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SERENDIPITY AND GOOD READING: A REVIEW ARTICLE

You will find the best stuff in libraries and in life through serendipity. Experience has confirmed that to me time and again.

In the 1950's, I read an account of the adventures of a peculiar little British army unit during World War II in my father's *True* magazine. Years later when I was wandering through a library at Ft. Meade, Maryland, I found *Popski's Private Army* by Vladimir Peniakoff. I realized that the *True* magazine article was an abridgement of the book. I found the book very interesting because I had studied Arabic and Middle Eastern studies in the interim. Before the war, Peniakoff had lived in Cairo and navigated in the desert as a hobby. During the war, he became an expert at mounting commando raids behind German lines. His handpicked team was called *Popski's Private Army* after his nickname. His book is a fascinating account of desert warfare.

In the 1960's, I was stranded in St. Maries, Idaho, for a week while I was waiting for a job with the Forest Service at Red Ives. I wandered into the library to look around. I found *Arsenal of Democracy* by Donald Nelson. That was one of the most interesting books I have ever read. Nelson was a former president of Sears who headed the War Production Board during World War II. He was at the center of the effort to mobilize the economy for war and, therefore, at the center of a gigantic bureaucratic battle over who would get what resources. I learned a lot about government, industry, bureaucratic politics, and World War II. Many years later I stumbled onto a book by a newspaper man who had worked for Nelson at the War Production Board. The book was *The War Lords of Washington* by Bruce Catton. Catton was extremely critical of some of the war lords the WPB came in conflict with, particularly General Lucius Clay and Under Secretary of War Robert Patterson. Catton used his experiences in Washington as a prism through which he viewed the Civil War.

I found another of my very favorite books in the basement of the home of my parents-in-law. It is *Under the Red Sea Sun* by Edward Ellsberg. When the United States entered World War II, Ellsberg, who was a well-known navy salvage expert, was

given the daunting task of salvaging ships scuttled by the Italians in the port of Massawa on the Red Sea. He had to work in terrible heat and humidity. With virtually no equipment, his first job was to salvage machine tools and other equipment. To make matters worse, he had to deal with incompetent bureaucrats who would not pay the native workers he had hired. Ellsberg was a good writer and was very good at blowing his own horn. His account is fascinating. I learned about government, war, salvaging ships, and working under pressure.

Serendipity led me to one particularly valuable book, *The Novelist on Organization & Administration* by Dwight Waldo. I was studying public administration at the University of Georgia. I was looking in the card catalog in the library for another book by Waldo when I found *The Novelist on Organization & Administration*. The analysis in the book is dry, but the lengthy bibliography of administrative novels in it has led me to dozens of interesting books and many excellent authors. After ten years, I am still mining that bibliography for gems.

This takes me to the real subject of this article. Two books listed in Waldo's bibliography are *Fire* and *Storm* by George Rippey Stewart. Stewart was a prolific English professor at University of California, Berkeley. He wrote about a great variety of subjects—including Bret Hart, California history, and American place names and given names—and he wrote novels. His science fiction novel *The Earth Abides* is well-known.

Fire and *Storm* are realistic novels about the interaction of natural phenomena with people. *Fire* is about a fire in a national forest, and *Storm* is about a severe winter storm that strikes California. I was particularly interested in *Fire* because I had worked for the Forest Service as a fire fighter and as a lookout. From what I know about organizations, both accurately reflect human interactions with nature. Also, they are dramatic and informative. In *Fire*, the fire boss has to mobilize forces and equipment to fight the fire and to make the correct tactical decisions about how to fight it. The story turns on the inability of the fire boss to make the correct decision.

In *Storm*, the effects of the storm are widespread—individuals, businesses, and governments—must cope with them. Vast resources must be mobilized to counter the storms' effects and many people have to make very hard decisions. Some people act heroically and some get killed.

As librarians, our duty is to facilitate serendipity by adding books interesting to our patrons. Although they were written in the 1940's, *Fire* and *Storm* are still relevant and interesting to readers in the Northwest. Any kid who wants to work for the Forest Service should read *Fire*. *Storm* would be a good book to read the next time you are snowed in.

I recommend both *Fire* and *Storm* for junior high, high school, public, and college libraries.

Judging from a search of the WLN database, many of the libraries in this area already have both. If you want to add them to your library, they are still available because the University of Nebraska Press has issued them in new trade paperback editions:

Stewart, George Rippey. *Fire: a Novel*.
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press,
1984. [LCCN 83-016885]

_____. *Storm: a Novel*.
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press,
1983. [LCCN 82-16098]

Other books mentioned here are:

Catton, Bruce. *The War Lords of Washington*
New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948. [LCCN
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46-011947]

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the Story of American War Production*.
New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company,
1946. [LCCN 46-006266]

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New York: Random House, 1949.
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& Administration: an Inquiry into the
Relationship between Two Worlds*. Berkeley:
Institute of Governmental Studies, University
of California, 1968. [LCCN: 68-63724]

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