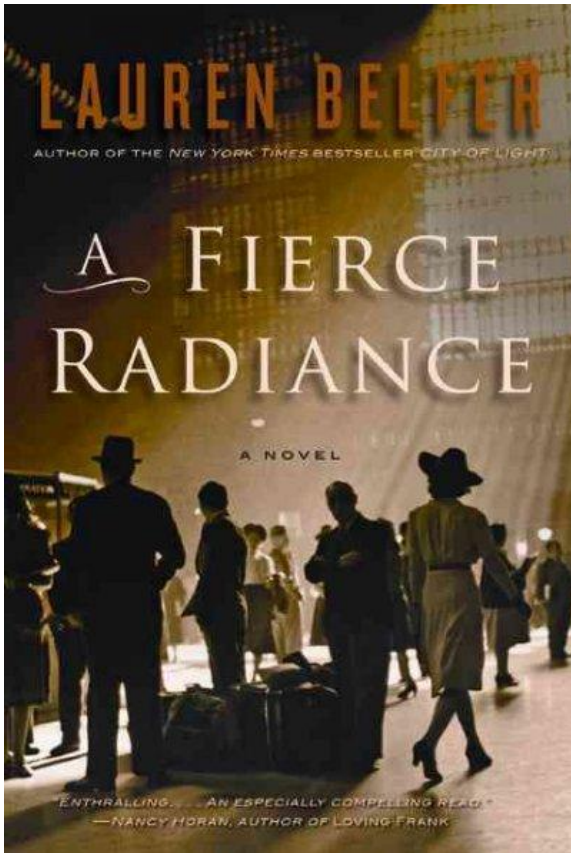


About the book... (<http://www.readinggroupguides.com>)



From the *New York Times* bestselling author of **City of Light** comes a compelling, richly detailed tale of passion and intrigue set in New York City during the tumultuous early days of World War II.

Claire Shipley is a single mother haunted by the death of her young daughter and by her divorce years ago. She is also an ambitious photojournalist, and in the anxious days after Pearl Harbor, the talented *Life* magazine reporter finds herself on top of one of the nation's most important stories. In the bustling labs of New York City's renowned Rockefeller Institute, some of the country's brightest doctors and researchers are racing to find a cure that will save the lives of thousands of wounded American soldiers and countless others --- a miraculous new drug they call penicillin. Little does Claire suspect how much the story will change her own life when the work leads to an intriguing romance.

Though Claire has always managed to keep herself separate from the subjects she covers, this story touches her deeply, stirring memories of her daughter's sudden illness and death --- a loss that might have been prevented by this new "miracle drug." And there is James Stanton, the shy and brilliant physician who coordinates the institute's top-secret research for the military. Drawn to this dedicated, attractive man and his work, Claire

unexpectedly finds herself falling in love. But Claire isn't the only one interested in the secret development of this medicine. Her long-estranged father, Edward Rutherford, a self-made millionaire, understands just how profitable a new drug like penicillin could be.

When a researcher at the institute dies under suspicious circumstances, the stakes become starkly clear: a murder has been committed to obtain these lucrative new drugs. With lives and a new love hanging in the balance, Claire will put herself at the center of danger to find a killer --- no matter what price she may have to pay.

About the author...

(<http://www.laurenbelfer.com/about.html>)



Lauren Belfer was born in Rochester, New York, and grew up in Buffalo, where she attended the Buffalo Seminary. At Swarthmore College, she majored in Medieval Studies. After graduating, she worked as a file clerk at an art gallery, a paralegal, an assistant photo editor at a newspaper, a fact checker at magazines, and as a researcher and associate producer on documentary films. She has an M.F.A. from Columbia University.

Her debut novel, *City of Light*, was a *New York Times* bestseller, as well as a number one Book Sense pick, a Barnes & Noble Discover Award nominee, a *New York Times* Notable Book, a *Library Journal* Best Book, and a Main Selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club.

City of Light was a bestseller in Great Britain and has been translated into seven languages.

Belfer's fiction has also been published in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Shenandoah*, and *Henfield Prize Stories*. Her nonfiction has appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Washington Post Book World*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and elsewhere.

She lives in New York City.

