



Between Shades of Gray

Ruta Sepetys

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Lina is just like any other fifteen-year-old Lithuanian girl in 1941. She paints, she draws, she gets crushes on boys. Until one night when Soviet officers barge into her home, tearing her family from the comfortable life they've known. Separated from her father, forced onto a crowded and dirty train car, Lina, her mother, and her young brother slowly make their way north, crossing the Arctic Circle, to a work camp in the coldest reaches of Siberia. Here they are forced, under Stalin's orders, to dig for beets and fight for their lives under the cruelest of conditions.

Lina finds solace in her art, meticulously--and at great risk--documenting events by drawing, hoping these messages 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, spanning years and covering 6,500 miles, but it is through incredible strength, love, and hope that Lina ultimately survives. *Between Shades of Gray* is a novel that will steal your breath and capture your heart.

Between Shades of Gray Details

Date : Published March 22nd 2011 by Philomel Books

ISBN : 9780399254123

Author : Ruta Sepetys

Format : Hardcover 344 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Young Adult, Fiction, War

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From Reader Review Between Shades of Gray for online ebook

Jamie says

Well done, Ruta Sepetys! A great book. Heartbreaking, but nicely written.

This book is a novel, but is actually based on history, during WWII. this story is written from the perspective of a teenager named Lina. she and her family are taken from their home in Lithuania by the Soviets. This story tracks the next year plus of all hardships they go through. The labor camps, the illnesses that struck, the deaths of fellow Lithuanians, cruel degrading treatment and more.

much is known about Hitler's reign, but what about those sent to Stalin? What of the voices never heard? This is one of those voices, crying out after all these years. The imagery is vivid. You see how lives are lived, you see the love and pain and sorrow. But it is more than that. you feel it. this book literally moved me to tears.

There is a hint of romance, and much community love. There is loss and heartbreak. There is pain and suffering. There is hope. The characters are endearing and so well done. Lina is one amazing young woman with all she endures.

If you are looking for a happy, upbeat book, this is not it. This novel shows how Lithuanians (and other people too) were treated during the war. It is well paced, and starts off with a bang with the Soviets coming for the girl's family right at the beginning. It is brutally honest. It is not always easy writing about such treatment from a young teenager's perspective, but this captured it perfectly. My only complaint to the book is the chapters were too short and I wish I could have continued on Lina's story a little longer.

I won this as a First-Read giveaway on goodreads.com. all thoughts and opinions of this review are strictly my own.

Maja (The Nocturnal Library) says

Exactly a year before, the Soviets have begun moving troops over the borders into the country. Then, in August, Lithuania was officially annexed into the Soviet Union. When I complained at the dinner table, Papa yelled at me and told me to never, ever say anything derogatory about the Soviets. He sent me to my room. I didn't say anything out loud after that. But I thought about it a lot.

Despite her father's caution, 15-year-old Lena Vilkas, her 10-year-old brother Jonas and their mother Elena are charged as criminals and arrested in their home in Lithuania by Soviet officers. Lena's Papa didn't return from work the previous day and they don't even know if he's alive. The three of them are forced into a train car with forty-six other people, mostly women and children. Among them are Ona and her newborn baby, taken from the hospital just as soon as the umbilical cord was cut, Miss. Grybas, a perfectly harmless spinster teacher, a mean bald man, supposedly a stamp collector, Mrs. Arvydas, wife of a murdered Lithuanian officer, and her 17-year-old son Andrius, who has to pretend to be feeble-minded in order to stay with his mother. Needless to say, they are all treated like cattle.

After spending more than 8 weeks in the train car with only two buckets of water and a bucket of food a day for all of them, they arrive to a beet farm where they're expected to work all day, most of them digging in

frozen ground with hand shovels and bare hands. For months they have nothing but hunger and disease in labor camp, and just when they think things couldn't possibly get any worse, they get moved to Siberia - supposedly to build a factory, but in reality, they're just expected to die.

Lena's story is powerful for many reasons. Of course none of us can stay indifferent to a story about so much suffering and Ruta Sepetys chose a very smart way to tell it. Her writing is very matter of fact, her sentences are short and to the point. She allowed herself very little emotion, thus giving the reader a chance to fill in the gaps. I think it was the only way to tell such a horrendous story without overdoing it.

