

# Penguin's Classroom Classics

## Making Curriculum Connections!



## An Educator's Guide to

*between  
shades of gray*  
RUTA SEPETYS

**INSPIRE • ENGAGE • EDUCATE**

The activities in this guide align with Common Core State Standards  
and fit into the curriculum for grades 7–10

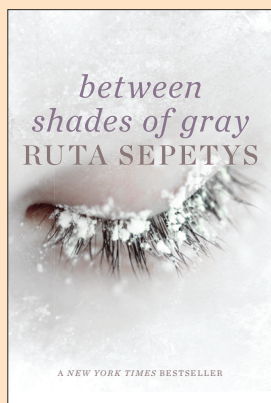
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## Dear Educator:

*Between Shades of Gray* is a complex, layered novel that tells the story of Lina Vilkas and her family, taken from their home in Lithuania and sent on a harrowing journey as refugees from the Baltics to the Siberian tundra during Joseph Stalin's purges during the 1930's and 40's. While this book has been well-received since its publication in 2011, it has already been recognized worldwide as a teaching tool for students. Spain has developed a curriculum guide around the book. The French have been using the book to discuss themes of national identity in the classrooms and the Japanese have been using it to study compassionate courage.

In this guide, you will find ties to the curriculum for English and Language Arts concentrations as well as History and Social Sciences. All of the activities, assignments, writing prompts, and discussion questions align with Common Core State Standards for grades 7-10. The guide can be used as a comprehensive tool to teach the book within the context of an English and/or History class for a unit that lasts **for 2-3 weeks time**, depending on the depth and breadth of each class discussion. Alternatively, the activities can be used independently as **enrichment activities**. We hope you'll enjoy the guide and use it in your classroom for years to come.

- Penguin School & Library



## About the Book:

In 1941, fifteen-year-old Lina Vilkas 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 from their native Lithuania 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 them by documenting their experiences in her art and writing. She risks everything to use her art as messages, hoping that 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 from the Baltics to the Siberian tundra and above the Arctic Circle, 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?



## About the Author:

Born and raised in Michigan, Ruta Sepetys is the daughter of a Lithuanian refugee. Her grandfather fled the country after annexation to the Soviet Union in 1941. *Between Shades of Gray* is Ruta's first novel. She sought to give a voice to the hundreds of thousands of people of the Baltics who lost their countries, their homes, and their lives in Stalin's cleansing of the region. You can visit Ruta Sepetys at [www.rutasepetys.com](http://www.rutasepetys.com) and [www.betweenshadesofgray.com](http://www.betweenshadesofgray.com).

This guide was created by Michael Brock, an AP European History and IB History of the Americans HL teacher at Coppell High School in Coppell, Texas and Rose Brock, a teacher, school librarian, and doctoral candidate at Texas Woman's University, specializing in children's and young adult literature.



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# Classroom Lesson Plans for *Between Shades of Gray*

## Pre-Reading Activity

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.
		In a survival situation, one must make decisions that are best for themselves and their family members, even if harm may come to others as a result.
		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 to speak out and risk punishment.
		Commitment to duty and honor should outweigh individual misgivings in times of moral crisis.
		A civilized society would ensure that its functions never allow a child to be harmed intentionally.

**Teachers:** Instruct students to complete the guide by placing a plus sign in the box next to the statements with which they agree and a zero next to those with 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, read each statement aloud and have 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 KWL chart for Stalin's purges in the USSR.

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards: SL 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, and 9–10.3.

### Awards and Honors for *Between Shades of Gray*

2012 William C. Morris Award

2012 Golden Kite Award

2012-2013 Texas Lonestar Reading List (Middle School)

2012-2013 Texas TAYSHAS Reading List (High School)

2012-2013 Kentucky Bluegrass Award (Grades 9-12)

2012-2013 New Hampshire Teen Reader's Choice Award: The Flume (Grades 9-12)

2012-2013 Maryland Black-Eyed Susan Book Award (High School)

2012-2013 Pennsylvania School Librarians Association Award (Young Adult)

2012-2013 Nevada Young Reader's Award (Young Adult)



# Classroom Lesson Plans for *Between Shades of Gray*

## Exploring the Novel through Writing and Research

1. As the novel opens, Lina explains that though the signs were in place, she had little understanding that her parents had planned to attempt to escape Lithuania.

**Teachers, ask students to:**

- Research the political climate in Lithuania in 1941.
- Create a visual presentation of the country, its leaders, and the surrounding countries and political leaders
- As a comparison/contrast, create a visual presentation of the political state of the United States.
- Then, compare Lina's experience with your own: how would you assess 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? Encourage students to actively involve themselves with the current landscape of US politics for a deeper understanding of the issues and platforms.

