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Running to the Fire: An American Missionary Comes of Age in Revolutionary Ethiopia (Sightline Books)

Tim Bascom

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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?

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