

The background of the cover is a misty, dark forest of evergreen trees at night. On the left side, there is a large, glowing, and jagged object that appears to be a piece of burnt wood or a charred object, with bright orange and yellow light emanating from it. The title is written in large, bold, yellow capital letters, and the subtitle is in smaller, white, distressed capital letters.

THE NIGHT WE BURNED

BOOK CLUB GUIDE



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A NOTE FROM S.F. KOSA

We all have things in our past that we're not proud of, memories that twist us up. For some, it's small stuff. A clumsy remark at a party that still makes you cringe when you think of it, or a fight with a loved one where you said some things you regret to this day. Some of us, though, have made mistakes that reverberate through the years. Things we wish we could bury forever.

How do we deal with the recollections that cause us shame and hurt? Some of us tell ourselves stories: *It wasn't really that bad. Our intentions were good, right?* Or we work very hard at forgetting. As soon as the memories try to crawl up from the basement of our minds, we kick them back down the stairs and slam the door shut again.

In *The Night We Burned*, Dora Rodriguez goes a step further. She thinks her past is safely locked away, and very few who knew her then are alive to tell tales. She's built herself a nice, quiet life as a fact checker at an online news magazine, devoted to accuracy. Truth and objectivity are literally her job. These things, right down to the most basic and boring facts, are particularly important to her because long ago, she was involved in a cult that warped her understanding of the world and made her question the truth of what she was seeing with her own eyes. So what does she do when a colleague decides to report on a murder that could be linked to that cult and her own actions twenty years ago when it all went up in flames?

Avoiding and forgetting the past are no longer options for her. Dora decides the only way she can save herself is to alter history. She sets out to "help" the journalist uncover the story while strategically doctoring facts that might connect her to the night everything turned to ash.

Thing is, it's much harder to escape the past than you might think. It leaves its evidence everywhere. It writes its story not only on our minds but on our bodies. It changes the lens through which we see the world and how the world sees us. And for Dora, it turns out it's actually hunting her down. The question is whether she'll have the courage and strength to rise from those ashes and face her memories in time to save herself and the people she loves.

I loved writing this novel about truth, memories, and the reasons why people try to rewrite their stories to escape the past. I hope you enjoy reading it!

The Bend Bulletin

OVER THIRTY FEARED DEAD IN ORACLES COMPOUND FIRE

Joel B. Keeler,
Bend Bulletin Correspondent

December 16, 2000

BEND, Ore. — Authorities fear more than 30 people have perished in a fast-burning fire on Friday night that engulfed a multi-building residential compound in southwest Bend. Firefighters battled the three-alarm blaze throughout the night and extinguished the last of the flames at approximately 2 a.m.

David Boden, a spokesperson for Bend Fire & Rescue, stated that they have not yet been able to determine the cause of the fire because it burned at such a high temperature and spread quickly. He stated that local and state personnel are assisting with the recovery of the bodies, all of which were found in the largest affected building, which he described as a kind of barn or meeting hall.

“We are investigating the possibility of arson and other criminal activity,” said Sgt. Kathy Piedmont, a spokesperson for the Bend Police



Bend Fire & Rescue putting out the blaze at Oracles Compound, southwest Bend

Department. She added that police are questioning three individuals who were found on the scene when fire crews arrived.

Andrew Hanson, a neighbor who saw the flames and alerted emergency services, stated that the compound was home to a controversial local group called the Oracles of Innocence. “I always called them a cult,” said Hanson, who also reported that he had clashed with the leader of the group, a man calling himself “Darius,” at recent city council meetings addressing permitting and zoning issues for the property. “They’d put up all these flimsy buildings in the last few years, with more and more people living there, and I could have told you it was a fire trap.”

Asked about his claim that the group was a cult, Hanson said, “I don’t know what else to call them. A bunch of people living off the grid, a lot of young women and little kids and only a few men, and they all wore these funny robes. You just got a funny feeling in your gut—something weird was going on there.”

Authorities confirmed that twelve young children were rescued from the site of the fire and transported to St. Charles Hospital. A spokesperson for the hospital system confirmed that the children are being treated for exposure and dehydration but are expected to make a full recovery.

The Bend Bulletin

STEPHEN MILLSAP, ALSO KNOWN AS DARIUS, CONFIRMED DEAD IN ORACLES COMPOUND FIRE

Joel B. Keeler,
Bend Bulletin Correspondent

December 21, 2000

BEND, Ore. – The first victim has been identified in the compound fire that claimed the lives of at least 33 people last Friday. Recovery efforts remain underway, but Stephen W. Millsap, 42, was identified using medical and dental records provided by his family. Results of an autopsy are pending, but prosecutors confirmed that Millsap sustained both thermal and sharp force injuries on the night of the blaze.

Millsap, who in recent years had gone by the mononym “Darius,” was reportedly the leader of the secretive group called the Oracles of Innocence, which has been described by some Bend residents as a cult.

Though Millsap’s family has declined to comment publicly



Stephen W. Millsap, 42

about his death, they did provide information regarding his life. Millsap was born in Media, PA, and graduated from Temple University in 1977 with a major in finance. He worked as a stockbroker and investor in New York City before moving to Portland, OR in 1987.

