



Reading Group Discussion Guide for

FIREPROOF

By **CURTIS DUFFY** with **JEREMY WAGNER**

*This reading group guide for **Fireproof** includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Curtis Duffy. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

INTRODUCTION

With rare intensity and candor, world-renowned, Michelin-starred Chef Curtis Duffy shares his epic journey from child of an outlaw biker father to famed culinary iconoclast.

Fans of no holds-barred stories such as Motley Crue's *The Dirt*, memoirs by celebrity chefs, and brutally honest personal memoirs will love this raw and inspiring true story of Duffy's rise from a chaotic childhood in rural Ohio to being mentored by and recognized among the world's top chefs. Duffy's path was meteoric, but not without significant setbacks and sacrifices: from the groundbreaking Charlie Trotter's kitchen to his first Michelin stars at Avenues, to launching—and eventually making the heartbreaking decision to leave—Grace restaurant, to rising again with Ever restaurant amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Duffy persisted where many others would have resigned their craft, and his story is one of determination, grit, passion, and an unending drive for excellence.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How familiar were you with Chef Curtis Duffy before picking up this book? What made you interested in reading his story?
2. What were your first impressions of Duffy's parents, Bear and Jan? How did your impressions of Duffy's parents and the larger Duffy clan change as you learned more about Chef Curtis Duffy's upbringing?
3. Why do you think Duffy was so determined to get out of Ohio? Do you think there was a particular moment that crystallized his desire to leave? Which moment, and why?
4. Duffy writes: "I'll go to my own grave wondering what [Bear] would've said—and whether I perhaps could've convinced him to peacefully abandon his madness" (p. 82). How do you think you might have reacted if you were in Duffy's shoes during the tragic events of September 1994? In your opinion, how was Duffy able to move forward after these events?
5. Despite the abuse Duffy experienced growing up, he holds his parents in high esteem. How do we see Duffy honor his parents throughout the book? What do Bear and Jan mean to him, despite their shortcomings?
6. From childhood and Duffy's early years in Chicago, to *For Grace* and *Ever*, how do we see Duffy taking control of his own story? Why is it important to him to control the narrative of his own life?
7. What does Duffy learn from Charlie Trotter about food and flavor? What does he learn about being an executive chef and mentor?
8. How is Duffy affected by early success at Avenues? How does this inform and shape his views on the cult of celebrity and celebrity chefs?
9. "Dreams of a third Michelin star danced in my head," Duffy writes of the days before *Grace* opened its doors (p. 142). What does the pursuit of greatness mean to Duffy? How

do we see that through his trajectory with Guide Michelin, among other awards?

10. Consider the juxtaposition of the expense and lavishness of fine dining and Duffy's "dirt poor" upbringing in Ohio. What does it mean to Duffy to be able to spare no expense to execute his vision for Grace, and later, for Ever and After?
11. How did you react to Dolos's increasing treachery? How would you have responded to the lawsuits and hostile work environment if you were Duffy or Michael Muser?
12. What does the loss of Grace mean to Duffy? Was it worth it, in your opinion?
13. How did Duffy shape his philosophy about food and recipes? What stood out to you the most as he writes about his process?
14. Who are the partners, colleagues, mentors that help Duffy along the way? Who do you think is most influential in Duffy's life?
15. What sacrifices does Duffy make in his pursuit of excellence? How does this affect him and his worldview in the long run? How does he learn from his early sacrifices?
16. Compare how Duffy handles the stress, sacrifices, and pressure of maintaining a multiple-Michelin starred restaurant to how we hear about other chefs in the same position. How does Duffy maintain his balance? What is his "north star" among all the pressure?



Photo Credit: MXML

A CONVERSATION WITH CURTIS DUFFY AND JEREMY WAGNER

JEREMY: When we were working on *Fireproof*, you weren't shy in sharing your life story with brutal honesty and revealing the good, the bad, and the ugly in your memoir, which is often rare in most memoirs, unfortunately. How important was it to you to be brutally honest in your life story?

CURTIS: Honesty is the only way to go. For me, it was a way to almost relive some of the stories in the book in a way that was just a very therapeutic process, and to be able to not sugarcoat anything. And again, just be 100 percent brutally honest with reliving those stories and telling myself, and sometimes it actually surprised me by jotting memories back to when those stories came about. They would spark other things that maybe I hadn't remembered or shoved down as a child or shut down as an adult, and I just forget. It was definitely a way for me to have a huge therapy session, if you will.

From doing 60 hours of interviews with you, it was therapeutic and cathartic during that process. It's just a matter of also having a great interviewer to probe those questions that you just don't even think about anymore and being able to dig deeper. And then, like I said, it

sparks all kinds of crazy thoughts and memories. And then it's just about me — what do I want to share with the world and what do I want to keep hold of something that's super close?

JEREMY: Relevant to your brutally honest memoir, *Fireproof*, what do you hope readers will take away from you bearing your soul throughout *Fireproof* when they get to the end? From the beginning to the end, what would you hope readers take away from your life story?

CURTIS: A lot of it has to do with being resilient. Everybody's dealt a shitty hand at some point in their life, and everybody's dealt with different things in their life they have to overcome and overcome adversity. And that's life. Everyone can relate to that.

