between shades of gray

RUTA SEPETYS
# Table of Contents

Summary ........................................... 3
Themes for Discussion ..................... 4
Official Discussion Questions .......... 5
Additional Discussion Questions ....... 7
Author Biography ............................. 10
Awards ............................................. 11
Summary
from www.betweenshadesofgray.com

In 1941 Lithuania, fifteen-year-old Lina is preparing for art school, first dates, and all that summer has to offer. But one night, the Soviet secret police barge violently into her home, deporting her along with her mother and younger brother. They are being sent to Siberia. Lina's father has been separated from the family and sentenced to death in a prison camp. All is lost.

Lina fights for her life, fearless, vowing that if she survives she will honor her family, and the thousands like hers, by documenting their experience in her art and writing. She risks everything to use her art as messages, hoping they will make their way to her father's prison camp to let him know they are still alive.

It is a long and harrowing journey, and it is only their incredible strength, love, and hope that pull Lina and her family through each day. But will love be enough to keep them alive?

*Between Shades of Gray* is a riveting novel that steals your breath, captures your heart, and reveals the miraculous nature of the human spirit.
Themes for Discussion
From www.betweenshadesofgray.com/bookclubs.php

The story of the Baltic people's genocide is a relatively unknown but important event in world history. Discuss why such an event could have so little awareness.

Meticulous research is revealed in the vivid details providing many moments for discussion throughout the novel.

Themes of survival, sadness, hope and oppression provide clear topics for review.

The simple and eloquent voice of the narrator, as well as flashbacks to life before Stalin's invasion, allow readers an intimate portrait of the characters and proves an interesting topic for exploration.

The combination of the author's personal connection and the history promote discussion between personal feelings and response to the story itself.

Readers can compare the story and themes found in Between Shades of Gray with that of the universally known The Diary of Anne Frank, including the distinctive qualities of each book, the use of art and journal to reveal history, and the settings.
1. As the novel opens, Lina explains that though the signs were in place, she has little understanding that her parents had planned to attempt to escape Lithuania. What can be inferred about her understanding of the political climate in her country? Do you think her surprise is a typical reaction for a teen? Why or why not?

2. Lina’s mother remains clam throughout the roundup for her family; how does her family benefit from this?

3. When Jonas observes his mother smashing her beloved china and crystal before they depart their home, he asks her why she is destroying these items. She replies, “Because I love them so much” (p 18). Do you consider this an act of rebellion? In your opinion, is her reaction appropriate? In what ways is she trying to control the situation?

4. As Linda’s family is placed in the truck to take them to the trains, they meet the bald man who proclaims loudly, “We’re all going to die. We will surely die” (p. 22). How does his presence affect the other prisoners? Consider and explain how Lina and her mother react to his rants. In what ways is Elena (Lina’s mother) sympathetic to his condition?

5. Using textual examples, what are some of the specific ways Lina’s mother chooses to fight back against the NKVD?

6. Being held prisoner on the train brings out the best and worst in some of the inhabitants. Consider and discuss some of the ways that individual extend their assistance and support. How do their choices differ from those who are most unkind to others?

7. Lina unflinchingly shares the nature of the condition in which she and the other prisoners are forced to live. What feelings does this candor evoke in you?

8. How does the author use the embedded flashbacks to help readers understand why Lina’s family has been rounded up for punishment? Do you agree with the family’s choices? Why or why not?

9. Though readers mostly learn about Kostas, Lina’s father, through her shared memories, a great deal can be understood about his character. In your opinion, what kind of man is he? Is he a good father? Use textual evidence to make your case.

10. Why does Elena pretend she doesn’t know her cousin Regina? What is she trying to accomplish? What can be gleaned about Elena from this encounter?

11. Though Ona’s baby is a newborn, she is still considered an enemy of the state due to the actions of her father. What can be understood about the government’s policy?