When I finished this book last night, I was completely grief-stricken. I thought: "What am I supposed to do now? Am I supposed to just stand up and walk around like I didn't just take a long, hard look at the ugliest side of humanity?" For the first time in my life, I felt that my education has failed me. How is it possible that we just went around all this, barely mentioning it? We dedicated so much time to Hitler and his victims (and we should have), but we're talking about 20 million people here! 20 million people they just omitted to tell us about. I'm not saying I was completely clueless about it all, far from it, but I was never really confronted with it. And I absolutely needed to be.

I think everyone should read *Between Shades of Gray*. Saying that it will help you appreciate the little things sounds like a horrible cliché, but it's also undeniably true. Just get ready to be crushed into pieces by all the atrocities and suffering this relatively short book describes.

Ari says

'Now my heart sank into my stomach where the bile began to chew it.'

Step on my heart, cut it wide open, rub it with salt and feed it to the sharks.. Or just make me read this book, because this is how it feels like reading this story.

How can I call "wonderful" a book full of so many horrors?

...But I will, because it really is, and what pains me the most is that it's all true, that this is a really tiny part of the darkest piece of our history as human beings.

You thought this was repugnant?!

Well, think again because this was only the beginning. What was left unspoken is what repugnance is really about.

I will confess that I was bracing myself for worse and even though for many of you some scenes were horrifying, I know that this was nothing compared with the horrors that have happened in that period of time. We learn about it in school, we know about it from books, there are movies and documentaries that will break your heart, because (I repeat) nothing hurts more than knowing that these things happened, it's not fiction - it's history, one written in blood and suffering... and death.

This story touched me in a way I could barely explain. I felt so much disgust and anger that I could tear the book apart. It gave me so many goose bumps that I didn't remember for a quite while how smooth skin felt

like.

Yes, you were all right; this is a powerful story, full of emotion, that will make your soul bleed and your eyes tear.

It's strange how can you find love and hope in such a hopeless place... The story was not as brutal as I thought it would be, but it broke my heart in many other ways:

It was their hope that broke me down, their smiles, their jokes, and Lina's memories from long gone happy times (As a side note I should mention how much I loved the transition from present to past, how one scene melted into another, how the past faded right in front of my eyes).

It was the love that killed me softly, it was seeing that those broken hearts could still find inside them the force to care when there wasn't almost any good left for them in the world.

And it was their force to keep going that made me love this book, because they were stronger when their body was weak, when their life was fading away, when they still held tightly to their dreams - even though they knew those were never to come true again.

The cover is absolutely perfect - It shows all the hope that filled their hearts, even when some of them were giving up their last breath. It reveals a piece of the settling, but also it shows that in all that coldness with which they were treated very few people showed them (just a bit of) mercy.

The characters are so complex and they bring so much into this story - from the bald man with his pessimistic thoughts, to the little children so full of life and hope (too young, too innocent to know the cruelty of this world).

It moved me how dramatically all those people changed through the story: kids had to grow up and help the others in order to survive, old people had to hold on to their memories to keep going, parents had to sacrifice everything for their children. They had to keep inside their fury, their hate and their shame. They had to keep their head down even though they were the ones deserving respect, because even when they had nothing at all, they still had hope and they fought for their life at all costs.

I need to mention Lina and Andrius, as their love was sparkling like a tiny star thought the darkest, clouded night sky. It gave hope and strength and made my heart ache just a little bit less.

"Andrius, I'm ... scared"

He stopped and turned to me. "No. Don't be scared. Don't give them anything, Lina, not even your fear."

Through the story, Lina saw the world and she described it in her sketches. Drawing was a way to express her fear, the injustice, the pain and the ache. That was her way of coping; gathering strength through her hope that some day her father will be able to reach them.

I'll leave you now with some of my favorite quotes as I don't have the force to describe this book any longer. This is not a story that you can talk about; you can only read it between tears and maybe find some colors between so many shades of gray.

