature's regeneration became an intensely personal journey.

This piece first ran in Printers Row Journal, delivered to Printers Row members with the Sunday Chicago Tribune and by digital edition via email. [Click here to learn about joining Printers Row.](#)

When Alt joined the team that spring, two major events in Alt's life occurred: the birth of her first grandchild, and her sister's diagnosis with cancer. Stunned, Alt poured herself into the work for the next six years, pushing herself toward the smoke and flames, attempting to extract meaning from the floating ash and forbidding heat while pondering the different roads her grandchild and sister were taking.

The result is "The Burn," a collection of clear-eyed observations about life and death that Alt learned by putting herself in the burn's path. "Tears flow as smoke obscures the way," Alt writes. Her sister, Peggy Fulton Heller, died in 2012.

More subjective than her previous documentary projects, Alt's visual eloquence in "The Burn" shifts from intense flames to dense clouds of acrid smoke to capillary ash rising into the sky. She finds beauty, mystery and drama in the process, sometimes called swailing.

In order to survive, prairies must burn or be burned. Seeds buried beneath the black carpet of ash are warmed by the sun and germinate. The burning of old plants enables the growth of new ones. In observing this process over and over, Alt shows us that the state of being, however joyful or sad, is fleeting.

Michael Zajakowski is a Tribune photo editor.

"The Burn"

By Jane Fulton Alt, Kehrer Verlag, 96 pages, \$50

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