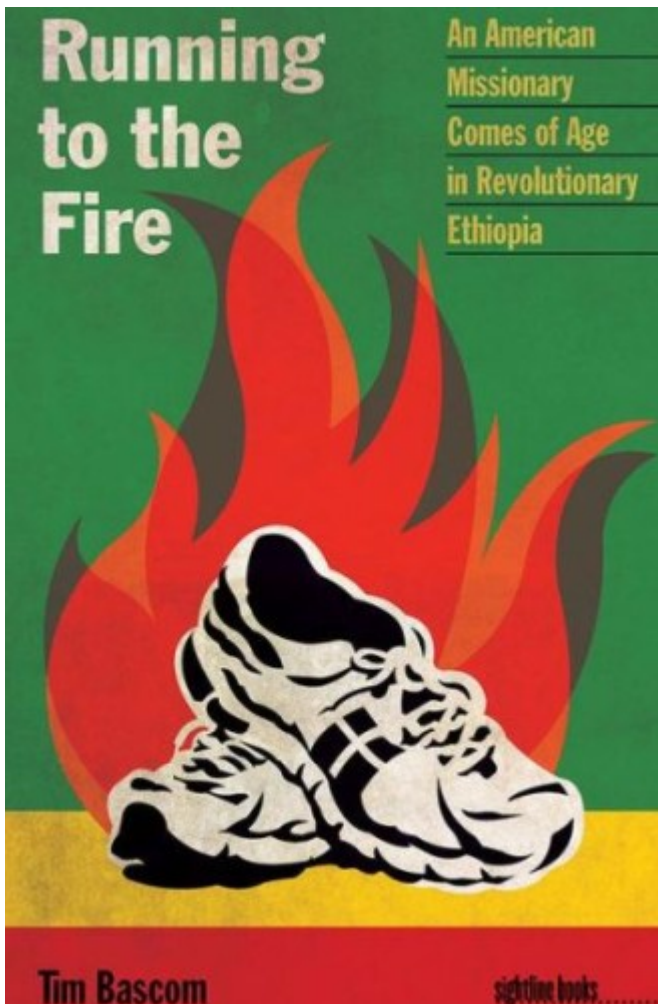


Running to the Fire, by Tim Bascom

reviewed by [Rachel Marie Stone](#) in the [October 28, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Running to the Fire

By Tim Bascom
University of Iowa Press

Like Tim Bascom, I have been both a missionary and a skeptic. I have squirmed uncomfortably in the presence of fellow missionaries' unflappable positivity and their self-assurance in the rightness of their mission. I have regarded their confidence

with both dread and envy: granting the dangers of hubris, it must be wonderful not to be plagued by doubt but to be absolutely persuaded that God smiles on your efforts.

Bascom's memoir, *Running to the Fire*, chronicles his Kansan family's return to Ethiopia just as Colonel Mengistu's Red Terror, and his own teenage years, were heating up. Bascom's parents were medical missionaries, and he spent his early childhood in the country. As a teen and as an adult reflecting on his teens, Bascom, who now directs the creative writing program at Waldorf College in Iowa, has harbored both uncertainty regarding his faith and a thirst for excitement, even danger.

Despite the great material provided by living through a revolution with a teenager's sensibility, and the tension between the religious faith of his parents and the ideas of the revolutionaries, *Running to the Fire* fails to sustain a suspenseful narrative or to open the author's memories to larger and more universal themes—the essential challenge for every writer of memoir. It has a plodding feel; the accumulation of detail supplants any attempt at plot.

Though there are beautifully drawn details of an expat's experience in Africa—the hesitation over taking communion (what parasites might lurk in the cup?), the sound of rain on the green-painted corrugated roof, the knot of fear at military checkpoints—they seem not to have been selected and arranged so as to advance a particular idea or point of view. The reader is left wondering why certain details are included.

Rather than allowing well-chosen details to suggest his meaning, Bascom seems bent on breaking the rule of storytelling by telling, not showing—and sometimes what he tells seems too commonplace to be worth saying. For example, he tells us almost conspiratorially that missionaries are motivated to go to dangerous or difficult places not only by the desire or a sense of obligation to share their faith, but also by their innate attraction to adventure. Well, of course they are. Is there anything shocking or problematic in that?

It's strange and tiresome, too, to read of Bascom's "sustained resentment" toward the rigid rules at the Christian school he attended abroad, and of the "need to apologize for my appalling ethnocentrism." Given other stories detailing horrific suffering and abuse in schools for missionary children, a 40-year-old grudge over

being coerced into early morning devotions seems a bit petty. That the shape of our faith changes as we ourselves change is not surprising; when postevangelical memoirs succeed, they often evince a certain graciousness toward the provincial or legalistic faith of the author's childhood.

Perhaps most frustratingly, though Bascom's father is a medical doctor, we are given scant details of the kind of work he did and how it changed the people he encountered. One can be motivated by appalling ethnocentrism and still improve the quality of life for a large number of people. But the reader has little opportunity to consider the ironies and paradoxes Bascom hints at. By now we are familiar with the abuses and hypocrisies of Western missionaries. What is more interesting is how, despite being wholly human and thus wholly flawed, Western missionaries have done good work.

For all his conflicted feelings and even embarrassment at his parents' calling, Bascom admits throughout the memoir to a "pull back to that turbulent place," where, he says, he felt "most alive," and he says repeatedly that he has felt "inexplicably empty" when safely at home in Iowa. "When we have a cause," he writes, "we live for a reason." He doesn't suggest what that cause or reason should be, but maybe that's part of his point.

Though flawed, *Running to the Fire* grapples with questions of perennial significance.