Reviews

Booklist *Starred Review*

Through the story of divorced 36-year-old Life photojournalist Claire Shiply, Belfer blends fact and fiction to describe the development of penicillin as a weapon of war in the 1940s. Seeing an early trial of the green-mold medicine, in which a dying man is miraculously cured of his infection, then dies when the medication runs out—Shiply is drawn to the story because of the earlier death of her young daughter from septicemia. She is drawn, too, to head researcher Dr. James Stanton, who is soon tapped to be national scientific coordinator to provide penicillin to treat battlefield infections. While Stanton travels to war zones, Claire is asked by government officials to watch for pharmaceutical companies neglecting production of unpatented penicillin to develop "cousin" antibacterials, even after her wealthy father has taken

over one of the companies involved. Belfer (*City of Light*, 2003) combines life-and-death scenarios, romance, murder, and wartime reality at home and abroad, while satirizing industrialists who profit by dubious means and salve their consciences through philanthropy; and she warns that resistance to antibiotics could return us "to the era when otherwise healthy adults died from a scratch on the knee." An engrossing and ambitious novel that vividly portrays a critical time in American history.

Library Journal

Thirty-six-year-old Claire Shipley is a most modern woman in 1941. A gifted, focused photographer for LIFE magazine, a divorced single mother, and fearless in the pursuit of her career, she stumbles upon an enormous story when she is sent to cover the use of an experimental, hard-to-produce drug, penicillin, on infections. Having lost one child to septicemia, she is fiercely protective of her son. When her original story is killed, she is asked by the U.S. government to pursue it as a patriot, keeping an eye on the big pharmaceutical companies who are supposed to be mass-producing patent-free penicillin for use on the battlefield but are really working on the much more profitable cousin drugs. VERDICT With an exquisite artist's eye for detail that puts readers right in the middle of New York City and the World War II fronts and incorporating all the elements of a hot, sprawling, page-turning romance—not to mention espionage, murder, crime-scene deceptions, big business

intrigue, and family estrangements. Belfer (*City of Light*) once again blends fiction and facts with riveting results.

Kirkus Reviews

A novel from Belfer (*City of Lights*, 1999) about the race to develop penicillin and other antibiotics during World War II. Claire, a photographer with *Life* magazine, is sent to cover a groundbreaking discovery by scientists at Manhattan's Rockefeller Institute. A mold seems to have generated a lifesaving drug, and doctors at the Institute are testing it on patients suffering from infections. Claire is deeply invested in her assignment—long ago, she lost a daughter to blood poisoning. She's drawn to Jamie, the handsome doctor administering the trials. Now divorced, single-handedly raising son Charlie and tentatively healing her long estrangement from her Wall Street kingpin father, Rutherford, Claire is shocked when patients on the verge of recovery die—supplies of penicillin, grown haphazardly in bottles and bedpans, are too sparse for a complete course of treatment. When the United States enters the war after Pearl Harbor, pharmaceutical companies, including some still-familiar players like Merck and Pfizer, compete to be the first to mass-produce penicillin. The success of the war effort and, of course, scads of money are at stake. Jamie's sister Tia, a Rockefeller mycologist, is investigating other antimicrobial agents found in soil,

known as penicillin's "cousins." Tia has just isolated a particularly promising specimen when she falls from a cliff near the Institute—or was she pushed? The sample she was cataloguing, notable for its startling blue color, disappears. The government, with the cooperation of Life publisher Henry Luce, enlists Claire to document the progress Pharma is making on the penicillin front. Rutherford has an entrepreneurial interest in patentable antibiotics. When Nick, a doctor from an impoverished immigrant background, who had flirted with Tia, offers to sell Rutherford a strikingly cerulean "cousin," Rutherford bites, but now he's keeping secrets from Claire. Jamie, who's engaged to Claire, returns from service in North Africa to find his romance disrupted by the fact that his prospective father-in-law might have ordered his sister's murder. A ponderously paced historical thriller.

