

Little Fires Everywhere: Arson, Surrogacy, and Safe Havens

Novel written by Celeste Ng. New York: Penguin Books, 2017. 352 pp. \$12.75. Miniseries written by Liz Tigelaar, Nancy Won, Raamla Mohamed, et al. Directed by Lynn Shelton, Michael Weaver, and Nzingha Stewart. Original Release Date on Hulu: March 18, 2020.

Reviewed by Karen B. Rosenbaum, MD, and Susan Hatters Friedman, MD

DOI:10.29158/JAAPL.200096-20

Key words: arson; abandonment; child custody; Safe Haven laws; surrogacy

As the title suggests, *Little Fires Everywhere* has literal and figurative connotations. The story begins and ends with the same scene: small fires that were mysteriously set in a large, seemingly happy household in Shaker Heights, a unique suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, during the 1990s. The town of Shaker Heights serves as one of the characters, more so in the novel than in the miniseries. Celeste Ng, the author who grew up in Shaker Heights, quoted an article called “The Good Life in Shaker Heights” from the March 1963 issue of *Cosmopolitan*. Life in Shaker Heights was further described in the first chapter: “Shaker Heights was like that. There were rules, many rules about what you could and could not do A helpful chart from the city categorized every home as a Tudor, English, or French style and laid out the appropriate colors for architects and homeowners alike” (p 9). The city’s motto was, “Most communities just happen; the best are planned” (p 10).

This motto matches the planned life of Elena Richardson, who is referred to as Mrs. Richardson (played by Reese Witherspoon in the miniseries), and her specific plans for her four children: Trip, Lexie, Moody, and Izzy. In contrast, Mrs. Richardson’s new tenant, Mia Warren (played by Kerry Washington), lives a life that is spontaneous and at times reckless. Spoiler alert: A photographer and art school dropout, Mia is forced to live a life looking over her shoulder after deciding to keep her daughter, Pearl, whom the reader/viewer later learns was commissioned as a surrogate by a wealthy couple who could not have children of their own. When

Mia and Pearl move to the idyllic community of Shaker Heights, Ohio, Mia promises her daughter that, this time, they can stay.

The story in the novel and the miniseries centers on the intersection of the Richardsons and the Warrens. Mrs. Richardson’s seemingly perfect life has cracks exposed by the relationships that develop between her children and Mia and Pearl. As an act of charity, superiority, or perhaps just to keep an eye on her, Mrs. Richardson offers Mia a job as a part-time caretaker of her home, which Mia does when she is not taking or developing photographs or working at her other job as a waitress at the Chinese restaurant, Lucky Palace. Elena Richardson’s employment often highlights their differences, and tensions increase between the two mothers.

Before motherhood, Mrs. Richardson studied to be a journalist and worked intermittently for the local paper. Mrs. Richardson puts on her reporter cap and decides to explore more deeply the background of her mysterious tenant. From Mia’s estranged parents, Mrs. Richardson discovers Mia’s surrogacy arrangement, from which she had fled with Pearl. Pearl is Mia’s own biological daughter whom she was meant to relinquish to Pearl’s father (who had inseminated her) and his fertility-challenged wife.

In 1988, the Supreme Court of New Jersey invalidated a real-world surrogacy contract in which a surrogate mother had been inseminated and was to be paid \$10,000 to relinquish her baby,¹ similar to Mia Warren’s agreement in *Little Fires Everywhere*. The court’s decision stated, “The surrogacy contract is based on principles that are directly contrary to the objectives of our laws. It guarantees the separation of the child from its mother; it looks to adoption regardless of suitability; it totally ignores the child; it takes the child from the mother regardless of her wishes and her maternal fitness; and it does all of this . . . through the use of money (Ref. 2, p 1250).”

Tensions further escalate about Mirabelle McCullough, the one-year-old foster daughter of Mrs. Richardson’s best friend, who had been left at a fire station as a newborn when her name was May Ling Chow. Mia Warren realizes that this is the long-lost daughter of her friend and co-worker at Lucky Palace, Bebe. Bebe had been desperate to find her daughter after her postpartum depression resolved, wanting again to care for her and regretting her decision to abandon the child.

