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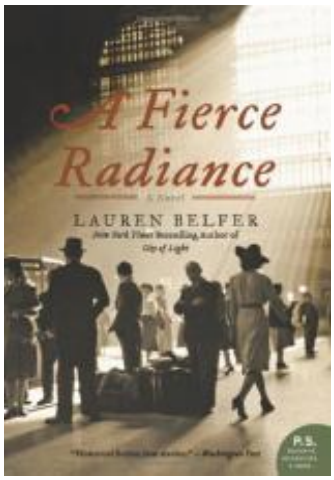
A Fierce Radiance

by Lauren Belfer



About the Book

A *Washington Post* Best Novel of the Year
An NPR Mystery of the Year

In the anxious days after Pearl Harbor, Life photojournalist Claire Shipley finds herself covering one of the nation's most important stories. At New York City's renowned Rockefeller Institute, researchers are racing to save thousands of wounded American soldiers and countless others by developing a miraculous new drug they call penicillin. For Claire, a single mother haunted by the loss of her young daughter --- a death the miracle drug could have prevented --- the story is cuttingly personal, especially after she unexpectedly begins to fall in love with the shy and brilliant head physician, James Stanton. But Claire isn't the only one interested in the secret cure. When a researcher dies under suspicious circumstances, the stakes become starkly clear: someone understands just how profitable the new drug could be --- and will stop at nothing to get it. Now, with lives and a new love hanging in the balance, Claire will throw herself into harm's way to find a killer --- no matter what price she may have to pay.

Discussion Guide

1. A Fierce Radiance is set in New York, at the onset of World War II. Talk about America during wartime. How was the war a part of the lives of Claire and Charlie Shipley, Jamie Stanton, Edward Rutherford, Bill Shipley, and other Americans? Did any of your relatives serve in the war? What about on the home front --- do you know how your relatives? lives were affected during that time?

2. Contemporary Americans are also living during a time of war. How have the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq impacted Americans today? Contrast the two times. Do you think Americans today feel as part of the war effort as they did in the 1940s? Explain.

3. Wartime New York City is brought vividly to life in the novel. What were your impressions of the city? How do those impressions compare to your ideas of what the city is like today? What was the place you call home like during World War II? How does it compare to its contemporary version? Do you think we --- as a society and a nation --- have lost anything in the decades between then and now?

4. What is your opinion of Claire Shipley? Do you think she was like other women of her time? How did her background influence her choices, including her work? How did her career shape her outlook on the events that were happening around her?

5. Outside of her son, the most important men in Claire?s life were her father, Edward Rutherford, Jamie Stanton, and Henry Luce. What did each of them mean to her? How did her relationship with each change over the course of the story?

6. Claire was a photojournalist for Life magazine. Have you ever seen an issue of that publication? What role did Life play in the national consciousness? Do we have anything like Life today?

7. Think about Claire?s job as a photojournalist and her directives from her boss, Henry Luce. Did she see herself as part of the war effort or as an objective bystander covering events? What is the role of a journalist today? Might our outlook of the Second World War be different if Claire and her colleagues covered it following today?s journalistic standards? What are the pros and cons of objectivity?

8. Before reading **A Fierce Radiance**, did you have any idea that penicillin and other antiobiotics were discovered less than a hundred years ago? How did these medical miracles change our lives? Are we too reliant on drugs like antibiotics as well as antibacterial household products today? Will these drugs always be as effective as they have been? How do you think can we extend the potency of the drugs we have available to us?

9. Do you think 21st-century Americans take their good health and advanced medical care for granted? Could you imagine living or raising a child when the simplest of conditions --- a cold, a scraped knee, a cat scratch --- could lead to death? How do you think you would cope living with such knowledge? Have we as a nation, forgotten the transformation that the discovery of antibiotics and vaccines have made in our lives?

10. The Rockefeller Institute followed the motto ?for the good of humankind.? The doctors, scientists, and researchers worked tirelessly in the name of science, not wealth. Does this kind of selfless humanity still exist? Should everything be done for profit? Why? Do you think we as a nation have lost our sense of shared commitment, of the ?common good??

11. Claire argues with her father that selling antibacterials are not like selling rivets. He disagrees, to which she responds: ?You don?t think there?s well, a human right for people to be able to receive an antibacterial at two cents a dose if that?s what it costs to produce? Okay, at a dollar to allow for a hefty profit, but surely not as much as two hundred dollars for one shot?? How would you answer this? Companies often do spend a great deal of money in research and development, which they want to recoup. But how much profit is enough, or are there no limits, no matter the cost to other human beings?

12. With the lives of millions of soldiers at stake, the war department claimed the patents on penicillin?s means of production to ensure that no single drug company could either have a monopoly on this essential ?war weapon? or to

divert government funding into other more lucrative research of their own. Do you think this was a good or necessary thing to do? What might have happened if they decided to let the free market take care of production?

13. Before doctors can discover cures, they need to do an enormous amount of medical testing. In **A Fierce Radiance**, some of the subjects were given drugs without knowing the possible side effects. Some of these were interned Japanese Americans. Should they have been told what could happen if they received the medication? Rutherford felt using them as test subjects was a necessary byproduct of saving the many, especially when the drugs saved their lives. Others felt these ?Japs? --- whom they viewed as possible enemy sympathizers or combatants --- didn?t deserve such knowledge. What do you think?

14. If one of your family members did something that horrified you, as Claire's father does something that horrifies her when he allows a new drug to be tested on Japanese internees, would you be able to forgive that person? Should you try to?

15. The government lackey, Andrew Barnett, tells Claire, there is ?no morality in war.? Do you agree with this? Is ?winning at any cost? --- if it includes murder and letting a killer go free --- victory?

16. What did you take away from reading **A Fierce Radiance**?

17. Do you think Claire and Jamie will be together after the war?

Author Bio

Lauren Belfer was born in Rochester, New York, and grew up in Buffalo, where she attended the Buffalo Seminary. At Swarthmore College, she majored in Medieval Studies. After graduating, she worked as a file clerk at an art gallery, a paralegal, an assistant photo editor at a newspaper, a fact checker at magazines, and as a researcher and associate producer on documentary films. She has an M.F.A. from Columbia University.

Her debut novel, CITY OF LIGHT, was a *New York Times* bestseller, as well as a number one Book Sense pick, a Barnes & Noble Discover Award nominee, a *New York Times* Notable Book, a Library Journal Best Book, and a Main Selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club. CITY OF LIGHT was a bestseller in Great Britain and has been translated into six languages.

Her second novel, A FIERCE RADIANCE, was named a *Washington Post* Best Novel of 2010 and an NPR Best Mystery of 2010.

Her third novel, AND AFTER THE FIRE, will be published in May 2016 by HarperCollins.

Belfer?s fiction has also been published in the *Michigan Quarterly Review, Shenandoah* and *Henfield Prize Stories*. Her nonfiction has appeared in the *New York Times Book Review,* the *Washington Post Book World,* the *Christian Science Monitor* and elsewhere.

She lives in New York City.

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