Kate Riley is not the sort of heroine we meet in most American novels. Self-centered, shape-shifting, driven from one man to another and one city to the next, she is all too real—but not at all the loyal and steady homebody of idealized womanhood. When we first encounter her, Kate (or Katherine, or Kate of the Prairie, or Katrina) is about to undergo exploratory brain surgery for a condition she herself has fabricated. Sobered by the gravity of the procedure, she commences a journey of memory that takes us back to the Saskatchewan village where she grew up and to the singular event that altered her forever and irrevocably set the course of her life. From her childhood, in which she was held captive to a mother gone mad, through her adult life, which unfolds as a mesmerizing sequence of men, abandoned children, and perpetual movement, Kate’s story is one of desperation and remarkable invention, a strangely American tale, brilliantly narrated by one of our most original writers. (20070413)

My Personal Review:
This is my review from NewWest:
www.newwest.net/main/article/lynn_stegners_because_a_fire_was_in_my_head/

Despite a slow beginning and a ragged ending, Santa Fe-based writer Lynn Stegner’s new novel, Because a Fire Was in My Head, is an engrossing, satisfying tale. Over the course of the book, Kate Riley, the self-absorbed anti-heroine, travels through six decades, three countries, two marriages (one that lasts only a day), four children, and never really seems to learn that much. An Irish-Catholic girl raised in the Saskatchewan prairies in the 1930s, Kate comes from a place where survival was more admirable than success. Through her various incarnations and homes, Kate survives, and does it a memorable way.

In her characterization of Kate, Stegner avoids stereotypes of loving mothers and martyr women, but almost veers too much in the opposite
direction. Kate is selfish, and complex. During the 1950s, an era known for perfect housewives, Kate avoids tending her baby and purposely contracts the flu so she wont have to breastfeed. Her wealthy and much older hotelier husband begs her to stay home and raise their son, but Kate pursues an accounts clerk position at a prominent bank and takes trips with her friends. With her long red hair and legs that dont quit, Kate also keeps a corral of afternoon men. Her actions are simultaneously inspiring and horrifying. Fortunately, readers dont have to like misbehaving characters, we just have to be fascinated by them, and Kate Riley is fascinating.

The single moment that changed Kates life was her beloved fathers death to pancreatic cancer. Kate was young and her mother would have preferred the death of another child to the death of her husband. Fiona Riley does not engage in physical abuse, but her competitiveness and inability to forgive Kate for surviving while her husband died is chilling. Kate hardly existed to this woman except for when she became ill. In those moments, her mother, a nurse, gives Kate attention, although the detached treatment is the same as that Fionas patients receive. This terrible mother/daughter relationship (and Fionas presence is felt throughout the book), along with Kates childish cluelessness about how her behavior affects other people, helps to make Kate and her awful actions bearable. She changes from an innocent girl leaving the prairie to a woman who begins to mirror her mother in sad, frightening ways, while creating some of her own unique dysfunctions. In her wake she leaves behind a paralyzed man, a drug addicted son, and baffled friends.

Her many men, some good, some bad, were like deposits in a bank account, there to draw upon when she found herself at a loss. In a terrible selfish moment, when Kates sons life is endangered during one of her trysts, Stegner uses enough mystery to keep us hanging and enough misery for Kate to keep us reading. Kate is never truly penitent, she is too self-absorbed to realize the effects of her actions, but she does suffer. Whenever she abandons one of her children, the reader feels immense relief. One of her former husbands calls her the maternal heart of darkness. But really, her heart isnt dark, its just lacking. A woman who adopts one of Kates sons demands, Why dont you go get yourself sterilized? The reader cant help but agree. Instead, Kate goes on to have another child. Its like watching a horror movie you cant turn away from.

Even though Kate treats her children worse than some people treat their pets, other characters keep emerging to treat Kate poorly as well, somehow evening the playing field. Throughout her various relationships, Kate manages the lows of her life with fake illnesses and myriad suicide attempts. She is a hypochondriac who details her various illnesses in her numerous journals. Kate even goes in for exploratory brain surgery she knows she doesnt need. She had many quiet lonely bedside interludes beneath a cone of lamplight during which shed had to note with religious devotion the conditions of her body, to care for it because there was no
one else who cared enough or properly. Impressively, and this is a testament to Stegner's ability as a writer, it's hard not to feel for Kate and her victims as she bumps along in her terrible predicaments. The reader longs to find out what will happen next.

Because a Fire Was in My Head is not about living well, but simply living. The vast prairie that Kate comes from is a place where you had to hold your head up and survey your prospects among what was available, and even if much of it seemed to be debris from old ships that had run aground, something passable might be salvaged, patched together, made to work again. Being able to survive among harsh people and landscapes is no small feat. In this, we could all learn a little something from Kate Riley.

Lynn Stegner directs the Santa Fe Writers Workshop and two of her previous novels were nominated for the National Book Award. The manuscript for Because a Fire Was in My Head won the William Faulkner-William Wisdom Award for Best Novel of 2005 and its easy to see why. Stegner is a confident, elegant writer. Her last name will ring a bell for many readers, as she is married to Wallace Stegner's son, Page. With the talent she has on display in Because a Fire Was in My Head, I'm sure the Stegners are happy to claim her as one of their own.

For More 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price:
Because a Fire Was in My Head (Flyover Fiction) - 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!