“I’ll see you”

“Are you really on page 300 or are you skipping ahead now?”

“Have you ever wondered what a human life is worth? That morning, my brother's was worth a pocket watch.”

Reviewer notes:

I loved the author notes as they gave so much depth to the story and now I feel the need to leave my own notes here, because even though I can't really conceive so much suffering, I can at least somehow understand it (though probably on a lower level that I might even think).

“How could Stalin simply take something that didn’t belong to him, something that a farmer and his family had worked their whole life for?”

“That’s communism, Lina”, Papa said.

Living in a country placed between Germany and Russia, our history has been marked (with dark ink) by those two as well. I know what communism means and I even know a bit how it 'felt'. I was too young to understand what was happening but old enough to keep memories of my grandparents working the field each day, but only being allowed to keep some (very few) fruitage for themselves.

But if for me it is sad to think about those times when we were only allowed to buy rations of food (like half of a bread a day), I can't even conceive how hard it might have been for those people that were 'unlucky' enough to be thrown in the middle of that madness described in this book, forced to work in such horrible conditions, humiliated and treated like animals, and even die horrible deaths while nobody cared.

As the author says, there is nothing that we can do now to change the past, but we can learn from it, and we can prevent such horrors from ever happening again.

PS:

While reading the book I listened to the soundtrack, which is as amazing as the story itself and I recommend it with all my heart.

This review can also be found at ReadingAfterMidnight.com

Blog (EN) | Facebook | Twitter | Tumblr | Bloglovin' | Blog (RO)

Later Edit:

Movie? Really?!

Oh.. I don't know if to be happy or scared.

I LOVED the book, hopefully I will enjoy it on the big screen too ^_^

Hirdesh says

“I tried to sketch but couldn’t. When I started to draw, the pencil moved by itself, propelled by something hideous that lived inside of me.”

Oh my goodness ! Perfect Historical fiction book. It's more than my expectations and quite contemplate with "The Thousand splendid suns". Praiseworthy one, Enjoyed every word.

Words and ratings on here couldn't exactly defines this book.....

Ruta Sepetys, I Love You ! ! !

What a splendid writing and expressions of Lina, she has made.

Just like she has experienced that.

Wonderful, heartthrobing story.

Lina, how she has survived and fight for life not only her and others too.

Whole catastrophic journey revealed in well written and exceptional echos of herself inside as well as in her drawings.

*“We'd been trying to touch the sky from the bottom of the ocean.”

*“Sometimes there is such beauty in awkwardness. There's love and emotion trying to express itself, but at the time, it just ends up being awkward.”

Samantha says

I think I may have made a mistake reading this on audio, as I didn't find it as compelling as most. I found the narrators tone very off from themes of the story, which left me separated from it. This largely unknown history was very interesting and tragic, by I didn't feel the close connection to the narrative that many did, due to the version I read it in.

Jillian (bookishandnerdy) says

These writings may shock or horrify you, but that is not my intention. It is my greatest hope that the pages in this jar stir your deepest well of human compassion. I hope they prompt you to do something, to tell someone. Only then can we ensure that this kind of evil is never allowed to repeat itself.

So I read this last night, and I went to work this morning. I was so deeply affected by this story, and my mind kept drifting back to Lina and Jonas and the countless real victims of the Baltic Deportations. When I

finished the book, I immediately went on my computer and googled anything I could find out about the deportations. While the book itself devastated me, the outcome of my Baltic deportation research devastated me on a whole other level. I felt a mixture of anger and sadness but more so angry because how can human beings treat each other this way. How can a human be cruel for the sake of being cruel? But as I kept researching, I found that many of those who did survive confirmed that being kind and continuing to have faith and love in and for the human race reaffirmed what I learned reaching the end of *Between Shades of Gray*. Love and faith will always outweigh hate and cruelty. That the tenacity of the human spirit can make it through beatings, death, torture, starvation, and isolation. That a human can make through all those atrocities and still come out to the other side and want to live. I am so happy that I picked this up and I am happy that I am no longer ignorant to this piece of history that had been hidden for too long. This is truly remarkable and one of the best and most important books I have ever read.

