

# Television adaptation of *Little Fires Everywhere*

## *Everywhere*: Small change, in fact

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18 May 2020

The eight-episode series *Little Fires Everywhere*, created by Liz Tigelaar, premiered on Hulu on March 18. It is based on the 2017 novel, a *New York Times* bestseller with the same title, by Celeste Ng.

The web television miniseries, set in the late 1990s, focuses on several families and individuals in Shaker Heights, an affluent, integrated suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, who come into sharp conflict with one another. The television adaptation places even greater emphasis in particular on race and race relations, and the so-called blind spots of “white America.”

As this may already indicate, the series is driven by a muddle-headed and confused notion about what’s wrong with the US. The fact it is being aired in the midst of a pandemic that has seen tens of millions lose their jobs, in the greatest economic and social crisis since the Great Depression, makes the self-absorbed and trivializing tendencies of *Little Fires Everywhere* stand out all the more sharply.

Elena Richardson (Reese Witherspoon) considers herself a paragon of American womanhood, someone who, with considerable finesse and skill, balances her duties as mother, wife, part-time journalist (for the local paper) and pillar of the community. While she has not fulfilled her dream of becoming a big-city newspaper woman, her life is otherwise what she intended and designed it to be.

The elite town of Shaker Heights’ unofficial motto is: “Everything should be planned out ... by doing so you could avoid the unseemly, the unpleasant and the disastrous.” (The introduction to each episode includes the newspaper headline: “Shaker Heights is a dream town come true”).

With overbearing efficiency, Elena runs her household of four teenagers: Ivy League-bound Lexie (Jade Pettyjohn), athletic Trip (Jordan Elsass), sensitive Moody (Gavin Lewis) and artistic Izzy (Megan Stott). Elena’s affluent lifestyle results from the successful career of attorney-husband Bill (Joshua Jackson).

But a hyper-organized manner of life does not allow room for problems, or children who are out of synch, such as her

youngest Izzy, who is gay, rebellious and considered by her mother to be a misfit.

Generally speaking, everything is apparently sunny and smooth-sailing in Shaker Heights—only a short distance from traumatically deindustrialized Cleveland—until an African-American art photographer, Mia Warren (Kerry Washington) and her teenage daughter Pearl (Lexi Underwood) rent Elena’s second house. (The novel does not specify Mia’s ethnicity).

Believing Mia has money troubles, Elena offers the newcomer the position of “house manager” in her domicile. Oddly, Mia accepts, but only to keep tabs on daughter Pearl who is enamored with Elena’s brood, mansion and overall opulent way of life. As the relationship between Elena and Mia begins to sour, the latter says sarcastically: “White women always want to be friends with their [black] maids.”

Specifically, the pair go to war when a custody battle erupts over the fate of a Chinese infant. Out of the proceeds from the sale of one of her most prized photographs, Mia finances the attorney for the baby’s biological mother, Bebe Chow (Huang Lu), who, suffering from poverty and postpartum depression, has left the infant outside a fire station.

Elena wholeheartedly sides with friend Linda McCullough (Rosemarie DeWitt) and her husband who were handed the child by the authorities and are proceeding with an adoption. Elena’s husband Bill is the lawyer for the McCulloughs (as he explains, somewhat regretfully, “People like Bebe Chow don’t win.”).

It is a court battle whose outcome tears Elena’s world apart.

The series purports to be a kind of report on the moral state of America. But how realistic and deep-going is it? There are recognizable situations and human beings, but one feels the presence of an ideology and agenda throughout. To far too great an extent *Little Fires Everywhere* is congealed upper middle class lecturing.

Many of the pivotal sequences are colored by the presence of this aggressive outlook. The series’ creators are not

making a work about life, but rather a film based on their schemas about life.

This renders the narrative in many places improbable. The guiding conception behind the series seems to be that white people are afflicted with the virus of racism. Despite the latter's best intentions, this prejudice resides in the recesses of the "white soul." To dramatize this false and reactionary notion *requires* unconvincing plot manipulations.