Publishers Weekly

Penicillin operates as the source of romance, murder, and melodrama in Belfer's (*City of Light*) evocative WWII-era novel. When Life magazine sends strikingly beautiful photographer Claire Shipley to report on a promising new medication made from green mold, Claire, 36, the single mother of a young son, who lost her daughter to blood poisoning eight years before, is moved by the drug's potential to save lives. She also becomes smitten with resident doctor James Stanton, a man with two interests: penicillin and bedding

Claire. But as the war casualties pile up, penicillin becomes an issue of national security and the politics of the drug's production threaten to disrupt the pair's lust-fueled romance, especially when James is sent abroad to oversee human trials of the drug. The pharmaceutical companies, including one owned by Claire's father, realize the financial potential in penicillin, which leads to a hodgepodge of soapy plot twists: suspicious deaths, amnesia, illness, exploitation, and espionage. Belfer handily exploits Claire's photo shoots to add historical texture to the book, and the well-researched scenes bring war-time New York City to life, capturing the anxiety-ridden period.

Literary Criticism

Title: *A Fierce Radiance*

Source: *Publishers Weekly*. 257.14 (Apr. 5, 2010): p45. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Book review, Brief article

A Fierce Radiance

Lauren Belfer. Harper, \$25.99 (544p) ISBN 978-0-06-125251-8

Penicillin operates as the source of romance, murder, and melodrama in Belfer's (*City of Light*) evocative WWII-era

novel. When Life magazine sends strikingly beautiful photographer Claire Shipley to report on a promising new medication made from green mold, Claire, 36, the single mother of a young son, who lost her daughter to blood poisoning eight years before, is moved by the drug's potential to save lives. She also becomes smitten with resident doctor James Stanton, a man with two interests: penicillin and bedding Claire. But as the war casualties pile up, penicillin becomes an issue of national security and the politics of the drug's production threaten to disrupt the pair's lust-fueled romance, especially when James is sent abroad to oversee human trials of the drug. The pharmaceutical companies--including one owned by Claire's father--realize the financial potential in penicillin, which leads to a hodgepodge of soapy plot twists: suspicious deaths, amnesia, illness, exploitation, and espionage. Belfer handily exploits Claire's photo shoots to add historical texture to the book, and the well-researched scenes bring wartime New York City to life, capturing the anxiety-ridden period. (June)

Source Citation

"A Fierce Radiance." *Publishers Weekly* 257.14 (2010): 45. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 18 July 2011.

Discussion Questions

(http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides_f/a_fierce_radiance1.asp)

- 1.** *A Fierce Radiance* is set in New York, at the onset of World War II. Talk about America during wartime. How was the war a part of the lives of Claire and Charlie Shipley, Jamie Stanton, Edward Rutherford, Bill Shipley, and other Americans? Did any of your relatives serve in the war? What about on the home front --- do you know how your relatives' lives were affected during that time?
- 2.** Contemporary Americans are also living during a time of war. How have the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq impacted Americans today? Contrast the two times. Do you think Americans today feel as part of the war effort as they did in the 1940s? Explain.
- 3.** Wartime New York City is brought vividly to life in the novel. What were your impressions of the city? How do those impressions compare to your ideas of what the city is like today? What was the place you call home like during World War II? How does it compare to its contemporary version? Do you think we --- as a society and a nation ---

have lost anything in the decades between then and now?

4. What is your opinion of Claire Shipley? Do you think she was like other women of her time? How did her background influence her choices, including her work? How did her career shape her outlook on the events that were happening around her?

5. Outside of her son, the most important men in Claire's life were her father, Edward Rutherford, Jamie Stanton, and Henry Luce. What did each of them mean to her? How did her relationship with each change over the course of the story?

6. Claire was a photojournalist for Life magazine. Have you ever seen an issue of that publication? What role did Life play in the national consciousness? Do we have anything like Life today?

7. Think about Claire's job as a photojournalist and her directives from her boss, Henry Luce. Did she see herself as part of the war effort or as an objective bystander covering events? What is the role of a journalist today? Might our outlook of the Second World War be different if Claire and her colleagues covered it following today's journalistic standards? What are the pros and cons of

objectivity?

8. Before reading *A Fierce Radiance*, did you have any idea that penicillin and other antibiotics were discovered less than a hundred years ago? How did these medical miracles change our lives? Are we too reliant on drugs like antibiotics as well as antibacterial household products today? Will these drugs always be as effective as they have been? How do you think can we extend the potency of the drugs we have available to us?

9. Do you think 21st-century Americans take their good health and advanced medical care for granted? Could you imagine living or raising a child when the simplest of conditions --- a cold, a scraped knee, a cat scratch --- could lead to death? How do you think you would cope living with such knowledge? Have we as a nation, forgotten the transformation that the discovery of antibiotics and vaccines have made in our lives?