I think at the end of the day for me it's like, we have two options as we go through life. One, we can be the victim, or, we can take that victim mentality and turn it into something successful. I chose to do the latter. I was dealt a shitty hand, but I'm not the only one in the world that was dealt a shitty hand.

So, do I sit around and pity myself for it the rest of my life? No. Let's take this opportunity and learn from it, grow from it, and use it as fuel to help facilitate my passions in life and push them towards my success in life. I hope people who read this book can see that, can feel it, and can learn from it and maybe take some inspiration from it and do the same.

JEREMY: Whether you're working at a restaurant, owning a restaurant, or visiting other restaurants either as a VIP or just a casual diner, can you share what you can recall would be the craziest thing or things you've ever seen happen in any restaurant?

CURTIS: Oh my God. Let me think. I haven't seen someone punching out a maître d' or whatever. I've seen full blown alcoholics that have worked for me standing up sleeping against the wall at eight in the morning. I've been in Hong Kong in restaurants where they're washing the dishes literally in the bathtub — in the bathtub of someone's home, right beside the urinal! I saw that *after* I finished eating, and I was so appalled by it. I couldn't fathom the fact that I just ate food from dishes that were washed in the bathtub right beside the toilet and urinal. I mean, inches away.

Like, if you've ever traveled to Hong Kong, the apartments are incredibly small. So, I went to what they call an "underground dinner," where people can't afford restaurant spaces, so they'll rent an apartment and turn it into a small restaurant. And they'll feed 10, 20, 30 people a night, but it's by invitation only.

I had traveled to Hong Kong and gotten invited to an underground dinner. I thought it was interesting. I sat down and had the meal. And then towards the end of the meal I used the bathroom and there you go — they're washing dishes in the bathtub. And the toilet was right there. So, had I known that (beforehand) I probably would have just left. I would have *never* even eaten. I mean, *that* was just so crazy to me.

On the flip side of it, I get it. I understand you do what you have to do to feel that passion — and maybe that’s the only way that they could do what they want to do (be a chef, have a restaurant). But doing it that way wouldn’t be my first choice.

JEREMY: How did you first hear of *The Bear*?

CURTIS: In the first season of *The Bear*, they actually used Grace in a few of their episodes. I actually didn’t watch *The Bear* the first season because like, what do you want to do when you go home? Be surrounded by more restaurant drama? Like, no thanks!

So, I didn’t watch it, but then somebody said, “Oh, I noticed they filmed at Grace for *The Bear*.” I’m like, what?

I went and watched the first season, and I think it’s Episode 2 — when they filmed that scene with Joel McHale yelling at Jeremy Allen White in his ear, saying, “*You’re not good enough, you’re bullshit, you’re garbage!*” All of that was filmed at Grace. So I’m like, *that’s very interesting*. And obviously that was filmed after we had closed Grace restaurant and moved on.

Grace was an empty space by the time *The Bear* was filmed there in Season One — it wasn’t an operating restaurant. I remember my chef Justin Selk going back to the old Grace space and saying that they would try and open the custom oven there... It was just stuck shut and was full of grease and shit, just so gross and filthy. Justin sent me photos of a big hole in the middle of the dining room going to the bottom of the basement. What a shame the former owner let that place go to hell — it was a work of art, that place. Anyway, they filmed the first season of *The Bear* there and then later, we all know that *The Bear* came to Ever restaurant and filmed a lot of content there in seasons 1 and 2.

JEREMY: Do you find it ironic that the TV series is called *The Bear*, and that happened to be your dad’s main nickname? Bear Duffy. Robert “Bear” Duffy. Were the directors or filmmakers aware that that was your father’s nickname at all and do you think that *The Bear* is based on your storyline as there’s many similarities on different levels of the TV series and *Fireproof*?

CURTIS: I thought it was pretty ironic. I don’t think it was a connection, but a lot of people out there will pinpoint five or 10 different very close, similar themes in my life that have also happened on *The Bear*. But I don’t think the TV series name had anything to do with my father, of course. That certainly was not my story. That was not my storyline. But a lot of people say that, but it never was. I think it’s just because I was in the restaurant industry. There’s a lot of similar stories. You can probably relate that to everybody in the industry to some degree.

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. There are several television shows and films mentioned in *Fireproof*. Either solo or with your book club, watch *For Grace* (available for rent or purchase on Prime, Apple TV, among others) before your book club discussion for a look into a different part of Duffy's life over ten years before the writing of *Fireproof*. Discuss as a group: how has Duffy's outlook changed over time, from what you saw in the documentary vs. read in the book?
2. For a true double-feature, watch *The Menu* (Hulu, Prime, Apple TV) for a comical and over-the-top take on fine dining. Do you see any reflections of Duffy's world in this satirical film?
3. Duffy wanted blood-red countertops at Ever, a dream that didn't come to pass as "practicality must surpass fantasy" (p. 256). In a dream world, how would you customize your own kitchen to fit your style and personality? Share your fantasy kitchen with your book club.
4. Create your own recipes using the freshest in-season ingredients you can find and share with your book club. A la Chef Curtis Duffy's ingredient-forward style, try to limit yourself to 3-5 components of the highest quality you can manage.
5. Take it up a notch with one of Duffy's own recipes for a classic risotto, shared here with the Escoffier school. <https://www.escoffier.edu/blog/recipes/making-a-classic-risotto-with-chef-curtis-duffy/>