• 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 excommunication 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 country’s role as a cultural crossroads as they do so. Assign group presentations that utilize his works to illustrate the representations of the gulag and prison life in their works.
• Assign students to write their assessment of the choice of this title for 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 the representations of the gulag and prison life in their works.
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Have you ever wondered what a human life is worth? That morning, my brother’s was worth a pocket watch.

Between Shades of Gray

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 has been 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

Ruta Sepetys

Divisions of Penguin Young Readers Group
www.penguin.com/teachersandlibrarians
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About Ruta Sepetys

Ruta Sepetys was born in Florida and raised in Tennessee, where she discovered her love for writing and art. The daughter of a Lithuanian immigrant, she has spent much of her life researching and learning about the Holocaust, a topic that inspired her first novel, BETWEEN SHADES OF GRAY. She lives with her family in Tennessee, and you can visit her website at www.rutasepetys.com.

Between Shades of Gray

A novel

Philomel Books • Puffin Books

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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 she handle 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 train, 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 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 characteristics 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 change?

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?

As a pre-reading activity, have students complete an anticipation guide to provide their rationale for agreeing if they wish.

Reading

Before Reading

a. Instruct students to complete the guide by placing a “+” in the box next to the statements for which they agree, and a “X” 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.

b. Once students have had the opportunity to complete the guide, the teacher reads each statement aloud and has students who agree show their guides. The teacher then responds to the statements—there are no conditional responses. Students should be assured that there are no correct or incorrect positions.

c. The process is repeated after reading the book(s), with students being given the opportunity to provide their rationales for keeping or changing their positions.

d. This activity can be effectively coupled with a KWL chart for the Holocaust.

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS/ EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before Reading</th>
<th>After Reading</th>
<th>Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is acceptable to remove a member of a society if the individual is found to be inferior.</td>
<td>Losing some individual freedoms is acceptable if it benefits the community or society as a whole.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you disagree with a rule, law, or public policy, it is better to remain silent than speak out and risk punishment.</td>
<td>A civilized society would ensure that its functions never allow a child to be harmed intentionally.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- As the book comes to a close, ask students to reflect on the ways in which the story has affected them. Have they gained a new perspective on life or history? How have they been challenged by the events and characters depicted in the novel? Encourage them to write a short essay or develop a presentation to share their thoughts with the class.

- The novel is a powerful reminder of the importance of remembrance and education. Consider organizing a community-wide event, such as a town hall or a forum, to discuss the themes and lessons of the book. This could be a great opportunity to bring together students, teachers, and community members to explore the significance of the past and its impact on the present.

- In the classroom, you could also assign students to research and present on similar themes in other literature. This could be a great way to encourage critical thinking and further exploration of the subject matter.

- Alternatively, you could encourage students to create a multimedia project, such as a video or podcast, that explores the experiences of those who lived through similar events. This could be a valuable way for students to engage with the material on a deeper level and share their insights with others.