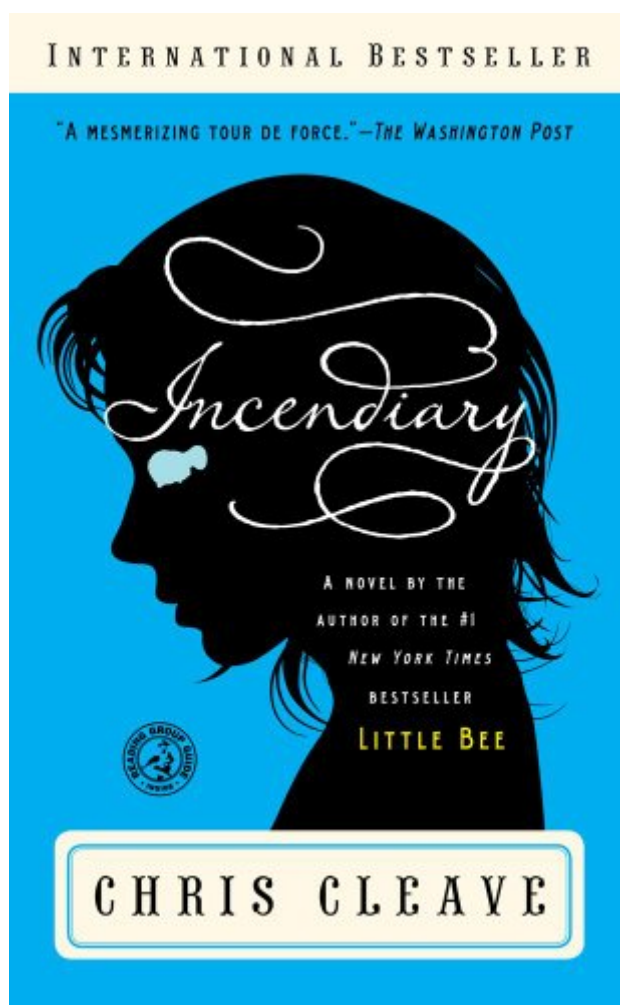


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Incendiary: A Novel



Synopsis

I am a woman built upon the wreckage of myself. In an emotionally raw voice alive with grief, compassion, and startling humor, a woman mourns the loss of her husband and son at the hands of one of history's most notorious criminals. And in appealing to their executioner, she reveals the desperate sadness of a broken heart and a working-class life blown apart.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In the world of post-9/11 literature, great attention has gone to Jonathan Safran Foer's *EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE*, Ian McEwan's *SATURDAY*, and Art Spiegelman's *IN THE SHADOW OF NO TOWERS*. Now comes a first novel less pyrotechnic and histrionic than Foer's, less cold and distant than McEwan's, and less shallow and self-centered than Spiegelman's, a book at once more graphically horrifying and touchingly, humanly real than any of them, and it seems to have hardly been noticed. Chris Cleave's *INCENDIARY* is an extraordinary work, a brilliant discourse on Western culture, class divisions, the meaning of family, and the meaning of freedom (or lack thereof) in an England (or an America) obsessively embroiled in a "war on terror." Structurally, *INCENDIARY* takes the form of an extended, Dear Osama letter, written over four seasons by an anonymous, lower middle class housewife whose husband (a bomb squad

member for the London police) and four-year-old son were killed in a suicide bombing at an Arsenal football match. At the very moment they were killed, she was engaged in flagrante delicto on her living room sofa with Jasper Black, a well-off social and professional climber who worked as a columnist for the Sunday Telegraph newspaper. Her lengthy epistle begins as a plea for Osama to stop the terrorism - to "stop making boy-shaped holes in the world" - but evolves as a retelling of her life's downward spiral following May Day, as Londoners come to call their soccer match version of 9/11. She becomes increasingly involved with Paul and his scheming newspaper columnist girlfriend Petra Sutherland, lands a file clerking job with her husband's former boss and anti-terrorism czar Terence Butcher, and ultimately learns a horrifying truth about May Day.

Incendiary is as multifaceted, complex and enthralling a novel as I have read in a long time. Ostensibly this book is about terrorism as represented by a massive suicide bombing at a soccer match in London. In actuality it is about the corrosive aftereffects terrorist acts have on both society and individuals both from the standpoint of dealing with the immediate trauma as well as the more subtle yet equally difficult task of reevaluating one's values and principles to confront an extraordinary yet essentially invisible evil in your own back yard. The book examines these issues through an artifice - the novel is one long letter from a widow created by the soccer stadium blast to Osama bin Laden. I have seen authors use this device before, with a tremendous lack of success, but Chris Cleave pulls it off with aplomb. His unnamed protagonist effectively reflects in her missive the complex dynamics of both her own and society's evolving reactions and responses to the terrorist act. The book raises many deeply relevant questions. How much of what our narrator feels and acts is a reflection of the act itself or the personal betrayal she was engaged in as the act took place? How much of one's values and principles does society wish to abandon to combat the terrorists? The book also gently ties into the narrative the essentially timeless aspects of these questions. Just as Churchill was faced with the question of what to do about the knowledge he possessed of Nazi intentions (gained through breaking Nazi communications codes), i.e., do we warn people in his target areas and save lives but lose the intelligence pipeline or do we sacrifice those lives to preserve that pipeline? (he chose the latter) the London Police face similar quandaries.

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