2. 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)

**Teachers, ask students to:**

- In small groups, describe what the author means by this statement: what literary device is the author using, and why?
- Create a visual chart of your answers.
- Think about the value, or worth, of a particular artifact from today's world: what types of accessories or articles could be used in a similar fashion to the pocket watch? Create a collage of these images, and display them for the entire class.
- As a class, evaluate each item in terms of worth, or trade-in value, and increase the size of the image according to its worth in a cloud format.
- Display the new collage with the various sizes and discuss the collage as a class: why are some items perceived as more valuable than others? Are these subjective or objective assessments? Why/why not?

3. Sepetys uses embedded flashbacks to help readers understand Lina's family history, and the "reasons" for their punishment.

**Teachers, ask students to:**

- Collect the various flashbacks in one document: what can you glean about Lina's family from the brief anecdotes?
- Write a brief summary of your perception of Lina's family. Highlight their social class, their education, their values, and their political views.
- In small groups, identify other books, documentaries, and feature films that use flashbacks in the same way that the author does. How does it help the reader/viewer understand the story better?

4. Throughout the novel, Lina uses her passion for her art to remain connected to her family and the outside world.

**Teachers, ask students to:**

- Identify some of the specific ways Lina uses the art medium to maintain this connection; does this seem to you like a form of resistance to Stalinism?
- Compare and contrast the risks and benefits of these personal pursuits
- Research similar "acts" from minority populations during a time of struggle, and the mediums they have used to express themselves: how have such paintings, drawings, songs, and/or poems served as outlets for the oppressed?
- Create a visual of the most iconic images.

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards: S.L. 7.1, 7.2, 7.3. 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 9–10.3; W. 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, and 9–10.3.

### Praise for *Between Shades of Gray*

★ "An important book that deserves the widest possible readership."  
—*Booklist*, starred review

★ "A gripping story."  
—*School Library Journal*, starred review



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# Classroom Lesson Plans for *Between Shades of Gray*

## Extended Writing Prompts

1. Kostas Vilkas clearly was a tremendous source of leadership for his daughter and for the community of Kaunas, Lithuania, at large. As Lina learns of him through the course of the story, it changes the way in which she views him.

**Teachers, ask students to:**

- Writing as Lina, compose a letter to Kostas detailing what she has learned about him as a person and how she has been changed because of experiences.

**\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards:** R.L. 7.1, 8.1, 9–10.1; W. 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3 and 9–10.3.

2. Two novels by Charles Dickens are among the few treasures Lina has left once her family is deported.

**Teachers, ask students to:**

Using information from library resources and the Internet, research Dickens and either *The Pickwick Papers* or *Dombey and Son* to prepare a Glogster poster ([www.glogster.com](http://www.glogster.com)) that details the following:

- Biographical information about Charles Dickens and basic plot outline of /blurb for the novel
- Imagery that reflects the themes, plot, or characters of the novel
- A passage from the novel that also reflects a theme or characterization in *Between Shades of Gray*
- Why you believe Dickens or these works might have resonance in Lithuanian or Russian culture

**\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards:** W. 7.4, 8.4, and 9–10.4.

3. The Stalinist gulag system has been a subject of extensive writing in Soviet literature.

**Teachers, ask students to:**

Examine excerpts from other texts and compare the description of the gulag and prison life in works such as:

- a. Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The House of the Dead* (addresses the czarist prison system in Siberia)
- b. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *The Gulag Archipelago*
- c. Martin Amis's *Koba the Dread*
- d. Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*
- e. Herta Müller's *Everything I Possess I Carry with Me*
- f. Vasily Grossman's *Everything Flows*
- g. Janusz Bardach and Kathleen Gleeson's *Man Is Wolf to Man*

**\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards:** R.L. 7.1, 8.1, 9–10.1; W. 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.4, 7.7, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4, 8.7 and 9–10.7.

4. In *Between Shades of Gray*, readers learn of the diabolical system devised by Stalin's government to deal with dissenters or anyone it perceived as a threat to the regime. In part, the system was designed to use confusion, brutality, and alienation to force confessions to whatever crimes the state might trump up against them. The text indicates that things went easier on those who confessed, but Elena and many of the others continued to refuse.

**Teachers, ask students to:**

- Write a persuasive essay in which you argue for or against signing the NKVD's confession papers. Consider the experiences of Lina and her family and friends as well as those who signed, and use textual evidence to provide specific examples to support your case.

**\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards:** R.L. 7.1, 8.1, 9–10.1; W. 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, and 9–10.3.

5. In *Between Shades of Gray*, one of the most critical components of the story involves the help that the prisoners get from unlikely sources—from Nikolai Kretzsky, Ulyushka, and Dr. Samudurov.

