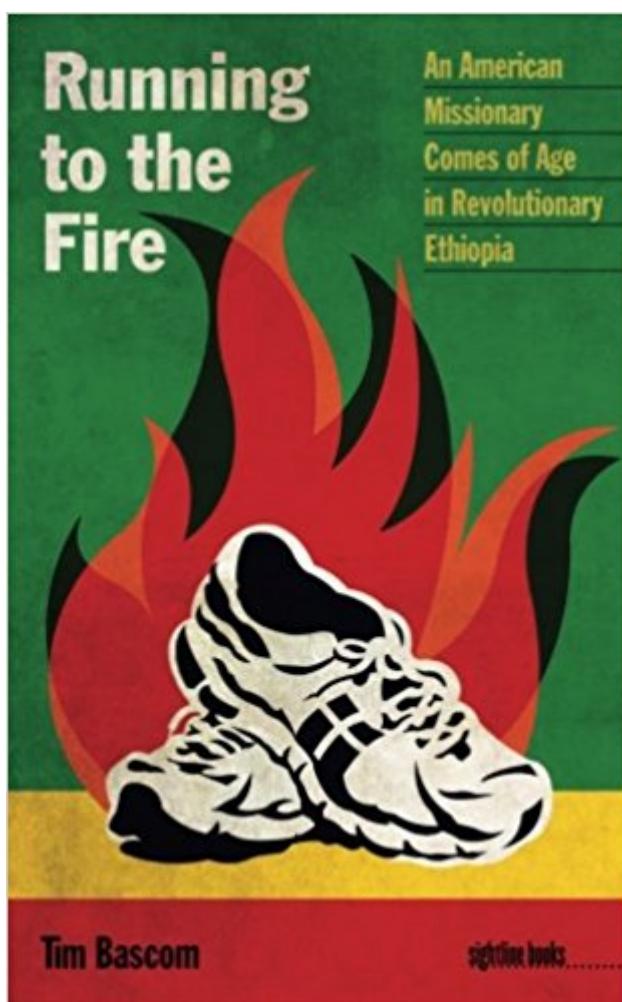


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# Running To The Fire: An American Missionary Comes Of Age In Revolutionary Ethiopia (Sightline Books)



## Synopsis

In the streets of Addis Ababa in 1977, shop-front posters illustrate Uncle Sam being strangled by an Ethiopian revolutionary, parliamentary leaders are executed, student protesters are gunned down, and Christian mission converts are targeted as imperialistic sympathizers. Into this world arrives sixteen-year-old Tim Bascom, whose missionary parents have brought their family from a small town in Kansas straight into Colonel Mengistu's Marxist & Red Terror. Here they plan to work alongside a tiny remnant of western missionaries who trust that God will somehow keep them safe. *Running to the Fire* focuses on the turbulent year the Bascom family experienced upon traveling into revolutionary Ethiopia. The teenage Bascom finds a paradoxical exhilaration in living so close to constant danger. At boarding school in Addis Ababa, where dorm parents demand morning devotions and forbid dancing, Bascom bonds with other youth due to a shared sense of threat. He falls in love for the first time, but the young couple is soon separated by the politics that affect all their lives. Across the country, missionaries are being held under house arrest while communist cadres seize their hospitals and schools. A friend's father is imprisoned as a suspected CIA agent; another is killed by raiding Somalis. Throughout, the teenaged Bascom struggles with his faith and his role within the conflict as a white American Christian missionary's child. Reflecting back as an adult, he explores the historical, cultural, and religious contexts that led to this conflict, even though in doing so he is forced to ask himself questions that are easier left alone. Why, he wonders, did he find such strange fulfillment in being young and idealistic in the middle of what was essentially a kind of holy war?

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In this fascinating, nuanced memoir rife with contrasts and longing, Bascom employs dual voices—one to capture the intensity and uncertainty of his youth in revolutionary 1970s Ethiopia, another to explore his adult ambivalence toward Christian missionaries (like his beloved parents), Evangelical Protestantism, Marxism in Ethiopia, and westerners in Africa.<sup>1</sup> Faith Adiele, author, *The Nigerian-Nordic Girl's Guide to Lady Problems*

Tim Bascom is the author of the novel *Squatters' Rites*, the essay collection *The Comfort Trap*, and the memoir *Chameleon Days: An American Boyhood in Ethiopia*, which won the Bakeless Literary Prize in Nonfiction. Excerpts from *Chameleon Days* won the Editor's Prize from *The Missouri Review* and were included in *The Best American Travel Writing*. Bascom is an MFA graduate of the Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Iowa and has published in an array of literary journals and commercial magazines, including *North American Review*, *Witness*, *Creative Nonfiction*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*. He is currently the Director of Creative Writing at Waldorf College and lives in Forest City, Iowa.

