

## Prize for the Fire

**Rilla Askew**

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Rilla Askew's historical novel *Prize for the Fire* is the tragic, passionate story of an Englishwoman who lived during the reign of Henry VIII.

In 1537, Martha faces an arranged marriage. But her sudden death leaves a void in the arrangement, and her sister, fifteen-year-old Anne, is offered in her stead. Anne's family wants to preserve their good name—and avoid returning the money paid by Martha's intended, Thomas.

Abusive and controlling, Thomas keeps his “gloved hand clamped” on Anne's neck in public, while beating her for “insolence” behind closed doors. Though she tries to run away, she is forced to return to Thomas and bear two sons. When Thomas breaks Anne's jaw, her brother, Francis, is outraged. Francis is also troubled, however, by Anne's unrealistic wish to obtain an annulment.

Anne refuses to accept her husband's cruelty or his Catholic faith. She is a Protestant reformist who does not believe in purgatory, confession, or the consecrated host. Even Anne's maid, who is devoted to her mistress, cannot comprehend her Protestant convictions. Furthermore, Anne's insistence upon reciting scripture aloud violates a law of Parliament that forbids women from reading or discussing the Bible. She faces heresy charges later on, though the novel avoids sensationalizing the horrors of her martyrdom.

In the background of Anne's story is King Henry's mercurial monarchy: he beheads his wives and fosters a climate of suspicion, betrayal, and persecution. Fears of the plague and poverty contrast with the sumptuousness of the royal court, where the elegant queen and her ladies preside in an arrangement of “jewelled colours.”

With poise and restraint, the historical novel *Prize for the Fire* tells the brilliant, multifaceted story of an intelligent, virtuous, and indomitable woman.

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