

Little Fires Everywhere

Celeste Ng

Teacher's Guide written by Jeanne M. McGlinn

Penguin Books

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Reading Level: 11th–12th Grade

NOTE TO TEACHERS

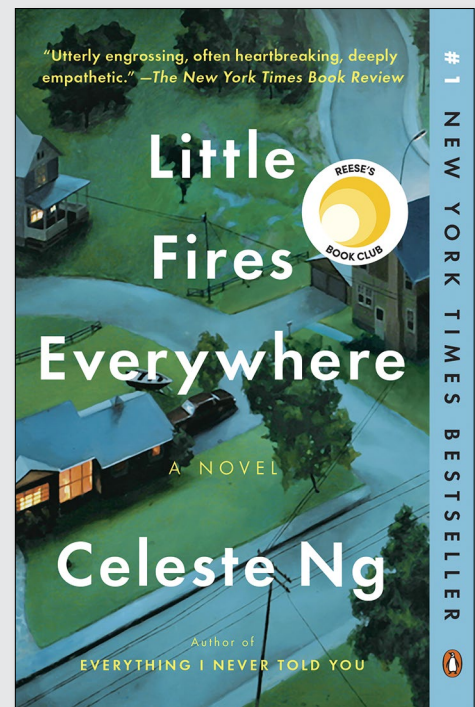
This novel presents sexual relationships, unplanned pregnancy, and abortion as part of the lives of the teen characters, all subjects suitable for mature students. It is important to follow all the protocols in your school or district, which may include presenting the novel in advance to parents and obtaining signed permission forms. Classics that offer related themes include *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller.

INTRODUCTION

There are five teenage main characters in *Little Fires Everywhere*, which will appeal to adolescent readers, but the novel is mainly about two adult women and the choices they make for themselves and their families. Celeste Ng presents the lives of Elena Richardson and Mia Warren in a way that asks readers to see each life as a commentary on the other. Who is right? Is it better to have a plan for life and to follow it without deviation or is it better to take chances, to be impulsive and to see where choices lead? Are there times when rules don't work? Are our actions or choices in life ever truly black and white? There are no easy answers. It may be that Ng is not saying one way is better than the other—there are just different ways of living and there are complex reasons why people do the things they do. This guide suggests activities, discussion questions, and projects to encourage students to delve into the novel, to discover its themes, and to make connections to their lives.

Teacher's Guide

**INCLUDES: CHAPTER SUMMARIES,
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS,
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES,
AND LINKS TO RESOURCES**



BUILDING CONTEXT AND REFLECTING ON THEMES DURING READING

1. Anticipation Guide

Ask students to react to an Anticipation Guide to activate their background knowledge and to generate interest in the ideas they will encounter in the novel. Students should respond to each statement on a scale of 1-5 with 1 representing “Very False” and 5 representing “Very True.” Then ask students to select the statement to which they have the strongest reaction, positive or negative, and write about their response. Engage the whole class in discussion about the statements to which they have the strongest reactions. During reading, students can add to this initial response, reflecting on how their ideas are changing as they learn more about the characters and their actions. As a synthesizing activity after reading the novel, ask students to reflect on their initial responses, explaining how they have changed and why. Students might also choose one statement and write a reflection from the author’s point of view, including examples and details from the novel.

1. People are happiest when they follow rules.
2. Rules are meant to be broken.
3. Children should only be raised in families that mirror their ethnicity.
4. The best community is one in which racial and cultural differences are eliminated.
5. A good mother will not make serious mistakes in raising her children.
6. Women with more financial resources make better mothers.
7. Teens in high school should not be parents.

Read more about using the anticipation guide as a pre-reading strategy at: <http://www.adlit.org/strategies/19712/2>.

2. Predicting and Analyzing Character

Introduce the novel by reading Chapter 1 as a class. With students, make a list of the main characters and ask them to brainstorm what they have learned about each person. Then, based on these impressions, ask students to predict the following:

- What might have happened before this point in the story?
- Describe each person’s personality and his/her role in the family.
- Where does this family live? Describe the neighborhood. What is their socioeconomic status?
- Who are Mia and Pearl? What might they have to do with the Richardson family?

Post this chart in the class or online where students can add to their impressions as they read. During reading, ask students to confirm or change their predictions.

