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And After The Fire: A Novel



Synopsis

The New York Times-bestselling author of *A Fierce Radiance* and *City of Light* returns with a new powerful and passionate novel "inspired by historical events" about two women, one European and one American, and the mysterious choral masterpiece by Johann Sebastian Bach that changes both their lives. In the ruins of Germany in 1945, at the end of World War II, American soldier Henry Sachs takes a souvenir, an old music manuscript, from a seemingly deserted mansion and mistakenly kills the girl who tries to stop him. In America in 2010, Henry's niece, Susanna Kessler, struggles to rebuild her life after she experiences a devastating act of violence on the streets of New York City. When Henry dies soon after, she uncovers the long-hidden music manuscript. She becomes determined to discover what it is and to return it to its rightful owner, a journey that will challenge her preconceptions about herself and her family's history and also offer her an opportunity to finally make peace with the past. In Berlin, Germany, in 1783, amid the city's glittering salons where aristocrats and commoners, Christians and Jews, mingle freely despite simmering anti-Semitism, Sara Itzig Levy, a renowned musician, conceals the manuscript of an anti-Jewish cantata by Johann Sebastian Bach, an unsettling gift to her from Bach's son, her teacher. This work and its disturbing message will haunt Sara and her family for generations to come. Interweaving the stories of Susanna and Sara, and their families, *And After the Fire* traverses over two hundred years of history, from the eighteenth century through the Holocaust and into today, seamlessly melding past and present, real and imagined. Lauren Belfer's deeply researched, evocative, and compelling narrative resonates with emotion and immediacy.

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Customer Reviews

A powerful blend of fact and fiction, Belfer has meticulously researched her subject to provide authenticity that captivates the reader from beginning to end. This novel will be of special interest to classical music devotees - and, in particular, to aficionados of Johann Sebastian Bach. When Susanna's uncle, in Buffalo, NY, leaves her a music manuscript appearing to be the original score signed by Bach, the mystery begins. How on earth did the manuscript make its way from Weimar, Germany to Buffalo and fall into her uncle's hands? Susanna no longer practices her Jewish religion, but honors her heritage. When she discovers that the music composition is a horrific anti-Jewish cantata, what, at first, seemed to be an epic discovery for the classical music world and of infinite monetary value, becomes her all-consuming quest for answers. What should be done with a music manuscript which has been carefully concealed from the world since 1783, as too dangerous to reveal to a Jewish culture - their persecution by the Nazis down through the years and the lifelong effects of the Holocaust still smoldering? The novel carries us through the salons of 1783 - 1800's Germany, where the music of Beethoven and Bach was the center of their entertainment. Family members were accomplished musicians and composers. Invitations to Sara Levy's salons were sought after for her skillful mix of guests and the quality of the musical entertainment. Sara was also the original recipient of the Bach cantata. Susanna enlists experts to assist with her efforts, and as they learn about the manuscript, personal agendas emerge. Susanna decides to travel to Weimar to trace the manuscript's ownership, which must be established before she can decide how to handle its disposition.

Lauren Belfer's book, *And After the Fire*, gets three stars mainly for what I learned about music history. The story and the construction of the book left a lot to be desired. And, by the way, what fire? Couldn't for the life of me figure out the title, but I may be a little dense. This is the story about a lost Bach cantata, stolen during World War II. The lexicon is extremely anti-Semitic and yet the cantata gets into the hands of one Jewish family after another. The premise of the story is good and the beginning definitely hooks the reader. From there it disappoints. The story flashes back from the present to the late 18th Century to the early 19th Century. The flashes help the reader understand where the cantata resides and who has it. Sara Levy, the main character in this time period is very interesting, compelling and kept me reading. The main character in the present, Suzanna Kessler, is less so, but not unlikable or unbelievable. The problems in this book lay in the story itself and the author's continued redundancy. When Suzanna discovers the lost cantata among her dead uncle's possessions, she seeks out music experts to help her decide what to do with it.

She is also interested in learning to whom the cantata belongs. Are there decedents from the war who have a claim on the piece? This leads her in the path of a new love interest, Dan Erhardt. We learn that Suzanna had been raped and afterwards her husband left her. Dan also suffered from the early death of his wife and was still grieving from that loss. These two events brought these two broken people together. This particular storyline didn't bother me and the author did a sensitive job of creating the union of Suzanna and Dan. What I have to ask is why all the different points of view?

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