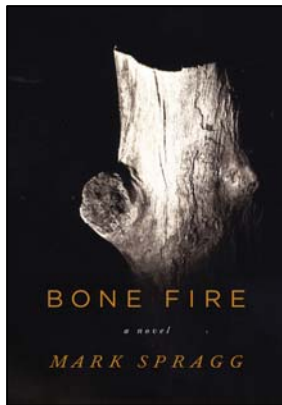


RUSSELL ROWLAND

The Real Fire

Bone Fire
Mark Spragg
Knopf, 2010

The West has an interesting distinction of spawning two strong literary histories. The first, and the one most people associate with the West, is the mythical tradition. These stories, often told by people who weren't raised in the West, romanticize cowboy life, glorify the pioneer spirit and pluck, and feed into the notion that the West is a place that attracts the brave, adventurous outdoorsy types. And although these stories often still capture the imagination of readers all over the world, they no longer represent the West accurately. Thankfully, the real story of the American West has also been told by some of the best writers in this country's history. Willa Cather was bold enough to transform a tradition of describing the West and its people as it is, and spawned other courageous writers like Wallace Stegner, Norman MacLean, Cormac McCarthy and Louise Erdrich. These and so many others have grabbed the baton and told stories about people that are real and alive, dealing with adult problems and situations. They just happen to live in the West.



Among the best of those who continue to carry this banner is Mark Spragg, the author of three novels (*Fruit of Stone*, *An Unfinished Life*, and the recently-released *Bone Fire*), a memoir (*Where Rivers Change Direction*), and a handful of screenplays, including one based on *An Unfinished Life*. Spragg is brave enough to tell a story quietly, without the grandstanding of the worst of Western writers. His characters talk like the people we know, they don't pull a gun or raise their fists at the first hint of conflict, and they show compassion and affection toward the people around them.

In *An Unfinished Life*, Spragg introduced us to an old rancher named Einar Gilykson, a man wracked with grief from the loss of his only child, a son named Griff. Einar was surprised to find Jean, his son's widow, walking up his drive one day...surprised enough that he told her he didn't want to see her. But because Einar was not as hard-hearted as he wanted people to believe, he let Jean stay once he heard her story, and once he realized that the young girl with her, also named Griff, was his granddaughter. *An Unfinished Life* goes on to tell the emotional story of how this man comes to accept these women into his life after spending the isolated years since his son's death caring for his single friend, Mitch Bradley, a man Einar met in the army and who has been disabled for years after being mauled by a bear. With Mitch's help and encouragement, Einar eventually realizes that his resentment toward Jean, who was driving the car when her husband was killed, has done more damage to Einar's own life than to anyone else's. Einar recognizes that his notion of honoring his son was misguided, and although Spragg is way too understated to bring all of these people together around a campfire to celebrate the changes in their lives, the book ends with much hope for all of them. He does an especially masterful job of showing how Einar develops a relationship with his precocious granddaughter Griff.

With *Bone Fire*, Spragg picks up with these same characters ten years later, and we learn that, just as in real life, some of them have fared better than others. Jean has married Crane Curtis, the local sheriff, and developed a fondness for whiskey. Mitch has died, and Griff's devotion to Einar has put her in a position of deciding whether to stay and take care of him, return to college, or travel with her boyfriend Paul, who has been offered an opportunity overseas. Spragg also throws a murder into the mix, but Crane's discovery of a young man who has been shot while cooking meth is not the focal point of the story. Instead, Spragg uses his considerable gifts to bring our attention to the relationships on the periphery of the crime. Although Crane is investigating this murder, the real pressures of his life come in the form of dealing with an alcoholic wife and a diagnosis of ALS, which also killed his grandfather.

Meanwhile, Griff's struggle to decide whether to stay with her grandfather is further complicated by the arrival of Einar's sister, whom he hasn't seen for many years, and who also happens to be a lesbian. We also meet a young boy named Kenneth, Paul's nephew, who displays many of the same stubborn qualities of self-preservation that characterize most of the people in this book. One of the best passages in the novel is when ten-year-old Kenneth decides to return home early from a visit to meet his real father and his new family in Denver. Rather than facing them with news he's worried will hurt them, he leaves in the middle of the night.

He made two sandwiches with the lunchmeat and cheese he found in the refrigerator, stuffing them both into a single Ziploc baggy and slipping that into an outside pocket of his backpack. He got an apple and put that in, too. Then he found the pad and pen by the phone and sat at the kitchen table, thinking about what to write. He wanted them to know he appreciated everything they'd done for him. He thought writing in longhand in pen was better than printing it out on the computer--more personal, like they were friends.

Thank you very much, he wrote. I had a wonderful time. It is a good thing to know that I have a brother and sister, and a spare father and mother. Your house is nice and quiet even though you live in a city. I will have lots of stories to tell from this adventure, and good times to remember. Don't worry because I know how to get home. I paid attention on the trip here. Good-bye, Kenneth

After he writes the note, Kenneth is still not satisfied that he's expressed his gratitude adequately, and he ends up leaving one of his most treasured possessions as a gift. It's gestures like this, the efforts people in this novel make to try and express something, like an old man planting a headstone for his sister's dead lover, that bring us close to these characters.

For a good portion of this novel, the connections between these various storylines appears tenuous, and sometimes even hard to imagine. But Spragg is a craftsman, with the ability to bring out the best in his characters in small moments. Everything that happens in this book feels as if it's pushing us toward some new realization, something important. Moments like Crane going to tell his ex-wife that he's dying before he tells his current wife create questions in the reader's mind that slowly come to light as the rest of the story unfolds. Without beating us over the head with any resounding message, Spragg brings this story to conclusions that are both organic and emotionally satisfying. As with the best of novels, *Bone Fire* doesn't focus on plot to bring some false emotional climax to the story. Instead, it is a long walk with people we care about, because we experience their frustrations and fears, as well as their joys, right along with them. And because Spragg brings us so close to their careful efforts to find some peace in their lives. It's easy to imagine Mr. Spragg seated at his kitchen table, with a fire in his bones, thinking about what to write.