



# Reading Group Gold

## The Great Fire

by Shirley Hazzard

“*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*

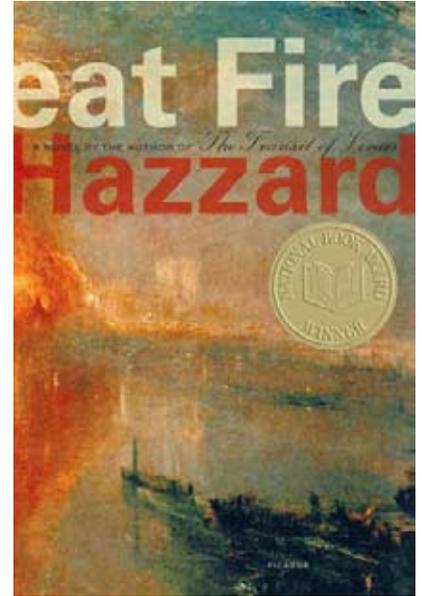
### Reader’s Guide Synopsis

The year is 1947. *The Great Fire* of the Second World War has convulsed Europe and Asia. In its wake, Aldred Leith, an acclaimed hero of the conflict, has spent two years in China at work on an account of world-transforming change there. Son of a famed and sexually ruthless novelist, Leith begins to resist his own self-sufficiency, nurtured by war. Peter Exley, another veteran and an art historian by training, is prosecuting war crimes committed by the Japanese. Both men have narrowly escaped death in battle, and Leith saved Exley’s life. The men have maintained a long-distance friendship in a postwar loneliness that haunts them both, and which has swallowed Exley whole. Now in their thirties, with their youth behind them and their world in ruins, both must invent the future and retrieve a private humanity.

Arriving in Occupied Japan to record the effects of the bomb at Hiroshima, Leith meets Benedict and Helen Driscoll, the Australian son and daughter of a tyrannical medical administrator. Benedict, at twenty, is doomed by a rare degenerative disease. Helen, still younger, is inseparable from her brother. Precocious, brilliant, sensitive, and at home in the books they read together, these two have been, in Leith’s words, delivered by literature. The young people capture Leith’s sympathy; indeed, he finds himself struggling with his attraction to this girl whose feelings are as intense as his own and from whom he will soon be fatefully parted.

### About The Author

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.



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## 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?

## 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 austere yet gorgeous work.” —*Chicago Tribune*



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“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.” —John Banville, *The New York Times Book Review*



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