Here is a link to video interview with Ruta Sepetys who is the granddaughter of a Lithuanian refugee where she talks about the inspiration and history behind *Between Shades of Gray*. Please PLEASE watch it and PLEASE read *Between Shades of Gray*. Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPIQ_...

Lola says

I don't know what the educational plan looks like in other Canadian provinces – it should be quite similar to Quebec's – but where I went to high school we learned so little about the *social* consequences of World War II, so I'm grateful I have books like *BETWEEN SHADES OF GRAY* to enlighten me on the subject.

Here's the thing: this is different from Ruta Sepetys' other novels. Maybe because it's her first one, I don't know, but suffice it to say, it's not as impossible to put down. Because it focuses so much on the psychological and social ramifications of World War II, the plot is rather slow and uneventful.

Lina, her brother and her mother are sent to a labour camp in Siberia, where they are forced to work for food. Lina wants desperately to find her father, who was sent to prison for treasonous behaviour. People are dying every day. Some are killed, some kill themselves. The war is hard on everyone but Lina knows she needs to be strong if she wants to ever see her father again.

See, it's less about the politics and more about the social. After all, whole communities of people are suddenly uprooted and forced into slavery... starved... beaten... raped... killed. It's a very emotional story. Ruta Sepetys is an extraordinary writer. I hope she will write for many years to come.

This book has been recommended to me by dozens of people, so I'm happy I finally gave it a chance.

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Lora says

Actual rating: 4.5 stars

As soon as I saw this video, I knew I had to read this novel. *Between Shades of Gray* isn't the type of book I'd normally read, but I'm extremely glad that I decided to read it.

Lina is a very strong and courageous character. Despite the situation Lina is placed in at the young age of fifteen, she audaciously chooses to write about the terrible cruelties the Soviets are doing to those around her as well as her family and herself. Lina is an artist, and she uses this talent to depict the ghastly scenes she's forced to witness on a daily basis. She then hides her drawings where the NKVD, hopefully, won't find them. In this she hopes that, one day, someone will find the proof of what really occurred, and make sure that it never happens again.

I'm going to warn you, a good deal of this book is very grim and Sepetys doesn't cover up the horrors that were committed against these innocent people with euphemisms. There are quite a few shocking, disturbing, and graphic scenes in this. You'll probably want to read something light and fluffy after finishing it. But much like the title of the book and the fledging plant sprouting up from the ice covered landscape on the book's cover signifies hope, the author does a wonderful job of incorporating snippets of hope even through the most grim of times for her characters.

Interspersed with Lina's time in the slavery camps, there are bittersweet flashbacks to Lina's life before her and her family were taken by the Soviets. I think they helped to break up the scenes of abuse and heartache, making the novel more palatable to the reader.

There is also a light romance in this that is both sweet and a welcome addition to a story such as this.

FAVORITE QUOTE:

"I shut the bathroom door and caught sight of my face in the mirror. I had no idea how quickly it was to change, to fade. If I had, I would have stared at my reflection, memorizing it. It was the last time I would look into a real mirror for more than a decade."

Ruta Sepetys' writing is erudite, yet simple, and it flows very well. I just hope that this isn't one of those one-hit-wonder cases where the author has one story to tell and never writes anything again. I'd really like to read more from Sepetys, whether it be more stories such as this, or something completely different.

On a side note, the finished, physical copy of this (I say it in this way because some people probably have an ARC or an ebook) is quite gorgeous. The jacket seems to be made of recycled paper, so it has a very natural, rustic look and feel to it. And it has deckled edges, my favorite. :)

I think this is one of those books that will be highly praised by some (like myself), and sadly overlooked by others. It's easy to be distracted by the deluge of YA paranormal novels with the pretty covers and the pomp and heavy promotion, but, I assure you, *Between Shades of Gray* is more than worth your reading time.

This book reminds me just how fortunate I am to be born in the era and country that I was, and I found it very humbling. I'm glad to have had the opportunity to read it, and I highly recommend it.

