

- The Soviet gulag system is one of the most notorious prison systems in history, and considerable historical evidence indicates that it claimed tens of millions of lives. Divide students into groups to investigate the elements of the gulag system:
  - a. *Siberia & the Geography of the Gulag*: investigate Siberia's historical role as a region of exclusion for Russia. Examine maps of the gulag network, and develop a rationale for the placement, movement, and purpose of the camps (which had a labor as well as an incarceration function). Compare the locations of the camps to a population density map of the Soviet Union over time.
  - b. *The Gulag in Literature*: examine excerpts from texts such as *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, *The Gulag Archipelago*, *Kolyma Tales*, *Everything I Possess I Carry With Me*, and *In The First Circle*. Compare the representations of the gulag and prison life in these works.
  - c. *Gulag Prisoners*: whether sent to prison by the tsars or the communist dictators, prisoners in the gulag like Lina and her family were often not typical violators of the law. Investigate the groups targeted for imprisonment in Siberia over the course of Russian history, who were often jailed for religious, ethnic, intellectual, or political affiliations.
- Assign students with the task of creating “A Brief History of Lithuania,” emphasizing the region’s role as a cultural crossroads as they do so. Assign student groups a time period to investigate (a century per group should be sufficient). Groups may develop presentations of their era to present to the class, or members of each group can come together in a jigsaw activity to discuss their time frame.
- *Between Shades of Gray* provides a unique perspective on the concept of family. Instruct individual students, student pairs, or student groups to develop a comparison of the treatment of the concept of family in the novel. This can be done as a short graphic organizer activity (e.g., a Venn diagram or double-bubble Thinking Map), or as a more elaborate activity such as an essay.
- Discuss the concept behind the phrase “shades of gray” with students. Assign students to write their assessment of the choice of this title for the novel.
- Have students research the life and works of the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch, and of the Symbolist and Expressionist movements with which he is associated. Develop presentations that utilize his works to illustrate these elements and to relate them to the novel. For greater enrichment, have them compare their assessments to the Socialist Realist movement that dominated Soviet art in the Stalinist era.

\* Questions align with the national English and Social Studies core curriculum standards.

## Recommended Resources

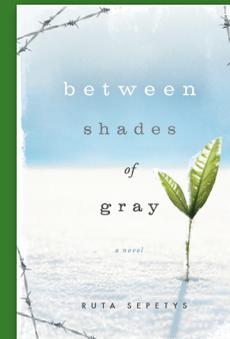
### Internet

- Memorial: International Historical-Enlightenment Human Rights & Humanitarian Society (<http://www.memo.ru/eng/index.htm>)
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum—Resources for Educators (<http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/>)
- Genocide Watch (<http://www.genocidewatch.org/>)
- Southern Law Poverty Center Teaching Tolerance Project (<http://www.tolerance.org/teach/?source=redirect&url=teachingtolerance>)
- Amnesty International (<http://www.amnesty.org/>)
- ESRC Mapping the Gulag Project (<http://www.gulagmaps.org/>)
- Gulag: Soviet Forced Labor Camps and the Struggle for Freedom (<http://gulaghistory.org/nps/>)
- “Lithuanian Children in the Gulag: Deportations, Ethnicity, & Identity Memoirs, 1941-52” ([http://www.lituanus.org/2005/05\\_3\\_2Balkelis.htm](http://www.lituanus.org/2005/05_3_2Balkelis.htm))
- EdvardMunch.com (<http://www.edvardmunch.com/>)

### Books

- Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (Abridged), Harper Perennial, 2007.
- Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Signet Classics, 1998.
- Solzhenitsyn, *In the First Circle*, Harper Perennial, 2009.
- Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, Penguin Classics, 1999.
- Herta Müller, *Everything I Possess I Carry With Me*, Books LLC, 2010.
- Vasily Grossman, *Everything Flows*, NYRB Classics, 2009.
- Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*, Metropolitan Press, 2007.
- Norman Naimark, *Stalin's Genocides*, Princeton U. Press, 2010.

Have you ever wondered what  
a human life is worth?  
That morning, my brother's was worth  
a pocket watch.



### BETWEEN SHADES OF GRAY

978-0-399-25412-3 • \$17.99 • Ages 12 up • Grades 7 up

In 1941, fifteen-year-old Lina, her mother, and brother are pulled from their Lithuanian home by Soviet guards and sent to Siberia, where her father is sentenced to death in a prison camp while she fights for her life, vowing to honor her family and the thousands like hers by documenting her story in art and words.

