



Things We Set on Fire

Deborah Reed

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From the best-selling author of *Carry Yourself Back to Me* comes another tightly plotted, emotionally complex novel about strangers who happen to be part of the same family.

A series of tragedies brings Vivvie's young grandchildren into her custody, and her two estranged daughters back under one roof. Jackson, Vivvie's husband, was shot and killed 30 years ago, and the ramifications have splintered the family into their own isolated remembrances and recriminations.

This deeply personal, hauntingly melancholy look at the damages families inflict on each other – and the healing that only they can provide – is filled with flinty, flawed and complex people stumbling towards some kind of peace. Like Elizabeth Strout and Kazuo Isiguro, Deborah Reed understands a story and its inhabitants reveal themselves in the subtleties: the space between the thoughts, the sigh behind the smile, and the unreliable lies people tell themselves that ultimately reveal the deepest truths.

Things We Set on Fire Details

Date : Published December 1st 2013 by Lake Union Publishing (first published October 22nd 2013)

ISBN :

Author : Deborah Reed

Format : Kindle Edition 260 pages

Genre : Fiction, Contemporary

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From Reader Review Things We Set on Fire for online ebook

Lolly K Dandeneau says

A fragile secret that lays dormant in the blood will force two daughters back into their damaged mother's life. Vivie's daughters, Kate and Elin, are estranged from each other and distant with their mother after the choices each made drove them apart. Both of Vivie's grown daughters are trapped by some unnamed memory related to the day their father was mysteriously shot to death, a memory that haunts them with questions they don't want to ask. Elin is living on the other side of the country, far away from her suffocating childhood when she gets a call from her mother that her careless sister Kate has attempted suicide, leaving her two little girls in their mother's care. Vivie needs her help. Elin's own seemingly secure life has thrown her and she knows she must go to her sister, even though Kate had burned the bridge between them long ago. What solid knowledge Elin had about her feckless sister falls away as she sees her in the hospital bed. The incident that kept Elin from meeting her nieces all these years becomes nothing when she finds two beautiful lonely little girls in grave need of love. Kate has been struggling for so long on her own, not out of pride so much as out of love for her family.

Vivie will have to face her regrets, mistakes, and sins to give her family a chance to love again. This novel is deeply painful and moving. I imagine when Neal enters the scene some readers will feel Elin wouldn't react as she does. I feel the opposite, I think what seems important when we're young sheds with the years, and forgiveness is easier when those you love are involved. It's hard to write a review and explore each person without giving the story away. All I can say is, read it!

Lisa says

This book was free from Amazon, so I decided to give it a try. Everyone, I think, has family member(s) they need to give another chance to reconnect. To put aside hostilities and barriers. I wanted to see what this book had to say.

The story starts a bit off-putting. I really thought about quitting right after the prologue. But I decided it had to get better, at least towards the end, and I continued to read. By about chapter 10 I was really into the story and did not want to put the book down. Well written and each character's view points were interwoven very smoothly. Sometimes I would get irritated with the mom. "Come on, you know you need to say it, just say it!" Or the sister not letting someone else explain themselves without her twisting the words or intentions.

The heat and humidity of Florida, the joy of seeing your first snow on the mountains, and the angst and the frustrations of letting go, I felt it all. The author did a nice job setting the scene.

What was the message? Don't be so hard on yourself or others. Life is short and you need to find what makes you happy. Let go of all the negative energy, it's unhealthy.

Nenette says

I like how this story ended. It was atypical, and yet very realistic. Elin and Neal did not end up together, as I had expected, and yet they were both on their way to resolving their individual issues.

The central theme of the story is not so much about ALS but on how major roadblocks such as a debilitating or life-threatening disease can change the course of the lives of each family member. It was written with a very lyrical prose, that is not so much to my taste, but it surely painted the dramatic theme of the story. If it was the intent of the author to put on a heavy weight on the heart of the reader, then she achieved that, probably in the same way that she intended to lift that weight at the end when the characters let go of their burdens.