Maxwell says

This is such a powerful story, and a subject that I knew nothing about. Most people know about the atrocities of Hitler's reign, especially those perpetrated against Jewish people. But in this novel Sepetys examines the lesser known genocide of hundreds of thousands of Lithuanians, and other Baltic peoples, under Stalin during the same time as the Holocaust. It's tragic and horrifying and such an important read. I'll admit that for a book aimed at young adults, Sepetys doesn't pull any punches, but I think that's vital to make clear the injustices and to put the reader in these characters shoes. It had me squirming in my seat and opened my eyes

a little bit more to history and also to the stories of real people. Yes, it's fiction, but it's something that countless people went through. Those experiences are real even if this particular story is not. I could've done without the added bit of romance, but I also think it humanized the characters more (while also being a tried and true YA trope). Overall though I thought this book was impactful and engaging, and I can't wait to see it adapted to film later this year.

Sasha Alsberg says

Really loved this book and it's story because I personally have never heard about this side of the war before and I'm so grateful I know about it now.

Hailey (HaileyinBookland) says

What a powerfully poignant story. Really unexpected and unique, but so so important. Video review to come!

Angela M says

I was so taken by the story of Lina and her family and all of the others that came to life here as they were deported from their homes in Lithuania, by Stalin's Russians to a work camp in Siberia. It's a devastatingly sad story of fictional characters but what makes it even more heartbreaking is that this story reflects a true story of a genocide that took the lives of over 20 million people . I am especially saddened by the fact that I knew pretty much nothing about it and I am grateful to the author for telling it. It's so hard to imagine that this is a piece of history that is so little known and I can't help but think - how can that be?

This is a remarkable story for so many reasons . It's categorized as YA and it is simply and well written in short chapters but by no means does it lighten the load of what happened here . I would say that this should not be missed by any adult who thinks this will be a light depiction of the horrific events . I fell in love with these characters - Lina , and her mother, and her brother Jonas and we see so much of their father through Lina's flashbacks and of course wonderful Andrius. I was struck by the real dichotomy between what was happening to them and the happy, beautiful life they had before which is depicted in Lina's flashbacks - the comfort , joy and beauty vs the vile conditions, sadness , ugliness and death . What remains constant is Lina's passion for her art , a sign of her hope.

I am grateful to Ruta Sepetys for giving me this story and enlightening me to the horrors that occurred because in doing so she has also given a glimpse at the strength of a people that allowed for hope and the ability to see "A tiny sliver of gold...between shades of gray on the horizon."

I am also grateful to my GR friend Tracey who waited patiently to discuss the book as I was behind in starting on our planned date

Maggie Stiefvater says

This is not a pretty book.

Even though I found this novel exceptionally well-written, it was not a pleasure to read. It's about Lithuanians displaced to Siberian work camps during World War II. It was pretty unflinchingly brutal, but here's why I think you ought to read it:

1. It is a side of World War II that you might not have seen before. I certainly hadn't heard these stories of displaced Europeans, and I have to say, having been to Lithuania on tour last year, it made so much of what they said have deeper meaning. I found their fierce national pride lovely and charming when I was there; after this novel, it seems incredibly brave and honorable.
2. Mom. The mother is really the heroine of this story (and that is my one nitpick about this novel: the narrator has no arc and no agency — all of the action is carried by her mother and her sort-of-boyfriend). She has such an incredible flame and kindness in her. One of my favorite book moms.
3. Shades of gray. The title promises and the novel delivers. Characters we think are horrid actually do incredibly kind things, and character we regard as friends do awful ones.
4. If you combine 2 and 3, you get my favorite part, which is that it makes you look at people an entirely new way. I love books that stretch my brain, and this one sat with me for hours and hours.
5. Wonderful sense of place, even when the place isn't so wonderful. Like Lucy Christopher, I trust the author to take me someplace different, and I'll be picking up whatever she writes next.

Emily May says

Um... so I'm a bit torn on this one but I'm going to rate it 3.5 stars. I think what made it worse was all the bloody hype (like with *Matched*) that made me think this was going to blow my mind and it kind of just, well, didn't.