**Teachers, ask students to:**

Compose a journal entry from one of their points of view and answer the following questions:

- a. What makes these individuals so important?
- b. What are their motivations to help these prisoners, who the state deems beyond redemption?
- c. Why put themselves at risk for them—what was to be gained or lost?
- d. How did their own experiences to that point motivate their decisions?

**\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards:** W. 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.4 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4 and 9–10.4



# Classroom Lesson Plans for *Between Shades of Gray*

## Interdisciplinary Investigations

The following prompts can be assigned to students in various disciplines. Each assignment highlights the suggested discipline.

1. Sepetys has stated that her primary purpose in writing *Between Shades of Gray* was to bring to light an historical tragedy that has been poorly investigated and has been largely ignored.

**Teachers, with the lens of a social studies or history course**

- a. Conduct a cursory investigation in historiography.
- b. Investigate some of the challenges faced by historians writing in the Soviet era, and the changes that the fall of communism brought to writing the history of the Soviet era. Focus particularly on how history has been rewritten in the former Soviet republics, such as the Baltic states.

**\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards: R.H. 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, and 9–10.3.**

- c. Investigate some of the historical context of the Stalinist system described in the story. Present these to the class. Topics could include:

- i. Stalin's Purges, 1929–38
- ii. Collectivization in the USSR
- iii. The Cheka/NKVD and State Terror
- iv. Cultural Life in the USSR under Stalin
- v. The Five-Year Plans
- vi. America's Lend/Lease Acts and the USSR
- vii. Forced/Coercive Labor in the USSR
- viii. Soviet Intellectuals in the Stalinist Era

**\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards: R.H. 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.7, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.7, and 9–10.7.**

2. Communist regimes by design rely very heavily on scientific approaches and statistical analysis in economic, demographic, and state administration.

**Teachers, with the lens of an economics, mathematics, or science course**

- a. Investigate and utilize some of the data from the Soviet era for concept and skills application. Examples might include data related to changes in literacy rates, economic outputs (particularly in heavy industry, consumer goods, and agriculture), demographics and population shifts, technology development, transportation and communications development, climate/meteorology/geology in Siberia, and data related to the USSR in World War II.
- b. As much as possible, relate these applications to events in the novel.

**\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards: R.H.6–8.3, 9–10.3; W. 7.7, 8.7, and 9–10.7.**

3. The Norwegian symbolist/expressionist Edvard Munch was the creative inspiration for Lina's future aspirations before deportation and her touchstone to intellectual sanity after it.

**Teachers, with the lens of a fine arts course**

- a. Investigate the style and works of Edvard Munch. Explore not only why Munch's work was distinctive both as part of and within the movements he is associated with, but also why his work might have served as inspiration for Lina in both freedom and captivity.
- b. Create a piece of art indicative of Munch's style. Possibly recreate one of Lina's sketches, and display the class's contributions on one wall as a mural.

### Praise for *Between Shades of Gray*

★ "Sepetys' flowing prose gently carries readers through the crushing tragedy of this tale that needs telling."  
—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review



# Classroom Lesson Plans for *Between Shades of Gray*

## Targeted Class Discussion and Reflection Prompts

**Making Meaning by Exploring Setting:** The Baltics as a Cultural Crossroads: The Baltic region has been a political, cultural, and economic crossroads for at least eight centuries. Investigate the region's indigenous cultures and its historical interactions, paying particular attention to causes and effects when the region either dominated affairs beyond its boundaries or was dominated by greater powers nearby (such as in *Between Shades of Gray*). To extend the research, consider also including Finland and Poland as part of the region.

**Siberia and 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.

**Microsettings in *Between Shades of Gray*:** The stark, frozen expanses of Siberia truly provide shape and structure to the despair of the novel. Sepetys does this in a manner even more riveting with her construction of more personal settings—the warm comforts of Lina's home in Kaunas, the stifling cars of the deportation trains, Ulyushka's tiny hut, the NKVD barracks, and the haphazard mud mounds the prisoners construct in Trofimovsk. In a group, construct representations of these spaces (either in physical or digital models) and describe how these settings provide direction/turning points in the story.

**Soviet Cultural Geography:** The Soviet Union was a country as ethnically and culturally diverse as our own. In *Between Shades of Gray*, Russians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Jews, Ukrainians, Altaians, Poles, Finns, and Evenks are mentioned. Stalin himself was not Russian (he was Georgian). Communist philosophy denounces ethnic distinctions as a form of exploitation, and by policy the USSR outlawed cultural discrimination. As the story indicates, policy and reality were often contradictory. Investigate the history of the USSR's various ethnic groups during the Soviet period, and develop presentations for the class identifying cultural characteristics as well as their experiences under the Soviet state. In keeping things aligned with the novel, the scope may be limited to the Stalinist era alone. However, consider the value of this investigation as done over time—was treatment of ethnic groups such as the Lithuanians different after the Soviet era? Also consider encouraging students to investigate the role of nationalism in the Soviet collapse in 1991 (Lithuania was, in fact, a catalyst of this part of the process). This investigation also might be narrowed just to the ethnicities east of the Urals—the aboriginal groups inhabiting the lands of the gulag system, such as the Altaians and the Evenks. Consider the extent to which members of these groups (such as Ulyushka) were as much prisoners of the system as the Baltic deportees in the novel.

