



Little Fires Everywhere, by Celeste Ng
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, March 2018

Little Fires Everywhere, Celeste Ng's blockbuster novel, has topped national bestseller lists for nearly a year. It was a popular gift during the holiday season; this reviewer received a copy. The book's opening line entices readers: "Everyone in Shaker Heights was talking about it that summer: how Isabelle, the last of the Richardson children, had finally gone around the bend and burned the house down." But could *Little Fires Everywhere's* white-hot beginning be sustained?

Bill Richardson, an attorney, and his wife Elena, a journalist, live with their four teenage children in Shaker Heights, a leafy suburb of Cleveland. The family is socially prominent and well respected in the community. Their oldest daughter Lexie, a high-school senior, is the proverbial golden girl—beautiful and popular. Next comes Trip, star athlete and perennial heartthrob. Moody, at 15, is the sensitive and artistic younger brother. Rebellious Isabelle, nicknamed "Izzy," a freshman, is the family black sheep.

Elena Richardson, a self-styled do-gooder, had inherited a small house on the outskirts of town. She often rents out the cottage to less fortunate newcomers. When Mia Warren, an artsy photographer, and her teenage daughter Pearl breeze into Shaker Heights looking for a rental, Elena eagerly offers them her cottage. Pearl, bright and personable, quickly acclimates herself to her new school. The four Richardson teens draw Pearl into their family circle.

Mia, however, is evasive about her past. She doesn't explain where she and Pearl came from and why they moved to Shaker Heights. Elena becomes suspicious of Mia and wonders what burning secrets Mia is hiding. Meanwhile, a custody battle ensues involving the adoption of a Chinese baby by a wealthy white couple who are friends of the Richardsons. Bill agrees to represent their friends while Mia champions the side of the Chinese woman trying to reclaim her baby.

The courtroom scenes in *Little Fires Everywhere* are dramatic, and both sides of the adoption case are plausible. However, several elements of the plot are a stretch,

and the storyline morphs into a bubbling stew of social issues: surrogate parenthood, teen pregnancy, and interracial adoption. The teen characters, except for Moody and Pearl, are stereotypically drawn. The book's themes are topical and engaging, indeed, but its initial bright promise flamed out.