Burning Short Guide

Burning by Diane Johnson

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Characters

Dr. Barney Edwards and his wife Bingo are two of the principal characters in the novel, struggling to renew a life together in their recently purchased home in the hills above Los Angeles. Their two children are away in Carmel with their grandmother, but Bingo winds up looking after two other children, Max's clever and resourceful offspring, Ronda and Derek. Trying to prevent them from being put into foster homes, Bingo is not quite as unsuccessful as she thinks — the children are returned to their father, another eccentric, Hal Gartman, once an engineering professor at UCLA, now a crazy inventor, Barney Edwards is a very straight, decent sort of person whose inhibitions are finally overcome by the colorful and persistent Max and her friend Nellie, who eventually persuade him to disrobe and try the Jacuzzi Nellie has placed in his tub. Barney also eventually has sex with Max, after her repeated invitations, while Bingo is trying to save her children for her.

Max, as she is usually called, is a pathetic junkie, separated from her husband. She dotes on her psychiatrist, Hal Harris, serving him like a slave, bringing him his daily cream (all he eats except for orange juice), and desperately hoping he will have sex with her. But as she never reaches climax, he refuses to do so. She genuinely loves her children but appears totally incapable of looking after them properly, as their messy motel room testifies. Nevertheless, Ronda and Derek do not seem terribly harmed by her treatment, except for Ronda's rotten teeth, the effect of eating too much candy and not enough proper nourishment.

More intent on his plants than his patients, Hal Harris typically sends each patient off into a drug-induced trance while he cultivates his garden.

His beautiful young wife, Irene, he mainly ignores, despite her threats, entreaties, and conspicuous infidelity.

Although he seems unable to establish any kind of relationship with anyone, his patients all adore him, even Neil Fish, who once took the rap for him on a drug charge and keeps trying to get into the doctor's good graces. Against these lunatic or at least loony individuals, Bingo and Barney seem models of sanity and normality, but in that environment they become increasingly vulnerable and threatened, if not harmed.

Social Concerns/Themes

The events in Burning all take place on a single day in Los Angeles, the day of the great Bel Air fire. But before the actual fire is so much as ignited, Johnson begins using it as her central metaphor in a novel that satirizes California's child welfare system, the drug scene, and above all the lifestyles of people living in Southern California.

Maxine ("Max") Gartman finds that her children may be taken away from her if she is found to be an unfit mother. In fact, she has a serious drug problem, but she persuades Bingo Edwards, her psychiatrist's neighbor, to pose as herself in the hope that Bingo's evidently straight character will stave off the do-gooding bureaucrats. Bingo's day is almost entirely taken up with interviews with social-welfare people, who finally determine — much to her outrage and chagrin — that she is unfit to keep "her" children.

While all this is going on, Johnson describes in dramatic detail the antics back in Bel Air, including the eccentric behavior of Max's psychiatrist, Dr. Hal Harris, who treats his patients with drugs and sex; the predicament that Bingo's husband, Barney Edwards (also a doctor, an orthopedist with an infected leg), finds himself in when Max and her friend Nellie invade his home during Bingo's absence and install a stolen Jacuzzi in his bathtub; the efforts of Neil Fish, a junkie, to make an important "connection" and earn enough illegal money to set him and his habit up for a lifetime; and the various sexual encounters that occur — or fail to occur — among various couples. The sick state of society is everywhere apparent, and the authorities charged with curing its ills seem entirely ineffectual; actually, they appear to be a major part of the problem.

Within this social satire, Johnson focuses also on the difficulties two intelligent, well-educated, and caring people (Bingo and Barney) face when they discover that their marriage has gone stale. Sexual boredom is part of their problem — each has fantasies involving other people during their lovemaking — but so is their failure to remain in close touch with each other's concerns. At the end, after their extraordinarily trying day, with nearly everything they owned gone up in smoke, they make love and cry, "At least we have each other." Although they have learned something from the day's experiences, and their marriage is not nearly the sham that the Harrises' or the Gartmans' is, they have come only a fraction of the way they must travel, and their "having each other" sounds utterly banal.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Johnson's satire is not nearly as biting or cruel as Evelyn Waugh's in The Loved One (1948), which also deals with the antic behavior of Southern Californians, although of an earlier era. Nevertheless, Johnson's novel makes its points, possibly the more tellingly because the satire is not as sharp: The picture of life in Los Angeles appearsvery realistic. The controlling metaphor of burning throughout the novel, culminating in the actual holocaust that envelops the homes of the Harrises and the Edwardses, along with many others, suggests the sexual preoccupations bordering on obsessions of nearly all the characters, but it also suggests other "hot" aspects of their lifestyles, such as the stolen merchandise (Max lifts plants from botanical gardens to bring to Hal Harris, for example), the drug dealing and using, the passionate intensities of the police, social-welfare workers, firemen, Treasury agents, and others. For these characters a madness or frenzy seems to have replaced normal mental activity. The ice plants and other succulents that Hal Harris plants around his house and that the Edwardses are advised to plant instead of the hedge that separates their house from the Harrises' also become a kind of metaphor for the exotic, sensual existence many of the characters lead.

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