



CITY OF ASH

Readers' Guide

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Discussion Questions:

- 1) The opening quote to *City of Ash* is from Robert Browning's *Rabbi ben Ezra*: "Leave the fire ashes, what remains is gold." How do you think this quote applies to the book?
- 2) By the time Ginny and Nathan arrive in Seattle, their marriage has deteriorated terribly. Why do you think that is? Do you believe as Ginny does, that Nathan is a liar and a user? Or do you believe as Nathan says, that Ginny ruined things by being spoiled and selfish? Do you believe they ever truly loved each other?
- 3) Nathan says in regards to Ginny's "affair" with Marat—"everyone believes you did, which makes it true enough." What's your opinion of this statement? Do you think the perception of truth is more important than the truth itself? Do you think it equally true in today's world?
- 4) "Suddenly she was just a woman, helpless as we all were...." Bea says of Ginny. How do you think women were helpless in the 19th Century? In what ways are they helpless in today's world?
- 5) Bea and Geneva both have terrible first impressions of each other. Who do you think is more right? Have you ever met someone who affected you similarly, and with whom you later became friends? What made the difference?
- 6) Ginny believes that art is all important, that it can change the world, that we need truth and beauty. Mrs. Brown says art can be better appreciated on a full stomach—that it only has relevance to those who can afford it. Who do you agree with?
- 7) Sebastian is forced to change his play in order to sell it, to make it more commercial, and many artists throughout history have battled with the concept of "selling out"—doing what one must to make one's work marketable. How do you feel about this? Do you feel, as Ginny does, that an artist's work should be pure? Or do you agree with Sebastian when he says it is a necessity, and that "there are ladders to climb even to heaven"? How do you think the commercialization of art impacts us as a society?

8) Bea, Ginny and Sebastian all present different aspects of creativity and inspiration: Bea not only feels passion for acting, but she is also Sebastian's muse. Ginny believes the power of discovering an artist is as inspiring as creation itself. Sebastian says inspiration can take different forms, and that it is a kind of addiction. What do you think about these different points of view? Do you believe them equally true? Which aspect do you think is most powerful? Why?

9) Ginny makes the comment that it is difficult for a woman to tread a different path when the only thing the world wants from them is domestic bliss. Do you believe women artists have a more difficult path to tread than male artists? Is creative passion in women more unacceptable? Do we treat female artists differently than men and if so, is it right that we do so?

10) Do you think that what Ginny and Bea did to Nathan was justified? Why or why not?

11) Both Bea and Ginny tell themselves that Sebastian is their reason for plotting against Nathan. But he ends up being the sacrifice both women make instead. Do you think his death worth what they won? Do you think they believed it was?

12) Bea says about Ginny: "I was entangled with her in ways I couldn't see clear of, and more importantly, I didn't want to see clear of them". How and why did this relationship become more important than Sebastian? Do you think women's friendships with other women often become more important than those they have with men? Why?

13) What do you think of what Bea sacrificed to save Ginny? Do you think the two of them equal in what they had at stake? What did Ginny sacrifice?

14) "We all live with illusions," Bea says. What illusions did she live with? What about Ginny?

Author Interview:

What was the inspiration for City of Ash?

I'd been writing first person POV with one protagonist for a while, and it seemed time to break out of that a little. I'd done *Susannah Morrow* with revolving first person POVs, but the sections were quite distinct. I'd recently read a fantasy trilogy by Sarah Monette (*The Doctrine of Labyrinths*), which featured two very different protagonists who were bound together, each with a first person POV, and their viewpoints were interspersed, which I thought would be an interesting structure to work with, and one I hadn't done before.

Also, I'd been watching *LOST*, which may be my favorite television show of all time, and the story had taken a sudden turn, where two men who had been enemies were suddenly dependent upon each other, and the words bloody alliance came into my head and wouldn't go away.

Why did you choose the Great Seattle Fire of 1889 as your backdrop?

One of the most popular tourist attractions in Seattle is the Seattle Underground tour. After the fire of 1889 destroyed most of Seattle's business area (over 120 acres), the city decided it was easier to rebuild the city on top of the ashes and remaining structures rather than raze them. This took care of numerous problems—the fact that Seattle was built on hills and fill, as well as its proximity to water, meant that there was no level ground in the city; some buildings were built six feet off the ground and others were at street level. Sidewalks ramped up and down to meet doorways, one of which might be five feet higher than that of its neighboring building. Streets met at odd angles where accidents happened frequently. Water and sewer pipes snaked on stanchions above street level in some parts of the city. The fire wiped out these problems in one fell swoop, and gave the city fathers the chance to start anew, and to set, for the first time, zoning and building and street standards.

