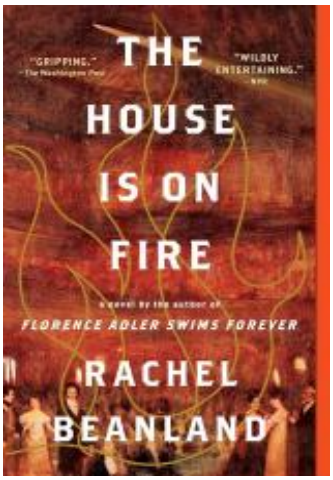
The House Is on Fire

by Rachel Beanland



About the Book

The author of FLORENCE ADLER SWIMS FOREVER returns with a masterful work of historical fiction about an incendiary tragedy that shocked a young nation and tore apart a community in a single night --- told from the perspectives of four people whose actions during the inferno changed the course of history.

Richmond, Virginia, 1811. It?s the height of the winter social season, the General Assembly is in session, and many of Virginia?s gentleman planters, along with their wives and children, have made the long and arduous journey to the capital in hopes of whiling away the darkest days of the year. At the city?s only theater, the Charleston-based Placide & Green Company puts on two plays a night to meet the demand of a populace that?s done looking for enlightenment at the front of a church.

On the night after Christmas, the theater is packed with more than 600 holiday revelers. In the third-floor boxes sits newly widowed Sally Henry Campbell, who is glad for any opportunity to relive the happy times she shared with her husband. One floor away, in the colored gallery, Cecily Patterson doesn?t give a whit about the play but is grateful for a four-hour reprieve from a life that has recently gone from bad to worse. Backstage, young stagehand Jack Gibson hopes that, if he can impress the theater?s managers, he?ll be offered a permanent job with the company. And on the other side of town, blacksmith Gilbert Hunt dreams of one day being able to bring his wife to the theater, but he?ll have to buy her freedom first.

When the theater goes up in flames in the middle of the performance, Sally, Cecily, Jack and Gilbert make a series of split-second decisions that will affect not only their own lives but those of countless others. And in the days following the fire, as news of the disaster spreads across the United States, the paths of these four people will become forever intertwined.

Based on the true story of Richmond?s theater fire, THE HOUSE IS ON FIRE offers proof that sometimes, in the midst

of great tragedy, we are offered our most precious --- and fleeting --- chances at redemption.

Discussion Guide

1. Have you faced a moment of crisis that revealed your true colors or that showed you a side of yourself you hadn?t realized existed? Have you seen moments of crisis reveal new or hidden sides of people you know?

2. In discussing whether to amputate Margaret?s leg, Sally and Mrs. Cowley don?t see eye to eye with Archie or Dr. Foushee. What do their opposing arguments reveal about how each party sees a woman?s place in society?

3. At the end of the novel, Margaret?s health is in peril once again. If she does pull through and survive, do you think she and Archie will be able to have a good marriage and future together? How will the novel?s events affect their union?

4. Discuss some of the parallels between Della?s life and Cecily?s. Why do you think Della has kept some of the facts of Cecily?s treatment from Cecil? Why do you think she?s kept some of the details about Cecily?s paternity from her daughter? If you were Della, how would you respond to Cecily?s initial plan to run away?

5. Put yourself in Jack?s shoes in the immediate aftermath of the fire. If you were him (at his age and in his position), do you think you would have turned the theater company in? How do you think you would have acted?

6. On page 141, Rachel Beanland writes of Gilbert: ?He knows that, sometimes, he can be blind to people?s failings, that he?s so eager to see the good in people, he ignores their ugly centers. He thought Good Pete was a decent man because he let Gilbert hire himself out on Sundays, but now he realizes that if he?d really been as good as all that, he?d have freed Gilbert a long time ago. Same goes for Elizabeth Preston, who treats Sara like she is a beloved member of the family, but not so beloved that she is allowed to grieve for Louisa, too.?

Is anyone really a hero in THE HOUSE IS ON FIRE? Who, if anyone, would you consider the book?s heroes? And how are some of the people who may act heroically in certain situations but not in others limited, both by existing power structures and by their own moral compasses?

7. Around the halfway point of the novel, Gilbert returns to the theater green, where he receives applause and a hero?s welcome. At that point in the book, did you think things would work out for him and Sara? Did you think he?d get rewarded for his bravery? What about later on, when he?s told some of the townspeople will buy his freedom?

8. At one point in the novel, Sally and Mrs. Cowley talk about how overlooked they are as widowed women, how they hardly have any rights. But Margaret is married, and her rights seem quite limited as well. Discuss how marriage both helped and hindered a woman?s freedom during this period.

9. Much of THE HOUSE IS ON FIRE is about how history is made and about who gets to set the historical record. The novel takes place in a much different media landscape than today?s. What are the downsides --- and the benefits --- of having a more concentrated media landscape? How does it shape whose stories are told and which stories will stand the test of time?

10. Do you think justice is served at the end of the novel? What would justice in this case look like to you?

Author Bio

Rachel Beanland is the author of THE HALF LIFE, THE HOUSE IS ON FIRE and FLORENCE ADLER SWIMS FOREVER, which won the National Jewish Book Award for Debut Fiction. She is a graduate of the University of South Carolina and earned her MFA in creative writing from Virginia Commonwealth University. She lives with her family in Richmond, Virginia.

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