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## KARLA MASS: The week's most talked about book

**Sept. 12 - 18**

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Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. So many books ... so little time. Approximately 1,000 new books are published daily and more than a few first-time authors are penning first-time hits. If an author can capture and hold your attention in the first chapter, it's a pretty good sign of what's to come. Others disappoint from the start with slowly developing characters and an even slower plot.

There are books out there, right now, hot off the presses, to accommodate every taste, every passion and every personal library. But what makes a good book for one reader is a bust for another. What keeps *me* reading? Passages like this one from the debut novel "Who By Fire" by Diana Spechler:

*Distraction is a dangerous thing. You should have seen me in class this morning, staring out the window at the wind shaking the trees, the leaves beckoning like fingers. I don't know how many times Rabbi Berkstein called my name, but when I finally heard him and jerked my chin off my fist, he was waving both arms above his head like he was stranded on a desert island and I was a helicopter. "Asher," he sang. "Earth to Asher." Believe me: I don't want to be thinking of*

*Monica. I would do anything to clear her from my thoughts. But she is a virus, spreading through me, mutating, staking her claim in my bloodstream.*

Fine-tuned writing explodes in a story about family, religion, redemption, betrayal and forgiveness. Falling in love with these characters is one thing, understanding their plight is another, plus you get the awkward feeling that you've met them before and that, as a reader, you're eavesdropping.

A skittish father, a confused mother, one missing sibling, a Torah-centered brother and a pagan sister, "Who by Fire" reads like a well conducted symphony as multiple points of view are skillfully employed at the right time. Details are plentiful. Metaphors prevail. As a writer, Spechler is just that good.

Bits, Ash (Asher) and Ellie appear so real, they come to life on paper. Bits is full of herself and everyone else is fed up with her shenanigans. She's a liar, a psychopath, a thief and as wild as a spooked horse. There's no love lost between Ash and his sister, Bits. Ash, from idolizing whales to Orthodox Judaism, is often haunted by his young sister Alena. Her horrific kidnapping brings him to Israel and to the realization that "guilt is a choice."

Sketchy plans are in the works to bring Ash home from Israel. But which plan will reign? Bits' poorly thought out objective to rescue Ash from the yeshiva? Ellie's attempt to save Ash from the "cult"? Or Ash's desire to remain in Israel and as close to God as humanly possible?

Who really needs rescuing? Readers will find out that eventually, they all do. Bits from her destructive self. Ash from guilt. Ellie, their mother, from Alena's ghost.

Bombs explode. Israel is not home, at least not for lost souls trying to find meaning in a crazy world. It's universal ... evil is everywhere. War is everywhere. Ash's religious beliefs are confronted and everyone's a skeptic.

Bombarded with a Jewish vocabulary of words like Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Torah, Shabbat, tzitzit and tefillin, Spechler feeds the curiosity of a religious world. Exploring the Jewish culture is so enlightening, that regardless of my limited Jewish vocabulary, every word and every action mesh.

Who kidnapped Alena? What happens to Monica, another wild child, seeking to rescue Ash? Does Jonathan, hired to deprogram Ash, stick around? The insufficient answers to these questions appear to be the novel's only weaknesses.

An appendix includes a short biography of the author, her personal writing crusade and a list of her favorite top ten novels on families ... good stuff, but a glossary of Jewish terms would have been helpful.

Most important, there's a lesson tucked in the pages of this riveting fiction: To save someone else, you must first save yourself.

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*Who By Fire*

**Fiction**

**Author:** Diana Spechler

**Publisher:** HarperCollins Publishers

**Publication Date:** September 2008

 [Listen to an excerpt from Who by Fire](#)

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