

Fires



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Smoke has as many different scents as skin. Part of the pleasure is not knowing what it will be -- sulfurous or closer to incense or airier and sweeter as I imagine the smell of clouds. Ella is a connoisseur of fire, a woman enthralled by it as other women are by love. She savors the seductive promise of a spark, the caress of a curling wisp of smoke, the all-consuming hunger of a spreading blaze. Ella's heart seethes with a rage that can be spoken only with tongues of flame. In her remarkable first novel, Rene Steinke has created a narrator so lyrical and lucid in her madness as to raise the book to the level of romance. Trapped in a sleepy Indiana town, torn by inner demons that drive her to pyromania and promiscuity, Ella is at once entirely original and unforgettably real. As she struggles to come to terms with her family's tormented past and her own uncertain future, she draws the mesmerized reader ever deeper into her scorched soul, revealing a sensuality that will spiral into final, fiery destruction -- unless it can be quenched by love.

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