



## **Wildfire**

Deb Loughead

Reading level: 3.8

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### **Book Summary**

Bridgewood is having one of the hottest summers on record. Despite the strict fire ban, fires keep breaking out, and it looks like arson is behind them. Dylan O'Connor is right in the middle of it all. His friend Eliot is questioned as a suspect. Dylan doesn't think Eliot is the culprit, but he knows Eliot has a secret—he has been providing shelter for a scruffy stranger named Jeb Wilder, aka Wildfire. Is Jeb responsible? Or could it be the guy Dylan caught smoking in the woods, local baseball legend Mason Bates? It's up to Dylan to solve the mystery before the fires get out of control.

This is the fifth book featuring Dylan and his friends.

### **Author Biography**

**Deb Loughead** is the author of more than forty books for children and young adults. Her books have been translated into seven languages, and her award-winning poetry and adult fiction have appeared in a variety of Canadian publications. Deb has conducted workshops and held readings at schools, festivals and conferences across the country. She lives in Toronto. Students who like reading about the adventures of Dylan and his friends are sure to enjoy *Caught in the Act*, *The Snowball Effect*, *Payback* and *Rise of the Zombie Scarecrows*.

## Connecting to the Text

### Character Study

To engage students with the characters in *Wildfire*, use the following as large-group discussion topics, individual novel study or paragraph-writing exercises:

1. To everyone else, Mason is the “town hero,” but Dylan and Monica see a different side. Why is Mason friendly with Dylan in private but mean to him in public? What does that tell you about Mason?
2. Imagine you are being grilled by Officer Vance in chapter 5. She says Mason is “in deep trouble. And he swears you can vouch for him.” In this moment, how would you feel? What would you do? How do you feel about what Dylan did at the end of the chapter?
3. Imagine you are Dylan and heading to the Scoop Coupe at the end of chapter 10. What’s going through your mind? Who do you think started the fire? How do you know?
4. In chapter 11, Dylan says Eliot left “a trail of clues everywhere,” and Dylan comes to realize he’s misjudged Eliot, “just like everyone else in town.” What led Dylan to jump to this conclusion? How might Dylan make it up to Eliot?

### The Writer’s Craft

Writers want their characters to come to life for readers, so they’re intentional when choosing the words and phrases characters use. As students read chapter 1, ask them to highlight three sentences Dylan uses when speaking to himself that demonstrate how he feels about bird-watching. *Prompts:*

- I’d been dreading this stupid floating picnic along the shore of the lake.
- So now I was trying, with a fake smile plastered across my face.
- I wasn’t really listening. Again.

For chapter 2, do the same thing for Monica. Can you tell how she feels about the person who built the shelter? (e.g., she calls the person a loser, jerk, dork, etc.)

For chapters 2 and 3, consider how Dylan describes Monica. What does he tell us about her and how he feels about her? (He says there’s no stopping her; she ignores his advice; she’s crazy smart, super cool).

### Building Vocabulary

1. The following words are used in the novel in the context of the dangers of wildfire in Dylan’s hometown, a summer cottage vacation spot in Alberta, Canada. Invite students to choose from the writing exercises below.

accelerant	damage	forensic	respect
accident	dangerous	investigation	sirens
arson	deliberate	lighter fluid	smoke
blaze	emergency	plumes	tinder
bonfires	flammable	pyromaniac	vigilant

Using at least four words from above:

- Describe why there is a fire ban in Dylan’s hometown.

- What happened in Fort McMurray, Alberta?
- What is Stanley Franklin’s opinion on “hacking a butt” (smoking) in the woods?
- Describe the scene in which Dylan discovered Jeb trying to save Mrs. Winston.
- In the end, what did Jonah do when he tried to get Mason in trouble?

*Option:* Create a pictogram or word art on fire safety using words from the list.

## Connecting to the Curriculum

### *Language Arts*

1. Soot on shoes is a key image in *Wildfire*. As they read the novel, ask students to create a mind map with this image at the center and branches leading to the characters who have soot on their shoes. Include quotes for each. Complete the map at the end of chapter 10. Can students guess who started the fire?

Examples:

Ch. 6: Mason is interrogated at the police station. “I don’t know! Maybe I stepped in a fire pit or something!”

Ch. 8: Dylan sees soot on Jonah’s boots when Jonah drops him off at the Scoop Coupe. “Maybe he was working around the fire pits or something.”

Ch. 9: Dylan drops by Eliot’s place. “And there was soot on the bottom of his frigging sneakers!”

2. An important theme in the novel is judgment and suspicion of others. Ask students to write a paragraph describing the implications of judgment/prejudice on a character in the novel. Topics to consider:
  - Dylan said “word was getting around” about Eliot and his home life. Even Robbie thought Eliot might have started the fire. Why do people judge Eliot so harshly when he has little control over how he lives? Imagine you are Dylan at the end of the novel and someone makes a prejudiced comment about Eliot. How would you react? What might you say?
  - Mason doesn’t want help with his stress because he thinks it will make him look like a “loser” to others. Do you think the baseball scouts would think he was a loser if he tried to get help dealing with his stress? If yes, is that fair? What is the risk to Mason if he doesn’t get help?
  - Jeb is described as “a creepy guy,” “a weirdo,” “sketchy” and “a homeless dude with a grimy ball cap.” Before he saw Jeb doing CPR in chapter 11, did Dylan jump to conclusions about him? Compare that to how Officer Vance describes Jeb. Is she judging Jeb too? How can you tell?

