

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Fires Burning

by

### Julie Lawson

### Book Information

Julie Lawson, Fires Burning  
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Chelsea, Beth, and Diggon play a dangerous game of their own making and are caught in a web of secrets that no one should have to keep.

**Award:** ALA Best Book for Young Adults; Manitoba Young Readers Choice Award/Nominee

**Topics:** Adventure, Danger; Canadian Content, Canadian Content (All); Mysteries, Murder; Mysteries, Secrets

### Main Characters

- Alison Tennison Chelsea's divorced mother, a former model, who lives with her boyfriend, Simon
- Beth Tennison a fifteen-year-old cousin of Chelsea who is uncertain about last summer's romance
- Carolyn and Rob Tennison Beth and Field's parents; Chelsea's aunt and uncle, who take care of her after her father's accident
- Chelsea Tennison a sixteen-year-old girl who plays with fire and withholds a dark secret she feels no one would believe
- Diggon a teenager tormented by his memory of watching his friends savagely beat a young boy
- Field Tennison Beth's ten-year-old brother, who enjoys teasing people
- Kawena Mark Tennison's Hawaiian housekeeper, who tells Chelsea the legends of Pele
- Mark Tennison Chelsea's divorced father, a famous photographer living in Hawaii, who has Chelsea come to live with him for the summer
- Simon Alison Tennison's boyfriend, who has molested Chelsea over the past seven years

### Vocabulary

**basin** a partially enclosed water area off an ocean or large lake

**claustrophobic** abnormally fearful of enclosed or narrow places

**deprived** not having the necessities of life or a healthful environment

**kelp** large brownish seaweed

**spit** a small point of land running out into a body of water

**tenuous** flimsy or thin

### Synopsis

After a seven-year separation, Chelsea Tennison is going to live in Hawaii with her father, Mark, a professional photographer, while her mother goes on vacation with her boyfriend, Simon. Chelsea harbors a dark secret about Simon that her mother refuses to believe. Chelsea's emotional problems are triggered by her parents' divorce and are aggravated by her secret. She responds by playing with fire. Her interest in fire increases when Kawena, her father's housekeeper, tells her about Pele, the Hawaiian goddess of fire. Three weeks later, her father is severely injured in a car accident. Chelsea is sent to live with her Uncle Rob and Aunt Carolyn Tennison in Victoria, Canada, while her father recuperates.

At the same time, in Vancouver, Canada, a teenage boy named Diggon frantically arrives home late after witnessing his friends beat up a young boy for no reason. Torn between his fear of arrest and his worry about the condition of the young boy, he runs away from home, blaming himself for not intervening. He arrives at his family's vacation home in Tidewater, where he thinks about his crime. He also wonders about his future relationship with Beth Tennison, whose family also has a summer home in Tidewater.

In Victoria, Uncle Rob and Aunt Carolyn receive the news of Rob's brother's accident and Chelsea's imminent arrival while preparing to take the family to their vacation cabin in Tidewater. Their fifteen-year-old daughter, Beth, and their ten-year-old son, Field, are unhappy about sharing their vacation with a cousin, especially since Beth is more concerned about her relationship with Diggon.

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Sixteen-year-old Chelsea is not what Beth had imagined. She is tall with long black hair and is very quiet. While Uncle Rob allows her to phone the hospital in Hawaii every morning, the children try to interest her in activities. Beth teaches her to row a boat, and along with Field, they explore a nearby island. When the boat accidentally floats away, Chelsea amazes her cousins with her swimming ability. The next day the girls make origami cranes after Beth explains about the Japanese legend of making one thousand cranes to get a wish granted.

That afternoon when the girls playfully leave Field stranded on the island, they are shocked to see him return and announce that Diggon, Beth's boyfriend, is back. Nervously anticipating the reunion with Diggon, Beth takes Chelsea into her confidence, telling her about the "danger game" of previous summers, which involved disobeying parental orders and going to Mystic Bay where, after swearing a secret blood oath, they dared each other to perform dangerous acts.

The next day, after leaving the rowboat at Diggon's landing, the four kids climb aboard his motorboat and head to Mystic Bay for adventure. Beth resents Chelsea's obsession with fire and her control of the boys. When Chelsea suggests an oath of fire, Beth refuses to participate but watches as Chelsea holds her finger in a match flame without showing any expression of pain. As the boys and Chelsea play a knife game, Beth alerts everyone to the dangerously high waves in the bay. When they attempt to return home, the motor on the boat fails, and they must return to the island to wait out the high winds.

