



VEIL OF FIRE – DISCUSSION GUIDE

by Marlo Schalesky

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A Note from Marlo:

Once, when we were children, we believed in miracles. The impossible was only a prayer away. Fairy tales were real, and dreams were free. Where did we lose the ability to trust? When did we stop daring to believe? What happened to us?

Life happened. Failure, discouragement, pain, loss. Somewhere, somehow, life burns us all. And we realize that this life we live is not the one we once dreamed. The realities of life scar us. Doubts rise. Fear whispers that hope is gone. And what was once a simple faith can fail in the face of that fear.

In the midst of life's disillusionment, choices appear. Do we retreat? Hide our hurts far from probing eyes? Do we embrace bitterness and cynicism? Do we use deceit to try to obtain our goals? Do we give up, give in, forget that we ever dared to dream?

Or is it possible to reach the high places of faith in the low valleys of life's reality? Can we still live a life of bold faith, of fierce hope, when fairy tales don't come true? How do we live this life that God has given us when it's not the life we dreamed?

These are the questions I wanted to explore in *Veil of Fire*. These are the questions which underlie each character's journey in the aftermath of the great fire of 1894.

So, for those burned by life, for those who carry scars that cannot be seen, for those who have retreated for fear of more pain, this story is for you, this journey from the hidden places of pain to a new hope in the unhidden truth of Christ's love.

Discussion Questions:

1. In chapter one, Nora says that sometimes people only see truth if we dress it up pretty. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
2. In chapter one, Nora says, "Sometimes all you can do is give someone a dress." How does this relate to chapter twenty-two where Ellie gives the dress to the hermit?

3. In chapter three, Arla turns her arm to hide the smear of cinders on her sleeve. What does this action say about Arla's character? What are some ways that you may attempt to hide your faults, especially during times of high stress and/or fear?

4. In chapter three, Arla wonders why some live and some die. What answer might you give her? What help does this verse: "Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (Luke 12:7 NIV) give us in our attempt to understand?

5. In chapter four, Josef wonders what they had done to deserve the fire. Do you believe that tragedy is a result of sin? Is it something that is deserved? Why or why not?

6. In chapter four, Josef questions the character of God. He asks, "What kind of God could look into the innocent face of this child and allow her mother to burn in the flames?" Have you ever questioned God in the face of pain and tragedy? Do you think such questions show a lack of faith, or are they simply a result of faith intersecting with the realities of life?

7. In chapter five, Nils says, "Folks need something to hope for, especially the children." Reflect on the power of hope in your own life. How has hope given you the strength to persevere in difficult times?

8. In chapter seven, the hermit wonders if God ordained the fire. Do you believe that God ordains tragedy or natural disasters? If so, what does that mean with respect to God's love? If not, what does that mean with respect to God's sovereignty?

9. Spiritually, Josef, Arla, and the hermit all react to their loss differently. How does each react, and with whom do you most identify? When you face hardships are you most likely to feel that God is giving you what you deserve, or that He doesn't love you, or that He is unjust or absent? How do these characters' journeys change the way you want to face difficulties in the future?

10. In chapter eight, Josef remembers giving his life to God ten years prior. How does that former commitment affect his reaction to the loss of his wife? How should it? What promises and commitments have you made to God? How do they come into play when you face hardship?

11. Have you ever felt disappointed with God, or felt as if He let you down? If so, how did you face those feelings? Did you, like Josef, withdraw from church and from others? Do you think it's helpful to hide your doubts and disappointments or to voice them?

12. In chapter eight, Josef asks, "What is faith in the face of tragedy?" After reading this book, what answer might you give him?

13. Arla loved her daughter, Rakel, but didn't know how to show that love in a meaningful way. Think of those closest to you. Is there someone whose love you need to recognize even though they show it poorly? Is there someone to whom you can express your love in a more effective way?

