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A LITERARY VENTURES FUND BOOK

The Fires

By Alan Cheuse

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Book Synopsis: Finely-honed portraits of hope and change, these two novellas are linked so skillfully that they achieve the intensity of a single novel in which some characters succeed and others fail on separate but equally compelling quests. In "The Fires," Gina Morgan makes a pilgrimage to Uzbekistan to carry out her husband's final wish—to be cremated—only to find herself entirely at sea in the strange new reality of the former Soviet republic, while in "The Exorcism," Tom Swanson begins to make sense of his life when he retrieves his angry daughter from her exclusive New England college after her expulsion for setting fire to a grand piano.

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Book Description

From acclaimed author and NPR's "Voice of Books" Alan Cheuse come two novellas of compelling intensity.

In "The Fires," Gina Morgan makes a pilgrimage to Uzbekistan to carry out her husband's final wish only to discover that in this former Soviet republic things are not as they used to be. And in "The Exorcism," Tom Swanson retrieves his angry daughter from her exclusive New England college after her expulsion for setting fire to a grand piano.

Publisher's Weekly has praised Cheuse's "impressive command of many voices," and *The New York Times Book Review* called his work "richly imagined." In *The Fires*, Alan Cheuse demonstrates once more the poetry and range of his literary gifts in these finely-honed portraits of hope and change.

Pre-Publication Praise for *The Fires*

"Alan Cheuse is one of the most engaged and vital writers on the scene today."—Robert Stone (author of *Dog Soldiers* and *A Flag for Sunrise*)

"This work is—as Chekov said—informed by the deeper harmonies. When Alan Cheuse writes, 'she is retreating from desire but not from love,' it is as if the woman suffering from this relentless condition has just entered the room. "The Fires" offers the twin bequeathing of profound sadness and enchantment. Cheuse is a writer of immense gifts."—Howard Norman (author of *Devotion* and *The Bird Artist*)

"Cheuse's skill as a writer makes it hard not to be drawn in...and to exit feeling transformed."—*Library Journal*

"Cheuse has for years been one of the smartest, most trustworthy reviewers in America. Now he shows us where he gets his authority—a fiction writer of startling talent."—John Gardner (author of *The Sunlight Dialogues* and *Grendel*)

"With intelligence and wit, Alan Cheuse takes us through the searing, tragic, heart-breaking and hilarious business of being alive. The two novellas that make up *The Fires*—one of sorrow and one of radiance—are filled with characters trying to maneuver that space between creation and destruction. Some come to ashes and some find forgiveness—even for themselves. Through it all, Cheuse never betrays the dignity or humanity of his characters. His brilliant creations are in good hands right to the end, as are we."—Ana Menendez (author of *Loving Che* and *In Cuba I was a German Shepherd*)

"[Cheuse]reminds us how close art and chaos really are."—*The New York Times Book Review*

"In these two novellas, Cheuse dissects the aftermath of two very different deaths: one, of an American businessman traveling in Russia; the other, a mother, jazz pianist and drug addict. In the first NOVELLA, "The Fires," a museum worker named Gina learns that her husband, Paul, died in a car accident while en route to Uzbekistan. Gina travels to Russia to ensure her husband gets cremated, per his wishes, and the foreign, surreal and familiar collide when Gina takes Paul's body to a Hindu ceremony to be cremated.

"The Exorcism" applies much more overt dark humor to similar feelings in a substantially different character. An unnamed baby boomer discusses his sadness FOLLOWING the sudden death of his first wife, renowned jazz pianist Billie Benjamin, who fatally overdosed on heroin. Billie's death hits her daughter, Ceely, hard (she lashes out postcremation by torching a piano at her college), and the narrator's fond recollections of courting Billie are not received warmly by his new wife. Misery is in greater supply than comfort throughout, and Cheuse approaches his subjects from interesting angles, making these novellas of grief strangely compelling."—*Publishers Weekly*

Post-Publication Praise for *The Fires*

"The realm of the transient is where we live. It's also the realm of innumerable desires, a place filled with all sorts of difficult ontological situations. We manage the best we can, which is the subject of the two dazzling novellas that make up *The Fires*. The action is triggered by departures from this world, and both stories entertain the possibility of redemption through fire (both actual and metaphorical). This is an old idea, older than money and pharmacology. And Cheuse writes so beautifully about jazz in the second novella that you will want to listen very carefully to the music he mentions. The characters, the dilemmas they face and resolve (or don't resolve) will stay with you long after you finish *The Fires*."—Karl Pohrt (*Shaman Drum Bookshop, Ann Arbor, MI*)

