

Little Fires Everywhere

A Introduction

The series *Little Fires Everywhere* takes place in Shaker Heights, Ohio, a Cleveland suburb, which was established in 1909. In the 1960s, Shaker Heights was considered to be a model city in the areas of transportation, government, housing, recreation, education, and racial integration. The magazine *Cosmopolitan* called it “an American dream town come true”.

1. Look at these three pictures of Shaker Heights today and imagine what conflicts could be brewing behind the peaceful facades.



B Summary

The series, based on Celeste Ng’s novel of the same name, is set in 1992 in Shaker Heights, Ohio, a wealthy, seemingly perfect little town that prides itself on progressivism. While literal flames do play a role in this drama, the title can also be interpreted metaphorically; the story sheds light on a multitude of social inequities, from which conflicts or, quoting the title, “little fires” arise. Identity, mother-daughter relationships as well as motherhood in general, privilege, economic inequality, sexuality, (non-)conformity and racism are the main issues addressed in this series.

2. Were any of these issues in your list of conflicts from ex. 1?
Which ones do you experience or witness in your life?

The Richardsons are an upper-class American family, which has deep ties to their affluent, orderly community Shaker Heights. They could be described as the embodiment of “domestic perfection”. Elena Richardson, mother of four children and wife to Bill, tries to uphold her and her family’s status by any means necessary. When Mia Warren, a black, rootless, and artistic single mother with apparently little income, and her daughter Pearl, move into Elena’s rental unit in Shaker Heights, opposing ways of life collide. This forces Elena to recognize all the “little flames” burning inside her own, seemingly picture-perfect family and community. Suspicion and jealousy further deepen the chasm between the two conflicting worlds and race adds another layer of social critique. Next to the racism Pearl and Mia experience on an everyday basis in Shaker Heights, Asian racism is also addressed by introducing a secondary-plot into the story – a custody battle for a Chinese baby. The series “Little Fires Everywhere” depicts the way privileged and racial dynamics impact even America’s most “progressive communities”.

Little Fires Everywhere

C Definitions

3. Write definitions for the following terms:

- a) passive racism
- b) white supremacy
- c) white savior
- d) reverse discrimination
- e) white privilege

4. Match these terms with situations from the series listed below:

- a) *Linda, Elena's friend, to Elena when she finds out that the Richardsons are renting their rental unit to Mia and Pearl:* She highly praises Elena's good heart and her good intentions behind renting for next to nothing to Mia and Pearl, who are practically homeless, calling Elena Super-woman.
- b) *Mia to Pearl, after she is caught trespassing with Moody Richardson, Elena's son who is the same age as Pearl, by the neighborhood watch:* She claims that the police do not stand behind the Black community and that Blacks are always held accountable for their actions, unlike white people.
- c) *Elena to Brian, her daughter Lexie's African American boyfriend, and Pearl when they meet for the first time at the Richardsons':* She automatically assumes that Brian and Pearl will get along really well, and that they share common interests.
- d) *Lexie at supper, talking about college applications:* She claims Pearl will have no problem getting into college wherever she wants to due to affirmative action.
- e) *A lawyer describing a Chinese woman's chances of gaining child custody in a court case:* People with Bebe Chow's history and background don't stand a chance of winning.

D Comparing episodes

[Episode 3:]

Bebe Chow, a Chinese single-mother of a newborn baby, is in a store trying to buy powdered milk formula while her under-nourished baby is crying in her arms. When Bebe begs the cashier to sell her the product even though she is 70 cents short and her baby is clearly very hungry, the cashier angrily throws her out and tells her to try breast-feeding, because it's free.

[Episode 3:]

Izzy, Elena's youngest child, gets on a bus after the homecoming dance but is 70 cents short...

5. Imagine what happens next and complete the scene.

Little Fires Everywhere

[Episode 5:]

Elena Richardson is sleeping in her car at the side of the road on her way home from New York City. A police officer knocks on her window and encourages her politely to move along. He remarks that she is parked in an unsafe neighborhood and thus grants her the benefit of the doubt. The camera then pans to an older Black man scraping ice off his car a few houses down, making the officer's implication even clearer.

[Episode 1]:

Elena Richardson spots a suspicious looking car near her house, unaware that the mother and daughter in the car are her soon-to-be tenants (Mia and Pearl Warren) ...

6. Imagine what happens next and complete the scene.

E Character profiles



Reese Witherspoon plays Elena Richardson

7. Read the profiles and find traits that the different characters share.
Which characters do you think are the most similar?

