

***Salt to the Sea* by Ruta Sepetys**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ruta Sepetys is an internationally acclaimed, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of historical fiction published in over sixty countries and forty languages. Considered a “crossover” novelist, her books are read by both students and adults worldwide. Winner of the Carnegie Medal and honored by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Ruta is renowned for giving voice to underrepresented history and those who experienced it. She is the daughter of a Lithuanian refugee. Born in Michigan, she was raised in a family of artists, readers, and music lovers. She is passionate about the power of history to foster dialogue and global understanding. Ruta was bestowed the Cross of the Knight of the Order by the President of Lithuania for her contributions to education and memory preservation and was honored with a postage stamp containing her image. She is deeply grateful for her Baltic heritage – even if it means she has a name that no one can pronounce. Ruta lives with her family in the hills of Tennessee. Visit her online at rutasepetys.com/

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

As you read and annotate the book, keep these three big questions in mind. Look for quotes or short passages that answer these questions – then mark those sections of the book!

- ★ To what extent do fear, guilt, and trauma affect the choices people make during times of war?
- ★ To what extent do secrets and personal histories shape a person’s identity and relationships with others?
- ★ In what ways can hope survive even in the middle of tragedy and loss?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Sepetys opens the novel by introducing each of the four protagonists with an association to a personal emotion – guilt, sense of fate, shame, and fear – that is correlated to a “hunter” motif. How does this help to link these characters to one another and to the events surrounding them in the story?
2. Several of the characters work hard to conceal things about their experience during the war: Emilia hides her pregnancy, Florian hides his mission, Joana hides what happened to her family, Ingrid tries to hide her blindness, and so forth. How does hiding these things both help and hinder the characters as they proceed through the story? Do the extreme events of the evacuation affect the perception of trust for these characters?
3. World War II was the first war in which civilians were more affected than soldiers. Considering what you learned from *Salt to the Sea*, what were some of the ways in which civilians were most greatly affected?

4. *Salt to the Sea* is told in multiple first-person narratives; how would the story be different if only a single character were telling it? Do you think changing the point of view would improve the story? Why or why not?
5. Throughout *Salt to the Sea*, many characters exhibit acts of bravery. Consider the individual actions of these characters. Who do you believe to be the most courageous, and why?
6. Considering each of the main characters' perspectives, in what ways is *Salt to the Sea* a story about things that have been lost? What does each character find along the way?
7. Before and during World War II, the Nazis looted and plundered art from across Europe. Consider the systematic theft, deliberate destruction and miraculous survival of Europe's art treasures. Why does art such as the Amber Room have such power over individuals? What does it say about mankind that we make tremendous effort to preserve and protect it? How does Florian view his theft of the swan to be his revenge against Hitler?
8. Explain the significance of the title, *Salt to the Sea*. Given the magnitude of the tragedy of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, does it accurately describe the events and relationships portrayed in the novel?
9. Consider the cover of *Salt to the Sea*. In what ways is the image represented symbolic of the events that transpire throughout the course of the book?
10. Why is repeated attention called to Emilia's pink hat? Beyond its means of identifying her to others, how does it serve as a symbol of her innocence? Can you think of any other examples of colors described by Sepetys in a meaningful manner?
11. What are some of the specific ways each of the characters in *Salt to the Sea* fight back against both the Nazis and the Russians? To what extent are these acts of resistance effective?