



READING GUIDE

PLAYING WITH FIRE

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Reading level: 2.8

Interest level: Adult

Themes: crime fiction, arson, mystery, journalist,
amateur sleuth, small town, psychic

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Summary

It's the morning after small-town reporter Claire Abbott has solved her first missing-persons case using the unique visioning capability that allows her to "see" events that no one else can. Claire arrives to work exhausted, having stayed up late the night before with search-and-rescue manager Matt Holden. Firefighter Trevor Bragg is waiting for her when she arrives, upset that she stood him up for their date last night—again. As Claire explains that she was following a story as it unfolded, Matt Holden turns up with a coffee for her. Tension builds as each man recognizes the other as a competitor for Claire's affections.

Sirens outside signal a fire; Trevor rushes off to fight the blaze. Claire grabs a camera and follows, intent on capturing the story. The shed behind the garden and pet store is ablaze. This is the fourth such fire in the past month. Claire speaks with fire chief Jim Wallis about it; they agree it's probably the work of an arsonist—one that's moving closer and closer to the town center. Claire sees a suspicious-looking teenaged boy among the observers, standing with his red-haired girlfriend. She approaches the boy but he runs away. She picks up a glove he dropped and immediately has a vision of a man setting the fire. She tells Chief Wallis about the vision. They conclude that it was probably the same kid.

When Claire experiences another clear vision, Matt helps her to apprehend the young man and bring him before the fire chief. The kid, Devon, denies starting the fire. Trevor appears; he informs Claire that Devon is his younger brother, and explains that he comes to all the fires because he, too, aspires to be a firefighter. Trevor and Chief Wallis question Claire's visions.

Matt invites Claire on a date for the next night. Later, Claire calls her mother to check in. She explains her love triangle with Matt and Trevor. Her mother echoes the advice that Claire's boss gave her, advising her to choose one man or the other—otherwise she's playing with fire.

That night, the arsonist sets the lumber shed next to the hardware store ablaze. Devon's girlfriend Kayla is in the crowd of spectators. When Claire touches the girl's sleeve, she experiences another vision, this time of the girl holding the gas can. As Chief Wallis prepares to take the girl in for questioning, Devon interrupts and swears he is the one who has been setting the fires and not



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Kayla. Devon is apprehended; Trevor is shocked and upset to see his brother being taken away. He promises his brother he'll sort it out. Then Trevor and Claire make a dinner date.

The next day, the romantic lakeside restaurant goes up in flames during Claire's date with Matt, and Trevor suddenly appears to heroically put it out. The two men argue jealously and Matt storms off. Kayla appears and summons Claire. She privately tells Claire to keep looking for the arsonist—that it's not her, and it's obviously not Devon, since he's in custody. After Kayla leaves, Trevor, Chief Wallis and Claire confer. Claire senses the chief's impatience with her visions, which have alternately pointed the finger at Devon, and then at Kayla. But Claire confesses that now she thinks it's someone else entirely.

Claire seeks counsel from her mother, who shares the same ability to have visions. Her mother tells Claire the visions are only useful insofar as they can point her in a direction—but that Claire still will have to figure things out for herself. She notes that sometimes the answer will be right in front of her.

Claire speaks with Devon next. Although the boy still won't give up the arsonist, through their conversation Claire realizes that Devon and Kayla have been trying to *stop* the fires all along—not start them. Later, Kayla helps Claire realize that the firebug is someone who likes the attention that the fires bring—and the glory of putting them out in front of the camera. Sick at her suspicion that Trevor is the arsonist, Claire stakes him out at the restaurant they've agreed on for their date. Sure enough, he shows up early and sets the place alight, planning to make it look like Kayla's work. Claire hides and takes photos (which she immediately emails to her editor), then confronts Trevor. He tells her that he initially began setting fires to challenge his own ability as a firefighter, but that over time, he began to crave the admiration of the crowd—and of Claire herself.

The fire crews arrive and extinguish the blaze. Trevor will go to jail, Devon will go free, and Claire decides Matt is a better choice of partner.

Questions for Discussion

1. Claire Abbott and her boss, Carol, are the only two writers for the *Black Lake Times*. How does the chronic (and ever-increasing) understaffing of North American companies affect the quality of life of their employees?
2. In chapter 1, Claire observes that Trevor likes being a firefighter just “a little too much.” How do we come to identify ourselves through our vocations? Is this limiting or liberating?
3. When Claire spots a handsome kid and his “dye-job” girlfriend watching in the crowd as the firefighters extinguish the blaze at the feed shed, she thinks that he looks too nervous. “He was jittery, too nervous for a guy that good-looking” (ch. 2). What stereotypes are shaping Claire's assumptions??
4. What biases and obstacles does Claire have to struggle against in using her visions to assist in investigations?
5. Meditating, offering yoga classes, drinking herbal tea: all things Claire says make her mother a nutcase in other people's eyes. What's the pulse on these things in your part of the world? Are they truly fringe, or is this mindful, body-centric way of living becoming more mainstream?





6. Claire is being courted by both Trevor and Matt. What is it about the love triangle that we find so appealing as audiences?
7. What do you think of Claire's mother's advice—that she shouldn't date two men at once? Is she right?
8. In chapter 6, Claire senses Trevor is about to cry—but she doesn't want to see it. Is she right or wrong? What changes if we "let" firefighters cry?
9. Matt and Claire have quite a powerful argument in the Lakeshore Bar and Grill over the fact that Claire has also gone on a recent date with Trevor. As you see it, are Matt and Trevor being reasonable in expecting and demanding Claire's loyalty so early in their dating history?
10. In Chapter 8 Claire seeks her mother's counsel about the lack of clarity in her visions. They talk about Claire's confusion over the conflicting information her visions give her, and her mother says: "Your hunches and those visions can only point you in a direction. You still have to figure things out for yourself." How is this true for intuition in general?
11. In chapter 9, Claire's mother tells her daughter she shouldn't be trying Matt and Trevor on as if they're shoes. But don't you kind of need to try out a new partner before you close the door on all the other possibilities? Discuss.
12. Claire is dismayed when she learns that Trevor wanted to date her for her position, rather than for who she is as a person. But the knife cuts both ways: she realizes she had admired him for being a firefighter—not because she was drawn to any particular part of his personality. How hard is it to separate our worth derived from what we do from our worth derived from who we are? How can we ever be sure someone loves us for just us?
13. Some experts say it's harder than ever to be a man nowadays. Gone are the days where a man had to use his physical energy to defend the tribe, hunt for meat or harvest crops. Now men sit behind computer screens and hire a gardening company to rake the leaves in the yard. Talk about Trevor's desire to actually battle fires in the context of modern society's dearth of traditionally masculine work for men to engage in.
14. What is the underlying theme of *Playing With Fire*?
15. Explain the double entendre in the book's title. What's another title that would work?





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