3. Tracing Themes

The novel suggests multiple themes for class discussion: the impact of race and class on identity, living according to rules vs. following one’s own instincts, the complexity of family relationships, the nature of motherhood, the role of art in transforming reality, and coming of age. Ask students to create a double-entry journal or chart listing these themes. Then, at intervals, ask students to list plot events that align with a certain theme along with supporting quotes from the text.

**CHAPTER SUMMARIES,
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS,
ACTIVITIES**

This section provides brief summaries, followed by discussion questions and activities to engage students in exploring themes and developing their analytical skills. Questions can also be used for reflective writing as a warm-up to class discussion. Remind students to draw examples from the novel to explain their answers and to support their ideas.

Part 1 – Chapters 2-7

Mia and Pearl, planning to leave their itinerant lifestyle permanently, move into an apartment in a Shaker Heights rental house owned by Mrs. Richardson. Pearl meets the Richardson children, Moody, Trip, Lexie, and, later, Izzy—the problem child of the family. Attracted to their confidence and lifestyle, Pearl begins to spend most of her time with them. Lexie decides to take “a new interest . . . in Little Orphan Pearl” while Izzy is attracted to Mia.

- Why is Moody attracted to Pearl and the way she lives?
- What attracts Pearl to the Richardson family and home?
- Is Mia right to allow Pearl's growing infatuation with the Richardsons?
- What is Elena Richardson's reaction to Mia? Why does she react that way?
- When Pearl asks her mother if she had wanted her when she was a baby, her mother assures her that she did, but then walks rapidly out of the room. Why doesn't Mia tell Pearl more about her feelings? Find other times when Mia avoids talking to Pearl about important issues in Pearl's life. What is the relationship like between this mother and daughter?
- How does Mia encourage Izzy to get even with her orchestra teacher? Does she give Izzy good advice?
- What does the “toothpick incident” teach Izzy? How does she change?

1. In “A Letter from Celeste Ng,” (included at the end of the novel) Ng says she wanted to write about her hometown of Shaker Heights, Ohio, “one of the first *planned* communities in the United States.” Envisioned as an idyllic country retreat from the industrial inner city of Cleveland, Shaker Heights was founded on Utopian principles. Brief profiles of Shaker Heights are at <https://www.tripsavvy.com/shaker-heights-ohio-753155> and <https://case.edu/ech/articles/s/shaker-heights>.

Ask students to note and collect descriptions of Ng's Shaker Heights and the rules and regulations governing the community in these first chapters. As a class, brainstorm a list of the Benefits and Drawbacks of these rules. Then discuss:

- What are the benefits of living in this community?
 - What might be problematic?
 - Have students experienced similar planned communities, and what did it feel like to live there?
 - Would they wish to live in Shaker Heights as described in the novel? Why or why not?
2. After school each afternoon, Pearl and the Richardson children, except for Izzy, watch the Jerry Springer show. The show aired from 1991 until 2018, so students

**CHAPTER SUMMARIES,
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS,
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(CONTINUED)

may be familiar with the hyper-inflammatory nature of the broadcast. If not, ten seconds of a YouTube clip will give students an idea of the show. Each of the Richardson siblings react differently to the program. Ask students to review these responses and discuss how this adds to or changes impressions they already have about the characters. Discuss what this activity suggests about the Richardson children and their perceptions of life. Could their reactions be connected to their lifestyle? How?

Part 2 – Chapters 8-12

On a trip to the art museum, Pearl sees a photograph of her mother entitled “Virgin and Child #1.” When Izzy learns about the photo, she wants to unravel “the secret” of Mia’s past. Hitting a dead end in her research, she appeals to her journalist mother. In addition to covering Elena’s personal history and her troubled relationship with Izzy, these chapters also introduce the McCulloughs, who are in the process of adopting an abandoned Chinese baby.

- Why is Pearl unable to pursue the question of why her mother’s picture is in the art museum, but Izzy is “determined to find answers” (p. 98)?
 - Explain whether the term “*noblesse oblige*” describes Mrs. Richardson’s life. How has her plan for her life worked out?
 - Why does Mia decide to tell Bebe that the McCulloughs are in the process of adopting her child? Is this the right decision? Why or why not?
 - Why does Mrs. Richardson decide to dig into Mia’s past? What is her real motive?
1. Ask students working in small groups to brainstorm their responses to the McCulloughs’ desire to adopt Mirabelle-May Ling by creating a chart listing the pros and cons that might affect the baby’s welfare. Then, as a class, discuss the different positions. Given the details that the reader knows about the McCulloughs, what arguments might be used to convince the state that they would make the best parents? What arguments might be used to influence the decision in favor of Bebe? Students can revise or add to their predictions later in the novel when Bebe’s attorney questions Mrs. McCullough.
 2. In this section, we learn about Izzy’s premature birth, which led to Elena’s fears and precautions in rearing Izzy—all of which have had the opposite of their intended effect. When Elena looks at Izzy, she is overwhelmed by a “feeling of things spiraling out of control . . .” (p. 110). Discuss with the class why Elena feels such anxiety about her youngest child. Is she reflective about her own behavior? How does this background information affect your reaction to her and Izzy?

