The Great Fire
Shirley Hazzard
Winner of the National Book Award

Shirley Hazzard is the author, most recently, of Greene on Capri, a memoir of Graham Greene, and several works of fiction, including The Evening of the Holiday, The Bay of Noon, and The Transit of Venus, winner of the 1981 National Book Critics Circle Award. She lives in New York City and Capri.

Acclaim for The Great Fire

"Brilliant, brave and sublimely written...among the most transcendent works I've ever had the pleasure of reading."
—Anita Shreve

"Beauty is felt in almost every line of this austerely gorgeous work."
—Chicago Tribune

"The last masterpiece of a vanished age of civility."
—The Wall Street Journal

"[The Great Fire] sails into port like a magnificent ship of fiction from another era."
—Entertainment Weekly

"Stunning...Shirley Hazzard has gifted us...a novel of indispensable happiness and sorrow. I loved this novel beyond dreams."
—Howard Norman, The Washington Post Book World

"A classic romance...the greatest pleasure is [Hazzard's] subtle and unexpected prose."
—Regina Marler, Los Angeles Times Book Review

"[The Great Fire] rises to heights far, far above the barren plain where most of contemporary fiction makes its tiny maneuvers [and] has passages that shine with a hard, steady, gemlike flame."

The Great Fire by Shirley Hazzard
0-312-42358-6 * $14.00/$20.00 Can.
The Great Fire Reading Group Guide
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"The Great Fire is an extraordinary love story set in the immediate aftermath of the great conflagration of the Second World War by purely and simply, one of the greatest writers working in English today."
—The New York Times

What to Read Next
Discussion

1. If The Great Fire is a historical novel—“historical” in setting as well as in its preoccupation with weight of political and personal history—how does the novel feel particularly contemporary? What themes present in the book exist today, in our world?

2. The novel is, as well, a veiled critique on Imperialism, on the Western world’s presence in foreign lands. In what way does each character reflect a different reaction to the East? What sorts of roles do they (Aldred, Peter, Oliver, the Driscolls, Calder, Talbot) play in its changing politics?

3. In what ways is love expressed in the novel? Do these characters put themselves at risk for such expression, and furthermore, what must they stand up against to love others?

4. The idea of destiny—fate—comes up again and again in this world. The word “destiny” itself is mentioned more than four times throughout the novel. If both love and war are then meant to be, if these people’s damages lead them to new places, what do these characters’ individual lives say about humanity as a whole? Does the novel leave you with hope or worry?

5. More specifically, what is the fate of women in The Great Fire? Think of the discussion on Western weddings in Hong Kong, on page 159. Of Aldred and Peter’s impressions and experiences with women. Of Helen’s plight.

6. Discuss the paragraph on page 111, beginning with “These were their days…”

7. What role do the mailed letters play in the book? Are they “the sad silly evidence of things,” as Aldred says to Helen, or are they more? How does Hazzard use the epistolary form to fuel the narrative?

8. Why, towards the novel’s close, does Aldred remember the stacking of his home’s firewood (page 223) with such immaculate detail?

9. Infirmity is everywhere throughout The Great Fire—from Benedict Driscoll’s degeneration to Aldred’s wounds to Peter’s fate to Dick Laister’s father’s amputation. What deeper, quieter infirmities exist in the book? What are your impressions about the characters’ reaction to their wounds?

10. What do you believe Benedict said when he yelled at the Japanese servant who would subsequently kill himself?