



**Between Shades of Gray**

Written by Ruta Sepetys

Philomel, 2011, 344 pp.

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*The signs were there... but I refused to acknowledge the signs. Only later did I realize that Mother and Father intended we escape. We did not escape. We were taken. (p. 3)*

In 1939, the Russians invaded Lithuania and relocated thousands of Lithuanians on a forced journey to Siberia. *Between Shades of Gray* brings to life this account of history largely unknown by the world. Through the moving account of fifteen-year-old Lina, her mother, and her younger brother, readers are snatched from their homes still in their pajamas, shuffled into cattle cars packed so tightly that it is difficult to breathe, and count the bodies thrown from the train each morning as they move further and further from their homes. Readers hope with Lina that her drawings will make their way to her father who is in a different prison and hold their breath as Lina falls in love with another one of the young “criminals” in their prison camp. A coming of age story under the most extreme circumstances, *Between Shades of Gray* will keep readers enthralled and deeply engaged until the very end of the book.

*Between Shades of Gray* is another story and perspective of the Holocaust, World War II, and its atrocities. What keeps Lina from giving up are her drawings, her family, and her young hopeful spirit. Themes about the importance of identity (both personal and cultural), the strength of family, and the horrors of political oppression and genocide are woven into the story. The story widens readers’ understandings of the Holocaust and the struggle that encompassed all of Europe during the late 1930s through the end of World War II.

This is a great text to be combined with other books in a unit on war or a unit on the power of love and family that transcends unbelievable cruelty. It could also be an example of how the arts can keep the spirit alive even under the direst of circumstances. If a unit on war, this could be used in a text set on World War II or the Holocaust with books such as *Black Radishes* (Susan Meyer, 2010), *Once* (Morris Gleitzman, 2010), and *Traitor* (Gudrun Pausewang, 2010), all of which show young people who question the war and their circumstances, but who also accomplish extraordinary things in spite of the restrictions placed on them. In a unit on how art, music, and writing can overcome the more extreme circumstances, this text could be used with *The Last Book in the Universe* (Rodman Philbrick, 2000), *The Book Thief* (Marcus Zusak, 2007), *You Hear Me?* (Betsy Franco, 2001), and *Out of the Dust* (Karen Hesse, 1997).

Author Ruta Sepetys based the story on her family's history, drawing from accounts they shared as she was growing up. She also did research in Lithuania. After WWII her family immigrated to the United States, where Ruta was born and raised. More information about the book and the author can be found at [www.rutasepetys.com](http://www.rutasepetys.com) and [www.betweenshadesofgray.com](http://www.betweenshadesofgray.com).

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