The "suburban utopia" of Shaker Heights is turned upside down by the arrival of Mia and Pearl (hints of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*), whose ethnicity and bohemianism create friction, gossip and worse. But, according to the 2000 Census, Shaker Heights was 59.9 percent white and 34.1 percent black. It's not clear that Mia is or does anything to merit the commotion she generates.

For her part, when Mia is not scowling or crying, or threatening to do one of those two things, her righteousness in relation to the white population is simply assumed. The series takes Mia's moral superiority as its starting point, something it would actually need to *prove* dramatically. This is the equivalent of "Believe women." In fact, Mia's behavior is largely cold and disdainful, and she suffers from vast doses of self-pity.

Bebe too feels awfully sorry for herself. But this is not typically how people in such circumstances, who are a hundred times tougher and more resilient than the series' writers imagine them to be, respond to adversity.

And then there is Lexie. Her boyfriend Brian (SteVonté Hart) is African American, but her supposedly hidden racism surfaces when she takes advantage of Pearl by stealing the latter's essay and appropriating it for her entrance into Yale. Even worse, she uses Pearl's name as her own at an abortion clinic. The creators stack the deck against her.

In turn, Brian accuses Lexie of not truly seeing him as a black man. For Brian, as well as Mia, colorblindness does not exist—or rather claiming a lack of prejudice is one of the surest proofs that the claimant is a secret bigot! According to the former, Lexie "stole a black girl's story ... you stole her discrimination as your own."

Furthermore, despite Elena's pretensions, when push comes to shove, she stands with her race and her class. The viciousness with which both she and her friend Linda treat Bebe Chow is the primary reason that Elena's house suffers a fiery fate.

"Little fires" abound everywhere. They are less fires than narrative implausibilities. It makes no sense, for example, that two middle class kids, Lexie and Brian, should have unprotected sex; that Bebe Chow should hysterically crash a baby shower, throwing herself into a crowd of people; that Elena, the model mother, should treat Izzy so miserably; that book club members should be scandalized by reading *The*

*Vagina Monologues*; that the college-bound Richardson offspring end up performing the most unlikely anti-social act. These are only a few of the unrealistic and unbelievable moments—as though someone were trying, hurriedly and carelessly, to cram something that doesn't fit into a bureau drawer.

It is also telling that the series' creators, including Witherspoon and Washington, both executive producers, consider the tepid and half-thought out incidents earthshaking. This, in a country that has experienced tremendous shocks and trauma, including the emergence of an elite possessing unimaginable wealth, endless war and threats of even more catastrophic wars and the relentless drive toward authoritarianism over the past 20 years. Not so much "little fires" as small change.

The series advances a host of essentially petty bourgeois perceptions about race, gender, sexual orientation, unorthodoxy versus respectability, repression and intolerance versus free-spiritedness—all for the supposed benefit of the benighted American people. This is an effort by moneyed, insulated Hollywood celebrities, people for whom the devastating economic conditions of every section of the working class in nearby Cleveland mean very little compared to the questions of "cultural appropriation," "white fragility," "intersectionality," "marginalization," etc.

In an interview with *Hollywood Reporter*, series' creator and showrunner Liz Tigelaar explains: "It's that theme of the show, I think — it's like, how can we know who we really are if we're too afraid to look at ourselves? It's the whole beginning of *The Vagina Monologues* and looking at your own vagina. If we're not willing to look at the parts of us that kind of scare us to look at, how can we really see ourselves? ...

"Who she's [Elena] really struggling with is herself. She is not comfortable that she had prejudice and acted because of it. But that spark is this whole series ... If it were today she would have voted for Obama."

What can one say? The entire set of unquestioned assumptions with which Tigelaar and her collaborators set out, including the belief that voting for the war criminal and enemy of the working class Obama is a tell-tale indicator of political progressiveness, lies at the heart of the problems when it comes to *Little Fires Everywhere*. Someone needs to light a large blaze fire under these people, sooner rather than later.



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