They build a crude driftwood fort to shelter themselves, and around a small fire, the other three watch as Chelsea puts her hands directly into the flames. Beth feels Chelsea must be hiding something and dares everyone to tell their darkest secret. When Chelsea refuses, Beth teases her that playing with fire was the reason her mother sent her away. A little while later, while Field and Beth are looking for more wood, Diggon tells Chelsea his secret about watching the boy being beaten up, and

Chelsea opens up to Diggon about her horrible secret. As Diggon holds Chelsea to comfort her, they are interrupted by Beth who runs away in a jealous rage. When Diggon finds her a short while later, they return to find Chelsea watching Field trapped inside a circle of fire. Pulling Field from the flames, Beth decides they must try to hike to Diggon's cabin.

When they arrive, Diggon confesses that his parents are not aware he is there, so Beth and Chelsea attempt to row home. Fortunately, as their boat is about to capsize, Beth's father finds them and tows the boat to shore. Back at the cabin, Beth's father tells Diggon his parents are on their way to get him and that Chelsea's mother and new husband, Simon, are also arriving shortly to take Chelsea back home.

The next morning, Beth's parents explain the danger of the children's actions and punish them by having Diggon and Field paint the boat while Chelsea and Beth pick blackberries. During their punishments, Diggon tells Field what happened with the young boy, and Beth tells Chelsea about her feelings for Diggon.

As they return to the cabin, Chelsea spots Simon's car in the driveway and tells Beth to go back alone while she goes to the beach. When Simon wants to leave, Beth finds Chelsea pouring paint thinner on herself. As Beth stops her from lighting herself on fire, Chelsea breaks down and tells Beth all about Simon, his touching game, and her mother's unwillingness to believe her. Beth convinces Chelsea to tell her mother again and then remain with her uncle and aunt. Diggon calls his parents and realizes his father will support him when he goes to the police. Later, Uncle Rob assures Chelsea they will help her in going to the police with her secret. Some time later, with her father out of the hospital, Chelsea returns to Hawaii ready to tell her father about the past and hopefully put out all the fires burning inside her.

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### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

#### Initial Understanding

Why does Diggon go to his family's cabin to hide?

*Diggon is afraid and confused, so he returns to the cabin because the cabin is a place where he has good memories. He may also want to see Beth and Field again. Even though he feels his parents do not understand him, deep down he knows that the cabin is one place they would be sure to eventually look for him.*

#### Literary Analysis

The reader knows the thoughts and feelings of the three characters who change in the story. How do Beth, Diggon, and Chelsea change?

*Beth matures in her relationships towards others. She understands more of the dangers of actions and tries to think problems through to come up with solutions. She also stands up for her beliefs even when the others think she is just scared. Diggon realizes that he must stand up for what he feels is right even if it means having to be punished for his actions. He calls his parents knowing that they will be angry but also finds that he has more support from his father than he originally thought. Chelsea learns to trust people to believe her and ask for help rather than keep her feelings inside. She realizes that to control the situation she has to let others know about it.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

Why might Chelsea's mother, Alison, refuse to believe Chelsea's accusations about Simon?

*Alison loves Simon, and when people are in love they do not always see the bad in the other person. Also, after a divorce, children sometimes do not want their parents to become involved with another person. Or Alison might think that Chelsea made up the story just because she did not like Simon.*

### Constructing Meaning

Diggon says he goes to the bay "because you see things differently there." What does he mean?

*At Mystic Bay, Diggon remembers how carefree life was during the past summers. He thinks he can forget all about his problems at the bay. Playing the danger game at the bay, the children make all their own decisions and feel they have control over their lives.*

### Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** Chelsea is surprised by the landscape of Hawaii. Have the students research Hawaii and give reports on the various islands, customs, people, climate, or interesting features of this state.

**Making Predictions** Both Chelsea and Diggon have hard decisions ahead when they talk to the police. Have students write a short paragraph about what might happen to one of these characters when they tell their secrets.

**Describing Actions or Events** Beth and Chelsea make origami cranes in response to the Japanese belief that making a thousand paper cranes helps wishes come true. Invite someone to teach the class how to do origami and then display the students' creations around the classroom.

**Responding to Literature** The Hawaiian legend of the fire goddess, Pele, is one way to explain the eruption of a volcano. The story of the raven stealing fire from a snowy owl is another myth which explains why deer have short tails. Have the students create a short myth of their own to explain something in nature and ask volunteers to read theirs to the class.