When Bebe learns from Mia that the McCulloughs want to adopt her baby, she confronts them and a

custody battle ensues. In the book, a successful Asian attorney takes on her case *pro bono*. In the miniseries, Mia sells a coveted photograph to obtain the money to help her friend find a lawyer. There were many differences, such as this one, between the book and the miniseries that served to have a more powerful, suspenseful, dramatic effect for the viewer.

Safe Haven laws originated in Mobile, Alabama, in 1998, and currently exist in all states in an effort to decrease rates of neonaticide.³ Under the patchwork of Safe Haven laws, mothers may relinquish their unwanted infant in a safe location. They remain anonymous and are not prosecuted if the baby is given up to staff at the appropriate location. Ages of the infant, as well as allowed locations for infant handoffs, vary by state.³ In Ohio, where the novel takes place, the law currently provides for leaving an infant up to 30 days old with a medical professional in the fire department such as emergency medical services, as well as hospitals or police stations.⁴

Both sides make arguments about custody. Bebe is much stronger psychologically a year later than when she abandoned her newborn. She believes the baby is not being properly exposed to her culture of origin. The McCulloughs have been caring for the infant as their own. But if these events had occurred in real life, Bebe could have been charged for abandoning her infant in a box in the snow on the steps of the fire station rather than safely relinquishing the infant. Even if Safe Haven laws had already been in place in Ohio at the time the novel was set, and even if Bebe had safely given her daughter to a medical professional in a Safe Haven, the right of that child to adoption and a family life would have been in question.

The theme of arson is only touched on by the title and by the beginning and ending scenes in the story. Mrs. Richardson's relationship with Izzy had always been complicated and was not helped by Izzy's unclear sexual orientation, choice of dress, and other behaviors seen as defiant. Izzy's artistic ability drew her to find solace in Mia Warren, who is forced to flee from Shaker. After the fire in the Richardson home, which was determined to have been caused by "little fires everywhere," Izzy disappeared.

Gannon noted that most arsonists are men; women who commit arson are similar to other female offenders and tend to be of Caucasian ethnicity, have poor education, low socioeconomic status, and range in age from the mid-20s to the late 30s.⁵

Pyromania⁶ is the principal diagnosis given to both male and female fire setters.

Arson is a general intent crime, so it is difficult to lower criminal responsibility for arson. Izzy is not demonstrated in the novel to meet criteria for pyromania; rather she wanted revenge for her perception that her mother drove Mia and Pearl Warren away.

Although there were some differences between the novel and the miniseries, both stories were compelling, and the miniseries was well directed and acted. Several themes are portrayed that may be of interest to forensic psychiatrists, including arson, Safe Haven laws, surrogacy, and custody battles.

Note: Lynn Shelton, who directed this and many acclaimed films, including *Your Sister's Sister*, died of a medical condition at age 54, right after this review was written. The authors would like to dedicate this review to her memory.

References

1. Feldman EA: Baby M turns 30: the law and policy of surrogate motherhood. *Am J Law Med* 44:7–22, 2018
2. *In re Baby M*. 537 A.2d 1227 (NJ 1988)
3. Friedman SH: Neonaticide, in *Family Murder: Pathologies of Love and Hate*. Edited by Friedman SH. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2018, pp 53–67
4. Ohio Revised Code, section 2151.3516, 2017
5. Gannon TA: Female arsonists: key features, psychopathologies, and treatment needs. *Psychiatry* 73:173–89, 2010
6. American Psychiatric Association: *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2013, pp 476–77

Disclosures of financial or other potential conflicts of interest: None.

A Cowboy, a Mystic, and Their Special Sauce: Amazon's *The Report*

Directed and written by Scott Z. Burns. Available at Amazon.com. Released November 15, 2019.

Reviewed by George David Annas, MD, MPH

DOI:10.29158/JAAPL.200059-20

Key words: torture; ethics; forensic professionalism; human rights

Americans hate government reports. Even our lawmakers disregard them, and the majority remain