10. The Rockefeller Institute followed the motto "for the good of humankind." The doctors, scientists, and researchers worked tirelessly in the name of science, not wealth. Does this kind of selfless humanity still exist? Should everything be done for profit? Why? Do you think we as a nation have lost our sense of shared commitment, of the "common good"?

11. Claire argues with her father that selling antibacterials are not like selling rivets. He disagrees, to which she responds: "You don't think there's well, a human right for people to be able to receive an antibacterial at two cents a dose if that's what it costs to produce? Okay, at a dollar to allow for a hefty profit, but surely not as much as two hundred dollars for one shot?" How would you answer this? Companies often do spend a great deal of money in research and development, which they want to recoup. But how much profit is enough, or are there no limits, no matter the cost to other human beings?

12. With the lives of millions of soldiers at stake, the war department claimed the patents on penicillin's means of production to ensure that no single drug company could either have a monopoly on this essential "war weapon" or to divert government funding into other more lucrative research of their own. Do you think this was a good or necessary thing to do? What might have happened if they decided to let the free market take care of production?

13. Before doctors can discover cures, they need to do an enormous amount of medical testing. In *A Fierce Radiance*, some of the subjects were given drugs without knowing the possible side

effects. Some of these were interned Japanese Americans. Should they have been told what could happen if they received the medication? Rutherford felt using them as test subjects was a necessary byproduct of saving the many, especially when the drugs saved their lives. Others felt these "Japs" --- whom they viewed as possible enemy sympathizers or combatants --- didn't deserve such knowledge. What do you think?

14. The government lackey, Andrew Barnett, tells Claire, there is "no morality in war." Do you agree with this? Is "winning at any cost" --- if it includes murder and letting a killer go free --- victory?

15. What did you take away from reading *A Fierce Radiance*?

Multimedia

NPR Interview

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128444970>

Read-alikes

The Postmistress by Sarah Blake (2010)

The lives of three very different women intersect in Sarah Blake's *The Postmistress*. During the early 1940s, American Frankie Wilson reports from the front lines of the war in Europe. She hopes that her radio program will inspire citizens back home to contribute to the war effort. Listening to Frankie's radio show back in Franklin, Massachusetts, is postmistress Iris James. She fears that war will soon come to the small town where she keeps her friends and neighbors secrets. Iris struggles to keep a deep secret of her own, her love for the town mechanic, Harry Vale. Meanwhile, Emma Fitch, the young wife of the town doctor fears that her husband will join the fight against the Nazis after listening to Frankie's radio show.

Turbulence by Giles Foden (2009)

In *Turbulence*, award-winning author Giles Foden tells the story of a mathematical genius who is charged with finding the scientifically ideal time to launch the D-Day attacks. Henry Meadows is dispatched to Scotland, where he meets famed meteorologist Wallace Ryman. Ryman has developed a numbered system for predicting weather patterns, and it is this breakthrough technology that the British army needs to launch their attack on Normandy. But complications arise when Henry gets drawn into Wallace's world and lays eyes on the scientist's beautiful wife. Author Giles Foden is also the author of *The Last King of Scotland*.

The Night Watch by Sarah Waters (2006)

In London during World War II four ordinary Londoners' lives intersect--Kay, an ambulance driver; her lover Helen; Duncan, a conscientious objector; and Duncan's sister, Vivian, whose lover is a married soldier. Working backward in time beginning in 1947 to 1941, the novel gradually reveals the network of connections that joins these characters to one another and the historical moment. Waters' strength is delivering the routine details of wartime life.

Charlotte Gray by Sebastian Faulks (1998)

In 1942 a pretty young woman named Charlotte Gray comes to London from her home in the Scottish highlands, looking for work. She wants to help out the war effort. She finds London practically in ruins, and the only work available to her is secretarial, which leaves her feeling unsatisfied. She falls in love with a wounded RAF pilot named Peter Gregory and has a passionate, doomed wartime affair with him. When she hears that his plane has been lost over France, she is heartbroken but determine to go to France herself, join the resistance, and make a real contribution to the fight against Nazism. The novel features a remarkable portrait of wartime France and a psychological profile of Gray's development under the pressure of wartime adversity.



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