**“Stalin deported and murdered millions,  
but he could not destroy the seeds of memory, compassion,  
and art that they left behind. From those seeds,  
Ruta Sepetys has crafted a brilliant story of love and survival  
that will keep their memory alive for generations to come.”**  
—Laurie Halse Anderson, bestselling author of *Speak* and *Wintergirls*

**“In terrifying detail, Ruta Sepetys re-creates a World War II  
coming of age all too timely today.  
*Between Shades of Gray* is a document long overdue.”**  
—Richard Peck, Newbery Award-winning author of *A Year Down Yonder*



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[www.BetweenShadesofGray.com](http://www.BetweenShadesofGray.com)  
978-0399-2593-5

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## DISCUSSION GUIDE

One girl's voice breaks the silence of history.

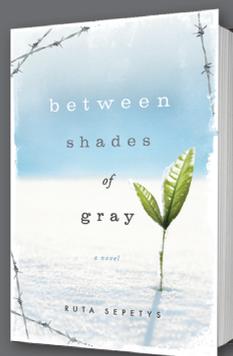
b e t w e e n  
s h a d e s

of  
g r a y

a novel

R U T A S E P E T Y S

## ABOUT THE BOOK



In 1941, 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.

Learn more at [www.BetweenShadesofGray.com](http://www.BetweenShadesofGray.com).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Born and raised in Michigan, Ruta Sepetys is the daughter of a Lithuanian refugee. The nations of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia disappeared from maps in 1941 and did not reappear until 1990. As this is a story seldom told, Ruta wanted to give a voice to the hundreds of thousands of people who lost their lives during Stalin's cleansing of the Baltic region.

Ruta lives with her family in Tennessee. *Between Shades of Gray* is her first novel.

You can visit Ruta Sepetys at [www.rutasepetys.com](http://www.rutasepetys.com).

Watch the moving and poignant author video at [betweenshadesofgray.com](http://betweenshadesofgray.com)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 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?
- Lina's mother remains calm throughout the roundup of her family; how does her family benefit from this?
- 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?
- As Lina's family is first 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?
- Using textual examples, what are some of the specific ways Lina's mother chooses to fight back against the NKVD?
- 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 individuals extend their assistance and support. How do their choices differ from those who are most unkind to others?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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.
- Why does Lina's mother, Elena, pretend she doesn't know her cousin Regina? What is she trying to accomplish? What can be gleaned about Elena from this encounter?
- 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?
- 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?
- After Jonas is selected to be separated from his mother and sister, their mother is able to save his life by using her language skills and quick wit. What are some of the specific things she does to secure his safety?
- 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?
- 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?
- What role does Andrius play in the story? In what ways is he a catalyst for the choices made by Lina and Jonas?
- Consider the consequences of 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?
- Though Lina believes 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 to in order to keep him safe ultimately affect him? How does Lina's understanding of these sacrifices reshape her perception of him? His mother?
- 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?
- Using the phrase, "This is a story about..." supply five words to describe *Between Shades of Gray*. Explain your choices.

## CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS/ EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- As a pre-reading activity, have students complete an anticipation guide structured in the following manner:

Before Reading	After Reading	Statements
		When in danger, it is best to play it safe rather than take a risk.
		It is acceptable to remove a member of a society if he or she is found to be inferior.
		Losing some individual freedom is acceptable if it benefits the community or society as a whole.
		If you disagree with a rule, law, or public policy, it is better to remain silent than speak out and risk punishment.
		A civilized society would ensure that its functions never allow a child to be harmed intentionally.

- Instruct students to complete the guide by placing a "+" sign in the box next to the statements for which they agree, and a "0" next to those for which they disagree. They must commit to agreement or disagreement—there are no conditional responses. Students should be assured that there are no correct or incorrect positions.
- Once students have had the opportunity to complete the guide, the teacher reads each statement aloud and has students who agree show it by standing or raising their hands. Each student should be permitted to provide their rationale for agreeing if they wish.
- The process is repeated after reading the text(s), with students being given the opportunity to provide their rationales for keeping or changing their positions.
- This activity can be effectively coupled with a KWLH chart for the Holocaust.