

**Book-Group Discussion Prompts for *The Fiery Alphabet*  
prepared by Beth Castrodale of Small Press Picks**

1. What do the Catholic cardinal's comments to Daniela (see pages 12-13) say about how intellectually gifted women were regarded by church authorities at this point in history?
2. Now, consider Balsamo's entry into the story. What are the major differences between him and Daniela? Why is she so taken with him despite these differences and her growing awareness of his deceptions? In other words, what does Daniela get out of her relationship with Balsamo?
3. Balsamo claims that Daniela and her father have hidden away the writings of "the Spanish Hebrew ... a man of visions ... of secrets, knowledge of the unknowable" (page 21). He also says to Daniela, "This is the house he came to, and you are the last of his line." Do you think that Balsamo truly believes these claims, or is this just another con? How does Daniela respond to his claims?
4. What are the short- and long-term consequences of Balsamo's attempts to use his powers of alchemy on Don Michele (see pages 42-48)? Do you think that we are supposed to perceive these powers as real or as another of Balsamo's scams? Why?
5. Why does Daniela travel east? What does she seem to be seeking personally, intellectually, and otherwise?
6. Over the course of the novel, what new understandings about her mother, her grandmother, and her family's past does Daniela arrive at? What remains shrouded in mystery?
7. Daniela thinks of Fiammetta as someone who has been "familiar to me all my life, aloof and comforting, alien and mine" (page 146). What explains these seemingly contradictory emotions?
8. At various places—and especially toward the end of the novel—Daniela reflects on the limitations of words. For example, on page 260 she describes *eunuch* as "[a]nother word, fixed, like a natural thing, precluding questions." Later, on page 271, she observes: "We put names to material objects and define their outside forms. Then we put names to abstractions, and the name becomes the form, so that love or honor or truth can be grasped like a stick or a block, and we pile up the blocks. Without the names, we cannot build, but everything we build is a wall, a limitation, an affront to infinity and the spaciousness of the unnamed." Do you agree with her about the limitations of words? If so, are there any implications for what, say, novels or poems can achieve when compared with other forms of expression that are not based (or that are based only to a limited extent) on words? Consider, for example, films or visual art.

9. At the end of the book, Daniela once again retreats behind physical walls. How might she see these walls as different from those that confined her in her youth? What powers does she possess at the end of the book that might have eluded her at the beginning?

10. Why do you suppose the novel was titled *The Fiery Alphabet*? In particular, what significance do fire and the letters of the Hebrew alphabet seem to have to the story?

11. If given the opportunity, what questions would you ask Diane Lefer about *The Fiery Alphabet* or about her process of writing it?