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A LITERARY VENTURES FUND BOOK

## Because a Fire Was in My Head

By Lynn Stegner

Publication Date: April 18, 2007

\$24.95 | cloth

x, 276 pages, 5 ½ x 8 ½

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Flyover Fiction series

**Book Synopsis:** A haunting portrait of Kate Riley: her upbringing on the Canadian Plains, her subsequent search for identity, her manipulation of people—especially men—and her unfailing self promotion.

**Flyover Fiction** is a series intended to support the work of fiction writers from the region in the center of the country referred to either sentimentally as the Heartland or dismissively as flyover country, a region more clearly defined by what it is not than by what it is.

### Included in this Press Kit:

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## Book Description

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From her childhood, in which she was held captive to a mother gone mad, through her adult life, which unfolds as a mesmerizing sequence of men, abandoned children, and perpetual movement, Kate's story is one of desperation and remarkable invention, a strangely American tale brilliantly narrated by one of our most original writers.

## Pre-Publication Praise for *Because a Fire Was in My Head*

“A strikingly rendered, dark and troubling novel about one woman’s confused journey toward what she believes may very well be herself. With exquisite precision, Lynn Stegner has captured Kate Riley’s life in all its shadows and specters. A harrowing book, beautifully told.”—Bret Lott, author of *Jewel*

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“Lynn Stegner’s portrait of a lost lady is as authentically compassionate as it is unsparing, a rare feat in fiction—and in life, for that matter. Accomplished from the outset of her career, Stegner has achieved here a level of mastery that places her in an elite group of those writing serious literature in America.”  
—Frederick Turner, author of *Redemption*

## Post-Publication Praise

Please visit this book’s [Web page](http://nebraskapress.unl.edu/product/Because-a-Fire-Was-in-My-Head,673189.aspx) (<http://nebraskapress.unl.edu/product/Because-a-Fire-Was-in-My-Head,673189.aspx>) for the most current post-publication praise.



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## Praise for Previous Work

### Praise for *Undertow*

“Both the writing and the story have an elevating dignity and presence. . . . *Undertow* is a fascinating depiction of a woman’s attempts to ‘throw down the pick-up-sticks of her life’ and learn how to play her own game.”—*New York Times Book Review*

“[Stegner] evinces a fine-tuned sensitivity for complex emotions. . . . [*Undertow*] is a profoundly insightful, refreshingly honest portrait of dilemmas that will resonate for many women.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Stegner’s narrative is laced with a network of metaphors connecting the moral and natural landscapes, inviting comparison with writers like Margaret Atwood, Jane Smiley, and Barbara Kingsolver. But Stegner speaks with an accent and an energy all her own. Her descriptions of the coastal landscape have the bright bite of the sea air, as do her insights about sexual politics. This novel draws you into its world as irresistibly as its title suggests.”—*Belle Lettres*

“This is the story of anguish among the intellectual elite . . . [whose exchanges have] an elegant power, an integrity of purpose.”—*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

### Praise for *Fata Morgana*

“Stegner’s second novel is a sensitive, fiercely intelligent portrait of a friendship—and its rupture—over time.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“A psychologically compelling and strangely indelible novel.”—*San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle*

“[*Fata Morgana*] display[s] the author’s remarkable sensitivity to both the physical and emotional territory she has chosen as her setting.”—*Los Angeles Times*

“Gutsy, unpretentious writing that would have made her renowned father-in-law right proud.”—*San Jose Mercury News*

“An extraordinary descriptive skill enhances the personality-driven plot of Lynn Stegner’s intriguing novel of self-discovery. . . . An unusual coming-of-age tale, *Fata Morgana* will stay with the reader for a long time.”—*San Gabriel Valley Daily Tribune*

“*Fata Morgana* is a beautifully written story about a powerful relationship between two women. In the tradition of Margaret Atwood, Stegner eloquently weaves the past into the present in her involving novel, and fascinates with her characters.”—*Small Press*



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Praise for *Pipers at the Gates of Dawn: A Novella Triptych*

“This is beautiful writing: the kind that articulates precise emotional complexity in sensuous terms.”  
—*Booklist*

“This collection of three interlocking novellas set in Harrow, VT, during the same year resonates with the depth and clarity of a cathedral bell. . . . In concise and elegant prose, [Stegner] conveys an exquisite sense of place, giving readers a captivating you-are-there feeling. A major accomplishment.”—*Library Journal*

