



Unit written by Dr Pam Macintyre & Dr Susan La Marca

## ***Between Shades of Gray*** **by Ruta Sepetys**

**Year 9 - 10**

### **Background**

#### **From the Author's Notes:**

'In 1939, the Soviet Union occupied the Baltic States of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Shortly thereafter, the Kremlin drafted lists of people considered anti-Soviet who would be murdered, sent to prison, or deported into slavery in Siberia. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, military servicemen, writers, business owners, musicians, artists, and even librarians were all considered anti-Soviet and were added to the growing list slated for wholesale genocide. The first deportations took place on June 14, 1941...Those who survived spent ten to fifteen years in Siberia.' (Sepetys, pages 347-348)

While the Holocaust is well known through film, documentary and literature, much less is documented about the fate of many in the Baltic states – Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia - countries that forcibly became part of the Soviet Empire. This story, told by teenage Lina, takes us into this little known piece of history and what it meant for many of the families who suffered enormous hardship and continual tragedy over many years. While the story is full of sadness, death, and unspeakable acts against fellow human beings, it is also a quiet and triumphant tribute to those who sacrificed themselves to save others, and to those whose strength of spirit and human dignity allowed them to survive to tell the story.

#### **Focus: Identity**

*Literature and context: Students learn how ideas and viewpoints about events, issues and characters that are expressed by authors in texts are drawn from and shaped by different historical, social and cultural contexts. (ACARA, 2010, The Australian Curriculum: English)*

- How do you retain a sense of who you are when everything that defines you is taken away – your family, your nationhood, your future? Consider how Lina retains a sense of herself as Lina, as a daughter, as

a sister, as a lover, as a strong and resistant member of an oppressed community, and the importance of her national identity.

- At the end of the book, the author tells us that the Baltic countries of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia did not become independent again until 1991. These countries lost a third of their population during Stalin's pogroms. Most people know about Hitler and the Holocaust, but do they know about Stalin's acts of genocide as well?
- Compile a class wiki or dossier with facts, maps, statistics, first person accounts, films, television programs etc. Find out about any survivors who may live in Australia.
- Lina, her mother and her brother refuse to sign the documents presented to them, which charge the prisoners with counter revolutionary activities against the Soviet Union, even though this refusal limits their privileges and makes them targets for more abuse by their Soviet captors. Discuss why they are able to resist when others readily succumb or feel pressure to sign.

**Focus:** The power of artistic record

*Examining literature: Students learn how to explain and analyse the ways in which stories, characters, settings and experiences are reflected in particular literary genres, and how to discuss the appeal of these genres. They learn how to compare and appraise the ways authors use language and literary techniques and devices to influence readers. They also learn to understand, interpret, discuss and evaluate how certain stylistic choices can create multiple layers of interpretation and effect.*

*(ACARA, 2010, The Australian Curriculum: English)*

Lina sifts, sorts and deals with what happens to her through her drawings and her writing even though if they are found, she will be punished severely.

- Find examples of what she draws and writes about, how she interprets events, experiences and people around her, and how this allows her to remain strong in the face of awful oppression and hardship.  
Is this a fundamental role of art and literature? Discuss.

Events are told in the first person by Lina with her artist's eye, and the book's settings, from inside the train to the Arctic Circle, are vividly created. This evocation of the physical surrounds increases the reader's sense of the situation. Discuss

Find or create images of scenes you find particularly powerful.

### **Assessment**

*Creating literature: Students learn how to use personal knowledge and literary texts as starting points to create imaginative writing in different forms and genres and for particular audiences. Using print, digital and online media, students develop skills that allow them to convey meaning, address significant issues and heighten engagement and impact. (ACARA, 2010, The Australian Curriculum: English)*

Sepeyts has written this novelised account from family records and research.

From research around this topic, or a more contemporary one in which you might interview family members or friends, listen to oral records, read personal accounts, write a fictionalised account in the first person, choosing carefully who will recount events.

### **Related Reading**

*The Endless Steppe* by Esther Hautzig

*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich; The Gulag Archipelago* by Aleksander Solzhenitsyn

*The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia* by Orlando Figes

*Animal Farm* by George Orwell

*Darkness at Noon* by Arthur Koestler