Part 3 – Chapters 13-15

Mia leaves home at eighteen to attend the New York School of Fine Arts to pursue her passion for photography. Her talent is recognized by her teacher, Pauline Hawthorne, who becomes her mentor. When she loses her scholarship and is unable to pay tuition, she decides to accept a proposal to be a surrogate mother in exchange for \$10,000. However, after her brother’s death, Mia realizes she can’t give up her child and runs away to California, where Pearl is born.

**CHAPTER SUMMARIES,
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS,
ACTIVITIES**
(CONTINUED)

- Why does her art professor want Mia to articulate the choices she makes in her photos?
- What skills, learned from her parents, did Mia bring to art school?
- How does Pearl's name fit the circumstances of her birth?
- Is Mrs. Richardson right to pry into Mia's private life?
- Why does Mia treat Lexie so kindly following her abortion? Would Mrs. Richardson react in the same way? Why or why not?
- Why is Mia unable to talk with Pearl about Pearl's love life and sexual activity? Does this point to a flaw in Mia's development as a person?

In Mia's first photography class, her teacher shows a series of famous photographs—three are mentioned by name (p. 202). Select one photograph to analyze as a class using the Levels of Questions listed below. Then ask students to select one of the other photos and journal their reactions. Students can meet in small groups to share their impressions.

Levels of Questions.

- Seeing: What do you see in the photograph?
- Understanding: What ideas or emotions does the photo suggest?
- Analyzing: What details stand out? What idea or effect does the artist make by including or highlighting certain details?
- Evaluating: Is the artist successful in conveying a central message or emotional impact?
- Creating: Using your memory and imagination, make a sketch of how you might portray a similar subject. Compare your "photo" with a partner, noting the details you each chose to include. Talk about how your perceptions differ and why.

Photos:

Man Ray: <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/54733/man-ray-le-violon-d'ingres-ingres-s-violin-american-1924/>

Ansel Adams: <http://anseladams.com/new-release-mt-mckinley-wonder-lake-modern-replica-print/>

Dorothea Lang: <https://allthatsinteresting.com/migrant-mother-photo>

Part 4 – Chapters 16-18

The custody hearing for May Ling pits the economic status of the McCulloughs against Bebe's claims as the biological mother. Mrs. McCullough is questioned about the impact of race and culture on the baby's identity. Meanwhile, Moody discovers that Trip's "mystery girl" is Pearl, and Mrs. Richardson, believing Pearl has had an abortion, confronts Mia and demands that they vacate the apartment.

- Looking back over the arguments concerning the custody of May Ling, describe the most persuasive argument presented. Explain your point of view.
- What stereotypes does Mr. Richardson raise in order to deflate Ed Lim's examination of Mrs. McCullough?
- Mrs. Richardson says that Lexie would never have a baby out of

**CHAPTER SUMMARIES,
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(CONTINUED)

wedlock because she was raised “to have more sense than that” (p. 268). Why does this logic fail with Lexie?

- What is Trip's attraction to Pearl? How is she different from his mother and his classmates?
- Could Pearl have avoided hurting Moody?
- How have Lexie's friends, Brian and Serena, been able to enjoy apparent social acceptance?
- Does her mother's sense of rules influence Lexie to have an abortion?
- What is Mr. Richardson's reflection on rules? Is he right or wrong when he thinks, “. . . most of the time there were simply ways, none of them quite wrong or quite right, and nothing to tell you for sure which side of the line you stood on” (p. 269).
- Is there anything ironic about his belief that his wife always follows the rules?

1. In his examination of Mrs. McCullough, Ed Lim asks her to consider the impact on May Ling if she is raised in a white family without access to toys and books in which she is represented. Mrs. McCullough is able to name one picture book that features Chinese characters: *The Five Chinese Brothers*. Do you think Lim's critique of the book is fair? Has anything changed?