“In this fine, poetic book . . . [Stegner] gets inside her characters, makes us know them, care about them, and through them, we know a place where the woods are thick and fog hovers over the lakes in the early morning.”—*San Jose Mercury News*

“Stegner dissects with taut prose and decisive narrative moves the complex emotional states of characters living in a hamlet in Vermont called Harrow. . . . Stegner’s storytelling skills are impressive. These expressively written tales maintain their momentum even as Stegner commands the reader’s attention to look at fog over a lake or ice cream melting into homemade apple pie.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“A beautiful and evocative book.”—*Burlington Free Press*

“Each of these tales leaves a challenging number of concepts to ponder, and a presentation to applaud for its intelligence and distinctive appeal.”—*Sunday Times Argus* (VT)



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## Author Biography



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**Lynn Stegner** was born in Seattle, Washington. For the most part she grew up in northern California where she attended the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Menlo Park, and subsequently the University of California, Santa Cruz from which she graduated with highest honors in the field of Literature with an emphasis in Creative Writing. For several years, in order to support her writing habit, she worked as a wine consultant and marketing representative in the California fine wine industry, studying in France through her employment with a San Francisco-based company. Eventually she and a partner started their own company—marketing, distributing, importing, and producing wine—with offices in the Monterey/Santa Cruz area. In 1986 she married the novelist, historian, and essayist, Page Stegner, and two years later gave birth to their only daughter, Allison (now a Freshman at Stanford University). With publication of her first novel in 1991, she sold her share of the wine company in order to cut down to two full-time jobs: mother and writer. The family left California in 1999 and took up residence in Vermont where they have long owned a summer home, but the West proved too strong a magnet and within two years they returned, settling inland this time in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

In addition to her years in the wine business (in France it was noted that Lynn has an exceptionally keen palate and has been called by close friends an “organoleptic freak”) she was also a whitewater boatman, and has rafted most of the rivers in the Western U.S. Now she prefers early morning sculling on Vermont’s Caspian Lake, or hiking the dusty trails of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

Lynn has been the recipient of, among other honors, a National Endowment for the Arts, a Fulbright Fellowship to Ireland, and a Western States Arts Council Fellowship. She is the author of four novels: *Undertow* and *Fata Morgana*, both of which were nominated for the National Book Award, *Pipers at the Gates of Dawn*, a novella triptych, (one of the three novellas was awarded the Faulkner Society’s Gold Medal for Best Novella of 1997); and *Because a Fire Was in My Head*, which won the William Faulkner-William Wisdom Award for Best Novel of 2005. She has also written a long critical introduction to an assembly of her father-in-law’s short fiction, *Collected Stories of Wallace Stegner*, as well as editing and writing the foreword to a Penguin edition entitled *Wallace Stegner: On Teaching and Writing Fiction*. Lynn herself has taught writing at the University of California, Santa Cruz, the University of Vermont, the National University of Ireland, Galway, the College of Santa Fe, and at present she directs the Santa Fe Writers’ Workshop. She is currently at work on a volume of short stories, *The Anarchic Hand*.

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### Author Web Page

[www.lynnstegner.com](http://www.lynnstegner.com)

### Multimedia

Click [here](#) for podcasts and videos of Lynn Stegner reading from *Because a Fire Was in My Head*

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## New Lynn Stegner Novel Named a Literary Ventures Fund Book

The Literary Ventures Fund (LVF), the venture-based non profit foundation that invests in important works of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, will partner with the University of Nebraska Press in the marketing and promotion of acclaimed writer Lynn Stegner's latest novel, *Because a Fire Was in My Head*. "Our mission for the Flyover Fiction series meshes perfectly with that of LVF—helping worthy works of literature flourish in the marketplace," said Margie Rine, UNP Sales and Development Director.

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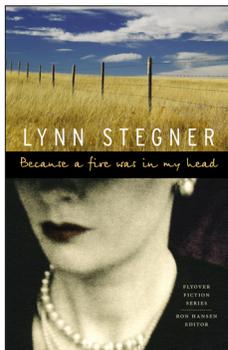
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## BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

# Because a Fire Was in My Head

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Lynn Stegner creates an unflinching portrayal of Kate Riley, a young woman dangerously captivated by her own lucid fantasies. As the novel traces Kate's life from one relationship and breathtaking landscape to the next, Stegner's exploration of the dynamics of sexuality, power, and familial relations leaves the reader in alternating moments of awe and pure and simple horror, faithfully capturing both the ugliness and frailty of humanity.