MIA

(early- to mid-30s, single mother and struggling artist, African American)

- secretive about her past
- helpful and loving to those in need
- aloof
- opinionated
- distrusting
- manipulative
- creative
- prejudiced against wealthy people
- independent and liberal
- protective, leaning towards possessive
- strong willed

ELENA

(mother and wife, wealthy family, journalist, white)

- secretive about her past
- appearances and social standing extremely important
- opinionated
- superficial
- manipulative
- has regrets
- high expectations of family
- generous with advice and time - she may be able to use it to her own advantage later
- extremely structured and expects others to conform

LEXIE

(17 year-old, oldest child in family, white)

- tries to fulfill her mother's expectations
- popular at school (homecoming queen)
- has an African American boyfriend
- manipulative
- accepted to Yale
- appearance is important to her
- superficial
- uses people
- ranked second in her class for grades

Little Fires Everywhere

PEARL

(15 year-old, only child,
African American)

- writes poetry and likes to read
- caring
- unsure of her identity
- gives into peer-pressure
- independent
- tries to please others: sometimes too accommodating to other's wants and needs
- selfless and selfish at the same time, depending on the other person

IZZY

(14 year-old, youngest child
in family, white)

- rebellious and non-conforming
- opinionated
- gets bullied at school and home
- has no friends
- artistic
- (probably) homosexual
- tries to be her own person, yet also gives into peer-pressure
- often in conflict with her mother
- feels unloved
- courageous

MOODY

(15 year-old, 3rd child in family, white)

- plays the guitar
- caring
- open-minded
- more of a loner than his older siblings
- especially supportive and protective of his younger sister Izzy
- can reflect on controversial, social issues
- sensitive and calm
- introverted and reserved
- trusting

TRIP

(16 year-old, 2nd-oldest child in family,
white)

- popular athlete
- ladies' man
- self-confident
- good-looking
- superficial
- not very interested in school
- puts others down
- picks on his younger siblings
- carefree
- shallow

8. After reading the profiles, which character would have said something like this?

Explain your decision.

- a) This character loves the feeling of changing another person's life through his or her actions.
- b) The character is upset by his or her assumption that if you don't come from a troubled home or dysfunctional family but rather from a stable and well-off family, you're actually punished for it by having less handed to you "for free".
- c) This character accuses Lexie of faking a friendship with Pearl in order to improve her standing with Brian.
- d) This character claims that Elena never faced a situation in which she had to make the right choice. Rather her privileged way of life and her whiteness already had everything in store for her, without her having to work or struggle for it.
- e) Pearl is charged with letting herself be used by a girl who lives by completely different standards.
- f) This character is convinced that whether you are black or female or both, everybody shares the same problems.

Little Fires Everywhere

9.

- a) Do some research on the Black Lives Matter movement and write down the most important information – e.g. origins, goals, achievements.
- b) Pick two characters from the ones listed above and, with a partner, based on the character profiles, write down what the characters' opinions on the Black Lives Matter movement might be.
- c) Write a dialog/discussion between these two characters about the Black Lives Matter movement and their opinion on the question why the movement isn't called "All Lives Matter".

F Discussion

10. In one scene, Elena Richardson requests Mia Warren's criminal record after finding out that Mia had given a false reference as her previous landlord. Discuss: Can Elena's actions be classified as racist or does it simply show general concern about renting the unit to Mia?

11. Read this description of a conversation between Lexie and her boyfriend Brian.

In one scene of the series Lexie's boyfriend Brian confronts Lexie with the question as to whether she sees him as a black guy. Lexie is unsure of what to answer and states that she does not see people as colors. For Brian it is incomprehensible why Lexie can see him as a football player or a 17 year-old, but not as a man of color.

What does Lexie mean when she says she doesn't see people's colors? And why does Brian insist that she see his color?

12. In the novel, the author Celeste Ng doesn't assign a race to Mia and Pearl Warren. What do you think the author's intentions were?

13. The author Celeste Ng grew up in Shaker Heights and is Asian American. What influence do you think this has on her work?

C Definitions

3.

passive racism – unconsciously expressing racism in everyday situations

white supremacy – believing that whites are inherently superior to other races

white savior – white people believing that they have to fix the problems of people of color

reverse discrimination – when policies effectively discriminate against a majority and favor a minority

white privilege – benefits white people enjoy based solely on their skin color

4.

a) white savior

b) white privilege

c) passive racism

d) reverse discrimination

e) white supremacy

E Character profiles

8.

a) Elena

b) Elena

c) Trip and Moody

d) Mia

e) Mia

f) Lexie