(To remind students of the 1938 picture book you can show this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CX7k_QN29y8. In 2007, based on an online survey, the National Education Association listed it as one of the top 100 books used by teachers for children: <http://www.nea.org/grants/teachers-top-100-books-for-children.html>.)

2. In her support of the McCulloughs, Elena says it will be an advantage to the baby to be “raised in a home that truly doesn't see race” (p. 269). She goes on to say that it might be better for everyone if they were “given to a family of another race to be raised. Maybe that would solve racism once and for all” (p. 269). Elena is advocating an ideology of color blindness. Ask students to read one or more short articles that articulate the basics of color blindness, such as <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/culturally-speaking/201112/colorblind-ideology-is-form-racism> or <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/colorblindness-is-counterproductive/405037/>. Then ask students to write a counter-argument to Elena based on what they have read.

Part 5 – Chapters 19–20

Mia tells Pearl that they must leave Shaker Heights and then tells the complete story of Pearl's birth, her father, and her grandparents. When Izzy misses Mia and Pearl, she realizes that her mother doesn't know the truth about the abortion and probably blames Mia. Faced with losing Mia and fed up with her family's callousness, Izzy decides she must do something. Mia's words, “sometimes you need to scorch everything to the ground and start over” (p. 311), echo in her head and Izzy decides to burn down the Richardson's house.

- Why does Mia tell Pearl the story of her birth at this time? What does Mrs. Richardson have to do with Mia's decision?
- Does Mia give good advice to Izzy about starting over?
- How do her brothers and sister disappoint Izzy?

**CHAPTER SUMMARIES,
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(CONTINUED)

- In what way is Izzy's decision to burn down her home symbolically fitting? How might Izzy have expressed her condemnation of her family in a less violent way?
- What would Mia think if she found out how Izzy applied her advice?
- What does each photo show about the person depicted? How is each photo a portrait or a wish?
- At the end of the novel, Mrs. Richardson reflects on her photograph from Mia and she wonders, "Was she the bird trying to batter its way free, or was she the cage?" (p. 336). Has she been a cage to Izzy? Has she herself been caged by her rules?

**SYNTHESIZING ESSAY AND
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

These questions can be used to initiate discussions in small groups or as a class, or as essay prompts. Ask students in both situations to explain or elaborate on their ideas by providing details or quotes from the text.

1. In what ways is Mia a good mother to Pearl? In what ways does she fail Pearl?
2. Does Mrs. Richardson's plan for her life change after Izzy's ultimate act of rebellion?
3. Has the plan to build acceptance of racial diversity in Shaker Heights worked out? What are some of the clues that overt or covert racism still exists in this planned community?
4. In what ways does the epigraph to the novel, "To those out on their own paths, setting little fires," indicate a theme of the novel? Who are the characters who symbolically are creating little fires?
5. Mia's art professor and mentor demands that she articulate the reasons for her choices in her photos. Does Mia do the same in her life? Does she make conscious choices, or does she act impulsively?
6. Coming of age happens in several stages, loosely described as: change or challenge, separation, struggle, reintegration. Choose one of the teen characters in the novel and describe their process of coming of age, even if they have not yet moved through all the stages. Describe the stages they go through as they develop a deeper understanding of themselves and others.
7. Mrs. Richardson learned to control her passions and to follow rules because "if you followed them, you would succeed" (p. 161). In what ways are rules beneficial or destructive to her and to other characters in the novel?
8. Identify the rules that Mrs. Richardson lives by. Categorize these rules according to ethical principles or pragmatism. Discuss whether there was a time when Mrs. Richardson was guided by ethical rules.

