

"A stunning tour de force."
—MICHELE CAMPBELL, international
bestselling author of *It's Always the Husband*

THE NIGHT WE BURNED

A NOVEL

S. F. KOSA

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?

A CONVERSATION 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.

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.

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.