A spokesperson for the family stated that they had not been in contact with Mr. Millsap for at least five years prior to his death. To their knowledge, he had never married and did not have any children. They denied being aware of his role in the Oracles of Innocence.

In Bend, Mr. Millsap, under the name “Darius,” had been a frequent presence at city council meetings in the last eighteen months. After an LLC registered to Mr. Millsap

purchased a 210-acre tract of farmland in southwest Bend in March of 1997, he requested several permits from the city to install wells and septic systems on the property. He also filed for zoning permits to construct numerous outbuildings, including the large barn that served as the Oracles’ central meeting place and was the site where all thirty-three bodies were found after the fire was extinguished.

Forensic teams continue the process of attempting to determine the identities of the fire’s remaining victims. A source close to the investigation, who requested anonymity to discuss sensitive details of the case, indicated that, like Mr. Millsap, many of the victims appeared to have sustained stab wounds in addition to injuries caused by the fire. The source went on to report that the identification process has been complicated by the fact that many of the individuals living on the compound at the time of the fire went by assumed names, with no written records of their official identities yet found.

The three individuals found at the scene of the fire have been identified as Marie Heckender, 20, Arnold Moore, 39, and Shari Redmond, 26. Uninjured in the blaze, all three remain under scrutiny for their roles in the catastrophe.

The Bend Bulletin

THREE CHARGED WITH HOMICIDE IN CONNECTION WITH ORACLES COMPOUND FIRE

Joel B. Keeler,
Bend Bulletin Correspondent

April 14, 2001

BEND, Ore. — The only adult survivors of the Oracles of Innocence fire in December have been charged in connection with the inferno, which killed at least 33 individuals and left the 13 young children found at the scene without parents.

Marie Heckender, 20, Arnold Moore, 39, and Shari Redmond, 26, have each been charged with twenty-nine counts of second-degree murder for their roles in the fire. Mr. Moore and Ms. Redmond have been assigned public defenders in the case. A source close to the investigation confirmed that neither defendant is currently cooperating with police. Prosecutors on the

case would not confirm whether plea deals or charge reductions are being discussed in exchange for cooperation.

Ms. Heckender is represented by Charles Granger of Granger, Kimmerman, and Saroyan, a Portland-based law firm specializing in criminal defense. Asked for comment in the matter, Mr. Granger said, “Marie is an impressionable young woman who, at the time of this horrible tragedy, was under the complete control of Stephen Millsap. She is devastated by the loss of so many people she loved and grieves alongside their families. When the time is right, the truth about her actions on the night of the fire will come out, and she will be exonerated.”

Details of what happened at the Oracles of Innocence compound in southwest Bend on the night

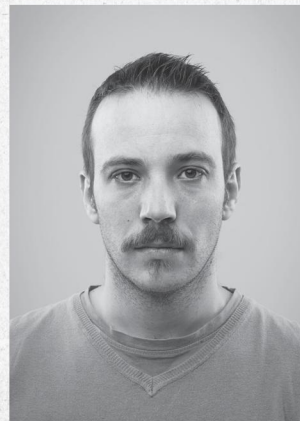
of December 15 remain murky. Authorities have confirmed that 11 of the victims, including the group’s leader, Stephen Millsap, 42, sustained sharp force injuries, some fatal, just prior to the fire. Causes of death for the remaining 22 victims were determined to be directly related to the blaze, including smoke inhalation and thermal injuries.

Formal identification of the victims remains underway. A spokesperson for the Department of Oregon State Police Medical Examiner Division confirmed that the process has been difficult because so many of these individuals did not have ties to their families or the outside community at the time of their death. To date, only 10 of the 33 victims have been identified.

■ *The Bend Bulletin*



Marie Heckender, 20



Arnold Moore, 39



Shari Redmond, 26



AN INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

***The Night We Burned* is a fascinating look at cults and cult psychology. What inspired you to write this thriller?**

As a psychologist, I'm always trying to understand why people behave and think how they do, and cults (also called "high-control groups") provide a fascinating challenge in that respect: Why do typical, intelligent people "allow" themselves to be manipulated and controlled in such strange, weird ways? I think most of us are fascinated with that question. My focus in this book was to show one (very extreme) example of how someone gets drawn in and why they stay long after things go bad.

Did you model the Oracles of Innocence after any real-life group? A mix of different groups?

The Oracles of Innocence grew from my understanding of several existing or past groups, including Heaven's Gate, the Branch Davidians, and the followers of Charles Manson. More prominent in my mind than any other, though, was the Peoples Temple and its notorious leader, Jim Jones. Several times before the Jonestown mass suicide event, Jones essentially had his followers "practice" by asking them to drink substances and then telling them they'd ingested lethal poison. He got them used to that kind of obedience before the tragic finale. He also exploited female followers by telling them that sex with the leader would help purge or heal them of their various trauma histories and issues (this is not an uncommon behavior among cult leaders). Jones also became obsessed with persecution, and the mass suicide came when he became convinced that the government was going to invade the compound and kill them all, including the children. In *The Night We Burned*, Darius uses all these strategies to control his followers.

