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ABC bushfire drama is near perfect - but is it too soon?

By [Karl Quinn](#)

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On the basis of the three episodes I've seen, I'd call *Fires* a raging success. But I'd also advise you to think carefully before watching it. The six-part anthology drama takes us deep into the summer of 2019-'20, a time of trauma seared deeply into the national psyche. Watching it could be extremely triggering.

It's an immersive experience, one that puts the viewer in the front seat of a broken-down fire truck on a dirt track as it's engulfed in flames; amid the burnt-out remains of a farmstead, where a husband and wife wonder if their son is still alive; inside a hand-built home in the bush that its owners have vowed to defend to the bitter end, no longer an abstract concept. It is powerful, convincing, deeply moving. But it's a bloody hard watch.



Personally, I'm up for it. My experience of that summer was one of cancelled camping trips, beloved bush and wildlife destroyed, the oppressive heat and orange-shrouded skies that made it hard to breathe. I have friends who were caught in the hellfire of Mallacoota, and their fear and trauma was real and lingering, but how can you respond if you haven't actually lived through it except with an "I can imagine", or perhaps "I can't imagine". Either way, you're on the outside.

Co-created by Belinda Chayko (*Safe Harbour*) and Tony Ayres (*The Slap*, *Stateless*, *Clickbait*), *Fires* takes us inside, as much as any piece of filmed storytelling can.

It starts in Queensland in September, with young volunteer firefighters Tash (Eliza Scanlen) and Mott (Hunter Page-Lochard) on the job. She's been doing it for five years and knows her way around a fire truck and a dirt back road; he's on his first gig and is making all the errors a rookie might.

Soon they're caught in a burnover, and no amount of training can prepare them for its terror. Filmed using the Dreamscreen LED rear-projection system developed by Clayton Jacobson, the episode takes us right inside the belly of the beast. What it finds there is panic, confusion, helplessness – and a desperation to survive.

In the next two episodes, there's little sign of the fires but their impact, and imminent threat, is everywhere. Episode two, in which Richard Roxburgh and Miranda Otto star as a farming couple who must confront the enormity of their loss, is remarkable.

Filmed in verite style by director Ana Kokkinos (who shares series directing duties with Kim Mordaunt and Michael Rymer), it tracks them through the various stages of grief but mostly settles on the stoic resilience that guides them through their pain until it can't. It's one of the finest hours of Australian drama I have seen.



There's a narrative through-line involving a couple of firefighters who roam the country lending a hand as the bushfire season escalates but, otherwise, each episode focuses on different characters, their situations unique (though fictional, they are drawn from real stories) yet representative of the overall experience: bad decisions, calamity, narrow escapes, loss, survival.

The memories of that summer are still raw for those most directly affected but, for many of us, they were soon displaced by a new threat, COVID. *Fires* is gruelling but it may be just what we need: a chance to grieve, an opportunity to empathise, and a dare to look straight into the face of a threat that will remain long after the virus is gone.