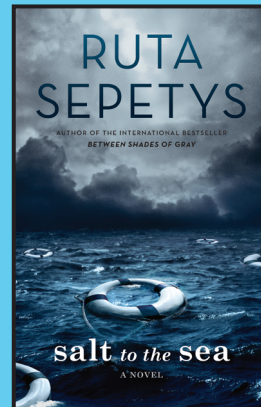


- For what reasons do you think Florian begins to feel connected to Joana? How would you characterize their relationship, and how does it change over the course of the novel?
- *Salt to the Sea* is told in multiple first-person narratives; how would the story be different if only a single character were telling it? Do you think changing the point of view would improve the story? Why or why not?
- As they travel toward the shore in hopes of a spot aboard the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, Florian tells Joana that Emilia is without identity papers, and Joana thinks to herself, “Emilia had no papers. No papers, no future.” Why does her lack of documentation subject her to a likely death sentence?
- 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?
- Emilia and Joana are both Polish. Of the two, Joana is welcome in Germany and considered “Germanizable.” While discussing the inequality of Hitler’s position on Poles, Eva says “Life’s not fair. You’re lucky. Do you think you have time to be moral?” Consider Eva’s statement. Do you agree? In a moral crisis, in what ways do the actions and reactions of an individual define them?
- World War II was the first war in which civilians as affected as soldiers. Considering what you learned from *Salt to the Sea*, what were some of the ways in which civilians were most greatly affected?
- 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?
- 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?
- What would you identify or describe as being part of “survival mode”—what kinds of struggles bring out in people the ability to endure extreme hardships (like World War II or the Holocaust), and to overcome them?
- 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?

This guide was created by Dr. Rose Brock, an assistant professor in the Library Science Department in the College of Education at Sam Houston State University. Dr. Brock holds a Ph.D. in Library Science, specializing in children’s and young adult literature.

Salt to the Sea by Ruta Sepetys



978-0-399-16030-1 • \$18.99
Ages 12 up • Grades 7 up

★ “Sepetys excels in shining light on lost chapters of history.”
—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

★ “Sepetys’s exploration of this little-known piece of history will leave readers weeping.”
—*School Library Journal*, starred review

★ “This haunting gem of a novel begs to be remembered.”
—*Booklist*, starred review

“Heartbreaking, historical, and a little bit hopeful.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*



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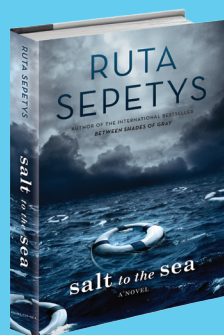
DISCUSSION GUIDE

RUTA SEPETYS

salt to the sea

A NOVEL

ABOUT THE BOOK



In 1945, World War II is drawing to a close in East Prussia, and thousands of refugees are on a desperate trek toward freedom, almost all of them with something to hide. Among them are Joana, Emilia, Florian, and Alfred, whose paths converge en route to the ship that promises salvation, the *Wilhelm Gustloff*. Forced by circumstance to unite, the four find their strength, courage, and trust in one another tested with each step closer toward safety.

Just when it seems freedom is within their grasp, tragedy strikes. Not country, nor culture, nor status matter as all ten thousand people aboard must fight for the same thing: survival.

Told in alternating points of view, and perfect for fans of Anthony Doerr's Pulitzer Prize-winning *All the Light We Cannot See*, Erik Larson's critically acclaimed #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Dead Wake*, and Elizabeth Wein's Printz Honor Book *Code Name Verity*, this masterful work of historical fiction is inspired by the real-life tragedy that was the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*—the greatest maritime disaster in history. As she did in *Between Shades of Gray*, Ruta Sepetys unearths a shockingly little-known casualty of a gruesome war, and proves that humanity can prevail, even in the darkest of hours.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Born and raised in Michigan in a family of artists, readers, and music lovers, Ruta Sepetys is an internationally acclaimed *New York Times* bestselling author of historical fiction. Her award-winning historical novels *Between Shades of Gray* and *Out of the Easy* are Carnegie Medal nominees, and have been published across 45 countries in 33 languages. Ruta lives with her family in Tennessee.