**The Baltics in the Second World War:** A great irony in the novel is that even as Stalin's regime perpetrated genocide on the Baltic peoples in 1940–41, it was fighting desperately for its own survival as the Nazis advanced to the outskirts of Moscow itself. Occasionally Lina speculates on how things in Lithuania and their circumstances as prisoners might be under German control, and eventually how her beloved cousin Joana and her family might be faring as repatriated Germans. Investigate the experiences of the Baltic states, particularly Lithuania, under German occupation from 1941–44.

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards: R.L. 7.1, 8.1, and 9–10.1; R.H. 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, and 9–10.3; W. 7.7, 8.7, and 9–10.7.

### Praise for *Between Shades of Gray*

★ "A harrowing page-turner, made all the more so for its basis in historical fact, the novel illuminates the persecution suffered by Stalin's victims (20 million were killed), while presenting memorable characters who retain their will to survive even after more than a decade in exile."

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"Brave Lina is a heroine young and old readers can believe in."

—*Entertainment weekly*



# A Q&A with *Between Shades of Gray* author Ruta Sepetys



**Q:** *Between Shades of Gray* is a very powerful book full of struggle and hope. What helped you find the right balance between the two?

**A:** Thank you! I was trying to address the search for self in the face of death, which can be pretty dark and depressing. My editor, Tamra Tuller, continually pushed me to focus on the hopeful elements. Many of her revision suggestions centered around amplifying the sense of hope. I enjoy bleak stories so my first drafts tend to be pretty depressing. Tamra's suggestions added incredible dimension to the story but allowed me to retain the dark atmosphere I felt was critical for historical authenticity.

**Q:** Lina is a wonderful character and I remember thinking several times while reading the novel that you had picked a perfect age for her. What made you decide to make Lina fifteen turning sixteen in the book versus a younger or older protagonist?

**A:** Many of the survivors I met with were teenagers when they were in Siberia. Their stories were incredibly compelling and they were all so full of fire and bravery. I thought it might add an interesting dimension to the story if it were told from the point of view of a teenage girl. Also, since this is such a little known piece of history, I was hoping that it might be discovered by teachers and librarians. There are so many wonderful librarians who support the YA genre.

**Q:** When writing a historical novel, do you plot then research or do you research then plot?

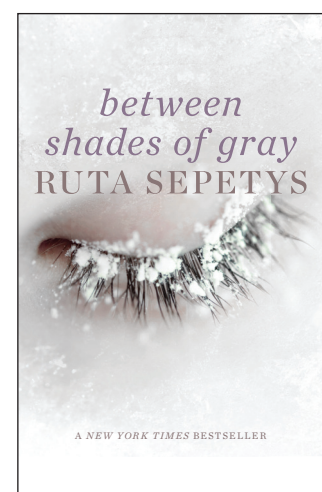
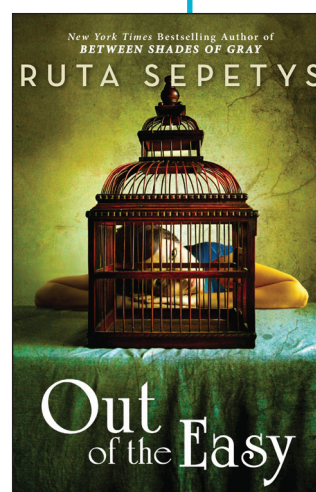
**A:** When I started *Between Shades of Gray* I decided to write the book as I was researching. I hoped writing amidst the research process would create a sense of immediacy in the narrative. I'm not sure I'd do that again! I ended up revising quite a bit. I think next time I will research, plot, then draft.

## The eagerly anticipated novel from the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Between Shades of Gray*

Known among locals as the daughter of a brothel prostitute, Josie wants more out of life than the Big Easy has to offer. She devises a plan to get out, but a mysterious death in the Quarter leaves Josie tangled in a police investigation that will challenge her allegiance to her mother, her conscience, and Willie Woodley, the brusque madam on Conti Street.

Josie is caught between the dream of an elite college and a clandestine underworld. New Orleans lures her in a quest for truth, dangling temptation at every turn, and escalating to the ultimate test.

With characters as captivating as those in her internationally bestselling novel *Between Shades of Gray*, Ruta Sepetys skillfully creates a rich story of secrets, lies, and the haunting reminder that decisions can shape our destiny.



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