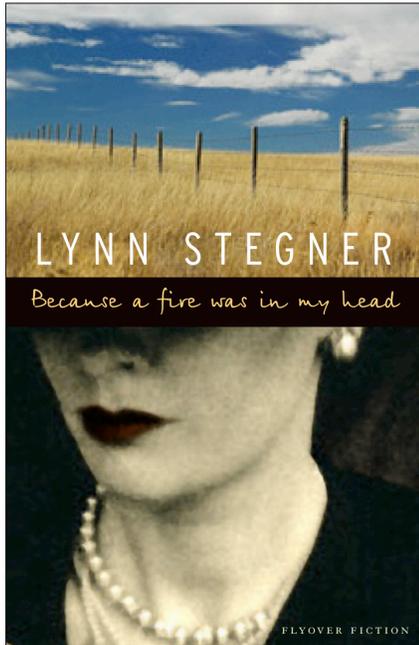
1. Although Hugh Riley, Kate's father, dies early in the novel, his death is perhaps the beginning of Kate's loss of innocence and ultimately shapes her life choices and dealings with men. Of him, Stegner writes, "He gave his daughter his own original innocence." What kind of man was he? What kind of relationship did he have with Kate, her mother, and her siblings? How might these relationships impact each character differently?
2. At times, Kate describes her relationship with her mother as a competitive one, both competing for her father's affections. How might Kate and Fiona's mother/daughter relationship foreshadow Kate's relationship with her own children?
3. Kate's life sprawls over numerous landscapes and time periods. In some scenes, she's surrounded by stretches of Canadian prairie, while in other scenes Kate is flanked by San Francisco hippies or dazzling Seattle cityscapes. In each of these settings, Kate reflects on their significance. Why is the landscape meaningful to Kate? How does the landscape mirror Kate's life?
4. Kate's body becomes a landscape, as well, reflecting her growth and ultimate demise. How does her body change with the birth of each child and with the start and end of each relationship with the men in her life? What might these changes suggest?
5. Stegner's novel explores motion, both "motion and suspended motion." What is "suspended motion" and how is it different from motion? How might Kate's life be indicative of these notions?
6. Stegner explores the role of family through images of homes. In an early scene of her home, a young Kate feels, "in that civilized house small brutal crimes had been committed, every day." Later, her son, Davy plays with a doll house for hours at a time. Kate's thoughts as a child juxtapose the "civil" and the "brutal." What are these crimes? And how might Davy's perceptions of homes match Kate's as a young girl?
7. Class and ethnic distinctions mark this novel at many turns as the poor Irish Kate struggles to move up the socio-economic ladder post-war to present Canada and America. Kate succeeds in seducing several men in order to attain wealth before destroying many of them. How might Stegner be exploring female sexuality as a source of capital?

8. In the second line of the novel, Stegner writes, “There was always a man. Did it matter which?” Kate fails to answer this question. Reflect on each of Kate’s loves: Jan, Gregor, Max, Nelson, etc. How might each relationship reflect Kate’s self-awareness and ultimate moral corruption?
9. The title, *Because a Fire was in My Head*, is taken from “The Song of Wandering Aegnus,” a William Butler Yeats poem. In the poem, the fire becomes a “glimmering girl,” whom the speaker wanders after into the woods. What connections can you draw between Yeats’s and Stegner’s depictions of the young and the old, the land and the body?
10. For a time, Kate, Nelson, and Rudy function in many ways as a post-modern variation of the nuclear family unit. What is the significance of this relationship, and what might Nelson’s betrayal be suggestive of?
11. Motherhood and the self are contending themes in this novel. What is Stegner suggesting about the changing role of motherhood in modern and contemporary times?
12. Kate’s daughter, Marie, says, “[A]rmed with a man, it was Kate she meant to love, and Ramona Moon she kept trying to accept.” What do both Ramona Moon and Kate symbolize?
13. Each of Kate’s children is the product of short-lived relationships. How do her children represent Kate at different places in her life?
14. At the end of the novel, Kate’s surviving children are reunited, a family of sorts. What lies ahead for each?
15. If you were to adapt this novel into a film, who would you cast as Kate, Jan, Gregor, Max, and Nelson?



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