What character did you connect with the most?

Dora, I think. She's painfully imperfect but wants to do better. She's terrified but wants to be brave. She knows the stakes and doesn't want to give up what she's built for herself over the years, but she also grows to understand that she's missed a few key ingredients. She comes to realize she's not trusting or prioritizing her relationships as much as she should, in part because of what she went through when she was a member of the Oracles.



AN INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Talk a bit about Dora and the way she has dealt with her trauma. What research did you do to bring Dora's character to life?

In terms of a formal psychology text, I relied on Alexandra Stein's *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems*, which explains how, under the right conditions, almost anyone can be manipulated in unexpected and surprising ways. Also helpful was Steven Hassan's BITE model (behavior, information, thought, and emotional control), which outlines how groups draw in and maintain control over members. A lot of people think only weak-minded or gullible individuals can be lured into high-control groups, which results in a lot of shame and self-condemnation for people who have survived them. Dora is an example of such a person—twenty years later, and even though she can intellectually understand why she joined and why she stayed, emotionally she's still fragile, in part because she's avoided seeking treatment and still bears the internalized stigma from her past. To portray her mindset, I not only read books like *Waco* by David Thibodeau and two books by Jeff Guinn (*Manson* and *The Road to Jonestown*), but I also watched several documentaries that included interviews with former high-control group members, including *The Vow* (about NXIVM), *Wild Wild Country* (about the Rajneeshpuram), *Holy Hell* (about Buddhafield), and *Going Clear* (about Scientology). These former group members provided a range of perspectives but also showed how intelligent, accomplished people can be drawn into these groups—and often experience trauma that requires long-term treatment to heal.

Talk a bit about the relationship between Eszter and Parvaneh. Why is their friendship so crucial to the story?

The relationship between Eszter and Parvaneh grounds and humanizes a story in which frankly crazy stuff is going on. I think their connection, forged from similar pasts and mutual need, helps carry readers through the difficult and hair-raising sequence of events that leads to the fire. Eszter doesn't lure or manipulate Parvaneh into the group so much as she wants to share this wonderful thing she's experiencing with someone who might need it as much as she does. It's only later that she realizes it was a terrible mistake, but at that point, it's too late to save both of them.



AN INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

This novel has such an amazing twist to it. When you begin writing a thriller, what comes first, the hook or the twist? Do you always know the twists before you begin?

It depends. Sometimes the twist comes first, but in this case, the hook did. I knew I wanted to tell a story about a fact-checker who needed to conceal details of her past, and only later did I decide how I wanted to tell that story. At first, I considered including several additional perspectives (e.g., Miles, Ben Ransom), but after I churned on it a bit, I decided it would be best to distill it down to the two most important voices: Parvaneh and Dora.

What's been on your reading pile lately?

In the realm of fiction, I am currently riveted by *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong. In terms of nonfiction, I recently finished *Culture Warlords* by Talia Lavin and *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson, both of which I highly, highly recommend.

What do you ultimately want readers to take away from *The Night We Burned*?

One extraordinarily common mistake we all make as humans is called “fundamental attribution error.” It’s our tendency to blame a person’s character or personality when things go wrong. But when we do that, we lose all sympathy, and it’s often because we don’t think deeply enough about how the pressures and pulls of the situation shape human beings’ decisions and behaviors. I’d love for readers to come away from *The Night We Burned* with more appreciation for how people’s contexts, the behavior of others around them, and the dynamics of their present circumstances can lead them to do things we can’t necessarily predict if we focus only on what’s “wrong” with them personally.

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Why do you think “Christy” first goes with Eszter that day in Portland? Imagine if you were in Christy’s shoes. What would you do if presented with this kind of friendship, kindness, and opportunity?
2. How would you describe Dora? Why do you think she is well suited to her job as a fact-checker?
3. Miles tells the team at the Hatchet that the Oracles of Innocence story was huge news at the time. Why do you think audiences are fascinated by cult stories? What comes to mind when you think of cults?
4. Compare and contrast Eszter and Parvaneh. What do you think draws them together? What separates them? How would you describe their roles in the Oracles of Innocence?
5. Describe Darius. What character traits does he have that push him to hold this leadership role? How do you picture him?
6. What part of the Oracles of Innocence lifestyle did you find most intriguing? Most outlandish? Where do you think the dangerous turning point was?
7. If you had an Oracles of Innocence name, what would it be? Imagine you could take on a new identity and new way of life. How do you think that would feel? Why do you believe people choose that route?
8. Describe Miles and Dora’s partnership. Do you think of them as allies or adversaries? How do their goals align?
9. Trauma plays a large role in the story. How do each of these characters manifest or work through their respective traumas?
10. What do you make of Xerxes’s journey? Do you think his past defines him? If you were in his shoes, what would you make of your tumultuous early years?
11. What do you think happens to Dora once the story closes? Do you think she finds the peace she’s been seeking?