The story showcases the resiliency of human beings, adult and child alike. Families will pass through difficult times, ties may be severed, but there is always hope of repairing the damage, of starting over.

Janice says

At first I loved this book, with just the right emotional intensity and interesting characters. But somehow it just never went anywhere for me after that. The story about a mom with two adult daughters who are both, in varying degrees, estranged from her, was one that I thought would really pull me in, but the characters were never really given enough depth to engage me very much. At the same time, this author does have good writing skills, good at descriptive detail, and should have been able to do much more with this story.

Larry H says

I'd rate this 4.5, maybe even 4.75 stars.

Old tensions, hurts, and unresolved arguments between family members are never fun to actually experience, but they're fodder for a treasure trove of fantastic books, movies, television shows, and plays. Deborah Reed's new novel, *Things We Set on Fire*, is an exquisitely rendered story about the hurts we don't forget and what they drive us to do, as well as the things we think we understand and the truths we rarely do.

When a tragedy reunites Vivvie with both of her estranged daughters, and introduces her to her two young granddaughters for the first time, it's almost more than she can bear. Memories of her husband's tragic death in a hunting accident nearly 30 years before haunt her, and the incident and its aftermath was enough to send both of her daughters fleeing their home as soon as they could, and fleeing each other as well.

"Why did everything have to go unspoken between Vivvie and Elin? Unspoken but not unaware. Why did they feel the need to play this game of fool you/fool me that neither was winning or would ever win?"

Vivvie's older daughter, Elin, is the midst of her own crisis when her mother summons her home to Florida, so leaving Portland seems like the logical thing to do. But Elin has run before, and it cost her more than she ever imagined. And returning home reopens wounds that had never really healed, and forces her to confront incidents from her past that she had hoped never to deal with again.

"Her sister was a stranger whose life had existed outside of Elin's understanding, hidden from her affections, an outsider with a warmth and affection all her own, uncloaked inside this house, broadcast in everything around her, the faces of her daughters the most staggering display."

So often in life problems stem from jumping to the wrong conclusions or simply leaving things unsaid in the

hopes they're already understood. As Vivvie and her daughters come together again, they have to relive memories from long ago and accept the correct answers to questions they've always had. Yet while these do bring more pain, they also bring catharsis, as only through clarity can they start to heal and move on with their lives.

This is a beautifully written book about trying to come together after so much has transpired through so many years. Deborah Reed does a wonderful job in creating flawed characters that evoke your sympathies, and demonstrating how, much like real life, what we think we know and see is often quite different than what is true. Reed's story is painful, emotional, and moving, and her language is tremendously poetic. While you may not have experienced any of these issues that the characters in *Things We Set on Fire* did, the emotions the characters deal with are nearly universal, which increases its power. Well done.

Lisa Holliday says

Masterful

This woman is such an exquisite writer. Sentence after sentence that were as delicious as this moment is, sitting in my cabin by a fire in the blue ridge mountains, grieving the the thought of ever leaving, and the turning of the final page of this book.

Sam Sattler says

Deborah Reed's *Things We Set on Fire* is all about family secrets and the potential that these secrets have to destroy a family over time. It tells the story of the Fentons, mother and two daughters, a little family that learns the hard way how easily it can be destroyed when everyone refuses to talk about the secret they all know but are afraid to openly examine.

The girls, Elin and Kate, lose their father suddenly. One moment he is there and the family is thriving, the next he is gone, victim of an unsolved shooting that authorities consider to be a tragic accident. Now, some thirty years later, the three women are forced to confront the secrets that almost destroyed them all those years ago. They have no choice. Kate, the mother of two little girls, is in the hospital near death, and her children, although they know neither their grandmother nor their aunt, have no one else in the world to care for them. What happens next is not what any of them expected.