14. In chapter fifteen, Nils asks Arla if she thinks she deserves God's favor because of her prayers, church attendance, and Bible reading. Do you feel that you deserve God's blessings more when you're "being religious"? Why or why not?

15. In chapter fifteen, Arla says, "We're supposed to have faith. And faith doesn't question." Do you agree? Consider the books of Job and Habakkuk, as well as Psalms such as Psalm 10, 22, 42, 43, 44, 74, and 88, among others. How would you answer now?

16. In chapter fifteen, Arla also asks what good God is if bad things just happen. Consider her question in the light of Romans 8:28 (NIV) which says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

17. In chapter fifteen, what do you think Nils means when he says that God is a gingerbread maker? How does that image shed light on Arla's question?

18. In chapter seventeen, Rakel wonders if God still loves us when we do wrong, choose poorly, when we sin. How does Romans 5:8 (NIV), "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" speak to her question?

19. In chapter eighteen, we discover that Josef suffered injustice through the folly of his older brother. How do you think this experience colored the way he viewed God's justice in the face of tragedy? Do you think that you have injustices in your past that may color the way you see God today?

20. In chapter eighteen, Nora likens life to a grand ball dress in the making. What does it mean to you that we can only see today's stitches and yesterday's? How does knowing that you can't see the whole picture yet help you to trust God in the midst of difficulties and disappointments?

21. In chapter twenty-two, the hermit tells Josef that there is often no answer to the question of "why." If we can't always know why something bad happens, how does that change the way we comfort others in hard times? Is it wise to offer reasons for why God may have allowed a tragedy? Or is it better to simply offer sympathy and not to speculate as to why? Consider the book of Job as you answer.

22. In chapter twenty-four, Arla realizes how tired she is of wearing masks. How is her mask similar to the hermit's? How is it opposite? For both of them, think about how revealing their true selves set them free. Is there something in your own life that you're making from others? How can you be more honest about your life and who you really are?

23. In chapter twenty-four, Josef realizes that he has misjudged God just as he misjudged the hermit. Consider the line, "But who among them all had sought out the ghost to see if it were truth? No one had reached out, no one had taken the time to discover who the ghost really was." What should have Josef done instead of blaming God? What does that mean for you when you face difficult times?

24. Think about the idea that the opposite of blaming God is seeking God. Do you think it's possible to seek God even in the midst of doubts, questions, and fears? What does it mean for you to seek Him honestly and yet not deny your disappointments or doubts?

25. Given Josef's experience, think about the difference between asking, "Why did this happen?" versus "How can I better find out who God really is?" when responding to hard times. Which do you think is the more helpful question? Why?

26. In chapter twenty-six, Arla confesses that she failed to do what she should have because she was afraid of what people would think of her. Do you ever find that you hesitate to do what you should because of the opinions of others? If so, how can you overcome this tendency?

27. In chapter twenty-six, Arla discovers that her secrets weren't as well hidden as she supposed. Do you think there are things about you that others might see even if you've tried to keep those things hidden? How can you be more honest with yourself and with others?

28. In chapter twenty-six, Nils says that he's loved Arla even in all her mistakes and foolishness. When asked why, he says, "Because I've been loved that way too." Who is he talking about? And what does that mean for your life?

29. At the end of chapter twenty-six, what do you think that Arla finally realizes about God? How does that realization change her view of herself and her shame?

30. In chapter twenty-nine, Arla calls Ellie "Ellie" instead of "Eleanor" for the first time. What is the significance of this change? What do you think it signifies?

31. In chapter thirty-one, Lars thinks that he wants peace but he doesn't want truth. Is it possible to have real peace without truth? Why or why not?

32. Why do you think Ellie could move on and find peace only after she gave away the dress in chapter thirty-two?

33. In chapter thirty-two, Winnie realizes that she has been judging God's love through the lens of her father's sins. In what ways have you allowed your relationship with your parents to color how you view God's character and His love for you? Has that been good or bad in your experience? How can you learn to see God for who He really is?

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