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English 112B

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Salt to the Sea

By Ruta Sepetys

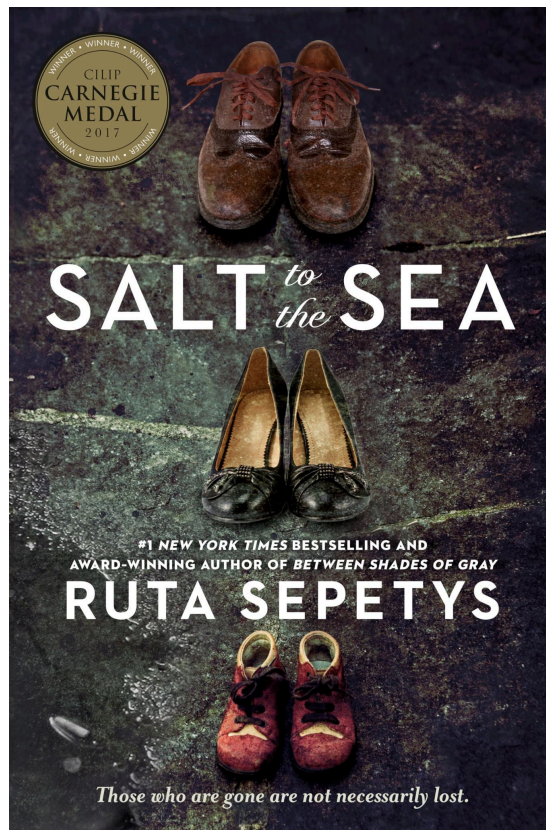


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<https://www.amazon.com/Salt-Sea-Ruta-Sepetys/dp/0142423629>

About the Author:



Image Source:

<https://www.parnassusbooks.net/event/author-event-andrew-maraniss-conversation-ruta-sepetys>

Ruta Sepetys is an internationally acclaimed “#1 New York Times” best-selling author of historical fiction. Published in over 60 countries and forty languages. Sepetys is considered a “crossover” novelist since her books are read by both students and adults worldwide. She is renowned for giving voice to underrepresented history and those who experienced it. Sepetys is the daughter of a Lithuanian refugee. Born in Michigan, she was raised in a family of artists, readers, and music lovers. Sepetys is passionate about the power of history and story to foster global dialogue and connectivity.

Summary:

This book follows the perspective of 4 main characters, Emilia, a teenage Polish orphan; Florian, a restoration artist from East Prussia; Joana, a Lithuanian nurse; and Alfred, a Nazi. The plot revolves around these four and how their fates intertwine with each other during the setting of the end of World War 2. Florence has stolen a precious amber after learning of a betrayal from a close colleague that he looked up to. He meets Emilia who later is revealed to be pregnant and grows a desire to protect her as she reminds him of his little sister. The two meet Joanna who helps tend to their wounds and tries to convince the two to travel together to a ship called Wilhelm Gustloff. There the group meets Alfred a nazi who constantly makes this mental letter to his beloved often portraying himself as more heroic and important than he actually is. Throughout the novel Florence and Joanna build a relationship with each other as well as all 4 characters (well except Alfred actually) begin to come to terms with their tragic pasts. Emilia discovers the love of her land and family with her baby as well as Joanna comes to terms with how she got her cousin killed. Florence develops this sense of protecting those he holds near and dear over revenge and self-preservation.

Quote 1:

“I knew the legends of the birds. Seagulls were the souls of dead soldiers. Owls are the souls of women. Doves were the recently departed souls of unmarried girls. Was there a bird for the souls of people like me?” (Kindle Location 1117).

This quote is significant as it shows Emilia's thoughts on herself. She often sees herself as different from the rest as she was actually raped by Russian soldiers and doesn't allow herself to forgive herself as she wasn't the one to blame. She tells the rest that the baby is that of her

boyfriend August however later during birth she feels the weight of this burden and declares that there is no August just before the birth of her child. This was a very emotional scene and I believe it set in motion the development of Joanna and Florence.

Quote 2

“We brought her into the house. My stomach pushed up into my throat. The Polish girl was my sister’s age. What had Human beings become? Did war make us Evil or just activate an evil already lurking within us? The day was a loss. I had left ahead of the group, yet they had arrived before me. Pathetic.”(79)

This quote conveys Florian’s mixed feelings. On one hand, he is dead set on taking revenge on Dr Lange who betrayed him by basically tricking Florian into stealing art. However, he has developed conflicting feelings about protecting someone other than himself. Though at the start he portrays himself as a selfish character often trying to abandon Emilia and leaving the group once he gets what he needs like medical help or information; he would constantly leave, yet as the quote says he leaves first but often finds himself arriving second almost as if he is subconsciously trying to follow behind everyone to make sure they are safe. He tries time and time again to not let these emotions grow at the start by forgetting about the little girl who reminds him of his sister or to convince himself of the pretty nurse not being pretty. Eventually, as the journey progresses he gives into his true emotions and opens up to everyone. Going from intimidating silence to a protector and happy character as we see him smile and laugh more as well as share more personal and emotional information to the rest of the group.

