

THE GREAT FIRE

Post-Reading Response Prompts

After reading *The Great Fire*, choose five of the following prompts to respond to.

<p>A.</p>	<p>What environmental factors caused the fire to ignite and spread quickly?</p> <p>Chicago’s lack of rainfall began in July 1871. By October, the landscape was so brittle and dry from the constant sun that a single spark could set the city on fire. In addition, a steady wind from the southwest began on the day of the Great Fire.</p>
<p>B.</p>	<p>How did Chicago’s architecture contribute to the fire's quick spread?</p> <p>Leading up to the fire, two-thirds of Chicago’s buildings were made of wood. In some areas, structures were built close together, and many buildings had flammable products inside, which made it easy for the fire to spread quickly from structure to structure. In addition, the walkways and streets were made of wood, and trees grew throughout the whole city. With highly flammable wood found throughout the city, there was plenty of fuel for the fire.</p>
<p>C.</p>	<p>Describe Claire Innes. Who was she, what happened to her during the fire, and how did she reunite with her family?</p> <p>Claire Innes was a twelve-year-old girl whose family had recently moved to Chicago. She was the oldest of four children. As Claire and her family fled the fire, each person grabbed a bundle of food and clothes from their home. She and her family quickly got swept up by the crowds of panicked people. In the chaos, a man grabbed Claire's bundle, and she struggled to hold on to her belongings. Another man helped Claire keep her bundle, but by then, Claire had lost her family in the crowd. Though she thought they’d return for her, she couldn’t stay where she was standing because a nearby building caught fire, and the people around her turned into a mob. She fled into an alley to escape the mob. There, she choked on the smoke and dust from the fire, and when the fire consumed her surroundings, she hid behind a pile of unused bricks at a construction site. With luck, Claire survived, and after the fire died down, she left the alley to look for her family. She returned to her neighborhood, where she eventually reunited with her father and the rest of her family.</p>
<p>D.</p>	<p>Editor-in-chief Horace White often used poetic language to describe what he witnessed during the fire. Find three examples of White’s poetic language in the book. What is the impact of Horace White’s words?</p> <p>Examples will vary but may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “red tongues of light began to shoot upward.” • “The dogs of Hell were upon the housetops ... bounding from one to another ... The fire was moving ... like an ocean surf on a sand beach. It had already traveled an eighth of a mile and was far beyond control. A column of flame would shoot up from a burning building, catch the force of the wind, and strike the next one, which in turn would perform the same direful office for its neighbor. It was simply indescribable in its terrible grandeur.” • “The flames were driving thither with demon precision.” <p>Horace White’s poetic language gives the reader a sensory experience because he wrote vivid descriptions of his personal experiences and observations of the events that occurred during the fire. His words elicit emotion, illustrating the drama and chaos throughout Chicago.</p>

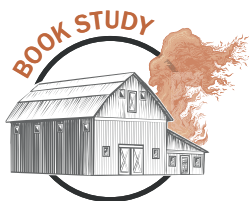


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<p>E.</p>	<p>Readers of <i>The Great Fire</i> experience the tragedy from multiple points of view, including from the perspectives of Alexander Frear, Horace White, and Claire Innes. Why do you think the author does this? Choose one perspective and explain why their account is important to the story.</p> <p>The choice to follow specific characters is intentional. It provides the reader with an emotional connection to the events. By following each character, the reader is invested in their survival. Student answers will vary but may mention that Claire Innes's account is compelling because Claire was young, just like the students reading the story. Claire was separated from her family, and her loneliness, fear, and bravery elicit sympathy. Her story shows how children faced huge challenges during the fire but survived with luck and courage.</p>
<p>F.</p>	<p>Shortly after the fire, the people of Chicago began to restore and improve their city. However, some residents had a difficult time rebuilding their homes and neighborhoods. Why was this? Cite two examples from the text to support your answer.</p> <p>A new policy required people to build with brick or stone, which were more expensive materials than wood. Few of the lower-middle class and poorer families had fire insurance, and the city made no effort to help them get loans to rebuild. Without money from insurance or loans, many families who lost everything could not rebuild their homes. Therefore, poorer citizens were not able to rebuild in the places where they used to live. Even if citizens owned their wooden houses before the fire, they could only use wood to rebuild if they went outside the city's larger commercial district. So during the rebuilding of Chicago, people without access to brick or stone were forced to move out of the main part of the city.</p>
<p>G.</p>	<p>One of the themes in the book is determination in the face of great tragedy. Find two specific examples from the story that illustrate this theme.</p> <p>Student answers will vary but may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Margaret O'Toole set up the first business to open in the burned-out area—a stand selling chestnuts. • William Kerfoot opened his real estate business from a shack with a sign that read: "All gone but wife, children, and energy." • Newspaper men, such as Wilbur Storey, scrambled to rent space and resume publishing newspapers. • Two weeks after the fire, a building frenzy began. Temporary wooden shacks, or shanties, quickly appeared all over the city. As a result, there was a high demand for carpenters, bricklayers, and farmers.



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<p>H.</p>	<p>After the Great Chicago Fire, Mrs. O’Leary was blamed for what happened, even though she was asleep when the fire began. Why do you think she was unfairly blamed? What other individuals or groups were unfairly blamed for the fire?</p> <p>Many of the wealthy residents of Chicago blamed the "poor and slovenly" people of De Koven Street for the fire. Newspaper owners also wanted a good story and needed someone to blame, so they were responsible for pointing the finger at Mrs. O’Leary. The newspapers and people of Chicago also blamed an anarchist group, a disgruntled fire extinguisher salesman, a higher being, and “Peg Leg” Sullivan.</p>
<p>I.</p>	<p>Author Jim Murphy researched personal accounts from survivors to craft a story of panic and destruction while also sharing examples of people’s courage. Who shows courage in this story? Choose one survivor and find one direct quote from the story to support your claim.</p> <p>Students may name Alexander Frear as a survivor full of courage and perseverance. Although just a visitor to Chicago, Alexander jumped to action to save the lives of his sister-in-law and other family members. At one point in his search for his family, he crossed a bridge badly damaged by the fire. Frear described his crossing as “a severe struggle and at the risk of my life.” Even so, Frear courageously continued his search and rescue efforts.</p>
<p>J.</p>	<p>Compare the hand-drawn images with the photographs in the book. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using each type of visual to help readers understand the Great Fire of 1871?</p> <p>Many of the photographs in the book depict people and buildings either before or after the fire started. There are no photographs from the time of the fire, but there are hand-drawn illustrations that depict the events that occurred during the fire. The hand-drawn images help represent the class system of the time, which is apparent in the clothes the people wore and the items they held as they fled. In these images, the viewer can also see details, such as facial features and expressions, allowing the viewer to experience an emotional response to the images. However, it’s important to remember that the drawings are an artist’s interpretation and may not represent the event exactly as it occurred. The photographs in the book are stark reminders of the fire’s destruction. Unlike the illustrations, the reader can trust that the photographs depict reality. For that reason, the photographs can shock the reader.</p>