Fascinating read and a balanced look at missionary life.

Talk about a front-row seat for a revolution! Tim Bascom reluctantly left Kansas at the beginning of his high school years to move with his family back to Ethiopia, where his father, a Baptist missionary, would serve as a doctor. In *Running to the Fire*, Tim reflects, decades later, on his experiences there. Living in Addis Ababa, going to a boarding school for missionary kids, he was somewhat protected. Through the fence, though, and while on outings, he saw the fruits of the Marxist uprising in the checkpoints, the dead victims on the road, the changes in the streets. *Running to the Fire* is a nice mix of Ethiopian history, reflections on the missionary life, and of coming of age as a Christian. To Bascom, the verdict is mixed. The Marxists were pretty bad, but in some ways the Orthodox church's persecution of other Christians was worse. He appreciated his parents, the sacrifices they made, and seemed to admire their work, but he ponders Western arrogance and the sometimes negative impact of Western missions in the developing world. And his own faith—well, it's clear that the legalism of his upbringing pushed him away. He is still a Christian,

but exhibits a healthy skepticism: "Skepticism sweeps over me when people seem to have an unwarranted conviction about what God wants--what exactly is God's desire or plan. . . . I continue to doubt when others act convinced by their own special revelation." I would encourage anyone involved in foreign missions to pick up *Running to the Fire*, especially if they have kids on the field, and even more especially if they are in a more legalistic, conservative tradition. I'm not a missionary, but I appreciated his perspective as a teen in a rigorous religious tradition. I want to encourage my teens to be involved in church, to practice spiritual disciplines, and develop their own faith. I don't want my actions and words to lead my kids to say my encouragement "lowered the very thing it claimed to elevate--shrank my eagerness into reluctant obedience" the way Bascom responded to one of the missionary school teacher's chiding him for missing morning devotionals. Whether in a war zone or a comfortable American suburb, raising children to be faithful Christians can be a challenging adventure. Thanks to NetGalley and the publisher for the complimentary electronic review copy!

I received an advance review copy of Tim Bascom's second memoir and was gripped by its central question: Why do some people run to fire? His family flies into Ethiopia's ill-fated communist revolution from tranquil Kansas in the 1970s just as other expats flee. Compassion, heroism, faith, doubt and adventure interplay as Bascom wrestles with why his medical missionary family returned during Ethiopia's most tragic human rights turn-around that claimed .25 million famine deaths. Yet what triumphs is Bascom's own life among worlds lived in 3D hyper-drive and in reverse as his adult self interjects analysis 30 years later. Telling his story as one trying to understand all sides, Bascom entangles us in complex questions without easy resolutions. At boarding school in Ethiopia, gunfire in the streets shatters the night and Bascom realizes people are risking death for what they believed. I loved his experimental address to readers: "What would have that much value for you?" I enjoyed the history and the telling. Yet Bascom is at his best when he bares his soul: his periodic doubt juxtaposed with his father's bold faith; his learning to hunt and kill birds versus his father's apparent willingness to die. His cold daily devotions versus the hot, rebellious devotions of imprisoned Christians. Throughout, I was buoyed by Bascom's lush, poetic language, and lifted with him on a beautiful peak in Bulki, south Ethiopia, when he finally reaches his home village. Adding meaning and relevance, as though digesting the story with us, Bascom's older voice breaks in to extend the

experience and linger over its personal, intellectual, spiritual and historical depths. This is a brilliant turn at memoir, layering meaning into memory; adding the long view of history, doing the heavy lifting by mining significance of story and spaces. The adult self claims some inherited truths, and rejects others (just pray when political systems go bad?). And yet Bascom is unapologetic of his 16-year-old self bowing forehead to the floor in a village church. In this gripping narrative, as communist conflict results in deaths and imprisonments, Bascom asks fundamental questions. If prayers, trust and loyalty to Jesus save some, why not others? Perhaps, as Job of the Bible discovers, it is the wrong question. And yet for a writer raised in 1977 Addis, it is classic. The author claims not only an international childhood but a trauma surviving identity. This is a towering book. I am convinced when, after his good-bye to a high school sweetheart, he writes simply, „Ashes, ashes. Some scenes are so well-conveyed emotionally that language is inadequate. Bascom admits to an innate skepticism in contrast to others „innate optimism. Yet on a return visit 30 years later he reaches a personal epiphany that pierced me with the permanence and solidity of place despite the rootlessness of a traveling childhood; the perennial nature of faith despite waves of doubt. - Faith Eidse, co-editor, *Unrooted Childhoods & Writing Out of Limbo*

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