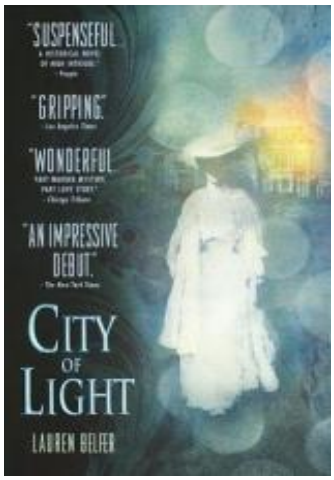
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City of Light

by Lauren Belfer



About the Book

The year is 1901. Buffalo, New York, is poised for glory. With its booming industry and newly electrified streets, Buffalo is a model for the century just beginning.

Louisa Barrett has made this dazzling city her home. Headmistress of Buffalo?s most prestigious school, Louisa is at ease in a world of men, protected by the titans of her city. But nothing prepares her for a startling discovery: evidence of a murder tied to the city?s cathedral-like power plant at nearby Niagara Falls. This shocking crime--followed by another mysterious death--will ignite an explosive chain of events. For in this city of seething intrigue and dazzling progress, a battle rages among politicians, power brokers, and industrialists for control of Niagara. And one extraordinary woman in their midst must protect a dark secret that implicates them all?

Discussion Guide

1. In **City of Light**, the upper echelons of Buffalo society all get what they want by cultivating an "acceptable" image under which they can do what they want, regardless of its moral implications. How does this rationalize their behavior, as well as hide it?

2. Faced with a social order that demanded this "acceptable" behavior, was there any other way Louisa could react when faced with a crisis -- such as Millicent's abduction or the vandalization of her school?

3. Are there any main characters in this story who don't follow society's code? Who and why?

4. Louisa likes to think of her students as "a generation of subversives who took up their expected positions in society and then, day by day, bit by bit, fostered a revolution." Do you think that this is what she achieved with her students? Was it the best way she had to help the social progress of women?

5. Why do none of the members of Buffalo society become involved with the faction that is worried about the affects of the power plant on the environment?

6. In protecting Grace, was Louisa doing the right thing? Did her focus on the little girl blind her, impairing her judgement, as with her decision to not turn Susannah Riley in?

7. Would Louisa have been better off moving away from Buffalo and merely keeping in touch with the Sinclair family? Would Grace have been better off?

8. If Abigail's mother wanted to keep her daughter's child far away from Abigail and from scandal, why didn't she have him adopted in a family far away, instead of sending it to the asylum?

9. Why does Mr. Rumsey let Louisa know that he planned her meeting with Cleveland? Would she have been better off never knowing?

10. Why does Mr. Rumsey seem surprised that Louisa might have suffered from her experience of conceiving Grace -- or that she feels badly about her "loss of innocence?"

11. In 1901, Buffalo is one of the richest, most sophisticated cities in the nation. How does this influence Louisa's life, and the lives of the wealthy citizens of the city? What do they hope to achieve on the brink of a new century?

12. What motivates Tom Sinclair's dreams of electrical power? Is it the vision of industrial progress, the hope of personal fame and wealth, or something else?

13. Why was Francesca Coatsworth able to maintain her "alternative" lifestyle and still be such an influential member of society?

14. Why do you think Francesca allowed Sarah to disappear into Singapore after she confessed her crimes?

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.

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