12. Upon arriving at the country train depot, the NKVD officers begin sorting the prisoners, and Lina asks, “Have you ever wondered what a human life is worth? That morning, my
brother’s was worth a pocket watch” (p. 35). How does this realization change Lina? In what ways does Lina better understand her mother’s actions and motivations?

13. After Jonas is selected to be separated from his mother and sister, their mother is able to use her language skills and quick wit. What are some of the specific things she does to secure his safety?

14. Discuss the character traits that allow Lina, Jonas, and Andrius to ultimately persevere. How are these characters similar to each other? In what ways are they different? Which character are you most like?

15. Throughout the novel, Lina uses her passion for her art to remain connected to her family and the outside world. What are some of the specific ways she does this?

16. What role does Andrius play in the story? In what ways is he a catalyst for the choices made by Lina and Jonas?

17. Consider the consequences for not signing the documents which charge the prisoners of counterrevolutionary activities against the Soviet Union. Does Lina’s family make the right decision by refusing to “confess” these transgressions? Why or why not?

18. Though Lina believe that Andrius and his mother are supplying information to the NKVD officers in exchange for food and shelter, she eventually learns that the arrangement comes at a great cost to his family. How does this knowledge of the lengths his mother goes in order to keep him safe ultimately affect him? How does Lina’s understanding of these sacrifices reshape her perception of him? His mother?

19. Throughout the novel, the bald man is cast as an unsympathetic character. How do his random acts of kindness help portray him as more than one dimensional? Cite specific instances from the story where you find evidence of this. Why might the author choose to include these examples?

20. Using the phrase “This is a story about...,” supply five words to describe Between Shades of Gray. Explain your choices.
Additional Discussion Questions
Written by Gretchen Kolderup

1. If you had twenty minutes to pack one suitcase while the Soviets watched, what would you bring with you? Why would you choose those items?

2. When Lina and everyone else on the train are finally taken off and allowed to rest in a field, they outnumber the guards. Why don’t they try to fight back?

3. Did Lina's mother make the right decision when she refused to translate and spy for the Soviets at the work camp?

4. What keeps Lina from signing the documents condemning her to 25 years of hard labor?

5. Why does Lina's mother give her food to the bald man and Ulyushka and treat them kindly even though they're mean to her and her children?

6. Why does the author go back and forth between the present-day story and flashbacks to Lina's life before her deportation?

7. What art would you send if you were Lina?

8. On page 240, it says, “Stalin’s psychology of terror seemed to rely on never knowing what to expect.” How do you think this uncertainty affected those who were in the camps? What do you think was Stalin’s intention in creating uncertainty?

9. They don't include illustrations of any of Lina's drawings. Do you wish they had? Why do you think they didn't?

10. What things did you encounter in this book that you didn't know before you read it? What in this book was unfamiliar to you?

11. The man who wound his watch and the repeater aren't referred to by their names even though Lina knows them. Why?

12. Joana made it safely out of the country, but did so at Lina's expense. Was this fair?

13. After Lina’s mother’s death, the bald man explains why he has arrested and says, “Surely, my survival is my punishment. That has to be it...I’ve wished for death since the first day, and yet I survive. Can it really be so hard to die?” (p. 318). Lina wonders if it is harder to die or to be the one who survives (p. 319). Which do you think is harder?
14. When Lina goes to steal wood and Kretzsky sees her, why is she kind to him? (p.323-327)

15. How is what happened in this story similar and different to Nazi concentration camps?

16. Edvard Munch’s artwork is mentioned many times in the novel, as Lina is fascinated by his work (p. 197). She describes his style saying, “He didn’t care about proportion, he wanted it to feel real” and says of his painting *Ashes*, “Sorrow, crying, and withering. I saw that in *Ashes*, too. I thought it was brilliant” (p. 295). She also quotes Munch as saying, “‘From my rotting body flowers shall grow, and I am in them and that is eternity.’ Isn’t that beautiful?” (p. 309). Why do you think Lina is so drawn to Munch’s painting? In what ways could Lina’s story be reflected in Munch’s paintings and his words?
The Scream

