



## BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

# Because a Fire Was in My Head

By Lynn Stegner

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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