

• 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://memo.ru/en-us/>)
- 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/>)
- The Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation (<https://www.victimsofcommunism.org/>)

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.



ASHES IN THE SNOW  
9781984836748 • \$9.99 • 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*

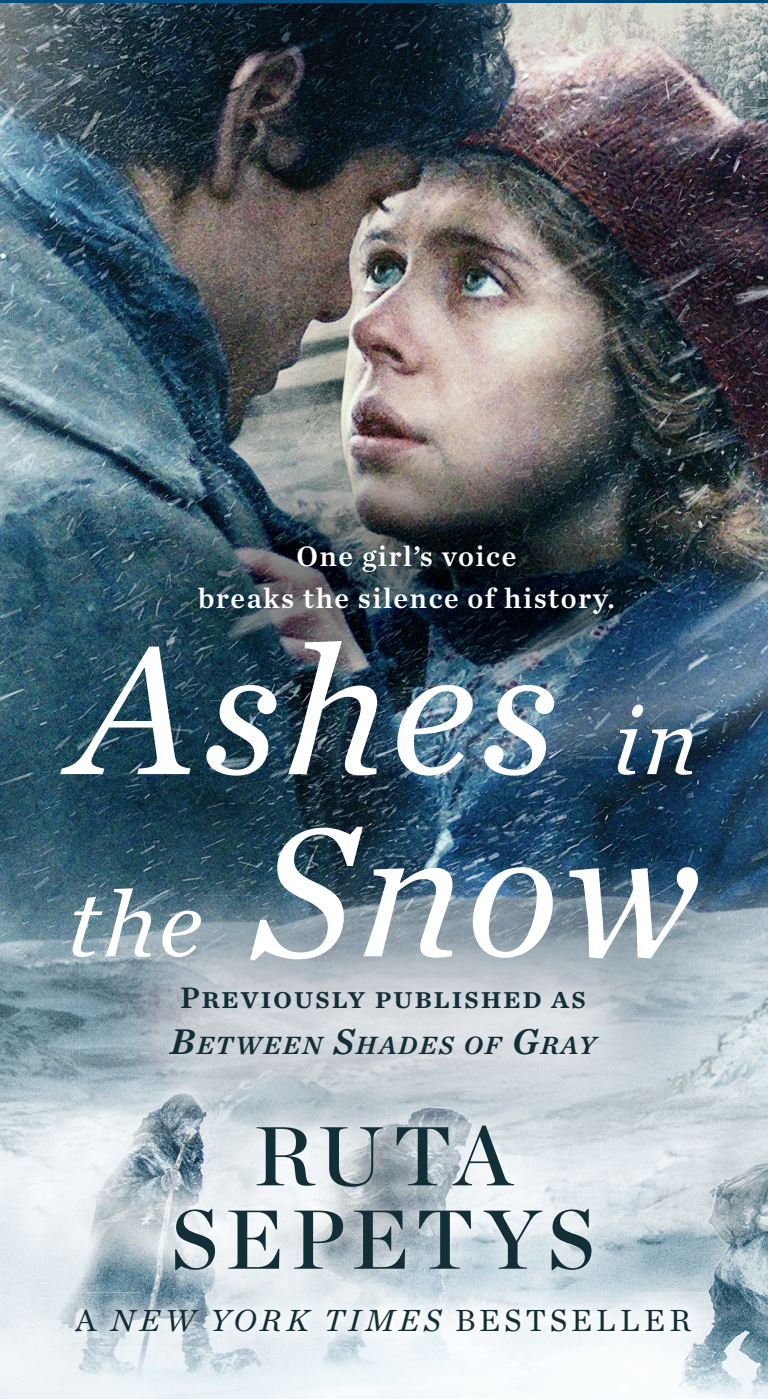
“In terrifying detail, Ruta Sepetys re-creates a World War II coming of age all too timely today. *Between Shades of Gray* is a document long overdue.”  
—Richard Peck, Newbery Award–winning author of *A Year Down Yonder*



Philomel Books • Puffin Books  
Divisions of Penguin Young Readers Group  
[www.penguin.com/teachersandlibrarians](http://www.penguin.com/teachersandlibrarians)  
[www.BetweenShadesofGray.com](http://www.BetweenShadesofGray.com) 978-0399-2593-5

This discussion guide has been provided by Penguin Young Readers Group for classroom, library, and book club use. It may be reproduced in its entirety or excerpted for these purposes.

Discussion Guide





ABOUT THE BOOK



An international bestseller, a #1 *New York Times* bestseller, and now a major motion picture! Ruta Sepetys’s *Between Shades of Gray* is now the film *Ashes in the Snow*!

Fifteen-year-old Lina is a Lithuanian girl living an ordinary life—until Soviet officers invade her home and tear her family apart. Separated from her father and forced onto a crowded train, Lina, her mother, and her young brother make their way to a Siberian work camp, where they are forced to fight for their lives. Lina finds solace in her art, documenting these events by drawing. Risking everything, she imbeds clues in her drawings of their location and secretly passes them along, hoping her drawings will make their way to her father’s prison camp. But will strength, love, and hope be enough for Lina and her family to survive?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ruta Sepetys is an internationally acclaimed author of historical fiction published in over sixty countries and more than forty languages. Sepetys is considered a “crossover” novelist as her books are read by both teens and adults worldwide. Her novels, *Between Shades of Gray*, *Out of the Easy*, and *Salt to the Sea* are all *New York Times* bestsellers and international bestsellers. Her books have won or been shortlisted for over forty book prizes, are included on over forty state reading lists, and are currently in development for film and television.

Ruta is the daughter of a Lithuanian refugee. Born in Michigan, she was raised in a family of artists, readers, and music lovers. She was recently bestowed the Cross of the Knight of the Order by the President of Lithuania for her contributions to education and memory preservation. She is intensely proud to be Lithuanian, even if that means she has a name no one can pronounce.

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.