Visit her at www.rutasepetys.com

FOR DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

- As the novel opens and readers are introduced to each of the four protagonists, they are told by Joana, “Guilt is a hunter.” Florian states, “Fate is a hunter.” Emilia shares, “Shame is a hunter.” And Alfred declares, “Fear is a hunter.” What makes this common refrain such a powerful one? How does it immediately capture the internal conflict of each of these characters? What role do guilt, fate, shame, and fear play in their respective lives?
- Florian’s father tells him “You are Prussian. Make your own decisions, son.” What do you believe he means by this statement? In what ways are his father’s words meaningful to him? In your opinion, does Florian successfully heed his father’s advice?
- What are the consequences of Florian’s decision to shoot the Russian soldier about to attack Emilia? How does this one decision change the course of their lives? In what ways does Florian become Emilia’s “knight”? Do you believe the actions of a single person can have a profound difference on another’s life? Why or why not?
- When reaching out to thank Florian for saving her, Emilia thinks, “He would want nothing to do with me. Adolf Hitler had declared that Polish people were subhuman. We were to be destroyed so the Germans could have the land they needed for their empire. Hitler said Germans were superior and would not live among Poles. We were not Germanizable. But our soil was.” In what ways does Emilia’s awareness of being a marginalized people come into play in the story? In the larger context, examine why Hitler sees Poles and others as a less valuable people. Can you draw any parallels to the current political climate in the United States and throughout the world?
- Consider the cover of *Salt to the Sea*. In what ways is the image represented symbolic for the events that transpire throughout the course of the book?
- 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?
- Upon Florian and Emilia’s encounter with Joana and the rest of the make-shift group, and after Florian is observed staring at Joana, Eva tells her, “But something’s not right with him.” Consider Eva’s assessment. Does it seem accurate? Why or why not? What is it about this moment that leaves Joana feeling unsettled by Florian’s presence?
- Why does Emilia attempt to conceal her pregnancy? In what ways do her memories and fantasies of August Kleist help her persevere through her trauma?
- Florian observes the shoemaker’s dance and thinks, “He seemed like a wise man, a kind man.” In your opinion, is the shoemaker both of these things? Are there any other words you would use to describe him? In evaluating his actions throughout the course of the novel, what role does he serve the group?
- After his father warns him not to become a “traitor” to his soul, Florian slowly begins to recognize Dr. Lange’s intentions. Why is his father’s early understanding of Lange’s manipulation of his son important? While addressing Florian, Dr. Lange remarks, “You, my boy, are the Reich’s best-kept secret.” Why do the memories of these words haunt Florian so deeply? In what ways does he see his early inability to understand what type of person Dr. Lange really is as a flaw in his character? Do you believe Florian appropriately tries to right his wrongs?
- The shoe poet tells Florian, “The shoes tell the story.” Explain this statement. Do you agree? In what ways can we learn about someone from the shoes they wear?
- Using textual examples, 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?
- Describe Florian, Emilia, Joana, and Alfred. What makes them dynamic characters? What are their greatest strengths as people? What are their weaknesses? Using examples from the text, support your position. Are they the type of people you would befriend? Why or why not?
- Describe the “Alfred” in the imaginary letters written to Hannelore. How is he different than the “Frick” observed by those with whom he works and interacts on the *Wilhelm Gustloff*? What does this dual perspective allow readers to understand about his character?
- Because Alfred fantasizes about his relationship with Hannelore, he is unable to understand why she proudly proclaims “I am Jewish!” as he tries to argue that half of her is “part of the master race.” What was your reaction to learning of Alfred’s role in the removal of Hannelore and her father?
- How are children affected by war? Can you provide some examples, whether from war in general or *Salt to the Sea* specifically? What roles do young Klaus and Emilia’s baby play in the story? While they each suffer great loss, in what ways do these two children serve as symbols of hope for the people in their lives?