The characters of *Things We Set on Fire* are generally sympathetic ones even when their behavior is at its most irritatingly selfish. That Reed's female characters are so flawed does make them considerably more believable than their near-perfect male counterparts, but this contrast leaves the novel with a "TV Movie" feel. The relatively short novel would have packed more of an emotional punch had Reed more fully developed each of her five main characters and their individual side stories. As it stands, *Things We Set on Fire* is more representative of the sometimes denigrated genre "chick-lit" than it is of a literary novel.

Debbie says

I have to say that this book was not what I expected. The prologue caused me to stop and think. I wasn't sure that I wanted to read yet another book about the horrors family members can inflict on one another. But the book was free, and my first book from the new Kindle First program, so I read on, wanting to give it a fair shot.

There's no horror story. There is plenty of despair and anguish, but none of it results from evil intentions. There is an imperfect family with terrible problems, fractured and distant from each other for years. Misplaced good intentions fail because of a lack of understanding and communication. It takes a death to begin the healing process for them all. By the end of the book, there is also some peace, and a brighter future for the family as a whole.

This is a very well written book, and I did enjoy reading it.

Ana says

This book was just a potentially good book that never quite lived up to its potential. First things first. (There might be spoilers)

The Good:

It's well written. The author is clearly not a novice with words and it shows in the way it is written. The plot could have been compelling and it's a simple, sad story.

The Bad:

- 1.) I like well written books. When combined with a great plot, it can result in excellence. But this book was overly descriptive and I found myself skimming through paragraphs because I wanted to get to the fucking point already. No one needs to know all those excessive descriptions of leaves and weather.
- 2.) The characters all felt a bit flat for me. Vivie was a major character but I felt like I still didn't understand her motivations at the end of the book. Elin was the level-headed slightly annoying one and her sister Kate had all these personality flaws that were never fully explained. The writer just used a flat excuse like her disease to explain pretty much all her actions. Oh yeah? that's why she stole her sister's fucking boyfriend and not just had 1 but 2 kids with him! Of course, she feels bad. Neal was also a fucking douchebag and the fact that he tried to excuse his dumbass actions by claiming that he was still "in love" with Elin was bad storytelling. Add that to the fact that there was no reason for his "feelings" to be included at all considering (SPOILER ALERT *****) that they don't even end up together at the end of the book. Waste of fucking time.
- 3.) This is nit-picky and not nearly as annoying as I'm making it out to be but the characters had weird names. Wink, really? WHY?!

All in all, this was by no means a bad book. I just expected better and I was disappointed.

Also, I have to point this out. If it takes 100 pages for a writer to get to the meat of her story, I'm already bored and uninterested. That is probably my biggest complaint with this book.

Margaret Madden says

I received a copy of this from NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.....

Vivvie is woken in the middle of the night by a phone call from local police, asking her to come and collect her two granddaughters. Her youngest daughter, Kate, is in the hospital and there is no one else to mind the little girls. Vivvie is no stranger to heartbreak as we discover early on in this book. She is a widow, with two estranged daughters and now is landed with two young girls she barely knows and she contacts her other daughter, Elin for some help. All is not what it seems though and the two women discover that Kate's disappearance from their lives may have had a hidden agenda.

The author blends parts of the past with the present and we can begin to form a picture of the girl's lives growing up with their widowed mother and all that it entailed. Sisters can clash at the best of times, but the loss of their father at an early age, shaped their personalities for the future. Both stubborn and self preserving, they chose to remove themselves from their mother's life and try to be individuals in their own right. When Kate is hospitalised, the women are forced to examine their current situations and assess their priorities.

This is a novel of feeling. Beautifully written with some wonderful prose, harrowing at times, but all with a view to exploring the meaning of family. Split into four parts, it has short chapters, is very easy to read and it is over before you know it. I loved the whole feel of a non- traditional family and how a moment of misery can sometimes bring change you could never expect. Well worth reading.