It was an interesting history lesson. My knowledge of Soviet activities was previously more political than social and anything I did know of the more personal impact on people's lives was what I'd gained from German museums telling the story of the Berlin wall. It's true that the Baltic countries often slip our minds and not much thought is given to the horrors that went on there during the reign of Stalin; bearing that in mind, the Lithuanian perspective was fresh and interesting, not the typical story of oppression under communism. This I liked.

But I'm not going to overlook the fact that I spent the first two thirds of the book just waiting for it to be over and thinking it another highly-anticipated disappointment. The story mainly consisted of two cramped journeys in a cart and a struggle to survive starvation, scurvy and whatever else on a daily ration of 300g of bread. It was awful, I get that, truly it was... but in a novel you expect something more gripping. Maybe the

author tamed down the harshness for a young adult audience but the result was a mostly drab and boring story.

That being said, there were sad and moving moments that did manage to somewhat redeem the novel. I also liked the love story subplot going on, mostly because I liked Andrius, it wasn't too much and remained in the background to the real story but it was nice.

So, yeah, I was looking for something more out of this book, the story dragged too much. However, the author's note at the end made me cry.

Elana says

(Edit, July 9, 2016: I was a pretentious 16-year-old when I wrote this review, lol. I'm 21 now and I'll be going back to edit it periodically.)

Let me justify my seemingly harsh rating. First things first, let me provide you with some (probably not necessitated) background into my interest in this book: I am an avid studier of Lithuanian history. I have rigorously researched this time period prior to this book's creation, thus I was absolutely overjoyed when I got wind of its publishing. It's about time that a "young adult" book chronicled the heinous acts of human evil that the Soviet Union committed against the Baltic peoples.

This book was certainly a proverbial "eye-opener" for those who were unfamiliar with Lithuanian history. It was an immersive, interesting book with "relatable" (my reasoning behind the quotation marks will be addressed later) characters.

But one qualm I had was the writing style. I am cognizant of the fact that this was Sepetys' debut novel, but the writing style felt almost detached to me. It was an itemization of Lina's torturous experience, as opposed to the immersive, detailed account I surmised a first person perspective would entail. In fact, the writing style did not allow me to get close enough to the characters to truly empathize with what was happening to her and her family. Even in the beginning, before most would assume that dissociation and other psychological trauma would kick in and truly prevent Lina from grasping the severity of her situation or being capable of detailing events, there were no details to attach me to her life. (view spoiler) This narration style made basically every character flat to me, with no substance or meaning to me. The plot was moved forward by dialogue as opposed to narration, which provided no true insight into Lina's deepest emotions, feelings and thoughts. Thus, I felt as if the book would have fared better with a harsh critic such as myself if it were in third person objective. That way, it would have been safe to abstain from revealing Lina's thoughts, as opposed to pretty much avoiding them in favor of utilizing dialogue to encapsulate her feelings.

Additionally, the gratuitous usage of capital letters, multiple exclamation points and italicized text to represent flashbacks was irritating; those are the signs of drafting stages to me. While it is most likely just personal preference, I am very stringent upon the utilization of capital letters. To me, they are used solely when merely italicizing dialogue or a word just isn't enough to express how crucial the idea is. Capitalizing words on basically every page is distracting and, honestly, makes me think of an elementary school child writing a story sans the knowledge of using italics. I know I am being very harsh. Also, the representation of long flashbacks via italics was unnecessary. Sure, for a truncated flashback (view spoiler) this would have

been fine, but some of these flashbacks were multiple, consecutive pages. It was an annoyance to the eyes and was useless, as Sepetys could have opted to make those flashbacks into separate chapters, so long as Lina provided insight into their being flashbacks.

My final grievance lies in the ending; it seemed very abrupt. (view spoiler). It was almost as if Sepetys has simply run out of ideas and decided to end it there. However, despite my harsh review, this book was definitely powerful and deeply moving. I did enjoy it, cry over it, and store it on my bookshelf for future rereading, but it did not touch me in the way I initially assumed it would. I would recommend this book to my friends solely because I want them to read an interesting account of the Lithuanian deportations as opposed to the itemized history books I read myself, but that would be the only reason. It is not on a young adult's reading level, despite it being a very adult-themed book; it is much, much simpler.