### *Sciences, Nature*

1. Monica, Dylan’s girlfriend, is really into birds. She drags Dylan along when she’s bird-watching, and she plans to pursue this interest when she goes to university in a few years. Invite students to learn more about ornithology, the study of birds. Educator resources: Audubon Society [www.audubon.org/birds](http://www.audubon.org/birds) has webcams of a variety of birds, and Cornell University’s [birdsleuth.org/free-resources/](http://birdsleuth.org/free-resources/) has lesson plans.

- As well as looking at a bird's physical appearance and song, ornithologists are interested in *migration patterns*, *habitats* and *conservation of species*. Define these three terms and briefly describe how an ornithologist might do this work.
  - Using the Audubon Society website, choose a bird that interests you. Describe the bird's diet, habitat and migration pattern. What color are the bird's eggs? How do the male and female birds differ in appearance?
2. Dylan and Monica are worried about fire in the woods. In chapter 2, Dylan says, "In the woods! In the driest summer in ages. All we need is another Fort Mac." He's referring to the 2016 wildfire in Fort McMurray, Alberta. Invite students to find out more about this devastating fire, making connections to *Wildfire*. Ideas to explore:  
(Students may wish to research the 2018 California wildfire instead.)
- Using a map of Alberta, locate Fort McMurray. Trace an outline of the surrounding area and indicate where the fire started and how far it spread.
  - How long did the fire last? How much land was burned?
  - Name two contributing factors (e.g., hot, dry weather, low snowpack, winds).
  - How many people were evacuated? On your map, indicate their path with arrows.
  - Imagine you are Dylan or Monica. Write a paragraph describing why you were alarmed about smelling smoke and seeing that someone had a campfire.
3. Dylan's grandmother knows about natural disasters. In chapter 2, Dylan says Gran is like a "live-in reporter." Invite students to describe the disasters mentioned: flood, fire, earthquake and tsunami. What causes these natural disasters? Name a famous example for each.

### ***Personal Planning, Wellness***

1. Finding the shelter and cigarette butts in the woods, Dylan reflects on what it must be like to be Mason, the town hero. "Sometimes I wondered if all that attention made him nervous—because if it were me, it sure would." (ch. 3)  
Ask students to imagine they're a friend of Mason's and want to help him manage all the pressure he's under. Themes to explore:
- What are some signs that Mason is stressed out? (He's hiding out, smoking, can't sleep at night)
  - Mason doesn't want help from a counselor because he's afraid he'll be judged as a "loser." How do you feel about this? Is needing help something to be ashamed of?
  - How would you suggest Mason deal with his stress?
2. Help students understand the difference between mental, emotional and physical health and identify wellness ideas for each. You may wish to try some of the ideas below in your class or start a classroom challenge. Examples include:
- Mental: unplug for a few hours, meditate, hang out with your pet, keep a journal, practice yoga, listen to relaxing music.
  - Emotional: write and illustrate a personal affirmation statement, make a list of your good qualities, volunteer to help someone else.
  - Physical: play sports, dance, walk or jog, eat healthy foods, get rest.

3. Dylan and Mason were both Boy Scouts, so they know about campfire safety and being prepared in the woods. Invite students to find out more about Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts or Girl Guides. What kinds of activities do they offer, and what skills can one expect to learn? How do you join? Is it possible to visit a troop/unit to see what it's like?
4. In chapter 10, Dylan jumps into action to help Mrs. Winston. He knows how to do CPR because he took a first-aid course. Invite students to find out about first-aid courses in their community. If cost prohibits attending, explore online options or appropriate YouTube videos and materials.

### Art

1. Invite students to make collages (using images from magazines or found online) to capture the essence of a character in *Wildfire*. Include a few quotes from the novel that typify the character's personality or a key scene the character is in. (You may wish to assign characters to students to ensure all the main characters are illustrated.)

Ideas to get students started are below. Once their artwork is complete, invite students to share it. Can others guess the character that is illustrated?

- Dylan: “crazy guilty for something I had nothing to do with”
- Monica: logical, determined, “crazy smart and super cool”
- Mason: baseball player, smoker, whiny, “a total jerk” who is “able to talk his way out of anything”
- Eliot Barnes: under suspicion, judged by others, “really a good guy at heart”
- Jeb Wilder: “homeless dude who slept out in the woods” aka Wildfire

### Orca Currents with Similar Themes

1. In chapter 1 of *Wildfire*, Dylan says he'd like to make movies one day. In *Rise of the Zombie Scarecrows*, Dylan makes a movie with his best friend, Cory, and his girlfriend, Monica. The film is for school credit, and their plan is to film on Halloween. Everything falls into place until Dylan and Monica encounter a zombie scarecrow that causes Mr. Dalton, a friend of Dylan's grandmother, to have a heart attack. Dylan and Monica learn that a couple of zombie scarecrows are pranking a local neighborhood. The police shut down Dylan's project until the pranksters are caught. But Dylan is determined to see his film through to completion, no matter what the cost.
2. In *Pyro*, by **Monique Polak**, Franklin has to learn new ways to cope. Ever since he was small, Franklin has been soothed by fire. Staring into the flames helps Franklin forget his problems. And right now, he's got a lot to forget. Franklin's mother has left the family home to be with her hairdresser boyfriend. Franklin's father, the mayor of Montreal West, is too busy worrying about his public image to do anything about the family. As a rash of local fires competes with upcoming elections for media attention, Franklin's father has to work hard to keep the public happy. And Franklin has to reconsider his romance with fire.