



## Who by Fire

By Diana Spechler  
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### Introduction

When Bits and Ash were children, their younger sister was kidnapped, a tragedy that led to their family's unraveling. Years later, Ash, who always blamed himself for Alena's disappearance, abruptly moved to Israel to become an Orthodox Jew.

By the spring of 2002, with the second Intifada at its peak, Ash's new life has consumed him; he wants nothing to do with Bits anymore, or with their mother, Ellie. Bits, a twenty-something wild child living in Boston, who parties too much, consistently destroys her personal relationships, and seeks solace in sex, is almost willing to accept Ash's disappearance, until she hears the news that changes everything: After thirteen years, Alena's remains have been recovered.

Now Bits is on her way to Israel to find Ash and bring him home for Alena's funeral. She becomes obsessed with the idea of salvaging what's left of her family, but she approaches her mission with limited information: She doesn't know about the secrets her mother has been keeping, about the girl who is trying to seduce Ash away from the religious life, about the struggles that her brother is having with his faith.

Told from the alternating points of view of the three family members, *Who By Fire* is a searing commentary on guilt, grief, and the inescapable bonds of family.

### Questions for Discussion

1. On the surface, Bits and Ash are polar opposites. Do they also share similarities? Do you feel that you are more similar to or more different from your siblings and parents?
2. The three narrators in the novel disapprove of one another's lifestyles, and set out to change one another in some pretty invasive ways. Have you ever found yourself trying to "rescue" someone, perhaps for selfish reasons? Has anyone ever tried to "rescue" you?
3. Ash believes that Orthodox Judaism is "the answer." Ellie believes that he is in a cult. Is one of them right and one of them wrong? What are some pros and cons of the pious lifestyle?
4. What do you think of Ash's claim that "only weak people believe in nothing"?
5. Can you sympathize with Ellie, or is her poor judgment unforgivable?
6. Guilt is a dominant theme throughout the novel, and the characters have various ways of dealing with their personal guilt. Is there a healthy way to deal with guilt? As Ash asks Yosi, what are we supposed to do with it?
7. Most of the characters in the novel are undeniably flawed, but is anyone a "bad person"? Think particularly of some of the peripheral characters (David, Jonathan, Benjamin). Is anyone unredeemable?
8. What do you think of Bits' claim that "everyone's a little to blame for everything"?
9. Did the novel make you think about fundamentalism in a new way? If so, how so?
10. What do you think Monica's future holds? What are some of her character strengths and weaknesses?

### About the Author

Diana Spechler received her MFA from the University of Montana and was a Steinbeck Fellow at San José State University from 2004 to 2005. Her fiction has appeared in *Glimmer Train Stories*, *Moment*, *Lilith*, and elsewhere. She lives in New York City.