"*The Fires* is a rich reading experience."— Mark Laframboise (*Politics and Prose Bookstore, Washington, DC*)

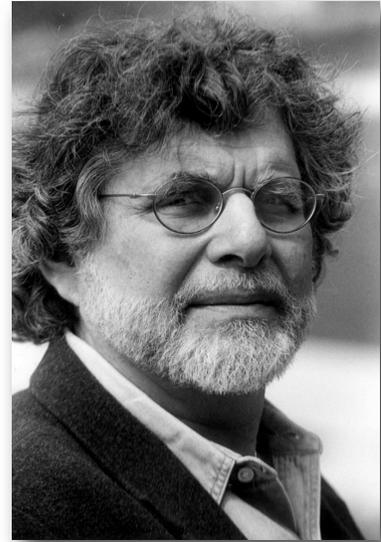
See: http://www.alancheuse.com/the_fires_reviews.html for the most current post-publication praise.

Author Biography

Alan Cheuse has been reviewing books on *All Things Considered* since the 1980s.

Formally trained as a literary scholar, Cheuse also writes fiction and novels and publishes short stories. He is the author of three novels, two collections of short fiction, and the memoir *Fall out of Heaven*. With Caroline Marshall, he has edited two volumes of short stories. Cheuse's short fiction has appeared in publications such as *The New Yorker*, *The Antioch Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Another Chicago Magazine*. His most recent collection of his short fiction was published in September 1998 and his essay collection, *Listening to the Page*, appeared in 2001.

Cheuse splits his time between the two coasts, spending nine months of the year in Washington, D.C., where he teaches writing at George Mason University. His summers are spent in Santa Cruz, Calif. teaching writing at the Squaw Valley Community of Writers. Cheuse earned his Ph.D. in comparative literature with a focus on Latin American literature from Rutgers University in 1974.



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Additional Information

Appearances

For an up-to-date listing of author appearances, visit Alan Cheuse's Tour Dates page: <http://www.alancheuse.com/touro7.html>

Author Web Page

Visit Alan Cheuse's web page at:

<http://www.alancheuse.com>

Read an Excerpt

Read an excerpt from *The Fires* at:

http://www.alancheuse.com/the_fires_excerpt.html

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Reading Guide

- 1) *The Fires* is comprised of two novellas. Which elements of the novellas are similar? Different?
- 2) Compare and contrast the fire images in this book. What role does religion or spirituality—or the lack of each one—play in these novellas?
- 3) “What are you carrying?” Paul Morgan recalls these words of a French philosopher that his wife read in college (p. 20). In *The Fires* the words seem to convey extra meaning for each character in each novella. What do the characters carry with them throughout the book?
- 4) What does the dream sequence at the end of the novella suggest for Gina Morgan? And how does that dream sequence compare to the conclusion of “The Exorcism”?
- 5) Gina is experiencing physical changes. What is the significance of what she is going through?
- 6) Gina’s story concludes: “Morning comes, as she awakens, throat raw, eyes sore, head throbbing, to the remainder of her days.” Has Gina been changed by her story? If so, how? Where do you think she’ll go from here? How would you react if you were in Gina’s position?
- 7) In many ways, the characters in “The Exorcism” seem unhappy. The lives they lead do not fulfill them. How does each character manage to work around their unhappiness?
- 8) What do you think Tom Swanson means when he says: “Most people tak[e] one side or the other, either the romantic or the rational, and never ris[e] up to the even more troubling, puzzling level of the paradoxical where you hold both views in your mind at once...”? How do we see both views portrayed in these novellas?
- 9) In Chapter two of “The Exorcism,” wild dogs run between the moving cars on the highway while Tom and Ceely are driving home to Washington, DC. What do these dogs symbolize? Why does Ceely seem changed after this event?
- 10) In its review of the book, *Publisher’s Weekly* calls the stories “novellas of grief.” Would you agree? Disagree? Why?
- 11) What is a novella? How does it differ from a novel? A short story? And why is it not as popular a form of literature as the novel or short story? Why do you think Alan Cheuse chose to write these stories as novellas? What are some of the advantages of the novella form? What are some of the disadvantages of the form?
- 12) Besides the novellas in this book, can you name other novellas? (You will find a list of many well known and some lesser known novellas at our website, www.sfwp.com/novella.)