Quote 3:

“‘What if the relatives return to find the dead family and my name?’ ‘Sure, you slaughtered the family and then left a borrow note for a sewing kit. That’s a real calculated killer’ I laughed. The curtain flew back up. I had pushed too far. ‘Killers aren’t always assassins. Sometimes they don’t even have blood on their hands.’”(Kindle Location 1585).

This line calls back to when they first met. Florence is getting some shrapnel removed by Joanna and in order to ease his nerves they start talking about themselves and Joanna reveals that she is a murderer. Later in the novel after this quote it is revealed that Joanna indirectly caused the death of an old relative/friend by sending a letter that detailed their whereabouts and she carries that burden or survivor's guilt. Towards the end of the novel both she and Florence come to terms with their past and develop a romantic relationship neither wanting to abandon the other from their troubles.

For Classroom Use/Why Teens Should Read This Book:

I believe this text would be very well suited for teens as it carries this sense of suspense and awe as you go through the story. Seeing relations between characters flourish. The death of some innocent companions as well as the development of self-forgiveness as well as growth some characters go through make this a must-read. I myself didn’t put the book down once I started reading.

I think this book can be a good introduction to witness if taught simultaneously as the way the storytelling happens is similar having four perspectives on the same story. I would probably have my students write about what character they sympathized or connected with the most or what character had the biggest growth in their personality.

Another assignment I can think of is if they could be any of the four main characters, who would they be and would they lead the same choices and development? I think looking at how our past can influence character growth as well as the people we surround ourselves with influence personality can really help students think critically about who they are as a person on a much deeper level.

How it best fits in Chapters 4-8 of Adolescents in the Search for Meaning:

Chapter 4: Books about Real-Life Experiences

- The setting is during the WW2 era nearing its end.
- The plot takes place around multiple refugees seeking safety during the collapse of Germany
- Some militaristic machinery of the time is referenced.
- People of all ages tragically perish

Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions

- Emilia is constantly having to hide her identity as she is Polish and discriminated against by Germans.
- Many characters hide their identity or disabilities as it can lead to mistreatment or even death.
- Time and time again Florence is faced with the decision of self-preservation or protecting those he cares about.

Chapter 7: Courage and Survival

-Emilia is the most courageous character as she strives forward even through her pregnancy, she even saves Florence as well as goes to great lengths to deceive Germans in order to escape and survive.

-Florence has to sneak around and deceive people using his artistic skills in order to avoid getting caught as a deserter.

Quantitative Analysis

Page count: 391 pages

Word count: Approximately 72,000 words

Lexile level: 560L

Age range: 12 to 18 years old

Interest grade level: Grades 7–12

ATOS level: 4.6

Dale-Chall Readability Level: 5th–6th grade

Qualitative Analysis

Structure

-Novel takes place during 104 short chapters each pertaining to a different perspective

-Usually told in first person for each character

-Chronological storytelling as each chapter is in order of events sometimes flashback scenes happen but they aid in developing the character's past.

Language

-Accessible and straightforward: The language in *Salt to the Sea* is generally clear and accessible to young adult readers. It avoids really complex vocabulary, making it suitable for a wide range of readers.

-Emotionally charged: The language does a really good job conveying the emotional weight of war, loss, and survival. Sepetys uses short, impactful sentences to highlight the tension and urgency experienced by the characters.

-Descriptive yet restrained: While the author provides enough detail to paint vivid images of the war-torn landscapes and the horrors of war, the language is not overly graphic, which makes it appropriate for a younger audience.

Knowledge Demands

-Historical context: The novel assumes some familiarity with World War II, particularly the Eastern Front and the displacement of refugees in the final months of the war. However, the author provides enough contextual information for readers without extensive knowledge of the era to understand the events.

-Cultural understanding: Understanding the backgrounds of the narrators (Lithuanian Joanna, Polish Emilia, Prussian Florence) requires some knowledge of the ethnic and political tensions during the war, though the novel introduces these themes gradually and accessibly.

-Empathy: The novel requires readers to engage with the characters' inner emotional lives, including their feelings of guilt, fear, and hope. This involves an ability to empathize with the trauma and hardships of war.

Levels of Meanings

-Surface level: On the surface, the novel is a survival story about four individuals trying to escape the horrors of war and find safety. It's an adventure filled with danger, loss, and hope.

-Deeper level: On a deeper level, the novel explores themes of guilt, redemption, identity, and the moral complexities of survival during wartime. Each character wrestles with their past actions, and their journey is as much about emotional healing as physical survival.