Ashley Mackler-Paternostro says

Have you wanted to love a book simply because? Because you should, or because you wanted to, or because you've enjoyed other offerings from the novelist? That's how I felt upon beginning my time with *The Things We Set on Fire* by Deborah Reed. I wanted to love this book is my kind of novel -- deep with a richly woven narrative, complex and--okay, at times--maddening characters. It's a story with soul. I should have loved this book, and I did love it, but then...

Things We Set on Fire begins with a brazen act of violence so unexpected that it is bound to give the reader pause. That's the way it's designed, for shock and awe. It really is, all things considered, a brilliant way to begin a novel. It leaves one breathless with confusion and worry and does not allow them to set the novel aside, doesn't allow for one to think 'maybe this book isn't for me...' ... it leaps, and you leap with it.

Vivvie was widowed too soon. Left to raise her daughters without the man she had loved since she, herself, was little more than a girl. The death of Vivvie's husband has a 'butterfly effect' on her daughters, Elin--the oldest--and Kate--one year Elin's junior--in many ways.

Maybe the girls were born destined to bicker and pick at each other mercilessly. Maybe it was the Florida heat that made them ornery. Or maybe it was stress of living in a home where their mother kept an ugly secret that turned her inside out and made her withhold her love that turned them into angry children. Whatever it

was in Elin and Kate's childhood that proved to be a catalyst the anger they felt defined them. And then it happened, something that could have bonded them together. But no, it became a secret they were forced to share. It drove the wedge deeper and the guilt they both felt for having it only stood to break them further apart...leading to a betrayal that would come later in their lives.

The book opens to find the family grown and spread far and wide. From the Pacific Northwest Portland area to the sunny orange groves of Orlando, Florida. The distance between the girls and their mother isn't accidental, it's purposeful and deliberate, proving some families simply cannot stay close.

Vivvie is used to living alone now. Her children are grown and gone and are, for all intents and purposes, estranged from her. She works, she tends to her home, she smokes her cigarettes, she flirts with her neighbor, Wink, she keeps her pile of regrets close. Her life now is as peaceable as it is predictable as it is lonely, and considering what it once was when she had her husband and little girls under foot, it's really only a shadow of what could have been.

Kate is dying by fate and she wants to die by choice. Something is ravaging her body, something in her genetics that is bound and determined to take her away from her daughters slowly, methodically, cruelly. She makes the (selfish?) choice to beat it to the end--why fight the inevitable? A bottle of pills, a quiet night, two little girls sleeping in their beds. She'll make the 'leaving' as simple as she can and spares them the horror of watching their mother--the only real and present parent they have--fade slowly away. But something in her plan went wrong and now she still very much alive, still very much dying and forced to face her mother and sister.

Elin is at a crossroads. Her life, from the outside, is a slice of perfect. A beautiful home, a handsome and worldly husband, a job, her dog. But what looks perfect from the exterior isn't always so pretty inside: Her husband isn't the man she believed him to be, and she could use some time away from him to collect her thoughts, or punish him, whichever comes first. So when Vivvie calls to tell her about Kate's failed suicide attempt, she has no reason not to go home, except the singular reason that kept away for a very long time.

The Things We Set on Fire is a character book. There is little suspense, little danger, the book focuses most on telling you the story of three generations of women thrown back together and how their interconnected lives unfold when they are forced to not only face each other, but all the things they ran away from. To that end, the characters Reed created are both vibrant and authentic. There is an unmistakable truth to them. They aren't written for you to like or love or even relate to...they are written merely in the vein of feeling real. They are flawed and erratically, helplessly human which only adds to the charm of this book. And as the novel picks up speed, you will find yourself drawn to them because Reed goes to great lengths to explain them to you, to tell you precisely what it is that makes them so broken so you can understand and care.