The new city was built at the old first story level, which meant the original first story of the city was below ground. Streets were raised 22 feet in some places. To cross the street meant taking a ladder or stairs up to the street level, crossing the street, and then climbing a ladder or stairs down to the storefronts below ground on the other side. The rumor is that every now and then someone would fall, or a horse or wagon would plunge off the road, and so eventually these were covered, with skylights built into the sidewalks to lend light to the walks underground.

Eventually, these underground floors were closed off and forgotten. Now, old Seattle is a dank basement of storefronts, empty spaces and dust, a curiosity for school tours, tourists and ghosthunters.

I'd been on the tour when I was in junior high school, and when my children were in elementary school, I ended up as a parent volunteer every time they went on the tour—three times. I found I was fascinated not only with underground Seattle, but with the fire that caused it, and I knew I had to write a story about it.

What interested you most about the fire?

Perhaps not so strangely, it wasn't the fire itself that fascinated me, but the aftermath. The upper class in Seattle tended to live on the hills ringing downtown, but most ordinary people in the city lived in the area affected by the fire—this was not only the working class, but merchants and businessmen, as well as almost the entire lower and immigrant class and those dedicated to the business of "sin": saloon owners, dancehall owners and workers and prostitutes. Most of the living spaces in the city were in this area, and boardinghouses and hotels were destroyed by the score.

When I began reading about the relief operations that arose after the fire, I read mostly of tents erected as temporary shelter for men; there was no mention of women anywhere. So what happened to the whores and dancehall girls and actresses? A relief tent for women was not even erected until days after the one for men only. Relief workers apparently had a bit of an aversion to sheltering prostitutes.

What sources did you use in researching this book?

Once again, the Seattle Public Library, University of Washington Library, and the Kitsap Public Library were invaluable in locating primary sources, and the online resources were excellent. Luckily, the aftermath of the fire was well documented photographically, and these photos are easily accessible online. If a picture tells a thousand words, I read millions of them in researching this book. Also invaluable were archived articles from the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, books such as Sally Woodbridge and Roger Montgomery's *Guide to Architecture in Washington State*, and James R. Warren's *The Day Seattle Burned*. Also very helpful was Washington State's HistoryLink.org.

How did you come up with the characters of Ginny and Bea?

Well, I knew I wanted two women, and I knew I wanted them to dislike each other and to be thrown together in that "bloody alliance." I knew that for the story to work, I needed for each of them to be the key to a different future for the other—a future each wanted and yet which had seemed impossible until they met. They also needed to be doppelgangers, of a sort. Which meant that Bea and Ginny had to each see themselves in the other—and so, in fact, needed to be more like than unlike, different sides of the same coin, so to speak.

I've noticed this phenomenon over the years, that the people I dislike the most are those who seem to have personalities much like my own—perhaps I see in them the things I dislike most in myself. I wanted Bea and Ginny to reflect that.

As a character, Ginny came first. I knew she would be upper class, someone who was spoiled and who always got her own way until she ran into the barrier of social disapproval. She had to be a risk taker confident of her ability to transcend those risks, and thus a little blind as to the truth of her situation. Once I had her in place, coming up with Bea—her reflection—was not very difficult.

Bea turned out to be one of my favorites of the female characters I've written. I liked her clear-eyed and rather jaded view of the world. I liked her irreverence. She made me laugh in almost every scene she was in. Writing her was a great deal of fun.

Why did you choose acting as Bea's profession?

Having previously done *Prima Donna*, where the lead character's profession was in opera, I'd done a great deal of research into the entertainment industry in the 19th century. Actresses were still on the very verge of respectability, and I was fascinated by the burgeoning melodrama scene in the 19th century, and the life of an actor. I'd read Clara Morris's memoirs, which were revelatory, and I liked the fact that Bea's being an actress meant that she would be precisely that kind of woman who was most affected by the fire and its aftermath—not quite respectable, but not unrespectable either. And I found the things she would have had to do to get ahead in such an unforgiving profession an interesting challenge to write.

Have you any theater training yourself?

I was heavily into acting in high school, and I did some acting in college as well, and also ended up taking theater production classes, where I was building sets and props and doing backstage work. In the last few years, my daughters have been involved in acting and dance, and so I've been focusing a great deal on costuming.

I always loved the theater. It's a very insular world, which tends to draw a certain kind of person, and I very much enjoyed drawing on my own experiences to create the world of 19th Century Seattle theater.

The plot of the book is tangled, and thematically you seem to be playing with the role of perception vs. reality in our lives.

Well, again, we get to one of my central themes. The idea of who we really are and who we think we are is one that's endlessly interesting to me. I am fascinated by the tricks our minds play upon us and the question of how much of that we control. And of course, the tangled plot was deliberate—since the book was set in the theater during the height of the melodrama craze, I liked the idea of coming up with a plot that was nearly as melodramatic and impossible as the melodramas the characters were acting in.