



## **A Lifetime Burning**

*Linda Gillard*

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Flora Dunbar is dead. But it isn't over.

The spectre at the funeral is Flora herself, unobserved by her grieving family and the four men who loved her.

Looking back over a turbulent lifetime, Flora recalls an eccentric childhood lived in the shadow of her musical twin, Rory; early marriage to Hugh, a handsome clergyman twice her age; motherhood, which brought her Theo, the son she couldn't love; middle age, when she finally found brief happiness in a scandalous affair with her nephew, Colin.

“There has been much love in this family – some would say too much – and not a little hate. If you asked my sister-in-law, Grace why she hated me, she'd say it was because I seduced her precious firstborn, then tossed him on to the sizeable scrap heap marked 'Flora's ex-lovers'. But she'd be lying. That isn't why Grace hated me. Ask my brother Rory.”

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A complex family drama spanning the 20th century from the author of Kindle bestseller, HOUSE OF SILENCE.

## **A Lifetime Burning Details**

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Author : Linda Gillard

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## From Reader Review A Lifetime Burning for online ebook

### Tim Pickles says

I find it difficult to know quite what to say about this book. The author is uncompromising in her subject matter, and this I welcome. It's not a comfortable read: as the theme of the subject matter unfolds - in ever more depth and pattern - you are drawn in. The juxtaposition of each of the different time segments can take a little getting used to, plus the post-death commentary that adds another layer to the experiences and perceptions being reported through the narrative. As others have written, you get to the end, and re-read the opening sections. There's much to reflect on here.

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### Lisa says

As others have said, on finishing this novel I did indeed turn back to the beginning. It's almost a compulsion to do so. It's a very evocative story that will make you feel and feel and you'll keep feeling (and thinking) after it's finished. The subject matter is very sensitive and yet it's a phenomenon that is far more common than people would have you believe and all praise to Linda Gillard for tackling it and showing it in such a sympathetic light. Illicit love, depression, dark family secrets that bind the family, a never ending spiral where the binds may never be broken...oh, what price keeping those skeletons in the closet?!

Character wise, they are realistic and you can understand why each acts as they do even though you can't always agree with it, which makes for many conflicting emotions whilst you read. They are without doubt, for the most part, selfish and deeply troubled but my overriding feelings were for Flora, for whom I felt such sorrow and sympathy; poor Flora who wanted to be good but by the deeds of others never managed to succeed and so we see a spiralling devastation that haunts the story as does Flora herself.

Very cleverly written in third person, flitting through the years which doesn't give the disjointed appearance it maybe ought to, but in fact gives us a far more intense view into the lives and events that shaped the family; then we have excerpts by Flora herself, giving a fuller picture where we can hear the heartache in her voice and we come to understand the characters more, even if we don't fully sympathise with them.

I could sympathise that the family were in a never ending history of illicit love but the way they dealt with it made me want to shout at the characters sometimes and I did feel that Flora was, unfairly, a scapegoat.

I can promise that you will come out of reading this book feeling wretched and moved and it will stay with you.

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### penelopewanders says

I finished this a few hours ago and feel a bit as though I've been through the wringer.

I received this as a gift from the author as I have read and greatly enjoyed other books by her. I will make this available on bookcrossing to share.

I think if I'd written my review mid-way through I would have appreciated this less than I do now, with the last page turned. This is a rather dire tale - as it starts with a funeral, and rather cynical commentary accompanying it, I suppose the tone is set. Likewise the title really says it all as well, between actual flames, the imagined flames of hell, the flames of guilt and a searing belief in sin, unabated desire and a desperate

sense of the inability to reach the unattainable ... Like Shakespeare's tragedies which are also present in the book, there is a tragic flaw here which is handed from generation to generation, clutched secretly, no one able to let go and be released from it.

Midway through I was a bit dizzyed by the skipping between different time periods. I was also a bit weary of Flora, how given two choices she seemed to have the knack for opting for the worst. By the end, I had reconciled myself to the jumps in time, and often referred back to the different dates, which fortunately were provided. And Flora, like so many tragic heroines, was Flora.

I don't want to provide spoilers so won't go into the detail of the various mis-steps. The characters are strongly portrayed and the story gripping. I am grateful to the author for making it available to me.