Things We Set on Fire is a beautiful book, but the things that make this novel beautiful--the intense use of flowery language, descriptors for even the most minute details--also prove to be the novel's primary hurdle. The language is thick, verbose, at times staggering and causes the book, for me at least, to sag a little. I found myself getting lost in it, almost losing track of the story because I was so immersed in the way --for example--the fireflies looked. It's not bad, and Reed's precise details of ordinary moments are lovely in moderation, but it came to be distracting page after page, sentence after sentence.

I liked this book very much...but I wanted to love it. Isn't that always so disappointing? Regardless, *The Things We Set on Fire* is well worth the read and I have a feeling few will regret giving the novel time and I have a suspicion that fans of Deborah Reed will cheer.

Brenda Funk says

I quite enjoyed this book...the theme of ALS interested me as my youngest sister passed away from that awful disease. The characters were flawed and interesting, I found the ending just a bit too 'happily ever after' to be realistic, but still, a good book.

Renee says

I often wonder what compels one to finish a particular mediocre book but not other equally mediocre books? There have been books in the past that I started, and just gave up on. This was such a book that I thought I would stop, but ended up finishing. Maybe because it was easy to read?

First, the pros (because it wasn't ALL bad)

1. The author clearly has experience with migraines. I know this is strange, but the descriptions of what it's like to have one were spot on. And this wasn't even an integral part of the story - just a piece that jumped out to me, because it was such a good description of what its like to have one.
2. Although I didn't much like the book, it was easy to read. There's something to be said for a book that may not be a very great story, but is still able to be mindlessly read.

Some of the stuff that ruined the book for me:

1. It was just too predictable. Like lifetime movie predictable. I didn't much care for the characters either. None of them were fleshed out enough for me to really feel like I was in their corner, so to speak.
2. The descriptions of how Elin treated her dog annoyed me. She wasn't an abuser, but the descriptions of her relationship with the dog made me feel a little bad for him. Example: in the morning when he very clearly needs to go out to do his business (and she knows it), she makes him wait inside. Because she can. That's it. He waits until she feels like letting him out. WTF? Just let the poor dog outside.

Meh - glad it was free through Amazon First.

Sierra says

This novel centers around a family that is brought together under tragic circumstances after years of avoiding each other and being scattered across the country. The ensuing action entails the way the family deals with the aftermath and examines relationships that remain in the wake of tragedy.

This book was great but there were a few things that could have been better. To begin with, the characters weren't all that interesting and were pretty flat. I was disappointed with the lack of strong relationships here. There was hope for strong family relationships to be established but that was dashed by a sullen protagonist who couldn't quite get over herself.

I was bored by the constant and redundant pontificating. I disliked the conclusions that the characters would draw about a family member or situation. There were a few gems of wisdom here and there but mostly I was annoyed by the protagonists' lack of desire to forgive and their justifications for it.

The storyline itself was interesting, which kept me reading despite my issue with the characters. Reed really knew what she was doing in terms of plot and engaging the reader's interest. She would reveal a glimpse of a past event and then expand upon it later, so that the reader would essentially know what happened but had enough doubt or curiosity to continue reading and find out.

While this book wasn't as moving as I'd hoped, it has a great story and has some touching moments and insights that one could learn from. It's a quick read so if you're looking for something that isn't too substantial or don't want to get too emotionally invested in a novel yet still want some excitement from the plot, this one's for you.

Melodie says

Family secrets..everyone has them. And the family in this story is no different. There is a family reunion of sorts about to happen. It's not a happy one. Vivvie has spent most of the past couple decades dealing with a toxic secret. And her chickens are coming home to roost.

Vivvie, her daughters and grand-daughters. One secret and three generations of heart ache. But hope and forgiveness is sometimes where it is least expected. This isn't a book that has the usual tie it up in a bow happy ending. That just isn't life. It plays out more or less realistically.

Initially, I wasn't crazy about any of the main characters except the grand-daughters. But they grew slowly on me as the story played out. Overall a good read.
