

10th Adv. Language Arts Summer Reading

Little Fires Everywhere by Celeste Ng

Welcome to the advanced 10th-grade English Language Arts course! To prepare for the year ahead, the ALA10 team has assigned *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng. This powerful novel explores the lives of two very different families living in the carefully planned community of Shaker Heights, Ohio. As their stories become intertwined, the book raises important questions about motherhood, privilege, identity, and what it really means to do the right thing. This book has also appeared on previous AP Literature exams and will offer rich material for our discussions and initial activities for our first unit.

We want you to enjoy the story while also approaching it with thoughtful analysis. **Make sure you have completed the reading and annotations before the first day of school. You should expect to annotate at least once every other page.**

Annotation Guidelines: As you read, take notes in a way that works best for you—whether in the margins of the book, in a notebook, or using sticky notes. Focus on these key elements:

1. **Personal Reactions:** Write about what stands out to you. Include your personal reactions of ideas, characters, or passages that evoke an emotional response.
2. **Vocabulary & Research:** Mark unfamiliar words or concepts and look them up. Jot down anything you need to research further.
3. **Text to Self, World, or Text Connections:** Link the text to personal experiences, current events, or other books you've encountered.
4. **Literary and Stylistic Elements:** Pay attention to stylistic elements like symbols, imagery, figurative language, motifs, and themes.
5. **Critical Questions:** Ask why certain choices are made, how different perspectives shape the story, and why key events matter, especially since the novel isn't told in chronological order.

Key Focus Areas for In-Class Analysis:

1. **Setting's Impact:** How does the Shaker Heights setting shape the characters' experiences and choices? What does the setting reveal about the society in which the characters live?
2. **Character Analysis:** Consider how different character types (protagonist, antagonist, confidant, foil, etc.) affect the plot. Pay attention to whether characters are flat or round, static or dynamic, and how these traits influence the story.
3. **Class, Gender, and Culture:** Characters like Elena say they treat everyone the same, but their actions show hidden bias. This can hurt others and make unfair systems worse, especially when race, gender and class affect choices about family and belonging.
4. **Viewpoint and Perspective:** Examine the intentionality behind the different viewpoints. Think about the perspectives provided by the characters and the literal viewpoint of Mia's camera. How does this shape the story's events?

Recommended themes to color-code:

- **Order vs. Disruption**

This theme explores the tension between a desire for structure, rules, and predictability (order) and the inevitable messiness of life, individuality, and emotion (disruption). Shaker Heights represents a meticulously planned, orderly community that values rules, routines, and appearances. Mia and Pearl, who live a transient, unconventional life, bring disruption. Elena Richardson also represents order, but her attempts to control outcomes often backfire.

- **Altruism and Manipulation**

This theme investigates the fine line between helping others selflessly (altruism) and using “help” as a form of control or to serve personal goals (manipulation). Elena believes she’s doing good, offering housing to Mia, supporting the McCulloughs’ adoption, but her actions often carry hidden motives or assumptions. Mia, too, helps others, but her choices can also be read as strategic or self-protective.

- **Mothers and Daughters**

This theme examines how mothers and daughters shape each other’s identities, values, and choices, sometimes through love and support, other times through conflict and expectation. The central conflict between Elena and Izzy and the quiet bond between Mia and Pearl show very different models of mother-daughter relationships. Adoption, surrogacy, and custody deepen this theme by asking who gets to define motherhood.

- **Identity: Heritage and Assimilation**

This theme looks at how characters navigate their cultural roots or racial identity in a society that often pressures them to blend in or conform. Bebe’s identity as a Chinese mother clashes with the McCulloughs’ vision of assimilation for her daughter. Meanwhile, the Richardson children live in a mostly white, privileged world where racial awareness is suppressed, often under the guise of being colorblind.

- **Transience**

Transience means not staying in one place for long, physically, emotionally, or in your relationships. It can mean moving a lot, not having strong roots, or being in a constant state of change. Some people choose this kind of life, while others are forced into it. Mia and Pearl live a transient lifestyle, and they move from city to city, never settling down. This gives them freedom but also creates a sense of instability. In contrast, the Richardsons have lived in Shaker Heights for years and value staying put and having everything in its place. The tension between these two ways of living reveals deeper questions about freedom, security, and identity.

Character List

The Richardson Family

- **Elena Richardson** – A journalist and mother of four who values structure, stability, and doing what she believes is “right.”
- **Bill Richardson** – Elena’s husband, a lawyer who tends to stay more neutral in family conflicts.
- **Lexie Richardson** – The oldest child, confident and successful, is often seen as a model student and daughter.
- **Trip Richardson** – Athletic and popular, Trip tends to go with the flow and enjoys his social status.
- **Moody Richardson** – Quiet, sensitive, and thoughtful, Moody feels deeply and forms a close bond with Pearl Warren.
- **Izzy Richardson** – The youngest Richardson, rebellious and artistic, often clashing with her mother and feeling like an outsider.

The Warren Family

- **Mia Warren** – A talented and private artist who supports herself and her daughter through a variety of odd jobs.
- **Pearl Warren** – Mia’s teenage daughter, bright and curious, who is intrigued by the Richardsons’ way of life.

The McCullough Family

- **Linda McCullough** – Elena’s friend who struggles with infertility and becomes involved in a controversial adoption case.
- **Mark McCullough** – Linda’s husband, who shares her desire to raise a child and build a family.
- **May Ling Chow / Mirabelle McCullough** – The infant at the center of the custody battle between the McCulloughs and her birth mother, Bebe Chow.

Others in the Community and Beyond

- **Bebe Chow** – A young immigrant mother who becomes central to the novel’s legal and ethical conflicts.
- **Pauline Hawthorne** – Mia’s former art teacher, mentor, and an important influence in her development as an artist.
- **Anita Rees** – Pauline’s partner, who shares her creative lifestyle and helps support Mia’s early career.
- **Ed Lim** – A lawyer involved in the custody case of May Ling/Mirabelle that divides the town.

If you have any concerns or questions, please contact Ms. Donahue (maryrose.donahue@bvsd.org) or Ms. Rossin (andrea.g.rossin@bvsd.org).

Happy Reading!