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### **Anne says**

I held back this book as a special treat having loved Linda's other two books, and for the first twenty-five pages I thought I was going to be really disappointed. It's such a different read - starts with a funeral and a large cast of characters, then jumps around in time, and for a very short while you feel rather lost. But then it soars - I got absolutely lost in Flora's life, the fragmented timeline felt absolutely right, the switching from first to third person, the strongly drawn characters (few of them particularly likeable). This is writing in a different league. The story might not appeal to all - it's a brave theme to tackle - but I was totally absorbed by it and finally put it down at 2am feeling satisfied but quite exhausted. Then I picked it back up and read the first twenty-five pages again... A brilliant read, a challenging one too, but don't miss it...

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### **Elizabeth says**

7/25 - rated it 5 stars 16 minutes ago

Thank you for writing this book, Linda Gillard.

I will return and try to write a review that will do justice to Linda Gillard's vision, words, writing, rhythm, one of a kind story weaving, and so much more. Rating 'A Lifetime Burning' as a five star book feels like an injustice to her and to her author.

I don't remember the last time a book swallowed me whole and took hold of me like 'A Lifetime Burning.' I literally just finished and I'm crying. Crying for the characters who came to life from page one, crying because I didn't want this book to ever end, and crying because I've discovered an author who captured me whole.

07/24 "Page 240

This is absolutely one of the greatest reading experiences I've had in years. I am so grateful that I came across this incredible author, Linda Gillard. I never want 'A Lifetime Burning' to end but I can't wait to read her other works. YES!!!"

07/23 "Page 140

Have you ever found an author whose works you've never read and whose words you've never felt, and then as you read that author's words and phrases, and the rhythm and play of all make your breath catch? Have you felt the intensity of connection and wonder in what you are experiencing so that you are brought to tears? I have. I am. Right now."

7/23 marked as: currently-reading

07/22 "Page 60 - good,good,good,good,good!"

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## **Mandy says**

Linda Gillard is particularly good at beginnings, and this is nowhere more evident than in this novel. In the first 2 pages, we meet all the main characters, have all the themes and narrative strands hinted at, and suspect that the title *A Lifetime Burning* is in some way the core of the novel. All in 2 pages. It would have to be an amazingly incurious reader who would not be impelled to read on...and on...because I defy anyone to be able to put this book aside. I rather deplore the over- use of the cliché “a page-turner”, but this book most certainly is one.

Any attempt to summarise the plot gives too much away, so I won't. In some ways it is a family saga – but about an unusual family, one with dark secrets, where illicit love runs through the generations to devastating effect, leaving no member of the family unscathed. Structurally the book moves backwards and forwards through time, from 1942 to 2000, and alternates between straight narrative and Flora's (the character who opens the story) commentary from beyond the grave. This is a plot device that often feels unnatural, but it is here both extremely effective and entirely relevant. Often a fragmented narrative can be confusing, but Gillard is totally in control of her subject and the story moves inexorably to its climax.

Each character feels real, not always likeable but always interesting, and each develops convincingly over the course of the novel. Gillard confronts some serious themes - incest for a start, but also love in all its aspects, lust, depression, unfulfilled dreams and longings, disappointment – with enormous understanding and sensitivity, so that although it is a sad book it is never unremittingly so.

Once finished, I turned, as I imagine most readers will, back to the beginning, and could fully appreciate what a clever book this is, how well it is constructed and how apparently effortlessly all the strands are gathered together into a very satisfying and absorbing read.

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## **Natalie says**

Isn't it funny, you can have a favourite author, and despite being different their books have 1 thing in common that makes you love them more, and then you read a book that's so completely different, and doesn't even have that common thing and yet it still packs such a punch it's probably going to be your favourite book by that author!

I have loved every single one of Linda Gillard's books, and yes, especially her talent for writing the dreamiest heroes ever! *A lifetime burning* is different, there's not really a dreamy hero, a dreamy anyone really, almost all the characters are rather unlikeable in their own ways, the story was quite horrible, but in that, can't look away car crash way, but actually it was a stunning read and will stay with me for a very long time!

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## **Pamela says**

This is the third book I have read by Linda Gillard. This is my new favorite book.

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### **Valerie Petersen says**

This is definitely a page-turner. It is a powerful and "disturbing exploration of the meaning of love within a close-knit family." It's mainly about love and the tangled web of human relationships, and is another brilliantly written book from this author.