**SYNTHESIZING ACTIVITIES
/PROJECTS**

1. Ask students to develop a chart comparing the four mothers in the novel: Mia Warren, Bebe Chow, Elena Richardson, and Linda McCullough. Headings might include marital status, number of children, socioeconomic level, occupation, parenting style or ways they demonstrate love for their children. Then ask students, individually, to rate the mothers in their role as a mother. Or ask students to determine who is the “best” mother in the group and list reasons for their choice. Following the ranking, engage students in a class discussion focused on the question of what makes a good mother/parent. Of all the factors they have considered, which is the most important to the welfare of the child?
2. Mia leaves an envelope of photos for the Richardson family: “There was one for each of them . . . half portraits, half wishes, caught on paper . . . to them it was unbearably intimate, like catching a glimpse of your own naked body in a mirror” (p. 327). Ask students to create a photo representation of Mia using collage or drawing that reveals her personality and their wish for Mia. Tell students they will share their “photos” in small groups and should be ready to explain their choices.
3. At the end of the novel, we have Mia’s impression of each of the Robinson children in the photos she leaves for them. Choose one of the teens, and, based on Mia’s photo and what you have learned about the characters, predict their lives in the next ten years. What will they do? What choices might they make? Outline this future in a brief story or outline of key events to share with the class.
4. If students have access to cameras, ask them to spend one week taking photos at their school, thinking about the ideas or emotions they want to project in their photos. Ask them to select their top one or two photos to share with the class. You might wish to create a PowerPoint of photos submitted by the students so they can be viewed on a big screen. After viewing the photos and discussing the ideas projected in the images, finding “something in each photograph to highlight and praise” (p. 203), ask students what they learned in the process. What does it take to make a memorable photo?
5. Mia’s art has the power to provoke reflection in her subjects and to lead to insights. Photography has the power to change people’s thinking and therefore impact social movements and history. Using sites like “The Most Influential Images of All Time” at <http://100photos.time.com/>, select five pictures that are appropriate for your group of students. As a class, view the photos and discuss their impact, using Levels of Questions. Then ask students to select five pictures that represent for them the current state of their town, state, or country. They can use photo magazines that you have in class or this project can be completed as homework by using digital resources. Ask students to write a rationale behind their selection.
6. In a “Conversation with Celeste Ng” at the end of the novel, she says that the setting of the novel, 1997 and 1998, was a time of denying race and that “ignoring race means ignoring longstanding problems and history, as well as ignoring important aspects of a person’s identity” (p. 6). Discuss with students what they understand by the terms “color blindness” or “race blindness.” How is race blindness portrayed in the novel? Have things changed in our society in the past ten years? Are attitudes to race and class today different from or similar to those depicted in the novel?

RESOURCES CONNECTED TO THE NOVEL

1. A television mini-series based on the novel is set to premiere in 2020 on Hulu. A brief overview is at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Fires_Everywhere_\(miniseries\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Fires_Everywhere_(miniseries)). Ask students to look at the first photo of the cast of the show at <https://www.oprahmag.com/entertainment/tv-movies/a27287365/little-fires-everywhere-show-details/> to predict who is playing each character in the novel. Are there any surprises in the casting? How might this casting affect the story? What might be gained and what might be lost?
2. Ask students to read Chapter 6, "Pearl," in *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne to understand why Hester Prynne names her baby Pearl. Then ask students to compare her reasons to Mia's. Discuss what this name choice suggests about connections between the two women. How are Pearl in Hawthorne's novel and Pearl in *Little Fires Everywhere* similar or different?
3. Introduce students to Kohlberg's theory of moral development by either presenting an image of the stages or asking students to read a brief synopsis, such as <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/teachereducationx92x1/chapter/kohlbergs-stages-of-moral-development/> or <https://www.simplypsychology.org/kohlberg.html>. Then ask students to create a chart with the six stages outlined by Kohlberg, identifying the stage of moral development for different characters in the novel. Students should include a detail or quote that supports their assessment. Then discuss whether this theory adds to students' understanding of the characters' actions.
4. For students' independent reading, here are two lists of novels that explore the complexities of motherhood and parenting: <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ariannarebolini/heartwarming-mothers-day-books-motherhood-goodreads> and <https://bookriot.com/2017/05/24/100-must-read-books-about-mothers-and-motherhood/>.

Classic titles that come up frequently include:

- *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne
 - *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver
 - *Mom & Me & Mom* by Maya Angelou
 - *At the Bottom of the River* by Jamaica Kincaid
 - *Beloved* by Toni Morrison
5. "Little Boxes" was written by Malvina Reynolds in 1962 and was recorded by Pete Seeger in 1963. Reynolds was inspired by the development of tract housing in Daly City, California, south of San Francisco. Her song was hailed as a satire on middle class conformity. Students can see Reynolds singing the song along with her biography at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUoXtddNPAM>. The lyrics to the song are at <https://people.wku.edu/charles.smith/MALVINA/mr094.htm>. Discuss with students how Reynolds' song mirrors the themes of the novel. As a creative project, ask students to create their own song for the novel.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

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