1. Ilya arrives in Leffie and finds nearly everything about it foreign and strange, from the Masons’ church to the swimming pool that’s lit up at night. Have you had a similar fish-out-of-water experience in an entirely new setting? What specific features about your new surroundings seemed most strange to you?

2. One of the primary themes of the novel is the complexity of Ilya and Vladimir’s relationship. What are the different forms that their brotherly bond takes, and what circumstances cause that bond to shift and change?

3. Berlozhniki and Leffie are different in so many ways. What are some ways that they might be more similar than it seems at first glance?

4. Very soon after Ilya arrives, he and Sadie find themselves to be kindred spirits. What do you think draws them together so strongly?

5. Gabe Thompson is an enigmatic supporting character in the novel. What do you take from his short-lived experience in Berlozhniki, and what do you make of the model he builds of the town upon his return home?

6. Their role in solving the murders aside, what role do you think The Adventures of Michael & Stephanie English-language tapes serve in Ilya’s life, first in Berlozhniki and then once he arrives in Leffie?

7. How would you describe the growth or change that Ilya undergoes during his first year in the United States?

8. Throughout the novel, Ilya experiences powerful feelings of homesickness for Berlozhniki, but by its end, he’s come to think of Leffie as a kind of home as well. What do you think this says about what “home” means to us, and do you think more than one place can be a true home to the same person?

9. Mothers play a very large role in this story. How do you think the personalities of Sadie, Ilya, and Vladimir have been shaped by their mothers?

10. Vladimir’s story ends with devastating finality, but Ilya’s story is left open-ended. What do you think happens to Ilya after the novel ends? How about Sadie and her mother, or Maria Mikhailovna?
How did you come up with Ilya and his life in Russia? Do you have any personal connections to Russia?

My mother is a Russian historian who lived and studied in Russia during the Cold War, and when I was little, my family hosted two Russian students, Olga and Tatiana. They were young—Olga couldn’t have been older than six—and both were completely brilliant. Olga was a piano prodigy, and her stay with us culminated in a duet that she performed with master cellist Mstislav Rostropovich at the Kennedy Center. I remember her playing standing up because otherwise her feet couldn’t reach the pedals.

When I was older, my family went to Russia for a summer. This was in the mid-’90s, in the long, chaotic wake of perestroika. We had a driver, Aleksey, whose life savings had amounted to a pack of cigarettes after the “shock therapy” economic reforms. I’ll never forget him telling us this as he weaved through Moscow’s hellish traffic, looking back at us in the rearview mirror to see if we understood, puffing on a cigarette that I couldn’t help but think was from that fateful pack.

Ilya’s story came about, in part, through my attempt to unpack these experiences, to tap into Aleksey’s resilience and into that mix of trepidation and euphoria with which Olga and Tatiana took in my family, my world, and our version of America.

Very roughly speaking, the novel seems to tie Ilya’s coming-of-age story to an unraveling mystery about his brother’s culpability in a series of brutal murders. What inspired you to meld these seemingly disparate plotlines?

I love mysteries and coming-of-age stories, and when I began writing the novel (more years ago than I care to count), I wanted it to be both. I’ve always been obsessed with the structure of “The Gift of the Magi,” and that was an early inspiration for the novel, though the “gifts” that Ilya and Vladimir exchange create an imbalance in their relationship—and the only way for Ilya to rectify this is to solve the murders.

I think, too, that in a way the storylines aren’t disparate at all. Solving the novel’s central mystery is the catalyst for Ilya’s coming of age because it allows him a deeper understanding of Vladimir and Vladimir’s love for him. To me, decoding that familial bond is what the book is about as much as it’s about the murders.

Ilya’s town and the people in it seem haunted by the past. How did you get a sense of the shadow communism and the gulag cast over their lives?

Through visiting Russia and by reading everything I could get my hands on about Russia in the ’90s and ’00s. Secondhand Time by Svetlana Alexievich was absolutely indispensable. It’s a collection of oral histories from 1991 to 2012 that beautifully captures the complexity of Russians’ view of communism and its collapse. Communism did cast a long shadow, but in the poverty and chaos of perestroika there was also a lot of nostalgia for it.

That said, Ilya and Vladimir are teenagers. History is all around them, but that doesn’t mean they’re always aware of it or sensitive to it. They’re not above lying to a woman from Moscow about where the camp graves are, or rolling their eyes at their grandmother’s paranoia. This is a long way of saying that it was important to me that their characters—their personal histories—took precedence over their national histories.
It seems that one of the biggest differences between American and Russian mind-sets in the book is that Americans are more optimistic, Russians pessimistic. Is that something you've found to be true?

Interesting. I think both the Russians and the Americans in the novel are optimistic, they just wear their optimism very differently. Ilya's storyline is fueled by hope—his own, his grandmother's, his mother's, his teacher Maria Mikhailovna's, and, most significantly, Vladimir's. And, of course, Ilya's own mission to get Vladimir out of prison is almost outrageously optimistic, given how thoroughly the cards are stacked against him.

Ilya and Sadie's bond seems formed in part out of what they have in common: traumatic pasts. What are the challenges that come with writing young characters who are dealing with such adult problems, or who feel out of place in typical teenage worlds?

Ilya is living with one foot in the past and one in the present. He’s half in Russia, half in Louisiana, and the enormity and urgency of the problems he’s dealing with don’t leave him much time or bandwidth for typical teenage life. But life presses on—there’s his burgeoning crush on Sadie, his first day of school, dinner with the Masons—and having Ilya engage with these less pressing concerns felt like an incredibly difficult balancing act, one that I had to reckon with in each chapter, paragraph, and sentence. Anthony Marra once told me that you need to make a reader laugh and cry on every page. I don’t think I’ve ever managed that, but allowing some typical teenage life on the page felt key to achieving a tonal balance in the book.

This book is coming out at a time when the United States has a complicated—to say the least—relationship with Russia. Did any of that change how you perceive your book?

I think there’s a risk that our current relationship with Russia will lead to a resurrection of Cold War stereotypes, and it’s my hope that the novel challenges some of those stereotypes, that it brings to light a very different segment of Russian society, far from the intrigues of Moscow, but still very much subject to its politics.
Remains of the Day by Kazuo Ishiguro
I was twelve or thirteen when I first read *Remains of the Day*, and Stevens, Ishiguro’s reserved, meticulous narrator, stole my heart. Stevens is an English butler, the product of a society that is crumbling around him, and Ishiguro brings him to life with wry humor and a tough and tender touch.

Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides
For me, there’s no truer pleasure in life than sinking into an epic, sweeping, multigenerational saga. The longer, the better, especially when the story’s as energetic, digressive, and devastatingly funny as *Middlesex*.

The Talented Mr. Ripley by Patricia Highsmith
Tom Ripley is one of the most compelling characters ever created. A sociopath who manages to elicit not just the reader’s sympathy but his shaky allegiance, because who hasn’t wanted to sink, just for a moment, into another identity?

Lincoln in the Bardo by George Saunders
I love everything George Saunders does. This novel is narrated by Tad Lincoln in the days after his death, along with a host of other raucous souls in limbo. There’s a palpable, contagious delight to Saunders’s writing, even as it delivers a portrait of a father and son in mourning and a powerful meditation on the power of the past over the present.

Selected Stories by Alice Munro
Munro made me see the possibilities in writing short fiction in a way no other author has. She moves through time, through lives, with such brilliance, and there’s this clean serenity to her prose that belies just how much is happening beneath the surface.