Ashes
Brief Autobiography

A bit about me...
I was born and raised in Michigan, the youngest of three, in a family of artists, readers, and music lovers. I grew up in a mid-century modern neighborhood full of creative characters and told anyone who would listen that I was going to marry Roald Dahl. I attended public schools with gray tile floors and had amazing teachers who inspired me. I then went off to college to study opera but changed gears, majored in International Finance, and lived in Europe. While in Paris I decided I wanted to live my life as a pretentious bon vivant so two weeks after graduation I moved to Los Angeles and began working in the music industry. For thirteen years I survived the earthquakes, the fires, the smog, and polished my defensive driving skills on the 405. Then one Friday, while staring at a package of hot dogs in the grocery, I had an epiphany that I needed to move to Tennessee. So I did.

Although I continued my music work in Tennessee, the beautiful scenery and pace of life allowed me to slow down, take a breath, and read even more. I contemplated becoming a hermit in the woods behind the library but was quickly reminded by my parents that I was in grave danger of becoming a dowdy old maid with no one to discuss books or music with. Since Roald Dahl had inconveniently kicked the bucket, I decided I needed to find a beautiful boy and get married. So I did.

In addition to music and writing, I enjoy teaching at the university, collecting eccentric art, and pondering life's mysteries over long meals with my friends and family. I have a passionate love for paper and vintage ephemera. I'm quite good at crying, dancing like a strumpet, laughing too loud, and traveling. In my travels, I have visited 41 countries on six continents. My adventures have inspired dozens of stories and seeing that I am fond of both sitting and being melodramatic, my husband suggested I write a novel. So I did.

“Between Shades of Gray” is my first published novel and was inspired by my father who escaped from Lithuania when he was a young boy. I cried a lot while writing the book and will probably get teary discussing it with you. I am intensely proud to be Lithuanian, even if that means I have a name no one can pronounce. So that's a bit about me. A lovely librarian emailed me for information and suggested I write a bio. So I did.

Thank you for reading it.
Awards

- A New York Times Bestseller
- An International Bestseller
- A Carnegie Medal Nominee
- A William C. Morris Finalist
- A New York Times Notable Book
- A Wall Street Journal Best Children’s Book
- Winner of The Golden Kite Award for Fiction
- An ALA Notable Book
- A Publishers Weekly Best Children’s Book of 2011
- YALSA’S Top 10 Best Fiction For Young Adults
- A School Library Journal Best Book of 2011
- A Booklist Best Book of 2011
- A Kirkus Best Book of 2011
- iTunes Best Teen Novel of 2011
- A Junior Library Guild Selection
- Notable Books For a Global Society Award
- An Indies Choice Book Awards Finalist
- IRA Children’s and Young Adult’s Book Award
- Winner of the Prix RTL Lire For Best Novel For Young People in France
- Amazon UK Top Ten Books of 2011
- Amazon Top Ten Teen Books of 2011
- A CYBILS Finalist for 2011
- National Blue Ribbon Selection by Book of the Month Club
- A Waterstones Children’s Book Prize Nominee in the UK
- A St. Louis Post Dispatch Best Book of 2011
- A Columbus Dispatch Best Book of 2011
- A ‘Best Breakthrough Author’ Nominee for the Penguin Teen Australia Awards
- Shortlisted for the Lewisham Book Award in the UK
- ‘Der Leserpreis’ Readers Choice Finalist in Germany
- Winner of the SCBWI Work-in-Progress Grant
- Texas Lone Star Reading List
- Tayshas High School Reading List in Texas
- Capitol Choices Noteworthy Books for Children & Teens
- Chicago Public Library Best of the Best Fiction for Teens
- Nevada Young Readers’ Award Nominee
- Grand Canyon Reader Award Nominee