

Reading Guide

- 1) *The Fires* is comprised of two novellas. Which elements of the novellas are similar? Different?
- 2) Compare and contrast the fire images in this book. What role does religion or spirituality—or the lack of each one—play in these novellas?
- 3) “What are you carrying?” Paul Morgan recalls these words of a French philosopher that his wife read in college (p. 20). In *The Fires* the words seem to convey extra meaning for each character in each novella. What do the characters carry with them throughout the book?
- 4) What does the dream sequence at the end of the novella suggest for Gina Morgan? And how does that dream sequence compare to the conclusion of “The Exorcism”?
- 5) Gina is experiencing physical changes. What is the significance of what she is going through?
- 6) Gina’s story concludes: “Morning comes, as she awakens, throat raw, eyes sore, head throbbing, to the remainder of her days.” Has Gina been changed by her story? If so, how? Where do you think she’ll go from here? How would you react if you were in Gina’s position?
- 7) In many ways, the characters in “The Exorcism” seem unhappy. The lives they lead do not fulfill them. How does each character manage to work around their unhappiness?
- 8) What do you think Tom Swanson means when he says: “Most people tak[e] one side or the other, either the romantic or the rational, and never ris[e] up to the even more troubling, puzzling level of the paradoxical where you hold both views in your mind at once...”? How do we see both views portrayed in these novellas?
- 9) In Chapter two of “The Exorcism,” wild dogs run between the moving cars on the highway while Tom and Ceely are driving home to Washington, DC. What do these dogs symbolize? Why does Ceely seem changed after this event?
- 10) In its review of the book, *Publisher’s Weekly* calls the stories “novellas of grief.” Would you agree? Disagree? Why?
- 11) What is a novella? How does it differ from a novel? A short story? And why is it not as popular a form of literature as the novel or short story? Why do you think Alan Cheuse chose to write these stories as novellas? What are some of the advantages of the novella form? What are some of the disadvantages of the form?
- 12) Besides the novellas in this book, can you name other novellas? (You will find a list of many well known and some lesser known novellas at our website, www.sfwp.com/novella.)