Linda Gillard manages to portray very flawed characters in a way that makes the reader understand totally the way they are behaving. I actually found it quite sad and moving in places, as the family was torn apart by revelations that were almost beyond anybody's control.

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### **Clare Flynn says**

Full marks to Linda Gillard for tackling such a difficult subject - but then when does she shy away from a challenge? In *A Lifetime Burning* she tackles the taboo topic of incest in a brave no-holds barred way. Pussyfooting around a subject like this would have been less effective and she faces her subject matter head-on in what is essentially a tragic family story.

While I didn't find the characters sympathetic I did find them compelling. The incest involves three generations of the same family - I wonder if there is any scientific evidence of genetic predisposition? I often felt uncomfortable reading it but LG is such a good writer that she carries you along.

This tale of forbidden love is set against a background where music, religion, acting, nature and gardening feature prominently and Gillard is knowledgeable on all of these.

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### **Lis says**

I think *A Lifetime Burning* is my favourite, and the best, of all Linda Gillard's books. It is certainly her most challenging, intense and exhausting.

The book is a family saga, so typical of the author, and there are shocking secrets within the family that affect many lives. The themes of the story are difficult but, because Linda Gillard is so good at developing her characters, the reader becomes emotionally involved and nothing is black and white. There are several very strong personalities among the family members and some of their behaviour borders on the outrageous, but we understand the reasons for their actions and judgement is hard.

The story moves backwards and forwards through time as it unfolds, partially narrated by one of the main characters. This style reflects real life, how the truth eventually comes out and incidents in the past finally make sense.

Again the author demonstrates her fine understanding of the human psyche and especially of the damaged mind.

Not an easy read but I highly recommend it.

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## Jane says

Where I got the book: this is one of those rare occasions where I requested a copy from the author because I became intrigued about her writing.

I've been mulling over whether to include spoilers or not, but I think I'll have to if I'm going to discuss the story properly. The blurb makes the novel sound like it's a family story and so it is, told in a non-linear style over a sixty-year period. It's the story of Flora Dunbar, her twin brother Rory, and their family through three generations, interestingly framed in a beyond-the-grave narration by Flora's—ghost? Tortured soul? There's a whole book club discussion in just that one point.

As children, Flora and Rory are emotionally close, to the point that separation causes them anguish. As they grow up Rory's extraordinary talent as a pianist takes him to places where Flora can't go. She marries Hugh, a widowed vicar (this is the early 1960s so Flora's view of her career options is excusably limited) while Rory marries Grace, a fellow musician.

Neither marriage is particularly happy. Flora and Rory's adult relationship is twisted and tormented by a physical attraction toward each other that is made apparent to the reader early on. Flora copes by drinking; Rory has his music; but you just KNOW where I'm going with this, don't you. Yep.

And this is where I have to say that I admire the way Linda Gillard deals with the subject of incest. All good novels have a "what-if?" at their core, and *A Lifetime Burning* asks: what if love—in all its manifestations, emotional and physical—is forbidden by morality, religion and law but still undeniably there? What does it do to the people involved? She flanks the story of Rory and Flora with two other instances of incest (the Dunbars are quite the close family) which have different outcomes, both equally bleak. And she handles the topic with grace: without glamorizing it, without condemning or condoning, with an understanding of the depth of love involved and the corresponding depth of pain.

I described this novel to a friend and she remarked that she wouldn't even read such a book because the subject-matter would make her feel as if she needed a shower. I understood her squeamishness: if *A Lifetime Burning* had glamorized the situation or tried to make it sexy or anything like that, I would have felt the same. But Gillard focuses on the consequences of Flora and Rory's obsessive relationship and its destructive nature; there's nothing glamorized about it. Sex is far from being the focus of the novel, although several of the characters crave a sexual relationship for the intimacy and warmth it brings. The one—memorable—sex scene that I recall is beautifully written to bring out Flora's role as the victim of her desires and Rory's as her tortured manipulator.

The writing is fantastic; Gillard is particularly good at dialogue and balances it beautifully with narrative scenes. Having recently read *Life After Life*, also a literary novel concerning a family told in a non-linear style, I couldn't help noticing that I cared a whole lot more about the characters in *A Lifetime Burning*—the emotion that I felt the much-touted litfic "best novel of the century" lacked was right here, in a novel that's every bit as good as Kate Atkinson's. I particularly liked Hugh, the still center of the novel who is, in the long run, able to deal with his own desires and emotions in a non-destructive way.

