

And After the Fire: A Novel

Harper Perennial

By Lauren Belfer

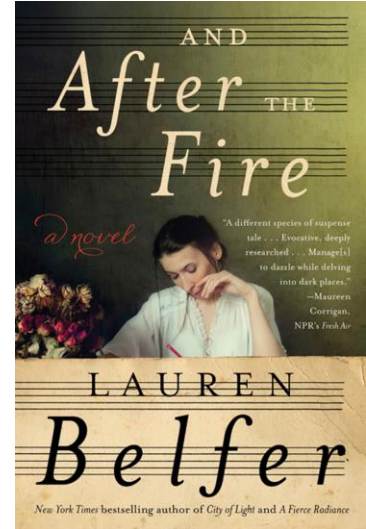
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Introduction

The *New York Times*-bestselling author of *A Fierce Radiance* and *City of Light* returns with a new powerful and passionate novel—inspired by historical events—about two women, one European and one American, and the mysterious choral masterpiece by Johann Sebastian Bach that changes both their lives.

In the ruins of Germany in 1945, at the end of World War II, American soldier Henry Sachs takes a souvenir, an old music manuscript, from a seemingly deserted mansion and mistakenly kills the girl who tries to stop him.

In America in 2010, Henry's niece, Susanna Kessler, struggles to rebuild her life after she experiences a devastating act of violence on the streets of New York City. When Henry dies soon after, she uncovers the long-hidden music manuscript. She becomes determined to discover what it is and to return it to its rightful owner, a journey that will challenge her preconceptions about herself and her family's history—and also offer her an opportunity to finally make peace with the past.



Questions for Discussion

1. I was inspired to write *And After the Fire* when one day I thought, *what would I do, if I came into possession of a previously unknown, and ethically controversial, artistic masterpiece?* What would *you* do? Donate it to a library or museum? Sell it? Destroy it? Hide it under the bed?
2. The masterpiece of music at the center of *And After the Fire*, a cantata by Johann Sebastian Bach, has an inflammatory libretto. This isn't a surprise, because any work of art is a product of its era, and Bach wrote more than one piece that lashes out at different religious groups. But when we perform such pieces today, do we need to recognize and discuss the aspects which might be disturbing in our era? Do you think great art can sometimes do harm? Or, do you believe that great works of art by definition rise above their time and place, and therefore their content is irrelevant, and we should focus only on their timeless beauty and magnificence?

3. At the end of the novel, does Susanna make the right decision about the cantata? Does she manage to turn bad into good, as she hopes?
4. Do you think Dan will regain his religious faith? Have you struggled with issues of faith in your own life?
5. Do you think Susanna should have confronted her mother more forcefully, to learn the truth about what happened to their family during the Holocaust? Why did Evelyn and Henry believe they had to conceal the truth from Susanna?
6. When Count von Arnim makes insulting, hurtful comments at Sara's salon, why does Sara react the way she does? Why doesn't she order him to leave, or argue with him, or at least challenge him in some way? If she lived today, would she handle this situation differently?
7. What if something similar happened at a party at your home? How would you react?
8. As I was writing the novel, I began to feel more acutely the tragic story of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel. She is among the most important women composers in the history of Western music, yet she is almost forgotten today. Her mother and her husband both encouraged her desire to compose and to publish her music, so she did have some family support. Why do you think she had so much difficulty standing up for herself against the opposition of her father and then, after her father's death, of her brother, Felix?
9. And what about Felix? Was he right or wrong, to publish his sister's work under his name? Was he trying, in his own way of thinking, to help his sister? And most importantly, why did Fanny participate in the deception by preparing this music for the engraver?
10. The more I learned about the relationship between Fanny and Felix, the more complex it seemed. They were closest companions during childhood. Have you ever known siblings who had such a highly-charged relationship?
11. Bach's music is an integral part of the story, moving the plot forward and revealing the inner lives of the characters, as it consoles their suffering and accentuates their joy — exactly as Bach's music has done in my own life.
12. What is the role of music in your life? Do you turn to music for comfort as well as for joy?
13. What do you think about the structure of the novel, shifting back and forth in time? By designing the novel in this way, I wanted each time period to illuminate the other, step by step, letting the reader learn more details gradually and put together the mystery. Did this technique work for you?