I do relish writers who tackle the hard stuff of life without making a big song and dance about it. I enjoyed this read very much and would recommend it to anyone who likes literary fiction and who appreciates that writers get to think the unthinkable so that we can experience the repercussions within the space of our own heads, with no harm to anyone.

## Femke says

This is the second book I read from this author. I absolutely loved the other book (House of silence), so I was curious to see what this book was like.

At first i wasn't so impressed. I always give a book 100 pages to convince me and if I don't like it after page 100, I can put it away and pick a new book. So around page 90 I was convinced this book would not make the cut. But than somewhere between page 90 and 100 things started to happen and I was completely hooked to the story.

The story entails the sad life of Flora, who always lived in the shadow of her twin brother Rory. It starts with a funeral and then semi-chronologically the life of Flora and her family is revealed. A very sad tale of love and loss, with some complicated family relations and history.

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## Jo says

A Lifetime Burning is an unsettling, haunting and emotional read about the different types of love within a close knit family. I will just say that due to the sensitive themes within the book, that it will not be for everyone, and to be honest, if I hadn't already read other books by Linda Gillard, I would have thought twice about reading this book. What we read is simply a woman's story about the men who played such powerful roles within her life, and who shaped the woman that she was to become. It is a beautiful story handled with great sensitivity.

We meet Flora Dunbar at the beginning of the book, as a spectre at her own funeral, and this instantly grabbed my attention. As a character, she truly captivated me, and I wanted to know what had happened to her in life, and the reason for her death. Her life was shaped by four men, her twin brother, her husband, her son, and the young nephew whom she had a brief affair with. Throughout the book, that stems from her early childhood that was somewhat eccentric and unorthodox, right through to the moment of her death, we learn why Flora is who she is.

Every single character is important within this novel. All impacted greatly upon Flora's life, all are flawed, and all unique. We have Rory, the twin brother, a talented musician who learned to play before he could talk. Flora is forever in his shadow. Here is a man whom I couldn't get to like, no matter how hard I tried, but who stayed with me long after I had finished reading the book. Then we have Flora's marriage to Hugh, a clergyman who is much older than her. She was very young when she married him, a widower, and from the very offset it is clear that the marriage is doomed. The exploration of Flora's relationship with her brother is what shapes every other single relationship that she has. I don't think I have ever read another book that explores the twin relationship in so much detail and intensity as this book. It is quite extraordinary to read. At its heart though is a tangled love story. Of a woman who was loved and who had much love to give.

But this is also a book that explores the relationship between women, of mother and daughter, and in particular that of Flora and Grace, her sister-in-law. This relationship was fascinating to read. Both women are bound together because of Rory, a forced bond that is exquisitely explored.

Flora though is the starring role. I felt great empathy towards this woman whose life was pretty much mapped out from birth. The descriptions of her life as a young mother to Theo were incredibly difficult for me to read. Here was a woman who clearly struggled with motherhood, who struggled to bond with her child, and my heart went out to her.

A Lifetime Burning is one of those books that tackles the darker realities of life with compassion, understanding and great sensitivity. What should be a somewhat difficult read is made to be a consuming and thought provoking one because of the great skill of this writer. It's an emotional read that fully engaged me. Flora and Rory will stay with me for a long time.

With thanks to the author who provided a paperback copy for review purposes.

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### **Kirsty says**

I really enjoyed Gillard's novel *Emotional Geology*, and purchased *A Lifetime Burning* on my Kindle sometime afterwards. I love immersive family sagas, and was pulled in immediately. There is such an intelligence and compassion to Gillard's prose, and I enjoyed the non-linear structure, which was effective in showing the depth and backgrounds of the characters.

Elements of the storyline, however, let the whole novel down for me. Some were frankly so unlikely that they felt ridiculous, which surprised me. I was very much enjoying the book up until the first bizarre twist came, but felt my interest in it waning somewhat. Despite being so well written, in some ways, *A Lifetime Burning* was really rather disappointing, and it has made me think twice about reading all of Gillard's oeuvre, which was my original plan.

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